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Title: Jessica Trent: Her Life on a Ranch

Author: Evelyn Raymond

Release Date: October 11, 2010 [EBook #33853]

Language: English

Credits: Produced by Roger Frank and the Online Distributed Proofreading Team at <http://www.fadedpage.net>

*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK JESSICA TRENT: HER LIFE ON A RANCH ***

JESSICA TRENT: Her Life on a Ranch

BY
EVELYN RAYMOND

Author of
"Jessica Trent's Inheritance," "Jessica, the Heiress"

Whitman Publishing Co.
RACINE, WISCONSIN

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Printed in the
United States of America
By
Western Printing & Lithographing Co.
Racine, Wis.

Jessica Trent

CHAPTER I ON THE CANYON TRAIL.

"Hello, there! What in the name of reason is this?"

The horseman's excited cry was echoed by a startled neigh from his beast, which wheeled about so suddenly that he nearly precipitated both himself and rider into the gulch below.

"Oh! I'm sorry--Hold on, Zu! Go! Do, please. Quick! It's so narrow just beyond and I can't--"

The stranger obeyed, perforce, for his spirited animal having now headed up the slope, continued on his course at breakneck speed, pursued at equal pace by the unknown creature that had terrified him.

The race would not have been so even had the trail been wider, for King Zulu could easily have beaten his contestant, but, as it was, the fleeing bay bruised his master's leg against the canyon wall, now and then, while bits of the bird's plumage were torn on the same projecting rocks. There was no point of passage till more than a mile higher on the mountain, and Jess knew this if Mr. Hale did not. He knew nothing save that he was clinging and riding for his life, and that this "Western horseback tour" which his doctor had prescribed for him, seemed now more likely to prove his death than his cure.

But when a laugh rang out, close to his shoulder, he turned his head and glanced angrily backward.

"Oh, I beg your pardon, but-it's so funny! I've often wanted to try King Zu against a strange horse and now I have. Only, if we were up there on the mesa, he'd show you!"

"Does this trail never end, nor turn?"

The laughter on the girl's face changed to anxiety.

"Not ill, exactly; only I'm not experienced at this business and it shakes me."

"You ride too hard and stiff. That's why. Let yourself go-just be part of your horse. He's a beauty, isn't he? Even the boys couldn't stand that gait."

"And you. Who taught you to ride an ostrich? Where did you get it? It's almost the first one I ever saw and quite the first that Prince did. I was nearly as scared as he, meeting such a creature on a lonely mountain trail."

"I never learned-it just happened. Zulu is 'patriarch' of the flock. The only imported bird left alive. We just grew up together, he and I. Didn't we, King?"

Speech was now easier, for the speed of both animals had slackened, that of Prince to a comfortable trot. While the sidewise lurching motion of the ostrich was enjoyable enough to Jessica, it turned Mr. Hale's head dizzy, watching. Or it may have been the blinding sunshine, beating against the canyon wall and deflected upon the riders in waves of heat.

"Whew! This is scorching. How far, yet?"

Jessica saw that what she minded not at all was turning the stranger sick, and answered swiftly:

"You wouldn't be able to get further than 'five times' before we reach the turn. There'll be a glorious breeze then. There always is."

"What do you mean by 'five times'?"

"Why, just the multiplication table. I always say it when I've something I want to get over quick. You begin at one-times-one, and see if it isn't so."

"What shall we find at the top; your home?"

"Oh, no, indeed. That is quite the other way. Down in the valley. Sobrante ranch. That's ours. Were you going there?"

"I was going-anywhere. I had lost my way. 'Missed the trail,' as you say in this country."

"I thought, maybe, you were just a 'tourist.'"

Mr. Hale laughed, and the laugh helped him to forget his present discomfort.

"Perhaps I am, even if you do speak so disdainfully. Are all 'tourists' objectionable?"

Jessica's brown cheek flushed. She felt she had said something rude-she, whose ambition it was to be always and everywhere "Our Lady Jess," that the dear "boys" called her. But she remembered how annoyed her mother was by the visits of strangers who seemed to regard Sobrante and its belongings as a "show" arranged for their special benefit.

"We-we are generally glad when the rains come," she answered, evasively.

"To keep them away? Yet if, as I suspect, you have an ostrich farm, I can't blame their curiosity. I'm hoping to visit one, myself."

"Ours is not a real 'farm.' It is just one of the many things our ranch is good for. But I know my mother would make you very welcome. You-but there! Look down, please. Yonder it is, Sobrante. That means 'richness,' you know. And now up. The next turn will land us on the mesa, and I hope, I hope, I have come in time!"

The road had now broadened, and with a little chirrup to King Zulu, she passed and forged ahead so rapidly that she was soon out of sight. The great bird upon whose back she was perched was not, apparently, at all wearied, but poor Prince was utterly winded, while a curious feeling of loneliness stole upon his rider.

But, presently, the sound of voices came over the bluff, and Mr. Hale urged his tired beast forward. The next he knew he was sprawling on the plateau and his horse had fallen beside him. Prince's forefoot was in a hole, from which he was unable to withdraw it.

"Oh! oh! The poor creature! And you, sir, are you hurt?"

"No, I think not. Rather a shake-up, though, and I was dizzy with the heat before. Prince, Prince, lie still; we'll help you."

One glance had showed the stranger that they were near a shepherd's hut, and that its occupant was at home. The man had been sitting quietly in the shade of the little building and of the one pepper tree which grew beside its threshold. He did not move, even now, till the girl called impatiently:

"Pedro! Come! Quick!"

Then he arose in a leisurely fashion and, carefully depositing his osiers in a tub of water, came forward.

"So? He can't get up, yes? A wise man looks where he rides, indeed."

Despite his anxiety over Prince, Mr. Hale regarded the shepherd with amused curiosity. Pedro's swarthy face was as unmoved as if the visits of strangers with disabled horses were daily events; but the man's calmness did not prevent his usefulness. In fact, during every step of his deliberate advance he had been studying the situation and how best to aid the fallen animal, which had now ceased to struggle and lay gazing at his master with a dumb, pitiful appeal.

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Then Pedro bent forward and, with a strength amazing in a man of his small build, seized Prince's head and shoulder and with one prodigious wrench freed him from the pitfall. Then he stooped again and carefully examined the bruised forefoot.

"A moon and a half he'll go lame. Yes. For just so long let him be left with Pedro. Si?"

Then he led the limping beast toward the hut and began to bathe its injured ankle with the water from the tub.

"Marvelous! I never saw anything done as easily as that!" cried Mr. Hale, recovering from his astonishment.

"Ah; but you've never seen our Pedro before. And to think I was so angry with him, I!"

With a remorseful impulse Jessica sprang forward and threw her arms about the old shepherd's shoulders. He received her caress as calmly as he did everything else, though a keen observer might have seen a fleeting smile around his rugged lips.

Smiles did, indeed, spring to all three faces when, a moment later, the rattling of tins discovered Zulu rummaging a heap of empty cans, even in the very act of swallowing a highly decorated one.

The jingling startled Prince, also, from the repose into which he had now settled, and, after one terrified glance toward his unknown enemy, King Zu, he dashed across the mesa as if lameness were unknown.

At which Pedro smiled, well content.

"Good. He that uses his own legs spares his neighbors. Yes."

"Meaning that he would have to be exercised by somebody?"

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The shepherd did not answer. He had lived alone so long amid the great solitudes of nature that speech had grown irksome to him. He regarded it a sin to waste words, and his young mistress understood this, if Mr. Hale did not. To this gentleman the situation presented itself as a very serious one. There was no habitation visible save the small hut, a place barely sufficient to its owner's simple needs and utterly inadequate to those of a lately recovered invalid. He was not strong enough to make his way to the valley on foot, and even if Prince were now able to carry him, he felt it would be brutal to impose so hard a task.

But Jessica came to his aid with the suggestion:

"If you'll come and rest behind the cabin I'll make you a cup of coffee on Pedro's little stove. He often lets me when I come up to see him, and then, when you've rested, we'll go home. I am so angry I can hardly breathe."

"Indeed; I should never have guessed it," he answered, laughing, and allowing the girl to lead him to the shelter proposed.

"Ah! but I am. And a gentlewoman never gets angry. Least of all with such a darling as Pedro. You see, he ought to have been about dying, and he hasn't even a single ache!"

"What an odd child you are!"

"Am I?" regarding him gravely. "I'm sure I don't want to be that. I want to be just-perfect."

Mr. Hale sighed as he dropped upon the bench to which Jess had guided him. "We are none of us that-ever."

"I suppose that's because 'none of us' ever try quite hard enough. But I will be, if trying will fetch it."

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Then she whisked inside the hut and presently there came to the gentleman's nostrils the aroma of freshly steaming coffee. He had not realized that he was hungry, but now could scarcely wait until the little maid came out to him again with a tin cup of the liquid in one hand and a can of condensed milk in the other.

"My mother always lets her guests 'trim' their drink for themselves, but I'll drop in the cream if you'll say how much. Enough? Now sugar. One? How queer. And it's sugar of our own making,

too; beet sugar, you know.”

The tin cup was decidedly rusty, the cheap spoon dingy, and “canned” milk the aversion of Mr. Hale’s dyspeptic stomach; yet despite these facts he had never tasted a more delicious draught than this, nor one served with a gentler grace. For Jessica was quite unconscious that there was anything amiss with Pedro’s dishes, and now offered the stranger a tin of time-hardened biscuits, with the air of one proffering the rarest of dainties.

“You would better eat one of these; they’re quite fine, with the coffee.”

“I’ll-I’ll try, thank you, if you’ll fetch your own cup and sit beside me.”

“All right. Only I’ll have to wait till Pedro’s finished. There’s only this and the egg, you know. He’s rather stubborn, dear fellow. My mother has offered him more dishes, but he says ‘more care’ and won’t take them. Excuse me.”

With a dip and swirl of her short skirts, the little hostess ran into the hut, to reappear, a moment later, bearing in both hands a drinking-cup which made the guest exclaim in delight:

“What an exquisite thing!”

“Isn’t it? But just wait until you see those which Pedro made for mother! This is fine, but they’re like cobwebs.”

She did not offer to show him the cup more closely, for she had seen the shepherd lay down his rushes and sit waiting, and Jessica would not disappoint the old friend for the new. Still the less, because she had so lately been vexed with him, and wholly without cause.

But when the silent fellow had emptied the cup she proudly gave it for Mr. Hale’s inspection.

“An ostrich egg, you see, cut off at the top. Pedro wove all this lacelike outside, of just the common tule rushes. He splits them till they are like threads, and see that handle! Nothing could break it, nor can one tell just where it begins or ends—the joinings, I mean. There are many wonderful weavers among the Indians, but none so deft as our Pedro, my mother says.

“Now, will you not fill this again and drink it with me? For I see that our speechless friend, yonder, has gone to work again as if his life depended on his industry.”

“He’s always at work, like that. Yet he never neglects his flock. He has been herding ever since he was a little boy. That must have been years ago. He’s so very old.”

“He doesn’t look it. I should guess he might be fifty.”

“Fifty! Why, there’s nobody anywhere around who remembers when our Pedro was born. Not even Fra Mateo at the mission, yet even he is more than a hundred,” she answered, proudly.

“Possible? Well, this is all wonderful to me who have lived always in a crowded city. This big West is like a romance, a fairy tale; not the least of its marvels to find a little girl like you riding alone on such a steed up such a desolate canyon, yet not in the least afraid.”

“Why, why should I be afraid? Except, of course, I was, for a bit, when I saw that Zulu made your horse rear. A step nearer and you’d have both gone over.”

Mr. Hale shuddered, and Jessica hastened to add:

“But the step wasn’t taken and you’re quite safe up here. Is the dizziness all gone? Many are like that before they get used to the glare. Some of the ‘tourists’ wear blue glasses, and veils, and things. They look so funny.”

Into her laughter burst Pedro’s speech.

“Ware Antonio. Is it plucking day, no? His third hand is Ferd, who lies and steals. I know. The mistress’ chest has many openings. *Nina*, go home, and bid Antonio come himself when next he’d have me die. Yes.”

Jessica sprang to her feet. These were many words for the shepherd to utter, and was not to be disobeyed. Though the old man’s age was doubtless far less than was accredited him, he was commonly considered a sage whose intelligence increased, rather than diminished, with the passing years.

“I’ll go at once, Pedro. Please forget that I was angry and—good-by.”

Mr. Hale was unprepared for this sudden departure, which bereft the scene of its fairest feature; for even while he listened to the brief speech between this odd pair there was a flash of twinkling feet and a scarlet Tam, and Jessica was gone.

“Why-why-what? Eh, what?” he demanded, rising.

His answer came with a crash and clatter which could never have been made by one small, fleeing figure, and with the startling force with which everything happened on that eventful day.

Over the bluff scrambled a shaggy piebald burro, from whose back there tumbled at the stranger’s very feet a brace of little lads, securely lashed together; even their wrists and ankles bound beyond possibility of their own undoing.

“Horrors! Indian captives!” cried the gentleman, aghast.

CHAPTER II

A BAD BUSINESS.

17

Captives? Far from it—save to their own reckless disregard of life and limb, and all for a bit of hitherto untested fun.

Shrieking with laughter at the success of their experiment, they rolled and floundered on the ground, till the laughter changed to cries of pain as their restless writhings to and fro drove their self-inflicted bonds deeper into the flesh.

By some dexterity they got upon their feet, at last, and one implored:

“Oh! you Pedro! or you, man! Cut us loose, can’t you? Don’t you see we can’t do it ourselves?”

Mr. Hale adjusted his eyeglasses and looked rather helplessly toward the shepherd; but that phlegmatic person was working away on his wonderful basket as stolidly as if there was none beside himself upon the mesa.

“Oh! you hateful old Pedro! Cut us free, I tell you! Ain’t I your master? You’d do it mighty quick for ‘Lady Jess.’”

The frightened little fellow, whose fun had now ebbed into a terrible fear of an indefinite bondage, began to whimper, and Mr. Hale to act. A few sharp slashings of the horsehair thongs and the captives were free to express their delight in a series of somersaults, which were only arrested by sight of Prince in the distance, holding up his injured foot and seeking for some pasture amid the dry herbage.

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“Hello! That horse is new. Is he yours, mister? What’s the matter with him? Humph! I guess you’re new, too, aren’t you? I never saw you in our valley before. Where’s your ranch?”

The questioner was a blue-eyed, fair-haired little chap whose close resemblance to Jessica proclaimed him her brother; but he was younger, sturdier, and less courteous than she. Yet his prolonged stare at the stranger had less of rudeness than surprise in it, and Mr. Hale laughed at the frank inspection.

“You look rather ‘new’ yourself, my man. About eight years, aren’t you?”

“How’d you guess?”

“Lads of my own.”

“Where?”

“Several thousand miles away, over the Atlantic coast.”

“Why didn’t you fetch ‘em?”

“Couldn’t afford it.”

“Oh! couldn’t you? H-m-m.” Then he turned his attention to Pedro, with the remark: “Why aren’t you sick, like ‘Tonio said? Making my sister come way up here for nothing. Don’t you dare do that again, I tell you. You’re just as well as ever, and I smell coffee. Come on, Luis!”

Catching his mate around the shoulders the boy rushed into the hut, only to be as promptly banished from it. With a swiftness matching the children’s own, the shepherd had followed and caught the pair, a lad in either hand, and flung them out of doors, exactly as one might a couple of mischievous kittens. Evidently, what was permissible to “Lady Jess” was forbidden these, though they were not at all disturbed by their sudden ejection. Such incidents were too familiar, and, having landed in one heap upon the ground, they immediately fell to wrestling as if this were the business they had originally intended. Now the black head of Spanish Luis was uppermost, now the sunnier one of Ned, with a flying jumble of vari-colored hands and feet, till Pedro came out and offered to each contestant a cup of cold, but well-sweetened coffee.

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This meant instant truce and they carried their treat to the bench Mr. Hale had occupied, leaving him to stand or sit upon the ground, as he preferred. He chose the latter and near enough to hear their eager chatter, which was still full of indignation against the shepherd’s robust health.

“‘Cause he ought to be dead, ‘most. And my mother wanting Jess the worst ever was. ‘Cause Wun Lung cut hisself.”

“Maybe Wun Lung die now, maybe,” suggested Luis, with hopeful heartlessness.

“Pshaw! No, he won’t. Chinamen don’t. You never saw one, Luis Garcia. Hi! Look at Zulu. Hi! Keno, Keno, Keno! Oh, Wow!”

By a mutual impulse, Prince and the ostrich had put as wide a space between themselves as possible, and the latter had strolled close to Pedro’s quiet flock before he had perceived it. This was evident, even from the distance; but now up rose Keno, the collie, and with angry yelps rushed fearlessly upon the great bird.

King Zulu hesitated but an instant before he turned his back upon his assailant and made all speed over the bluff into the canyon below.

“Well, of all cowards! A creature that could have killed the dog with one kick of his foot!” cried Mr. Hale, amazed.

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“Huh! No, he couldn’t. Kill you or Pedro. Kill that old horse of yours, easy as scat. Can’t kick low

down as Keno. Huh! Guess I know more about ostriches than you do," exulted Ned, in whose opinion the stranger had now greatly fallen.

"Huh! Don't know about ostrichers!" echoed Luis, loyally, and was rewarded by a friendly slap from his pattern and playmate.

Roused by the disturbance of his sheep, Pedro hurried to quiet them, but, as he passed, fixed a piercing gaze upon the stranger's face. The scrutiny seemed to partially reassure him, for he observed:

"Horse lame, Zulu gone, catch burro, yes. Let the feet which take the trail be young, not feeble and unused. But to him who journeys with evil in his heart evil will surely come. The widow and the orphan belong to God. Indeed, yet. 'Ware, Antonio."

Mr. Hale reflected swiftly. He smiled at thought of his own long legs bestriding the low back of the donkey, but a memory of that heated trail down which he must pass to reach the nearest house, decided the matter. While the small owners of the burro were improving the time of the shepherd's absence to ransack his dwelling the sturdy little animal bore its accustomed rider out of sight.

Meanwhile, Jessica's moccasined feet were flying down the slope, her blue skirts and scarlet Tam making a moving spot of color against the sandy glare of the canyon wall, and long before she came within hailing distance catching the eyes of one who eagerly awaited her approach.

This was John Benton, the carpenter and general utility man at Sobrante; who had come up the opposite side of the canyon, where were many huge boulders, a few trees, and no trail at all. Indeed, a passage along that face of the gulch was difficult in extreme, and so dangerous that it must have been serious business which brought a lame man thither. Fortunately for his patience, the girl paused for breath at a point level with his own narrow perch upon a shelving rock, and where there was no great width of the V-shaped chasm.

"Lady Jess! Oh! I say! Miss Jessica! Lady Jess!"

The girl looked about her, up and down, everywhere save to the further side where nobody ever went if it could be avoided. But she answered, cheerily:

"*Hola!* Coo'ee! Coo'ee! Who are you?"

The man made a trumpet of his hands and shouted back:

"The flume! Look east-to the flume!"

She followed his example and called through her own fingers:

"What's wrong? How came you there?"

He pointed downward, and she shaded her eyes from the blinding sunshine to see why, but could discover nothing new in the familiar scene.

"The water! That's where it goes! The flume is cut!"

Even at that pitch, his tones were full of excited indignation, and her own anger leaped at once.

"Somebody's cut the flume? Who dared! Wait-wait-I'm coming!"

"No, no! Don't. You can't help it-you'll break your neck! Oh! Lady Jess!"

"I'm coming! Wait for me!"

The carpenter laughed. "Might have known she would, and wanted she should, I suppose. Surest-footed little thing in the world. Guess I needn't fret. Though when I think what this old ranch would be without her, I don't feel any great call to send her into danger, myself. My! she's as nimble as a squirrel! Down to the bottom a'ready. Up this side in a jiffy, and won't her blue eyes snap when she sees this lowdown trick? If I knew whose job it was, well, I'm a peaceable man if I'm let, but there wouldn't be room enough in this here valley for the two of us. And it's all on a piece with the rest. One thing after another. There's a snake in this wigwam, but which 'tis? H-m-m! Beats me. Beats me clear to Jericho."

Then he fell to watching the slower, steady ascent of Jessica, who had descended the further side so swiftly, and who had clambered lightly enough over the roughness of the gulch bottom; at times filled with a roaring torrent, but now quite dry after a long, hot summer.

"Well, here I am!"

"And a sorry sight to show you. Look a' that now. Isn't that a regular coyote piece of work?"

Along this face of the canyon descended a line of small wooden troughs, closely joined, and supported upon slender but strong cedar uprights. This flume connected with the distant reservoir of an irrigating company and had been built by Jessica's dead father at a great and ill-afforded expense. But of all good things there was nothing so precious to the tillers of that thirsty land as water, and the cutting off of this supply meant ruin to Sobrante.

Young as she was, Jessica fully understood this, though she could not understand that any human being should do a deed so dastardly.

"John Benton, you mustn't say that. Some of the cattle have done it. It's an accident. It can be mended. I'm sorry, of course, but so thankful you found it. And I see you've got your tools."

"Oh! I can mend it, all right, but it won't stay mended. You'll see. 'Tisn't the first break I've

patched, not by any means.”

“Of course it isn’t. Only last week in that stampede, when the boys were changing pasture, the creatures ran against it and you fixed it, good as new. There isn’t anything you can’t do with an ax and a few nails.”

John passed the compliment by unheeding.

“There’s breaks and there’s cuts. Reckon I can tell the difference quick enough. This is a cut and isn’t the first one I’ve found, I say. ’Twas a fresh-ground blade did this piece of deviltry, or I’m no judge of edges. Now, who did it? Why? And how’s old Pedro?”

Despite her faith in her friends, the small ranchwoman’s heart sank.

“He-he-why, he isn’t sick at all! I was sent up there on a fool’s errand, and just on plucking-day, when I was so needed at home. With Wun Lung hurt and mother so busy, I ought to have a dozen pairs of hands. Of course, I’m glad he’s well, dear old fellow, but I shouldn’t have gone this morning if somebody hadn’t told Antonio wrong. I met a stranger on the trail, too, and Zulu scared his horse, and it stumbled in a gopher hole or something and is lamed for ever so long. He’ll likely come to Sobrante, if he can get there, but he looked ill if Pedro didn’t, and the sun nearly overcame him. Can’t I help you hold that board?”

John accepted her offer of help less because he needed it than because he always liked to have her near him.

“So ’twas Antonio sent you, eh? H-m-m!”

“He didn’t send me. Course not. He just said somebody said Pedro was dying.”

The carpenter laughed, but his mirth was not pleasant.

“Queer how stories get mixed, even in this lonesome place. There; you needn’t hold that. Your little hands aren’t so very strong, helpful as they may be. This isn’t any great of a job; it ’twould only stay, once ’twas finished!”

“Then I’ll go. Maybe I’d better send up one of the boys to help you. Shall I? Who do you want?”

Upon the point of declining, the carpenter changed his mind.

“Yes, you may. I wish you would. Send Antonio.”

“Send-Antonio! Why, I should as soon think of ‘sending’ that stranger I told you about. You’re teasing me, for you know well that Antonio is the only one who ever ‘sends’ Antonio. Even my mother, who has a right to ‘send’ everybody on the ranch whither she will, never orders the manager. Well, good-by. You shall have a nice dinner out of the house-kitchen to pay for your hard climb.”

“Take care where you step in your hurry, and just try that word on the ‘senor.’ Tell him there’s a bit of a break in the flume I’d like his advice about.”

The workman’s laugh followed the girl down the rough and perilous way, and just as she passed out of hearing came the parting shot:

“Send Antonio.”

“H-m-m! I don’t see what it all means. First is old Pedro, with his grim “Ware Antonio!” And now John Benton speaks in that queer way, as if there were two meanings to his words. Heigho! I hear somebody coming up. I wonder who!”

Hurrying downward as fast as the uneven path allowed, her own softly-shod feet making no noise, she reached a turn of the road and suddenly slackened her pace. The man approaching was one of the few whom she feared and disliked.

“Ferd, the dwarf!”

Instinctively, she hid behind a clump of shrubbery and waited for him to pass, hoping he would not see her. He did not. He was too engrossed in handling, apparently counting, something within a deep basket that hung on his arm, and his bare feet loped around over the rocks as easily as they would have carried him across the level mesa.

As soon as he had gone by Lady Jess started onward, but she had grown even more thoughtful.

“That’s queer. Antonio must need Ferd to-day if ever he does. Indeed, nobody seems able to serve him as well as that poor half-wit. What could he have had in his basket? And-ha! how came *this* here?”

With a cry of surprise she lifted a small, soft object from the ground before her and regarded it in gathering dismay.

CHAPTER III

SENOR TOP-LOFTY

Ever since Jessica could remember, Antonio Bernal had been manager of the Sobrante ranch, and

after the death of her father, a few months before, he became practically its master. Even Mrs. Trent deferred to his opinions more and more, and seemed to stand in awe of him, as did most others on the great estate. He was the only person there, save his own servant, Ferd, who did not treat the little girl with that adoring sort of reverence which had given her the love-name of "our Lady Jess." For some reason unknown to her he disliked her and showed this, so that she shrank from and feared him in return.

As she emerged from the canyon upon the broad, sandy road which crossed the valley, she saw him loping toward her on the powerful black horse with which he made his daily rounds to inspect the many industries that Mr. Trent had established. Jessica could always tell by the way he rode what Antonio's mood might be, and it did not lessen her dread to see that his sombrero was well over his eyes and his shoulders hunched forward.

"Something's put him out, but I can't help that. I must stop him and speak to him."

So she placed herself in the middle of the road and shouted her familiar:

"Hola! Coo-ee! Coo-ee!"

Any other ranchman would have paused and saluted his "lady," but the "senor" made as if he would ride her down, unseeing. 27

Jessica did not flinch. That ready temper which she was always lamenting flamed at the insult, and she would not move a hair's breadth from his path.

"Hola! Antonio Bernal! I must speak to you, and-see that?"

Suddenly bending forward she waved something long and black under Nero's nose, who reared and settled on his haunches in a way to test a less experienced rider.

"What do you mean, child--" began that irate gentleman, but pausing at sight of the object she held.

"I think this a plume from Beppo's wing, don't you, Antonio?"

He muttered something under his breath, and she went on, explaining:

"I found it in the canyon, just after Ferd has gone up it. I knew it in a minute, for I was looking Beppo over yesterday, and I never saw such perfect feathers on any bird. How do you suppose it came there, and why?"

"The fool! One of the very best. How dared he. But suppose I'll have to admit he stole it. I don't see how, though, for I did the work myself. Give it to me, *senorita*; I'll put it with the others."

Somehow, when Antonio was *sauve* "our Lady Jess" liked him less than when he was sharp of speech. His native "*senorita*" jarred on her ear, though she blamed herself for her injustice, nor did she yield him the feather.

"Not yet, please. I'm going to show it to mother. She'll be so delighted to know the plucking was a rich one; and if Ferd did steal this, or has others in his basket, of course you'll make him bring them back." 28

"Of course," answered Antonio, though he frowned and searched her face with his black eyes as if to read all her suspicions.

But as Jessica was not suspicious; she was vaguely troubled, as if she had come into some dark and unknown world. Surely Antonio was able to clear off all these little mysteries, and she checked him again as he was about to ride on.

"There's something else, *senor*," adopting his title in imitation of his addressing her; "John Benton is up the gulch fixing a break in the flume. It's a bad one, and more a cut than a break, he says. He asked me to tell you and wishes you'd go up there to advise him. I'm to send up a man to help him. But he wants you, too."

"Why should I waste my time on such a fool's errand, eh? I knew there was a leak somewhere and am glad he's found it. There's been no water in the ditches these three days-more, ten, maybe-and the oranges are falling. Send up that idler, Joe; and, by the way, how's Pedro?"

It was the blue eyes now which turned keen and searching, and under their gaze Antonio's were averted toward some distant point in the landscape, though the contemptuous smile remained upon his lips.

"That was a fool's errand, too, *Senor Bernal*, and I did so want to be at home this morning. Pedro was never livelier. Whoever told you he was ill was quite mistaken."

Antonio gave a short, derisive laugh, dug his spurs into Nero's sides and loped away. A picturesque, noticeable figure in his quaint, half-Spanish dress and his silver-decorated sombrero, bestriding the heavy Mexican saddle upon his powerful horse.

"Vain as a peacock," was his fellow-ranchmen's opinion of their "boss," though had his affectations been all his shortcomings these had not lessened their liking for him. 29

Lady Jess looked after him for a moment, her face still sober and perplexed.

"I ought to be at home, helping mother, this minute; but I'm going first to the corral to speak a word of comfort to poor Beppo, and see how big a plucking there was. If it was a good yield that will be so much the better news to tell my dear, and this certainly is the finest plume we ever got. Good! There are some of the boys over there, too, and I'll save time by getting one of them to go

up the canyon to John. *Hola!*"

Her soliloquy ended in the gay little Spanish salute, and this was now instantly answered by a hearty shout of welcome from a group of rough-garbed men, taking a moment's rest in the shade of the old adobe packinghouse.

As lightly as if she had not already walked a long distance, the girl ran to her friends, to be at once caught up by a pair of strong arms and gently placed upon a cushion in the box of an empty wagon.

"But this was your place, Joe Dean. I saw you get up from it."

"It's yours now, Lady Jess. You do me proud. What's the good word? How's old Pedro?"

"Well just plain, every day well. Never been sick a minute. Had all that climb for nothing; or, maybe, not quite for nothing, because I met a stranger up there and liked him; and saw John Benton as I came down, and-found this! Isn't that a plume to be proud of? Raised right here on our little Sobrante."

"Whew! It's a beauty, sure enough. A dozen like that would be worth a tidy sum. How found it?"

"Has anybody seen King Zu? Though, of course, I know it can't be his. He was plucked such a little while ago, nor could he have gotten across the gulch without losing more. Besides, Antonio said 'stole.'"

Then she gave a hasty account of her morning's adventures, during which meaning glances were exchanged between the trio of workmen who, by the time she had finished, had grown as glum as they had before been cheerful.

"Now, what do you think? Is there anybody who'd be mean enough to cut off my mother's irrigation, on purpose, or steal her feathers? Even poor Ferd; I'm sure she's always been good to him and pitied him."

"Ferd has hands. Others have heads," said Joe, as spokesman for the rest.

They nodded swift assent.

"Except yourself, Lady Jess, nobody ever sees the 'senor' handle the feathers, and you not often. Only he and his shadow, foolish Ferd, can manage the birds, he claims. I've been smoking that in my pipe along back."

"Oh! Joe, you shouldn't be suspicious of evil."

"No, I shouldn't be anything you don't want me to be, but I am."

"Even if I don't like him very well, because he's a little cross, Antonio Bernal is a good man. He must be. Else my father and now mother wouldn't trust him so. She lets him get all the money for everything first and she has what's left-after you're all paid, I mean."

"Poor little woman!"

"Not poor, exactly, Samson. And it isn't Antonio's fault that there isn't so much as there used to be when father was here. If there were, mother would carry out all father's plans. She'd irrigate that tract beyond the arroyo, toward the sand hills, and test it with strawberries, as he meant. There shouldn't be an inch of untilled land on all the ranch, if the crops we have paid out just a little better. But, no matter. As long as you boys get your due wages, we can wait for the rest."

There was another exchange of glances which Jessica did not see. Neither did she see herder Samson, lying at length on the ground, lift his great boot and significantly point to a hole in its toe. Nor would she have surmised his meaning had she done so. Indeed, she suddenly remembered her errand at the packinghouse and ran to its open door, but failed.

"How queer! Why should this be locked? I didn't know it ever was. Where can the key be?"

"In Antonio Bernal's pocket," said Joe quietly.

"Then even before I found this feather he must have suspected somebody and taken care of the others. But it's dreadful if we have come to turning keys on one another, here, at dear Sobrante. Well, I'm off to mother, now; and, Joe, Antonio said you should go to help John. Will you?"

"For you, fast enough, Lady Jess, though I'm about quit of Top-Lofty's orders."

"Grumbler!" laughed the girl, hurrying away, with her gayety quite restored by this few minutes' chat with the beloved "boys" who had petted her all her life.

They did not laugh, however, as they watched her going, and Joe, rising to do her bidding, slapped his thigh emphatically and remarked:

"I call it the time has come. The longer we put it off the worse it is. Poor little missy! Getting our wages due! That little angel 'd cry the blue out of her pretty eyes if she knew how long 'twas since we'd seen the color of our money. Pass the word along, boys, and let's confab, to-night, and settle it. Time, about moon-up, in John's shop. How's that?"

"Count me a mutineer," said the ex-sailor, Samson, as he strolled toward his cattle sheds.

"I'm with you," echoed Marty, departing for his orange grove. "Mutiny's an ugly word aboard ship, I'm told, but when psalm-singing Samson takes to using it right here on dry land I reckon the case differs. Anyhow, if it's a bid 'twixt the little one and Top-Lofty, I'm for the little one every time."

Scruff knew the road home as well as another, and doubtless reasoned in his burro mind that the sooner he reached there the sooner he would be rid of his awkward rider. So he made all speed over the steep descent, though Mr. Hale used his own feet, now and then, as human brakes to check the creature's pace; and, whimsically, remonstrated when the jolts became too frequent.

"Here, you beast! Hold on! If ever I ride a donkey again just let me know about it, will you? Keep that front end of yours up, please. I've a notion of sliding over your head, just to accommodate. Steady, there, steady. I flatter myself I can stick if I can't ride. And we're getting along. We're getting along."

Indeed, much earlier than he had hoped for, they were on level ground and had struck out upon that road where Jessica had met the manager, and which for some distance followed the tree-bordered arroyo—just then a river of sand only—leading straight toward a group of buildings and an oasis of greenery most welcome to the stranger's sun-blinded eyes.

"Sobrante ranch, that must be, and the home of my little ostrich rider. I hope she'll be there to greet me, for a tempting spot it looks."

The nearer he approached the more charming it appeared, with its one modern, vine-covered cottage, and its long stretches of low adobe structures—enough to form a village in themselves—and as dingily ancient as the other was freshly modern.

In reality, these old adobes were remnants of a long-abandoned mission, but still in such excellent repair that they were utilized for the ranchman's quarters and for the business of the great estate. Antonio Bernal was the only one of all the employees who had his own rooms at "the house," as the cottage was called where the Trents themselves lived.

From the kitchen of this attractive "house" now floated a delectable odor of well-cooked food, and with the reflection that he was always hungry nowadays, the visitor crossed to its open window; there came, also, a girlish voice, exclaiming:

"Yes, mother, I'm sure he was a gentleman, though he didn't look well. I told him you weren't fond of strangers and had little time to give them, but that I thought you'd make him welcome. Indeed, there's nowhere else for him to go, since his horse is lame and we so far from everybody. He lost his trail, he said. Was I right?"

Then his shadow fell across the sun-lighted floor and Jessica faced about. With a whisk of the saucepan, in which she was scrambling eggs, she added: "Well, right or wrong, here he is!" But she was talking to empty air, for her mother had disappeared.

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CHAPTER IV

AN INTERRUPTED SUPPER

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The young ranchwoman placed her pan in safety and ran out upon that north porch, where the table was already spread, to meet the visitor.

"Oh! I'm glad you've gotten here all safe. How did you do it? It's a long walk for those who aren't used to it. Even for those who are, too. Did you ride your horse? Was he better?"

She rattled off her questions without waiting for replies and to give him time to recover his breath, which he seemed to have lost. Then she poured him a glass of milk and urged him to drink it, with the remark:

"That's Blandina's own. She's the house-cow. You'll find it delicious. Don't you?"

"It's fine milk," answered the other, cautiously; "but, if it isn't too much trouble, a bit of ice would improve it."

"Ice? Why, where could I get ice? Sometimes, in the winter, a little forms along the arroyo, but now—I'm very sorry, indeed. I'd be so glad to get it if I could."

Mr. Hale swallowed the sickeningly warm liquid with a gulp and hastened to apologize.

"It wouldn't be good for me if you could. My compliments to your house-cow, and I'm very grateful for my refreshment. You have a beautiful home."

"Haven't we? The prettiest in the world, I guess. My father thought so and my mother loves it. So do we all, but to her it is dearest. Because, you see, father and she have made it all it is. Please, just let me move your chair nearer the edge of the porch. So. Now, look away off to the east. Father said there could be no view more uplifting. He wished everybody who had to live in cities could see it. He knew it would make them better men."

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Magnificent though it was, Mr. Hale found his small hostess more interesting than the view.

"Your father—" he began, questioningly.

"Isn't here, now. He passed heavenward a year ago. Since then nothing seems just the same, and dear mother is often sad and troubled. You know she wants to carry on all father's experiments, she doesn't want his 'life work to be wasted,' she says, and Antonio isn't able to get as much money as he used to be. She tries so bravely not to let it fret her, and I don't see where she is.

She was in the kitchen with me. We were getting dinner because Wun Lung, the cook, cut his hand, and Pasqual isn't to be trusted. Of course, he's a good enough boy, can make beds and such things, but-cook! One must be very dainty to do that. My mother can cook deliciously! She taught herself everything and the why of it. When she and father came here they lived in that tiny adobe away at the end of the second row. Do you see it? By the old corridor. Their table was a packing box and they had just a little camping outfit. Now there's all this."

Jessica Trent's sweet face glowed with loving pride in her fair home, but this was as nothing of the tenderness which filled her eyes as they now caught sight of a tall woman in black coming over the garden path.

"There she is, my mother!"

Mr. Hale rose as the lady drew near and one glance showed him what model "Lady Jess" had chosen as a type of that "perfect" breeding to which the little maid aspired. The mistress of Sobrante was a real gentlewoman, even though her gown was of cheapest print and her surroundings those of an isolated western ranch. Her daughter ran to cast a clinging, yet protecting, arm about her, and proudly turning toward their guest, presented:

"My mother, Mrs. Trent, Mr. --" and smiling waited for him to finish the sentence.

"Hale. I had forgotten to mention my name before, even though we have chatted so cosily. Permit me, madam."

The card he offered bore the inscription:

"Mr. Morris Hale, Attorney at Law, 156 Broadway, New York."

Watchful Jessica saw her mother's face pale, while into her native cordiality of manner crept that slight hauteur with which she regarded the most objectionable of "tourists." This, then, was one such, and the girl was sorry. She had liked the stranger so much and was already planning pleasant entertainment for him; but if her dear did not approve of him her own opinion went for naught.

Yet it was only the statement of the gentleman's business that had caused Mrs. Trent's momentary coldness, for at that time, though her daughter did not know this, the mere suggestion of law or lawyers disturbed her. But she was quick to feel the possible injustice of her fear and to atone for it by a deeper cordiality.

"You have come just in time to share our dinner, Mr. Hale, and we'll not wait any longer for laggards. I was looking for the children. Jessie, dear, have you seen them?"

"Not since breakfast, mother. But they can't be far away, for there's Scruff yonder, trying to get into the alfalfa."

"Antonio hasn't come up, either, since the plucking. I wish he would while the food is fresh. If you'll--"

"We needn't wait for him, because I met him riding toward the foothills, as I came home. He's probably off to the mines and that means an all-day's trip. But I'll help you dish up, and seek the boys, though they don't often need seeking at mealtime. You sit right down with Mr. Hale, dear, and I'll serve you. Pasqual can bring in the tureen, and I hope the eggs aren't spoiled by waiting."

"Is Scruff that mottled burro poking his nose through that fence?" asked the guest.

"Yes. He belongs to my little son, Ned, who shares him with his playmate, Luis. An inseparable trio, usually."

"Then I'm the cause of their present separation. I rode that animal down from old Pedro's cabin and at his advice," Mr. Hale described his meeting with the two small lads, the fright they had given him, and his own desertion of them. "Though now I'm ashamed to recall how readily I consigned them to a tramp I was unwilling to take myself. I wish I'd brought them with me. We could have used Scruff's back, turn and turn about."

"Oh how could they! One misstep and they'd have been killed."

"What is it, mother?" asked Jessica, seeing the lady's hand shake so that she could scarcely serve the soup which formed the chief dish of their plain dinner.

"Only another prank of those terrifying children. Bound themselves--or had help to bind--and rode Scruff bareback up the canyon! They're always 'playing Indian,' and I wish they'd never heard of one. It's that Ferd eggs them on. He 'dares' them and--Excuse me, Mr. Hale. Mothers are anxious people. Try some of Jessie's scramble, please. She is just learning to cook and likes to be appreciated."

"But I didn't see them, as I went up or down. They must have taken the long road around by the north end. Where the old Digger village is," observed Jessie.

"A forbidden route. It's to be hoped they'll follow the shortest road home. If they're not here in an hour one of the men must go to fetch them."

Jessica laughed and kissed her mother.

"Don't you worry, dear, and do, please, eat your dinner. Aren't those children always having hairbreadth escapes, and are they ever hurt? Pedro'll send them down in a hurry. He knows his mistress and her ways, and wouldn't let her be troubled if he could help it. They'll get no dinner at Pedro's, and dinner is something they've never missed yet. Hark! Aren't going to miss now!"

Listen. They're fighting along home in their regular fashion. By the sound they've about got to prickly-pear hedge. *Hola!* Ned! Lu-is! Oh! beg pardon. I forgot I was at table. Excuse me, mother, and I'll bring in the youngsters--after a deluge!"

Already there was an uproar in the outer kitchen, where two tired and hungry little boys were assaulting the unoffending Pasqual, diligently scrubbing away at his pots and pans. Any victim will do, at a pinch, to vent one's wrath upon, and Pasqual was nearest. But he was not one to suffer patiently, and promptly returned the puny blows of his assailants with much more vigorous ones, till Jessica reached the spot, rescued the truants, and conducted them to the washbasin. 39

From there, disdaining the towel, they made rapid transit to the porch and the presence of the stranger. All along their enforced walk home they had laid plans of vengeance, among which "tommyhawking" and "shootin' chock full o' arrers" were the wildest. But, alas! Now that their enemy was in their very power, they had no fiercer weapons than four grimy little fists. Better these than nothing, was Ned's instant decision, and Luis was but Ned's second thought. As Ned's right descended upon Mr. Hale's shoulders, Luis' left delivered a telling blow upon the gentleman's hand, uplifted toward his lips. This was small assistance to the yellow-haired chief, for the spoon fled straight from the victim's fingers and landed squarely in Ned's face.

This created intense diversion. The blows intended for the guest were now bestowed upon each other, and so impartially that neither side was worsted. Mrs. Trent rose in her place, flushed and apologetic, though the stranger was far more surprised than offended, while the sister had once more appeared and terminated a battle almost before it was begun. With a strength of which she did not look capable she caught up and lifted a child into each of the two high chairs in waiting--but wisely placed at opposite sides of the board. There they settled themselves composedly, beaming and smiling upon each other like a pair of wingless cherubs, while Ned thrust forth a tin basin and demanded:

"Give me my soup, mother."

"Gimmesoup!" echoed Luis, choking over a piece of bread he had filched from Jessica's plate.

"Children!"

"Oh! Huh! Please give me my soup, mother."

"Plea' gimmesoup, *madr'*."

"Isn't your *madre*, Luis Garcia. Isn't nobody's mother but mine, so there!" 40

"Humph!" remarked Jessica. "What about me?"

This set Ned off into a giggle, in which Luis dutifully joined, and the laughter restored the best of feelings all around. The meal over, Mrs. Trent offered the guest the use of a room in which to rest, and this he gladly accepted; adding that he wished he might be able to make some arrangement with her by which he could occupy it indefinitely, till his health was restored and the business which had brought him to that region was completed. Any terms she would make would be most satisfactory to him, for he was charmed with Sobrante and most anxious to sojourn there for a time.

Jessica was already clearing the table, yet watching her mother closely, and was surprised to see a moment's hesitation on the dear face before the expected and customary answer came:

"We are always glad to make our friends welcome at Sobrante, and for as long as our simple life suits them, but we could not accept payment for our hospitality. I am glad you like our home, and Jessica will show you to the friend's room at once. Tell Pasqual, my dear, to attend Mr. Hale and see that he has all which he requires. All that may be supplied at this isolated spot, that is," she added, with a smile.

Mr. Hale thanked his hostess and withdrew, but he felt that he had practically been dismissed from the ranch and that he had no past friendship to urge as a plea for any but the briefest visit there.

Yet the cool chamber into which the traveler was shown proved so restful that the "forty winks only" which he intended were prolonged till sunset. Then he hastily descended to the lower floor to find that the early supper of the household was over; though Mrs. Trent had kept his own portion hot, and smilingly waved aside his apologies as she placed before him a dish of delicately broiled quail, prepared by her own skillful hands. 41

"Why, this is a luxury! and to be expected only at some great hotel. By the way, where is the nearest one? I should have been on my way long ago."

"I hope not. And you cannot well reach any hotel to-night. The nearest is thirty miles away, and for a long distance the road is a mere track across the plain. Even those who are used to it, would find it difficult to keep it on a moonless night, as this will be."

"Oh! I'm so sorry."

The hostess' face grew anxious. "Is it so important? I thought--"

"Humph! That's another of my blunders. My regret is that I must force myself upon your hospitality after--"

Mrs. Trent interrupted with a laugh.

"I imagine we're talking at cross-purposes. While I cannot make any guest comfortable at

Sobrante 'indefinitely,' as you proposed, I should be disappointed to have you leave us hurriedly, I'd like you to inspect the ranch, thoroughly, and that will require at least a week. Besides, since I've learned from your card that you are a lawyer, I would like to ask your advice. Of course, if you are willing to give it in a business way."

"I shall be happy to serve you and more than happy to stay for the week you propose, I came--"

But he did not finish his sentence. There rang through the quiet room the echoes of rifle shots, repeated singly and in volleys, and accompanied by shouts and shrieks, so fierce and unearthly that Mr. Hale sprang to his feet while his hand sought his own pistol pocket.

"Horrible! In the midst of this peace--an Indian outbreak!"

A curious thrill ran through his veins, as if his sixty years had suddenly turned backward to sixteen, and, with an answering cry, he leaped through the open window and rushed straight into the arms of a man who had already reached the porch and was making for the very room that the stranger had just quitted.

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CHAPTER V COUNTER REVOLT

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The collision staggered both men and gave Mrs. Trent time to reach the side of her guest and to lay a restraining hand upon his arm. Her voice was tremulous with laughter as she explained:

"It's only a rifle practice. The ranchmen and the children--all children in this sport--and always noisy. I'm sorry it disturbed you, but--Indians! How could you imagine it. Ah! Antonio, good-evening. Have you had supper?"

"No, senora. I need it."

"It is waiting. This visitor, Mr. Hale, Senor Antonio Bernal, the manager of Sobrante."

The gentlemen bowed, one with the brevity of a busy man, the other with the profound salutation of his race. But they parted immediately, for the Easterner was anxious to witness the shooting and the superintendent to break his long fast; and with disgust at his own readiness to fancy danger where none existed, Mr. Hale followed the sound of the yells and cheers.

"Hi! hi! for the little one! Hit him again, blue jacket!" shrieked Samson, as, steadying upon a tie-post the rifle he was too small to support, Ned sighted the bull's-eye of a distant target, took a careless aim, yet struck it squarely.

Whereupon the strong ex-sailor thrust the weapon aside and tossed the lad in the air as if he had been a ball. Yet caught him as he lightly descended, and placed him astride his own shoulders.

"Who'll beat the little master? Three times out o' seven, with an iron heavy as that, how's the showing for an eight-year-old?"

But Ned slipped from the ranchman's back, picked up his own tiny, perfectly finished gun, and swung it over his head.

"Huh! That's nothing! Huh! This the feller! Huh! Guess 'tis. Shot more'n forty-'leven quails this day 't ever was. Had 'em for my supper. Had 'em for the man broke his horse's leg and stole Scruff. Hello, Mister! Had your supper? Wasn't them good birds? I shot 'em for you. I did."

"You?" demanded the gentleman, astonished. He had now joined the group surrounding the three children, and his presence caused a lull in the uproar which had preceded his arrival. "You! Why you aren't big enough to do such a thing."

"I did! I did! I never told a lie in all my life--never, never, never! So, there!" and unable to endure such an imputation, the child rushed upon his traducer and pounded him well with the butt of his little rifle.

"Ned! Edward Trent! Stop! You--a little gentleman--mother's son!"

Jessica's arms were about her brother, restraining his movements and for a moment making him drop his head in shame. The next he had broken from her grasp, caught up another gun and dragged it toward her.

"Your turn, Jess. Hurry up. There's just an inch of sun left--I mean there was a minute ago--hurry up! Me an' Luis's got to go to bed quick as a wink! Hurry--hurry!"

"Hurry up!" echoed Luis, with a yawn, and dropping down where he stood, was instantly asleep.

John Benton crossed to the visitor's side and remarked:

"Now, I tell you, stranger, you'll see the sight of your life. If I was a betting man I'd back Our Lady Jess again' any other girl-shooter on the globe. You just watch out--if the dark holds off a spell."

There were a dozen, maybe, of the ranchmen standing or lying around in a semi-circle, but now all quiet and intent upon the little girl, as, nodding and smiling upon her guest and her beloved "boys," she stepped into the open space before them all. "Forty-niner" March, unerring

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marksman and the children's instructor, took his place beside her, examined her rifle, handed it to her and also observed to the stranger:

"Now, if nothin' happens, you'll see sunthin'. Sorry it's so dusk, but any gent what doubt's is free to walk up to the target and look where the ball strikes. You, lady, do me proud."

"I'll try," said Jessica, simply. "Is it the little nail in the center?"

"Just that."

She sighted and fired; and a ranchman who had run forward to the target, shouted back across the darkening space:

"Hit her plumb!"

A roar of applause greeted this announcement, but the girl accepted this tribute with no comment save another nod and smile, as she waited her teacher's next direction.

This was given silently by a gesture downward.

Instantly Jessica dropped upon the ground, rested herself upon her elbows, aimed, fired, and—"Hit her again! Hooray for Our Lady! Hooray-hooray-hooray!"

In his excitement big Samson seized Mr. Hale by the sleeve and compelled that gentleman to jog-trot across the open and view at closer range the wonderful skill of the little maid who was so dear to them all.

"Stand aside, Psalm Singer. Your head's in the way!" cautioned somebody.

Still clutching his companion, Samson obeyed, and they saw Jessica now lying upon her back, sighting upward and backward over her head a small, white object that had been placed in the target where the tack had been. There was no cheering then, nor any movement among the eager watchers who fairly held their breaths lest they disturb their darling in that supreme moment of her success or failure.

"But she'll not fail!" thought more than one, and would have given a year's wages that she should not.

There was a swift rush of something through the air, so close to Mr. Hale's nose that he visibly drew back, and a double report as the bullet hit the toy torpedo which had been the chosen mark.

After that, pandemonium; or so it seemed to Mr. Hale. Those gray and grizzled men—for there were few young among them—shouted themselves hoarse and gave way to the wildest expressions of pride and delight. As for Jessica, the heroine, though her eyes sparkled and a flush rose to her cheeks, she was by far the calmest person present. Even Mr. Hale's heart was beating rapidly and he caught the girl's hands and shook them violently, in his congratulations.

"That was marvelous! marvelous! I've seen pretty good sharp-shooting done by professionals, but never anything so fine as that last shot of yours. How could you ever learn it, so young as you are?"

"How could I help learning? It is 'Forty-niner's' work, a deal more than mine. He's been teaching me ever since I could hold a tiny bow and arrow. He's wonderful, if you please; but I--Well, it seems just to do itself, somehow. But I must go in now. Time for the little ones to be in bed. Come, Ned. Come, Luis. Oh, dear! he's fast asleep."

"I'll pack him for you, lady. And say, boys, isn't this the time?"

Samson had lifted the sleeping Luis, tucked him under one arm and swung Ned to the other, but now paused to glance around among his fellow-workmen.

"Time was 'moon-up,'" answered Joe, minded to be facetious.

"This would be 'moon-up,' if the old girl knew her business," retorted the sailor. "In ten minutes we'll be with you. Come, on, my lady. I've a word to say to you and the mistress."

The daily evening sport was over and the ranchmen rapidly dispersed, each to his own quarters, and none considering it his especial business to entertain the stranger, who was now strolling slowly houseward mindful of the sudden chill which came with the nightfall and of his own unfitness for exposure.

Proudest of all, "Forty-niner" gathered up the weapons and carried them off, to clean and put in order for the next evening's practice. He was well satisfied with his pupil's achievements, though already planning more difficult feats for their performance. The man was eighty; yet, while his abundant hair was white, his back was still straight and his step firm. The joy of his old age was the athletic training of the Sobrante children, and it would have amazed him, even broken his heart, had he been told that by such means he did not well earn his keep. He was eldest of all the elderly workmen that the late master of the ranch had gathered about him, and his appreciation of this good home in which to end his days perhaps, the greatest of all. It was, therefore, a terrible shock which awaited him, as entering his own room, he lighted his lamp and saw lying on his table a white envelope addressed to himself.

He knew what it meant. Dismissal.

One year before, when Cassius Trent died, there had been twenty employees where there were now but thirteen—he the "odd one" of the "baker's dozen." Seven times, when least expected or desired, some one of these twenty had found in his room just such an envelope, containing his

arrears of wages, and the curt information that, "by the order of Mrs. Trent, his services were no longer required at Sobrante, nor would any wages be forthcoming from that day forward."

These men had all been friends, rather than servants, and in each case the result had been the same. Cut to the heart by the manner of discharge, and, for the first time it may be, realizing that he was no longer young, and, therefore, valuable, the recipient of the envelope had quietly disappeared, saying farewell to nobody.

"My turn! My turn, at last!" broke from the aged frontiersman's lips, and a groan followed. "Ten years I've lived in this old adobe cell till I've come to feel like the monk for whom it was first built. Now--"

The white head drooped forward on the outstretched arms and all the burden of his eighty years seemed suddenly to have descended upon that bowed and shrunken figure.

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In the pretty dining-room Antonio Bernal had eaten a hearty supper served by his own mistress, since Wun Lung was not to be found and the house-boy, Pasqual, claimed his usual recreation hour at the rifle practice. But neither thought anything amiss in this, and the manager would, indeed, have asserted that it was quite the proper thing. Was not he a Bernal, and superior to all at Sobrante? Even though he was, for the time being, receiving wage instead of bestowing. Well, it was a long lane that had no turning.

Pushing back from the table, Antonio had murmured the proverb in Spanish, with a smile of satisfaction lighting his dark face, and Mrs. Trent had failed to hear distinctly, though she was familiar enough with the language so often in use about her.

"Beg pardon, I did not understand."

"Beggings pardon, one's self, senora, it is seldom that you do. It is the business was never made for the small brains of the women, no? 'Tis the senora's place to be beautiful and let the business rest in the capable hands of I, myself. *En verdad.*"

Mrs. Trent colored and bit her lip. This man's insolence was becoming insupportable, and she could scarcely recognize him for the obsequious fellow who had been her husband's right-hand dependence. His brief authority had turned his head, she reflected, and, again, that she must in no wise offend him. The welfare of her children demanded this, and forcing herself to smile as pleasantly as if his insult were a jest, she remarked:

"The gentleman whom you met, as you came in, is a lawyer. A New York lawyer. I-I would like to consult him about our-this business you mention. I was born and reared in New York and have a feeling that anything which comes from there must be all right. Even a lawyer, though I'm not fond of the profession usually.

50

"The senor is not wont to waste so many words upon her most humble servant, no. And as for the lawyers, have I not this day been to the consulting of the most eminent, the wisest of his kind, no? But yes; and the truth is, senora-believe me, it breaks my heart so to inform you, but this barren rancho of Sobrante belongs not to the Dona Gabriella and her children, but to one Antonio Bernal, even I, myself."

"To you! Belongs-to-you?" gasped the astonished woman.

The manager shrugged his shoulders and tossed another Spanish proverb toward her: "What I have said, I have said."

Mrs. Trent felt her strength leaving her and sank into a chair, still gazing incredulously at the other, who now lounged back in his own chair and began to leisurely pick his teeth. It was a trivial action, but one wholly disgusting to the gentlewoman's fastidious sense, and it angered her, which was a good thing, for her anger banished her momentary faintness and gave her boldness to demand:

"The proof!"

"It will be forthcoming, senora, at the right time. Yes. Meanwhile, I am content you shall remain, you and your little ones, until-well, say a month. By that date all things should have been arranged and the senora will have found herself another home less lonely than Sobrante. One so beautiful as the Dona Gabriella must have hosts of friends who--"

Senor Bernal paused. There were footsteps approaching, and the merry voices of children, and an instant later Samson was in the room, still carrying the little lads in his arms, and with Jessica clinging affectionately to his ragged sleeve.

51

One glance showed the faithful ranchman that something was amiss. There was fresh sorrow, even consternation, in the beloved face of Sobrante's mistress, fresh insolence in that of her chief assistant. He was not one to hesitate when his friends were in trouble, and turned to Antonio with an angry demand:

"What have you been worrying your betters with now, senor?"

"Keep a civil tongue in your head, rascal."

"Returnin' the compliment, if you please. All the same, don't you know that a man-a *man*-doesn't go around worrying women as you worry Mrs. Trent? You, that hadn't a shirt to your back when the boss took you in and made you what you are! I'm anticipatin' a mite, and I don't know just how some of the boys'll take it, but we'd laid out this very night at moon-up-if there'd been a moon sensible enough to get up, which there isn't-to haul you and a few other matters over the

coals and stir up a fresh sort of blaze. Now, I warn you, just you let matters slide, peaceable, and you—just you, yourself, keep that civil tongue you recommend, or you'll light out of here so quick ye won't see your heels for dust, dry season though it is. Hear?"

"Hear? Yes, I hear. Now, 'tis your turn. You go tell those malcontents you call 'the boys' to take their packs and foot it. Times have changed. Things have changed. There's another master here now, and not a weak-willed mistress. That is me—I—Antonio Bernal, owner of Sobrante rancho and all that appertains thereto. Now, go. Vamos. Depart. Clear out. Get!"

Samson went—as far as the long, open window, and stepped out upon the porch. He did not see Mr. Hale, who had seated himself in a rocker, an unintentional witness of a scene he would gladly have missed, and putting a whistle to his lips blew a summons which was understood by every fellow-workman on the ranch. Then he quietly re-entered the house, folded his arms, and leaned carelessly against the door frame.

Senor Bernal started up as if he would forcibly eject the herder, but thought better of this and sank back nonchalantly in his great chair. Jessica had placed herself behind her mother, and clasped Mrs. Trent's shoulders with the protecting tenderness habitual to her. Ned had sprung to his mother's lap and Luis continued his nap at her feet; while all seemed waiting for some fresh development of the affair.

This came and speedily; for, in answer to Samson's whistle, there filed over the porch and into the room, Joe, the smith; Marty, the gardener; and Carpenter John. There was missing old "Forty-niner," commonly the dominant fifth of this odd quintet, but nobody wondered much at that. Doubtless he was polishing his darling's rifle and making ready for some astonishing display of her skill wherewith to dazzle the stranger upon the morrow. In any case he rarely disagreed with the opinions of his cronies and was sure to be one with them in the matter of that hour.

With a respectful salute to Mrs. Trent, a grin toward the children, and a scowl for Antonio, these stalwart ranchmen lined up against the wall and stood at attention. Mr. Hale, observant through the doorway, again noticed that each of these was well along in years, that each had some slight physical infirmity, and that, despite these facts, each looked a man of unusual strength and most entire devotion. Indeed, the gaze fixed upon the little lady, was one of adoration, and the situation boded ill for anybody who meant harm to her.

"Ahem. What say, mates? Has the hour struck?"

"The hour has struck," answered John Benton, solemnly, shifting his weight from his lame leg to his sound one.

Samson strode a mighty step forward and pulled his forelock.

"Then I state, madam, that we here, on behalf of ourselves and our whole crew, now, and hereby do, throw off all 'legiance to that there Spanish skunk, a-settin' in your easiest chair, and appoint Our Lady Jess, captain of the good ship Sobrante. Allowin' you to be the admiral of that same, madam, but takin' no more orders from anybody save and excepting her—under you, of course—from this time forth, so help us."

Then there burst from the trio of throats a cheer that shook the windows, and called a contemptuous laugh from the superintendent so valiantly defied.

The cheer died in an ominous silence which Senor Bernal improved.

"Highly dramatic and most edifying, *en verdad*. Senor, I kiss your hands in even greater devotion. But the play has one little drawback. To I, me, myself, belongs Sobrante. Already I have had the law of which you spoke. My claim I have proved. From the long back generations the good title from the Mission Padres to my own fathers, yes. Sobrante? *Si*. More and better. Wide lies the valley of Paraiso d'Oro. Mine, Mine. All—all mine. No?"

He rose to his feet and pompously paced up and down the room, insolently handsome and proud of the fact, while out on the darkened porch Mr. Hale had heard a word which set his own pulses beating faster and the row of ranchmen started forward as if minded to throw the braggart out of the house.

But Jessica stepped forth and cried, triumphantly, though still with an effort toward that courtesy she desired.

"Beg pardon, Senor Antonio Bernal, but surely you are quite mistaken. My father taught me some things. He said I was not too young to learn them. He—he only—has the title deed to dear Sobrante, and I—I only—know the safe place where it is kept!"

Antonio halted in his strutting march and for a moment his face grew pale. The next instant he had regained more than his former confidence, and with a sneering laugh, exclaimed:

"Seeing is believing, no? To the satisfaction of the assembled most honorable company," here he bowed with mock politeness, "let this most interesting document be produced. *Si*."

Jessica flew from the room and in an intolerable anxiety the whole "honorable company" awaited her long-delayed return.

When the tension of waiting was becoming intolerable, and Mrs. Trent was already rising to seek her daughter, Jessica reappeared in the doorway. Her white face and frightened eyes told her story without words, but her mother forced herself to ask:

"Did you find it, darling?"

"Mother, it is gone!"

"Gone!"

"Gone. Yet it was only that dear, last day when he was with us, in the morning, before he set out for the mines, that he showed it to me, safe and sound in its place. He was to tell you, too, that night-but--"

"It was that, then, which was on his mind, and I could not understand. I-Antonio Bernal, he entrusted you and you must know; where is that missing deed?"

"Deed, senora? This day, just ended, is it not that I have been over all the records and there is none of any deed to Sobrante later than my own-or that proves my claim. In truth, the honorable Dona Gabriella is right, indeed. I was the trusted friend of the dead senor, and if any such precious document existed, would I not have known it? *Si*. What I do know is the worry, the trouble, the impossibility of such a paper broke the senor's heart. It does not exist. Sobrante is mine. He knew that this was so-I had often spoken--"

The untruth he was about to utter did not pass his lips. There was that in the white face of Gabriella Trent which arrested his words, as, clasping her boy in her arms, she glided into the darkened hall and entered her own rooms beyond.

The "boys" had not moved, nor Jessica followed, and she now firmly confronted the manager, saying:

"I am sorry to tell you, Antonio Bernal, that you are not acting square. My father did have that title deed, and I believe you know it. Somebody has taken it from the place where his own hands put it, but I will find it. This home is ours, is all my mother's. Nobody shall ever take it from her. Nobody. You hear me say that, Senor Antonio Bernal, and you, dear 'boys?'"

"Ay, ay," echoed her friends, heartily; but the superintendent regarded her as he might have done some amusing little insect.

"Very pretty, senorita. The filial devotion, almost beautiful. But the facts-well, am I not merciful and generous, I? There is no haste. Indeed, no. A month--"

"Before a month is out I will have found that deed and placed it in my darling mother's hands. I may be too young to understand the 'business' you talk about so much, but I am not too young to save my mother's happiness. I can see that paper now, in my mind, and I remember exactly how it looked inside and out. It seemed such a little thing to be worth a whole, great ranch. I don't know how nor where, but somehow and somewhere, I shall find that paper. 'Boys,' will you help me?"

"To the last drop of our hearts' blood!" cried John Benton, and the others echoed, "Ay, ay!"

Antonio thought it time to end this scene and walked toward the porch, at the further end of which was another long window opening into his own apartments. But he was not permitted to leave so easily. Great Samson placed himself in the manager's path and remarked:

"There's no call to lose sight of the main business 'count o' this little side-play of yours. We boys come up here to-night to quit your employ and hire out to Our Lady Jess. We're all agreed, every man jack of us. Your day's over. Account of Mrs. Trent and the kids, we'd like things done quiet and decent. There's a good horse of yours in the stable and though there isn't any moon, you know the roads well. If you tarry for breakfast, likely you won't have much appetite to eat it. More'n that, the senora, as you call her, has waited on your whelpship for just the last time. Before you start you might as well pay up some of our back wages, and hand over to the mistress the funds you've been keeping from her."

"Insolent! Stand aside. How dare you? Let me pass."

"I'm not quite through yet. There's no real call to have talk with such as you, but we 'boys' kind of resent being set down as plumb fools. We've seen through you, though we've kept our mouths shut. Now they're open; leastways, mine is. This here notion of yours about ownin' Sobrante is a bird of recent hatchin'. 'Tisn't full-fledged yet, and 's likely never to be. Your first idea was to run the ranch down till your mistress had to give it up out of sheer bad luck. Fail, mortgage, or such like. Oranges didn't sell for what they ought; olives wasn't worth shucks; some little varmint got to eating the raisin grapes; mine petered out; feathers growing poorer every plucking, though the birds are getting valuabler. Never had accounts quite ready-you, that was a master hand at figures when the boss took you in and made you, You--"

Antonio strode forward, furious, and with uplifted hand.

"You rascal! This to me-I, Antonio Bernal, descendant of-Master of Sobrante and Paraiso, I--"

"Master? Humph! Owner? Fiddlesticks! Why, that little tacker there, asleep on the floor,"

pointing to Luis, "is likelier heir to this old ranch than you. The country's full of Garcias and always has been, Pedro says. Garcia himself, when all's told. As for Bernals, who ever heard of more'n one o' them? That's you, you skunk! Now, usin' your own fine, highfalutin' language: 'Go. *Vamos*. Depart. Clear out. *Get!*'"

"I go—because it so suits me, I, myself. But I return. New servants will be with me and your quarters must be empty. Let me pass."

"Certain. Anything to oblige. But don't count on them quarters. We couldn't leave them if we would 'cause we've all took root. Been growing so long; become indigenous to the soil, like the boss' experiments. Thrive so well might have been born here and certainly mean to die on the spot. Going? Well, good-night. Call again. *Adios*."

By this time Jessica was laughing, as her old friend had meant she should be. In his contemptuous harangue of the man he disliked and mistrusted, there had been more humor than anger.

"Well, my lady, that did me good. Haven't had such a thorough housecleaning of my mean thoughts in quite a spell. Feel all ready for a fresh voyage under the new captain. You rest run along and find that long sufferin' mother of yours and tell her the coast's clear of that pirate craft. We've all shipped men-o'-war, now, and run up the old flag of truth and love. That was the banner your father floated from his masthead, and the colors that'll never dip to lying or cheating. Wait. I'll pack this baby Luis to his bed. Poor little castaway, that your good father picked up in the canyon and fetched home in his arms, to share the best with his own. Well, needn't tell me that the family of a man as good as he was'll ever come to want. Heave ahead, captain. Show me the track to sail."

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Jessica stopped to bid the other ranchmen good-night, then led the sailor to the little bedroom which the lads shared in common, and where Ned was already asleep, tucked in his white cot by his mother, who let no personal grief interfere with her care for others.

"Good-night, dear Samson. I must find that paper. You must help me. My mother must not, shall not, lose her home."

"Never. Good-night, captain. You've a good crew on deck and we'll make happy haven yet."

That was Jessica Trent's first wakeful night. Though she tried to lie quietly in her own little bed, lest she should disturb her mother whose room she shared, she fancied all sorts of strange sounds, both in-doors and out; and whenever she dropped into a doze, dreamed of the missing paper and of searching for it.

One dream was so vivid that she woke, exclaiming:

"Oh, mother! I've found it. The black tin box under the three sharp rocks!"

But her eyes opened upon vacancy, and there was no response from the larger bed where her anxious parent had, at last, fallen asleep. Yet the vision remained, painted upon the darkness, as it were, a sun-lighted glowing spot, with three pyramidal rocks and a clump of scraggly live oaks. A spot she had never seen, indeed, but felt that she should instantly recognize, should she come upon it anywhere.

Then she curled back upon her pillows and again shut her eyes.

60

Could it be possible that she, a healthy little girl, was growing fidgety, like Aunt Sally Benton, who sometimes came to visit her son and help with the sewing? For she surely was hearing things. Movements, hushed footfalls, softly closing doors, creaking floors, at an hour when all the household should be at rest.

"How silly! It may be somebody is ill! Wun Lung's hand may hurt him, though it seemed so nearly well, and nobody else would have minded it. That stranger! Yes, I fancy it's he. He may need something that I can get him, and I'll go inquire."

Slipping a little wrapper over her gown, but in her bare feet, the girl noiselessly left the room and followed the sound she had heard. These led her to a small apartment which her father had used as an office and where stood the desk in whose secret drawer she had expected to find the title deed. A small fireproof safe was in this office. It was an old-fashioned affair, with a simple, but heavy key, which the Sobrante children had played with in their infancy. She remembered her father remarking, with a laugh, that a safe was the most useless thing he possessed, for he never had anything worth putting in it; but it had been a belonging of old "Forty-niner" Marsh, a gift to his employer, and therefore accorded a place of honor.

Before this safe now bent a man whom Jessica recognized with surprise and relief.

"Why, Mr. Marsh! Is it you? What in the world are you doing here at this hour? Are you ill? Do you want something?"

"No, dearie. I'm not ill; and I'm not robbing you. And I've got all I want. That's one more look at your bonny face, God bless it!"

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It was close to his shoulder now, that face he loved, and he kissed it tenderly; though with equal tenderness, if less emotion, the little maid returned his caress and clasped his neck with those strong, young arms that so yearned to protect and comfort everybody.

"That's funny. Should think you'd be tired of it, sometimes, I disappoint you so. But never mind. I'm getting handier with my new rifle every day, I think, and I mean to do yet what Samson

claims I should—just beat the world. Have you finished looking at your things?” For it was Mr. Marsh himself who had always used the safe, even after giving it away. “Can’t I get you something to eat, so you can sleep better?”

“No, dearie, no, just one more good kiss—to remember. Good-by. Good-by. It—it might have been done kinder, maybe, but—her heart is sad, I know, and her first thought is for you. She must save for you. Here, Lady, take the key. Some time you—you might want to look in that safe for yourself. Good-night.”

Jessica went with him to the outer door, wondering much at this oddly-timed visit. Yet the ranchman walked erect, still carrying his lighted candle quite openly, as one who had done nothing of which to be ashamed; and when he had departed the girl returned to her own bed still more wakeful because of this queer incident.

Ten minutes later, it may have been, she heard the limping footfall of a slowly-moving horse, the echoes growing fainter continually.

Again she sat up and listened.

“That’s Mr. Marsh’s ‘Stiffleg!’ What should send him off riding now? Oh! I do wish mother was awake, things seem so queer. Yet I don’t really wish it. She has so many wakeful nights and just this one is more than I want. Now, Jessica Trent, don’t be foolish any longer. Go straight to sleep or you’ll be late in the morning.”

Nature acted upon this good advice, and Our Lady knew no more till a pair of chubby hands were pulling her curls and Ned’s voice was screeching in her ear:

“Wake up, Jessie Trent. We had our breakfast hours ago, and the ‘boys’ is all out-doors, can’t go to work ‘ithout their captain. That’s *me*, Jessie Trent, ‘cause I’m the ‘heir.’ Samson said so.”

“It’s the heir, Samson said so!” echoed Luis from the floor where he was trying the fit of Jessica’s new “buckskins”—the comfortable moccasin-like footgear which Pedro made for her—upon his own stubby toes.

“He, he! What’s the heir Samson said? You’re a stupid, Luis Garcia.”

“Stupid Garcia!” laughed the little mimic, not in the least offended.

“Well, run away then, laddies, and I’ll be ready in a jiffy. Poor mother. To think that I should have left her to do so much alone.”

As she threw open the sash of the rear window, Jessica started back, surprised; for there, reined close to the porch, was Nero’s black form, with the dark face of his master bending low over the saddle.

“Good-morning, senorita, and good fortune. Those who hid may find. I kiss your hand in farewell, and may it rule in peace till I return, I myself, the master. One month hence I come, bringing my servants with me. *Adios*. Ah! but what did you and the old sharpshooter at the office safe at midnight? *When the senora would seek her title, seek him*. It is farewell.”

CHAPTER VII

CAPTAIN JESS

Jessica drew back, repelled. Why did that man make her so unhappy whenever she saw him nowadays? What did he mean by that speech about old Ephraim Marsh and the safe? Well, he was gone, riding swiftly away and lightening her trouble with every rod of ground he put between them.

“He’ll not come for a month, he said, and by that time everything will be straight. If Sobrante is ours it cannot possibly be his. That’s simple. Though he might have lived here always if he’d wished. The title paper has been mislaid. That’s all. I’m sure to find it when I have time to look thoroughly, and how different things do seem by daylight. Now, to say good-morning to the ‘boys,’ dear fellows, and then for breakfast. I’m as hungry as on ostrich.”

Though since sunrise each had been busy about his accustomed duties, neglecting nothing because of the change in command, it suited the ideas of these faithful ranchmen to report for duty to their newly appointed “captain” and to ask for orders from her. With the ready intuition of childhood she fell in with their mood at once and received them in a manner which robbed the affair of burlesque and invested it with dignity.

From a shaded corner of the porch, from behind his book, Mr. Hale watched the scene with an amusement that soon gave place to wonder and admiration. They were all profoundly in earnest. The fair young girl with folded arms and serene composure, poised at the head of the steps and the group of sunburned workmen standing respectfully before her.

By tacit consent Samson was spokesman for the company and his words had their usual nautical tinge.

“We’re ready to set sail, captain, and here’s wishing good luck to the v’yge! Old ‘Forty-niner’ hasn’t showed up on deck yet, but he’ll likely soon heave to, and the rest the crew’ll vouch for his

being a good hand in any sort o' storm we're apt to strike. We've overhauled this chart. Each of us solemnly promise to abide and obey no orders but yours, captain, or the admiral's through you. And would respectfully suggest--each man sticks to the post he's always filled, till ordered off it by his superior officer. Right, mates?"

"Ay, ay."

"How's that suit you, commodore?"

"That suits me, Samson. It will suit my mother."

"As for pay--being as we've got along without any these five months back, and Senor Top-Lofty's rode off, forgettin' to leave them arrears we mentioned, we wash the slate clean and start all over again. For five months to come we'll serve you and the admiral for mess and berth, no more, no less."

"Samson, do you mean that? Haven't you boys been paid your wages regularly, just as in my father's time?"

"Come, now, captain, that's all right. Give us the word of dismissal and let that slide. You missed your own mess this morning--"

"But that will break my mother's heart. I know! I know! I've often heard her ask him, and Antonio tell her--he said that your wages were always taken out before he brought what little money he could to her. I know you said something about 'arrears' last night, but I didn't understand. What are 'arrears,' Samson?"

"Blow me, for an old numskull. Why couldn't I keep my long tongue still! I only meant that we are willing, we want, we must work for you and all the Trents for nothing till we've made up part to 'em of what that sweet 'senor' cheated 'em of. That's all. We've settled it. No use for anybody to try change our minds, even if there was spot cash lying around loose, waiting to be picked up and you havin' no call for it. Not one of which conditions hits the case."

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"You are a good talker, dear old Samson, and a long one. I can talk, too, sometimes. Maybe you've heard me! You've read me your chart. Hear mine. It's my father's own--that he always meant, but was never able to follow. That I know my mother wants to follow for his sake, though she does know so little of business. Now, if we're starting fresh, with the clean slates you like, we'll put this at the top: 'share and share alike.' There was another long name dear father used to call it--I--"

"Co-operation," suggested John Benton.

"Yes, yes. That's it. As soon as he was out of debt and had a right to do what he would with Sobrante, he meant to run it that way. But you know, you know. It was only that last day when he came home so late from that far-off town that he had his own 'title' and was all ready to do as he wished. Let us do that now. I know how. He told me. He was to make you, Samson, responsible for all the cattle on the ranch. You were to hire as many of the other boys as you needed and were to have a just share for your own money. The more you made out of the cattle the better it would be for yourself. Isn't that right?"

"Right to a dot. Atlantic! but you've a head for business, captain!"

"I've a head must learn business, if I'm to be your captain. That is true enough. It isn't my father's fault if I don't know some simple things. He was always teaching me, because Ned was too little and my mother--well, business always worried her and he'd do anything to save her worry, even talk to a little girl like me. And as Samson was to do with the cattle, so George Cromarty was to do with the raisins and oranges. The ostriches--Oh! but they were to be Antonio's charge. And now--"

66

"They're yours, captain, with any one or lot of us you choose for helpers."

"Ferd knew much about them, and they minded him. But--"

"Ferd'll trouble Sobrante none while the senor is away. Joe is a good hand at all live stock, and I'll pledge you'll get every feather that's plucked when he does the counting. He won't let any eggs get cooked in hatchin', neither. You can trust Joseph--if you watch him a mite."

A laugh at honest Joe's expense, in which he heartily joined, followed this and Lady Jess stepped down among her friends, holding out her hands to first one, then another. Her blue eyes were filled with happy moisture, for she was not too young to feel their devotion to be as unselfish as it was sincere, and her smile was full of confidence in them and in herself.

"Eleven years old is pretty early to be a captain, I guess, but I'll be a good one--just as good and true as you are! What I don't know you'll teach me, and if I make mistakes you'll be patient, I know. One thing I can do, I can copy bills and papers. I can put down figures and add them up. It was good practice for me, my father said. So I'll put down your names and all your business in these new books he bought and was going to use in his co-co-operation--is that right, John?"

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"Right as a trivet."

"And our admiral, that's the dear mother, will not have to fret so any longer. Between us we'll make Sobrante all my father meant it should be and--as soon as I have my breakfast--I will find that title. I must find it. I will. Sobrante is yours and ours forever. Oh, boys, I love you! I'm all choked up--I love you so and I feel like that my father used to read in Dickens: 'God bless you every one!'"

With her hands clasped close against her breast, and her beloved face luminous with her deep affection, their little maid stood before her hardy henchmen, a symbol to them of all that was best and purest in life. Their own eyes were moist, and even Mr. Hale had to take off his glasses and wipe them as, looking around upon his comrades, great Samson swung his hat and cried:

"And may God bless Our Lady Jess! And may every man who seeks to injure her be-stricken with numb palsy! And may every crop be doubled, prices likewise! Peace, prosperity and happiness to Sobrante—destruction to her enemies!"

"Forgiveness for her enemies, Samson, dear, if there really are. That will be nobler, more like father's rule. Make it peace, prosperity and happiness to all the world! Hurrah! hurrah! hurrah!"

Mr. Hale clapped his hands to his ears, then hastily moved forward and joined in the cheer, that was deafening enough to have come from many more throats than uttered it. Yet he had an uncomfortable feeling that he might be classed among those "enemies" whom Samson wished afflicted with numb palsy and that, at that moment, he was, by no fault of his own, playing a double part.

But he gave himself the benefit of the doubt until he should learn, as he meant to do at once, the whole history of Sobrante with its strange hodge-podge of industries, its veteran employees, and its childish "captain." So, while the ranchmen dispersed to their business and Jessica sought her long-delayed breakfast, he turned towards the kitchen where he hoped to find the mistress of the ranch.

But he was disappointed. There was visible only the broad, purple-covered back and black pig-tail of a Chinaman, pounding away at the snowy loaves of his kneading-board, as if they were "enemies" of his own and deserving something much worse than "numb palsy."

"Wun Lung!"

No answer, save the whack, whack, whack of the tormented dough.

"Ahem. I say, John!"

Whack, whack.

"Wun Lung, where's your mistress?"

"Dlaily."

"Indeed? I fancy your hand is better. I'm glad of it. That bread ought to be fine. At your leisure, kindly point the direction of the 'dlaily,' will you?"

One yellow, floury hand was lifted and extended eastward, but as this signified nothing definite to the stranger he continued his inquiries.

"Where's Pasqual?"

"Sclub."

"And the little boys?"

"Alle glone."

"I congratulate you on your English, though I'm uncertainly whether you mean me to 'go on' or assert that somebody else has gone on. I don't like to disturb Miss Jessica at breakfast, but--"

"Back polchee," suggested Wun Lung, anxious to be rid of the intruder, whose irony he suspected if he did not understand.

Mr. Hale betook himself around the house, and, fortunately, in the right direction; for just issuing from her dairy, which was in a cellar under the cottage, was Mrs. Trent, bearing a wooden bowl of freshly made butter.

The guest's heart smote him as he saw her sad face brighten at meeting him, for he knew she trusted him for help he was in duty bound to give elsewhere. But it was not a lawyer's habit to anticipate evil, and he was thankful for her suggestion.

"You should have a ride this fine morning, Mr. Hale, before the sun is too high. I've ordered a horse brought round for you at nine o'clock, and Jessica shall act your guide, on Scruff. That is—if the laddies haven't already disappeared with him. Ah! here comes my girl, herself. You are to show our friend as much of Sobrante as he cares to see, in one morning, daughter. If the children have ridden the burro off you may have Buster saddled."

"Shan't you need me, mother? One of the men--"

"No, dear. Wun Lung is at his post again and Pasqual will do the milk and things. But as you go, I'd like you to take this butter to John's. It's the weekly portion for the men, who mess for themselves," she explained to the stranger.

"Lucky men to fare on such golden balls as those!"

"Come and see my dairy. I'm very proud of it. You know, I suppose, that cellars are rarities in California. Everything is built above ground, in ordinary homes; but I needed a cooler place for the milk, and my husband had this planned for me. See the water, our greatest luxury; piped from an artesian well to the tank above, and then down through these cooling pipes around the shelves. After such use supplying the garden, for whatever else may be wasted here it is never a drop of water. Will you taste the buttermilk? I can't give you ice, but we cool it in earthen crocks

sunk in the floor."

More and more did the lawyer's admiration for his hostess increase. She displayed the prosaic details of her dairy with the same ease and pride with which she would have exhibited the choicest bric-a-brac of a sumptuous drawing-room, and her manner impelled him to an interest in the place which he would have found impossible under other circumstances. But above all he wondered at the unselfishness with which she set aside her own anxieties and gave herself wholly to the entertainment of her guest.

"The loss of that title deed means ruin for her and her family—even if I were not also compelled to bring distress upon her. But she does not whine nor complain, and that's going to make my task all the harder. Well, first to see this ranch, and then—I wish I'd never come upon this business! Better suffer nervous dyspepsia all the rest of my life than break such a woman's heart. Her husband may have been a scamp of the first water, but she's a lady and a Christian. So is that beautiful little girl, and it's from her I mean to get all my needed information."

Absorbed in thoughts that were far from pleasant, the gentleman walked beside Mrs. Trent to the horseblock, and mounted the horse which a gray-haired stable "boy" was holding for him, all without rousing from the preoccupation that held him. It was not till he heard Jessica's excited call coming over the space between the cottage and the "quarters" that he realized where he was and looked up, expectant.

The little girl who had left them for a few moments, was galloping toward them on the back of a rough-coated broncho, waving a paper in her hand and with distressed indignation, crying out as she came:

"'Forty-niner' has gone. Dear old 'Forty-niner!' I found this letter in his room and it's forever-forever! Oh, mother! And he says *you* discharged him—or it means that—without show of chance! Mother, mother, how could you? That dear old man that everybody loved!"

"Discharged him—I? I should as soon have thought of discharging myself! What fresh distress is this?"

Catching the paper from Jessica's hand Mrs. Trent read it, then turned and without a word walked slowly into the house. But her head was giddy and her limbs trembled, and she had a strange feeling as if she were being swiftly inclosed in a net from which she could not escape.

CHAPTER VIII IN THE MINER'S CABIN

"Forgive me, mother! I oughtn't to have told it that way. But what does it mean? Why should you want him to go?"

"Did you not hear me say I would not have dismissed him? No, dear. There is something in this I don't understand. How do we know but that all the other 'boys' who left so suddenly have been deceived in just this way? As long as there was food enough to eat and a roof to shelter them the men whom your father befriended and who, in turn have befriended us, were as welcome to Sobrante as my own children. I must think this over. We must then find Ephraim and bring him back. We must. There! We'll not discuss it any more at present. You are keeping Mr. Hale waiting and that is rudeness. Go, now, and explain all your father's plans to him, as you ride."

"I'd so much rather stay with you. I don't like to leave you now."

"I shall be busy and you'll be back for dinner."

"I'd like to look for that paper—the title."

"When you come back."

"Good-by, then, and don't do any hard work. I'll send the children up to stay around the house. That will be one worry off your mind."

When she had again sprung into her saddle, Lady Jess apologized for keeping Mr. Hale so long, and suggested:

"Suppose we ride first to the mines, while it is coolest. Then come around by the olive and orange orchards. We can rest at the lemon house awhile. It's interesting to see how they are cared for, or so most strangers think."

"Anything and anywhere suits me, for I'm full of curiosity about Sobrante. How did your father happen to take up so many different lines of industry?"

"Oh, they were all his 'experiments.' You see he wanted to do good to some sorts of people that nobody else seemed much interested in. Men that were getting old and were not rich or well. He was born in California, and he always thought it the land where everybody could find a place if he only had a chance. He went to New York and lived a long time, and he and mother were married there. He'd once ridden over this valley, on a horseback trip—just like yours, maybe—and after that he always meant to buy it if he could. So, when he began to lose his own health he came right away. He hadn't much money himself, but he worked and mother helped, and he'd paid for it all

before he died. It was the title deed which proved it, that he had just brought home and I could not find last night. Though, of course, I shall find it yet," she added confidently.

"I hope so, my child. I devotedly hope so. Yet if it was duly recorded the matter should easily be set right."

Jessica's face fell.

"I don't believe it was. He said something about that, I didn't understand it quite, but I know he said 'recorded' and that he meant to have it done the next time he went to Los Angeles. But-he didn't ever go."

The lawyer's face grew still more serious. Something of the love with which she inspired everybody was already in his heart for this little maid, and thoughts of his own young daughters, threatened with the misfortune which menaced her, stirred him to fresh regret for the mission he had undertaken.

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They had now turned their horses' heads toward the foothills on the north and he asked:

"What are these 'mines' of which you speak?"

"For coal. It was an old man from Pennsylvania first thought there might be such stuff in the mountains near, and it's worth so much here. Father had found him in one of the towns, with his wife and sick son. They'd spent all they had, to come West to try to cure the son, and were very poor. So, of course, father brought them to Sobrante, and the boy got better at once. They didn't understand any sort of work except mining, and old Wolfgang couldn't rest without trying to do something back for father. So he and Otto dug and picked around till they found a 'vein' and then they put up a little cabin near and there they live. Their name is Winkler, and Elsa, the mother, is the quaintest little Dutchwoman. Of course, there's never been money enough to work the mine right. All they can do is to get out enough coal for us to use. That's why we always have such lovely grate fires in the winter time, that make the house so cosy. You'll like the Winklers, and you'll like Elsa's coffee. Go there what time of day you will she always makes you drink some, sweetened with the wild honey she gets in the hills and with her goat's milk in it."

Mr. Hale made a wry face.

"Oh! you're sure to like it. It is delicious, drank with a slice of her hard, sweetened bread. And their little cabin is as clean as can be. Elsa is a great knitter. She has knitted covers for everything, her beds, chairs, table, everything. All the furniture is made out of wood they found in the hills, and when they're not mining Otto carves it beautifully."

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"Are all the people who work for you unfortunate? I mean, was some misfortune that which made your father engage them?"

"Yes, just that. They are his 'experiments.' He said this valley was made for every sort of work there was to be done. All men can't be the same thing, and every man was happiest at his own trade. Young men can get work anywhere, but dear Sobrante is a Home with a capital H, for anybody who needs one. My father said the more he trusted people the less they ever disappointed him. He'd proved his plan was right on his own single ranch and he was trying to make others do the same on theirs. Paraiso d'Oro-oh! you're from that same New York. Do you know a-a Mr. Syndicate, I think he was, who owns Paraiso. Of course, I know in such a big city you might not, though maybe--"

The listener started, then looked keenly into the innocent face bending toward him from the broncho's back.

"Suppose I do know a syndicate-a company-not an individual, which is interested in Paraiso? Can you tell me anything about such a place? Until last night I had no idea that I had come anywhere near to it, and then by accident, hearing Antonio Bernal mention it as his. Is it hereabouts?"

Jessica turned her horse about in a circle, rapidly swinging her pointing arm to indicate every direction of the compass.

"Know it? It is there, and there, and there-everywhere. The very richest tract of land in all the country, my father believed. Sobrante is the heart of it, he said, but the rest of the valley is even better than Sobrante. It is so big one can hardly believe. He said there was room in it, and a little ranch apiece, for every poor down-trodden man-not bad men, but poor gentlemen, like worn-out lawyers and doctors and-and nice folks-and make a new home in which to live at peace. He said there were plenty of people always ready to help the very poor and ignorant, but nobody so willing to help gentlefolks without money. That's why he asked a lot of rich people he used to know in New York to buy Paraiso. He gave it its name, himself, and he believed that there might be really gold somewhere in it. There's everything else, you see. But it was a name of 'syndicate' he talked about most and was most grieved by because the money to buy it had not been sent as it had been promised."

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"Poor child!"

"Beg pardon?"

"It was nothing. I was thinking. So this 'Mr. Syndicate' never sent the money your father hoped for?"

"No. It was a great disappointment. Antonio had charge of all the letters, only he; so there could have been nobody careless enough to lose them had any come. Father left all the writing to Antonio, for he was nearly blind, you know. That's how he came to get hurt. He could not see and

his horse stepped over the ledge and somebody brought him home that way. Poor mother!"

"Poor mother, indeed!" echoed Mr. Hale, with something like a groan.

"Thank you for caring about it," said Jessica, quickly touched by his ready sympathy. "But she says her life now must be to carry on all father's work, and I shall help her. In that way it will be always as if he were still with us. Oh! see! That's Stiffleg's track! Ephraim Marsh has passed this way! Maybe I shall find him at the Winklers' cabin! Would you mind hurrying, just a little bit?"

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"I'll do my best, little lady. But I'm a wretched horseman, I fear."

"Oh! you'll learn. If you would only let yourself be easy and comfortable. But, beg pardon, you do it this way—so stiff, with your hands all clinched. Your horse feels that something's wrong, and that's why he fidgets so. You should get Samson to show you how. He's a magnificent rider. I'll coax him to do some tricks for you, to-night, when we get through supper. I'm off. Just drop all care and let the horse do the work and—catch me if you can."

As they approached the foothills they had dropped into a little hollow where the sandy ground was moist and retained an impression distinctly, and it was thus that Jessica's keen eyes discovered the peculiar footprints of "Forty-niner's" halting steed. But she quickly forgot these in the interest of the race she had started and was now bent upon nothing save beating Mr. Hale at the goal, the miner's cabin.

"He has by far the better horse. He ought to win, but he shall not—he can't. He mustn't! Go, Buster! A taste of Elsa's honey if you get there first!"

Bending forward the girl rested her cheek against the broncho's neck and, as if the touch fired him with new ambition, he shot forward so swiftly that the question of winning was soon settled. However, Mr. Hale's own pride was touched, and he put to the test the advice just given him, and with such good results that he, too, soon came in sight of a small house at the end of the trail, a dark hole in the mountain side, and a group of people eagerly surrounding his little guide.

Indeed, Elsa had already drawn the child upon her capacious lap, and was tenderly smoothing the tumbled curls with her hard hand, while she asked endless questions, yet waited for no answers.

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Till, suddenly remembering, Lady Jess demanded:

"But have you seen our Ephraim? Is he here? Has he been here?"

Elsa's fat form grew quite rigid and her hand ceased its caressing stroke. Not for her to betray the confidence of one who had taken refuge with her.

"Why ask that? What if he has and is? Is he not the old man, already? Even here there is no room for the old. When one is fifty one should die. That would be wisdom."

"Elsa Winkler, nonsense! That's not polite for me to say, but it's true. You're fifty, yourself, I guess, and you don't want to die, do you?"

Elsa shivered slightly. "When the right time comes and the usefulness is past. As the Lord wills."

Jessica laughed and kissed the woman's cheek, then sprang to the ground, demanding:

"Where is he? For he's mine, you know. He belongs to Sobrante just as much the sunshine does. If he'd loved us as we love him he'd not have ridden away in the night time just because of one little bit o' note. Wherever you've hidden him you must find him for me, and he's to go straight away back with me. With us, I mean, for here comes a—a friend of ours; I guess he is. Any way he's a guest and you must make him a cup of your very best coffee, and Otto must show him his carved clock that he is making. He's a pleasant gentleman, and so interested in everything, it's fun to tell him things. In that New York, where he came from, they don't have much of anything nice. No ostriches, nor mines, nor orange groves. Fancy! and he doesn't know—he's only just learning to ride a horse!"

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As Mr. Hale now approached, this description ceased and Jessica presented him to her mountain friends:

"This is dear Elsa Winkler, and 'her man,' Wolfgang. And Otto—where's Otto gone? He needn't be shy. Mr. Hale would like to see the carvings and the knittings, and maybe, go down the shaft. But first of all, he'd like the coffee, Elsa, dear."

The portly Dutchwoman, whose needles could click as fast as her tongue, now thrust the stocking, at which she had resumed working the moment Jessica left her lap, into her apron pocket and waddled inside the cabin. Already she was beaming with hospitality and calling in harsh chiding to the invisible Otto:

"You bad little boy, where are you at already? Come by, soon's-ever, and lay the dishes. Here's company come to the house and nobody but the old mother got a grain of sense left to mind them. Wolfgang! Wolfgang! Hunt the child and set him drawing a tether o' milk from Gretchen, the goat. Ach! but it shames my good heart when my folks act so foolish, and the Lady Jess just giving the orders so sweet."

Wolfgang heard his wife's commands and obeyed them after his own manner, by lifting his mighty voice and shouting in his native *patois*—"Little heart! Son of my love! Come, come hither."

But he did not, for all that, cease from his respectful attention to the stranger, for whom he had promptly brought out the best chair he owned, and whose horse he had taken to a shaded spot

and carefully rubbed down with a handful of dried grass.

Presently, the "child" appeared, and the Easterner flashed a smile toward Jessica, whose own face was dimpled with mirth; for the "child," Otto, proved to be a gaunt six-footer, lean as he was long, and with a manly beard upon his pink and white face. He shambled forward on his great feet and shyly extended his mighty hands.

Mr. Hale grasped them heartily, eager to put the awkward youth at ease; and, nodding toward the chair from which he had risen, exclaimed:

"So, you are he who does that beautiful carving! I congratulate you on your skill, and I hope you will have some trifle of your work to sell a traveler. I've never seen finer."

Otto flushed with pleasure and was about to reply, but again Elsa commanded:

"Milk the goat, little one. After the guest feeds let the household talk."

As if he had been the "child," the "little heart," his parents called him he obediently entered the cabin, tied an apron before his lank body and spread a tablecloth. Then, as deftly as if he had been a girl, he arranged it with the three cups and plates the family possessed, took his mother's cherished spoons from her chest, and, taking a small pail, sought the goat, Gretchen.

"Now, I'm in for it," thought Mr. Hale, regretfully. "My poor dyspepsia! Coffee, honey, and goat's milk! A combination to kill. But even if it is, one must respond to such whole-souled hospitality as this."

Jessica had no such qualms; and, indeed, the refreshment which her visitor forced himself to accept was far more palatable than he had dared expect; and, besides, he now brought to it that astonishing appetite which had come to him on this eventful trip. When the luncheon was disposed of, Dame Elsa held an exhibition of her wonderful knitting and it seemed to the unappreciative stranger that a small fortune must have been expended in yarns, and that even in this wilderness one might be extravagant and wasteful.

"My wife would know more about such things than I do, but I should think you might easily stock a whole shop with your tidies and things."

"Man alive, do I not? Didst think it was for the pleasure of one's self the fingers are always at toil? Ach! Yet, of course, how could a poor man from a far city understand! It is Elsa's knitting, and Elsa's only, will all the tourists have who come to Sobrante; and in that Los Angeles, so distant, where the master went but once every year already, there is a merchant buys all. Ay. See here. I show you!"

"I-I don't really care-I mean-ought we not to be going, Jessica?" cried Mr. Hale, hopelessly, foreseeing another exhibition of "trash," as he considered it.

But Elsa could not conceive that everybody should not be interested in all that concerned everybody else; and, besides, this was quite another matter. One for pride, indeed, beyond the accomplishment of the most difficult "lacework" or "overshot" stitch.

From the same chest in which her precious half-dozen plated spoons had reposed she now drew forth a buckskin sack; and, from this, with radiant eyes fixed on Mr. Hale's own, another bag, knitted, of course, and seemingly heavy. Sitting before him she spread her own apron over her guest's knees and poured therein a goodly pile of gold and silver coins. With a little catching of his own breath the lawyer realized that among these were many eagles and double eagles.

"Why, this is wealth. This is *money*. I can see now, after our paper bills and 'checks' how real this seems. You are a fortunate woman, Dame Elsa. Now, I begin to respect your 'tidies' and notions as things of moment. Did you earn it all?"

"Ach! wait. There is more already. This but begins; and it is for the child. Some day, when there is enough, he shall this mine buy and the machinery hire, and the workmen. Then he will repay to the mistress of Sobrante, and our Lady Jess, all that their dead man spent for us. More. He will make the great money-this but leads the way. Wait."

Trustful and eager of appreciation, which came so rarely into her isolated life, the woman thrust her hand again into the buckskin sack, her shining eyes still fixed upon the stranger's face, and her fingers fumbling nervously in the depths of the narrow bag. Her excitement and delight communicated itself to him, and he found himself watching her broad, beaming face with intense curiosity.

But-the face was changing. The light was dying out of the sparkling eyes, an ashy color succeeding the ruddy hue of the fat cheeks. Bewilderment, then anxiety, then terror.

"Why, good Elsa, what is it?"

"Gone-gone-but I am robbed, I am ruined! Mein Gott, man! Little one-lost, lost, lost!"

With a shriek the poor creature sprang up, and in so doing scattered far and wide the coins she had already poured into her apron, but heeded nothing of this as she rushed frantically out of doors.

While Elsa had been entertaining the stranger within doors Jessica had sought Wolfgang and compelled him, by her coaxing, to admit that Ephraim Marsh had been there and, also, that Antonio Bernal had ridden up that morning to give orders about the coal.

"None of it is to be sent down to the ranch, he said, no matter who calls for it, till he comes back. He was going away for a time and--How will you get on at Sobrante without him, Lady Jess?"

"Wolfgang, better than with him. Listen. Look at me. I'm the 'manager' now. The captain. The 'boys' all elected me or made me, whatever way they fixed it. I'm to be the master. I, just Jessica. Guess I'm proud? Guess I'll do the very, very best ever a girl can do? Nobody is to be any different, though. You're to go on mining just the same and John Benton says, quite often, it's high time you had another hand to help up here. He says with coal fifteen dollars a ton there's money in it, even if it is a weeny little mine. So, if you want a man, any time, just let me know. Ha!"

With an amusing little strut that was mostly affectation the girl passed up and down before the miner, and ended her performance by a hearty hug. It was impossible for her to withhold her caresses from anybody who loved her; and who did not, at Sobrante, save Antonio and Ferd, the dwarf? But she sobered quickly enough and at Wolfgang's petition to "Tell me all about it already," gave him a vivid picture of the changes at her home.

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"But now Antonio has gone for a month, things will get straightened all out again. When he comes back I'll have that deed to show him, and once he gets it out of his vain head that he is owner and not my mother, he'll get sensible and good again, as he used to be. I wish I liked him better. That would make it easier for me to give up being 'captain' when the time comes. What makes one love some people and not others, Wolfgang? You ought to know, you've lived a long time."

"The good God."

"He wouldn't make us dislike anybody. That can't be the right reason."

"Then I know not. Though I am getting old I'm not so wise, little one. But-ought I? Ought I not?"

"What?"

"Now you hark me. This Ephraim--guess you what that Antonio said of him?"

"How should I? Yes, that's not the truth. But what he said was so dreadful I wouldn't even tell my mother."

"Ach! A child should tell the mother all things. Heed that. It is so we train our Otto."

Jessica laughed.

"Otto is no child. He is a grown man. He is bigger than you. You should not shame him by keeping him a boy always."

"Pst! girl! I would not he heard you, for my life."

"He'll not hear. Elsa is talking. But what did Antonio say about my old 'Forty-niner'?"

"That much went with that old man besides his boots."

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"Of course. The feet that were in them, I suppose. Silly Wolfgang, to be so impressed by a sillier Antonio. The boys say his Spanish maxims have little sense in them. That proves it."

"This deed of yours. He said: 'Where Ephraim, the wicked, goes, goes their deed to the land.' And more."

"What more? The cruel, cruel man!"

"That it mattered not already. He would come back, the master. It was his, had always been. My friend--your father--well, it was not we who listened. Nor for once would Elsa make the cup of coffee she was asked. Not a morsel got he here, save that the little boy ran after him and gave him his own bit swiebach lest he faint by the way. And that was the last word of Antonio Bernal."

Jessica's laughter was past. On her face there was a trouble it grieved her old friend to see, and he hastened to comfort her.

"If one goes, some are left already. Come now to one whose eyes will be cured by a sight of your pretty face."

"To Ephraim?"

"Even so."

He took her hand to lead her, like the tender babe he still considered her, and they passed behind the cabin, toward the rickety shaft leading into the mine. At its very mouth stood old Stiffleg, and in her delight the girl gave him, too, one of her abounding hugs, which called a comment from the miner.

"Beasts or humans, all one to your lips. Well, no matter. It's nature. Some are made that foolish way. As for me--old horses--"

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"Wolfgang Winkler, shame! Now, sir, you'll wait till you ask before I kiss you again!"

"Then I ask right quick. Now! Eh? No? Well, before you go then, to prove you bear no malice; and because I'll show you a new vein I didn't show Antonio. Ach! He'll mine his own coal when once he comes--the master--as he said! And so I think, though I know not, will all the others say. Sobrante will not be Sobrante with us all gone. So?"

"You'll not be gone. It is my mother's."

"He is big and strong. He can plot evil, I believe."

Wolfgang spoke as if he were disclosing a mystery and not a fact well known to all who really knew the Senor Bernal.

"I will be stronger. He shall not hurt my mother. I will fight the world for her and for my brother!"

The miner had been arranging the rope upon the windlass and now held the rude little car steady with his foot.

"Step in."

"Is he below? Down in the mine?"

"Already."

Jessica needed no second bidding, but leaped lightly into the car and Wolfgang followed her more cautiously. He knew that was a forbidden delight to her, for Mrs. Trent was nervously timid concerning such visits, but, like her, felt that the present circumstances justified the proceeding. Was not one below in the darkness, nursing a broken heart? And was not it the supreme business of each and all at Sobrante to comfort the sorrowing? How else had he and his been there, so happy and comfortable? So rich, also. Why, Elsa had--

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"Lady Jess! Get Elsa to show you the buckskin bag! It has grown as fat as herself since you last saw it. The child will own the mine some day, believe me!"

Moved by the thought he swiftly lowered away, and as the car touched the bottom, the girl sprang out and ran calling in the narrow tunnel:

"Ephraim! My Ephraim! Where are you? I've come for you, I, Jessica! It's a dreadful mistake. My mother--ah! here you are! Why down in this horrid hole, Ephraim Marsh? You're all shivering, it's so damp and dismal. For shame! To run away from your best friends and never give them a chance to tell you. Whoever wrote that note and sent you off from your own home, it never was my mother. Never! She said so, and it's almost broken her heart."

"It's quite broken mine," said the old frontiersman, sobbing in his relief at having been thus promptly sought and found by his beloved "lady." For he did not know it was quite by accident that she had stumbled on this trace of him, nor did anybody enlighten him. Whether she would have set him right or not she had no chance, for, at that instant, they heard a hoarse cry at the mouth of the shaft and saw the car, their only means of ascent, moving swiftly out of reach.

"Heart of grace! Why that? Hark the woman! 'Tis the child! It is the little boy! Harm has befallen and I--the father--I below in the ground!"

In his alarm Wolfgang danced about the narrow space and wrung his hands, gazing frantically up the shaft, catching hold of his companions and conducting himself altogether like one bereft of common sense. Which behavior was sufficient to restore Ephraim Marsh to his own self-command, and none too soon; for the anxious father had already begun to try the ascent by climbing up the timbered sides when, suddenly, as if propelled by some extraordinary force the car shot downward again. Before it really touched bottom the shrieks had become deafening, and when Elsa jumped out and rushed upon her husband, he clapped his hands to his ears and retreated as far as the chamber permitted.

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"She has gone mad, already! The woman is dement! Hark, the clamor!"

Then he remembered his first fear and clutched his wife's arm, which promptly went around his neck and threatened him with suffocation.

"Well, well, I never had no wife, but if I'd had I wouldn't cared to have her choke me to death a-loving me, nor split my ears a-telling me of it," commented "Forty-niner," dryly.

At which Elsa's screams instantly ceased, and she turned her attention upon him.

"Where is it, thief? Give it up, this minute! How could you rob me of my hard-earned money? That was to buy the mine--and the vein runs deep--for my little boy, my child! 'Twas Antonio Bernal, the great man, told us already of the deed you stole! But I believed him not--I. Now, give me my money, my money--money!"

Overcome by her own violent emotion, rather than by any opposition of poor Ephraim's, her hands slid from his shoulders, which she had been shaking as if she would jingle the cash from his pockets, and her plump person settled limply against him for support.

"Hello, here, woman! This is a drop too much! Take the creature, Winkler, and find out if you can what in misery ails her. She's clean out of her wits."

Instinctively, Jessica had placed herself at the old sharpshooter's side. He should feel that she did not believe this terrible accusation, which recalled to her, with painful significance, the parting words of Antonio Bernal as he had ridden away from her window that morning. These had practically accused him of stealing the missing deed, and now came Elsa with this talk of "money,

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money." She brushed her hand across her eyes as if to waken herself from some frightful dream and then smiled up into Ephraim's eyes, now bent inquiringly upon her. Dim as the light was, there was yet sufficient descending through the shallow shaft to reveal each troubled face to the other, and the old man's own frightened at the confiding trust of his beloved pupil's.

"Never mind her. Let her scream and loll around, if she wants to. What matters it? Little lady, am I or am I not a-a-that pizen thing she called me?"

"Never!"

"Then come on. Let's get out of this."

But he was not to be permitted to escape so easily. Elsa had now recovered her full strength and, oddly enough, her composure. She waved her husband toward the waiting car and he obeyed her gesture without protest, gently lifting Jessica into it, for she would not otherwise have been removed from Ephraim's side.

"Go with him, lady. Elsa won't want to *live* down here and we'll follow presently. Never had a woman seem so fond of my company, not in all my eighty years. H-m-m!"

Commonly, the most genial of men, the sharpshooter's spirits had fully regained their normal poise. Since he had not been dismissed by Mrs. Trent, and since his little Jessica believed in him, everything was all right. Elsa had been hoarding so long for her overgrown "child" that she had lost her wits. He wasn't surprised. She was a woman.

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So, with a smile, he was able to watch the car disappear upward, and he even began to whistle, lest Elsa should improve this opportunity and resume her racket.

"No disrespect to you, ma'am, remembering the good victuals you've often given me, but kind of to keep my courage up, like the boy going through the woods."

Elsa vouchsafed no reply, beyond grasping his sleeve firmly, as if to assure herself that he should not vanish through the solid wall behind them; and he, at least, was relieved when the little car came rolling downward again, empty.

Elsa, who understood its management as well as her husband, grasped its side and motioned Ephraim forward.

"Ladies first," he objected, gallantly.

"Get in, wretch, already."

"Oh! I'm not loath to get in, now. Even your sweet presence doesn't make this hole a paradise. And I came down here a heavy-hearted man, yet I've going up light as a feather. Glad I've got you along to ballast, else I'd likely shoot clean up to the sky."

Poor Elsa thought his hilarity ill-timed. She glared at him first, then began to weep, and her tears sobered him as no frowns could do.

"Look, here, old girl, cheer up! Likely it's only a passing fit of madness has got you in tow. Women are kittle cattle, I've been told. Except Lady Jess and the madam. But they're quality. It's in their blood to be noble just as 'tis in-well, let that go. If you've lost any of your money, as you 'pear to think, you'll find it again. Why, you're bound to. Who is there to steal it save your own selves? Likely you've got up some dark night in your sleep and hid it away so careful you've forgot the place. Good! The top and fresh air again, thank Heaven!"

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Mr. Hale had left the cabin immediately after Elsa, and though inclined to stoop and gather up her scattered coins had refrained from doing so, restrained by that prudence which becomes second nature to lawyers.

"She thinks somebody has robbed her and would probably accuse me of pocketing some of these. Too much money for anybody to keep in a house," he reflected, forgetting that banks were not accessible to everybody. "But it's an ill wind, etc. Now I shall be apt to escape that promised visit to an amateur coal mine, and not endanger my life in their rickety car."

Elsa's conduct upon reaching home was as curious and contradictory as ever. Instead of collecting her scattered treasure, she merely said, with a shrug of her fat shoulders:

"What good? let it lie. When the much is gone who cares for the little?"

Then she dropped into a chair and began again to cry, disconsolately.

Jessica could not endure the scene.

"Oh! I hate this! Elsa, stop. Be happy. Nobody has robbed you. If there has 'tis nobody here. I'm going home. I was having such a good time and I've found dear Ephraim. I'll ask leave to come again to-morrow, maybe, and you'll have it by then. Just as I shall the title. 'Tis only that you've been careless, as-as somebody else was. Good-by. We're going. Say good-by, won't you?"

Elsa's good-by was to seize Ephraim's coat and hold it with all her force, but he was now too happy to object to this.

"Certain, ma'am. If you've took a notion to it, I'll leave it with you. Coats don't matter, when hearts are light. Yes, look in the pockets. Like enough 'twill ease your mind a bit. I'd give her a dose of sagebrush tea, Wolfgang. Catnip 'd be better, but ain't so handy. Good-by, all. I'll be 'round again, myself, soon, if the lady can spare me," and with this remark, "Forty-niner" quietly slipped out of the loose garment and made his escape.

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There was no more talk of inspecting the ranch. The little party of three rode thoughtfully homeward. Even Ephraim's gayety had ebbed and the strange accusation Elsa had made began at last to claim his serious attention. Thieving was a new matter at Sobrante, though he, along with all the other "boys," had thought for many months that the manager was dealing unfairly by his mistress and employer. This affair would have to be sifted to the bottom, and he didn't like it. He was glad to be going back to his familiar quarters, glad of many things, yet his light-heartedness was quite gone.

Mr. Hale was equally silent and self-absorbed. Every hour he spent among these people, like innocent children all they seemed to him, but interested him the more in them. Their unhappiness disturbed him and yet his own mission was to make them more unhappy still.

Jessica was angry, indignant, and amused by turns; but these troubles were changing her swiftly from a careless little girl to a sadly perplexed captain, and she rode along in silence, for most of the way, forgetting entirely that she had meant to take quite another route, or that her present errand was to exhibit the wonders of her beloved Sobrante.

They cantered peacefully downward across the valley, old Stiffleg himself leading the way, till they struck upon the main road and saw in the distance a vehicle crawling forward upon it.

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"Oh! oh!" cried Jessica, who had been first to observe this object.

"Heigho! What's that—a circus?" asked Mr. Hale, gazing curiously at the strange wagon.

Ephraim shaded his eyes with his hand and peered into the distance. Then he dropped it, and drooping ridiculously, groaned:

"Oh! my fathers!"

"Looks like a circus. All the colors of the rainbow," persisted Mr. Hale, glad of any diversion to his perturbed thoughts.

"'Tis a circus, temperance union, a salvation army, a woman's rights convention, what Samson calls a Mother Carey's chicken, an Amazon, a wild Indian, a-a-shucks! There isn't anything on earth that yonder doesn't try a hand at. Land of Goshen! I'd almost rather turn and go back to be jawed by the Dutchwoman. And I've come home—just for this!"

But Jessica was laughing as she had not laughed all day, and if the person driving along in front was objectionable to Ephraim it was evidently not the fact in her case.

"Oh! how glad I am!" she cried, and touched Buster to his swiftest gallop, while the sharpshooter grimaced and groaned:

"To have come back to this!"

CHAPTER X

AUNT SALLY

94

"Aunt Sally! Aunt Sally, wait for me!"

At the shrill cry and the clatter of Buster's feet the crawling vehicle came to a standstill, and from under its canvas cover peered the smiling face of a hale, elderly woman, whose gray head was bare save for its abundant crown of curling hair. A straw Shaker bonnet, with green curtains, hung over her shoulders. Her print gown was of brilliant pink and her capacious apron of blue gingham. She was collarless and her sleeves were tucked above her round elbows, but she was clean, as if just from a laundry. Indeed, at that moment, her conveyance suggested such an institution on wheels, for well-strung clotheslines were taut against its sides, and from these fluttered freshly washed garments and scraps of cloth.

Aunt Sally saw Jessica's eyes, fasten upon these articles and explained:

"Met a little water comin' along and used it. Never know where you'll be when you need water next—in Californy. How's all?"

"Well, thank you. I'm so glad you've come."

"That's a word to cure deafness. Here."

The woman pulled a gigantic cookie from her apron pocket and held it toward the girl, who had now come alongside. The cake was in the shape of a doll, with flaring skirt, and was promptly nibbled.

"Well, I declare! Eat your playmates, do you?"

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"Yes, indeed, when you make them!"

"Who's that loping along behind?"

"Ephraim, of course. Oh! yes. A Mr. Hale, from New York."

"What's he at here?"

"Just staying. Lost his way and making a visit."

"H-m-m! Don't look wholesome. Needs picra."

"I doubt it. He has a great row of bottles in his room and takes medicine every time he eats, or doesn't. That is, since he's been at Sobrante, which isn't long."

When the wagon had halted on the road before them Ephraim had turned to his companion, with a whimsical smile, suggested:

"Better ride along as if we was glad to see her. It's like a dose of that bitter stuff she makes everybody take, whether or no-get it over with. And she isn't so bad as-H-m-m."

Mr. Hale was not sorry to do this, for his curiosity was roused. The wagon box was long and narrow, and contained as many articles as would have sufficed a family "crossing the plains" in the olden times. A kerosene cooking stove, a cat in a parrot cage, a hencoop, with mother and brood inside it, a trunk, a blanket and pillow, a pail for watering the animals, and a box of tin dishes. The cover, like a small "prairie schooner," was patriotic in extreme, shining with the national colors, newly applied by Aunt Sally herself, and with no stingy hand. The arrangement was also her own, and as she considered, an improvement upon the flag; for she made the whole top a field of stars, and the sides of the stripes.

"Instead of a little weeny corner full of stars, that you can count on your fingers, I've made a skyful right overhead. I always thought if I'd had the designin' of Old Glory, I'd have made it regular, like a patchwork quilt-and nobody ever pieces a 'block' that way. Things must compare even, and so they would be if women had had a hand in the business."

This decorative turnout was drawn by a tandem team, consisting of a milch cow and a burro, with the cow in front. Which, after due introduction to the stranger, she explained, regulated the behavior of both animals.

"With Balaam in the middle, and him inclinin' to balk, and Rosetty in front, it works double-action. Them that use their wits is twice served. If he stops, the wagon runs onto him, and if she's in a movin' mood, that drags him. If she gets lazy, he butts her and thus, why-I've tried it both ways, changing their places more'n once. This is the best. How you like Californy?"

"Very much."

"Come for your health?"

"Partly, for that."

"H-m-m. Folks with you?"

"No. I'm alone."

"Maybe you've got no folks. Some hasn't. Ephraim, yonder, is one. He'd be in a fix if 'twasn't for Jessie and me. I come about once in so often and straighten out all the crooks. Took them pills, Ephy?"

Mr. Hale tried to repress a smile and failed, but "Forty-niner" burst into a loud laugh, and replied:

"No, Aunt Sally, and what's more I'm not going to. Why should I? Who never have an ache or pain-that medicine will cure," he added, looking tenderly upon Lady Jess and remembering his grief of the past night.

"Well, you ought to have. 'Tisn't human nature to live to eighty and not have. I'm twenty years younger'n you are and I ache from head to foot, some days."

"Asking questions sort of wears you out, I reckon."

"Now, Ephy, don't get playful. Not at your age. It's not a good sign. Besides, my hen chicken's been crowing more'n once this trip. That's a sign of death-somewhere."

"Giddap, Stiffleg!"

Ephraim urged his horse forward, meaning to forewarn the "boys" of who and what was coming. Jessica comprehended and quickly followed, but her object was to bespeak a different kind of welcome from that he intended. Neither knew, then, just how heartily glad they would be before many hours were over of the helpful, yet disturbing, presence of this same masterful woman.

The Easterner was left to jog alongside the curious team and its more curious mistress, who, even, while she held the rope reins in one hand, was threading her needle and sewing that patchwork which was as characteristic of her as the ceaseless knitting was of Elsa.

In fact, when one came to look at her closely, there were seen assorted bits of cloth, fragments of some "block," pinned here and there about her person; and as he watched her nimble fingers fly from one seam to another the gentleman's amazement found expression.

"How can you manage to drive and sew at the same time? And is it necessary?"

"I guess you're a Yankee yourself, aren't you? Well, if I hadn't been able to manage how do you s'pose I'd ever have got my quilt done in time for the State fair? Fifty-five thousand five hundred and fifty pieces there's in it, and I've willed it to Jessica Trent when I'm done exhibitin' it. None of 'em bigger 'n a finger nail, and all done over paper. That's a piece of work, I 'low. What's your complaint?"

"I-I don't know as I have any. They've made me very comfortable and welcome."

"Dare say. They couldn't do otherwise. Giddap there, Balaam. Rosetty smells alfalfa, and you'll have to step out to keep up with a cow 'at does that. I mean what's your disease?"

"Oh! well-it's of no consequence."

"Man alive, don't neglect yourself. You're yallar. You've got the janders. Sure's I'm a living woman that's what it is."

"I think not. I hope not," said the poor man, but rather feebly.

"Sure. Or shingles. I've never seen a real likely case of shingles, and if it *should* be that, I'd just admire to nurse you. What victuals you been eating?"

The dyspeptic winced. This sounded truly professional, for all his numerous physicians had prefaced their treatment by a similar question.

"I've been able to eat almost anything and everything since I came into this country of open-air living. The last thing was some of Elsa Winkler's swiebach and honey-sweetened coffee."

"You don't say! Oh! oh! Poison, sir, rank poison. You may as well count yourself dead and laid out--"

The unfortunate stranger shivered and turned pale. For some half hour past, he had been suffering various qualms which he had attributed to Elsa's hospitality, but to tell a nervous invalid that he has been poisoned is to increase his misery a hundredfold. If Aunt Sally had desired a patient she was now in a fair way to secure one; but her words were without any significance to herself beyond the fact that she favored neither Elsa nor her cookery. Elsa's knitting work had crowded her own patchwork pretty closely at that famous fair, and the handsome money prize, which she felt belonged of rights to herself, had been halved between the pair. Because, though their skill lay along different lines, they had both signed their exhibits: "From Sobrante," and, manifestly, the judges could not give two first premiums to one estate.

This memory served to change her thoughts from disease to a detailed history of the wonderful quilt, during which they arrived at Mrs. Trent's cottage and dinner.

But this could not yet be served. Aunt Sally must needs first see her son, and after the fondest of greetings, cautiously consign to him the care of her personal outfit. She even ran after him—as he walked away, grinning and leading the now obstreperous cow—with a vial in her hand, begging:

"Now son, please me, before you eat that 'mess' of men's cooking by taking one spoonful of this dandelion relish. Made it myself, purposely for you, and I'll warrant no alcohol in it, either."

Experience had proved that protestation was worse than useless; so, with another grin, but a really affectionate "Thank you," John accepted the vial and once more started stableward.

"Now, Aunt Sally, come! You must be hungry yourself, after your long ride," urged Mrs. Trent, hospitably, and with sincere pleasure lighting her gentle face. Living so far from other women made the presence of even this uncouth one a comfort, and experience had proved that Mrs. Benton was, in time of need, that "rough diamond" which she claimed herself to be.

"All right, honey; in a minute. I'll just step out to the kitchen and pass the time of day with Wun Lung. Besides--"

Jessica caught Aunt Sally around her waist—as far as she could reach—and tried to prevent her leaving the room, but was lightly set aside, with the remark:

"Face is next door to the mouth. Guess I want to see what sort of food that heathen's got ready for us, 'fore I touch it!"

"Oh, Aunt Sally! In my house—can't you trust me?" asked the hostess, with mild protest. Though she knew before she spoke that her will as opposed to Mrs. Benton's, at least in minor matters, was powerless. So she quietly brought a book and offered it to Mr. Hale, with the suggestion that he make himself content for the present.

"The dinner will be delayed and there will be a rumpus in the kitchen. But the dinner will be all the better for waiting and the rumpus will end in Wun Lung taking another rest while Aunt Sally does his work. Fortunately, she is a prime cook, and we shall fare sumptuously every day. I'd be glad to keep her here, always, if I could."

"Old Ephraim Marsh did not appear to share your sentiments," and he described "Forty-niner's" behavior and remarks at first sighting Mrs. Benton's wagon.

"Then you found him. He's come back with you? Oh! I am so thankful. Sobrante wouldn't seem itself without that straightforward, honest old man."

"You are certain he is that?" asked, rather than asserted, the other.

"As certain as that there is honesty anywhere. What can you mean? Why do you seem so doubtful?"

"I don't wish to be a talebearer, but another of your adoring *proteges* is in dire trouble. Elsa has been robbed and accuses this unfortunate person of being the culprit."

"Such a thing would be impossible."

"So it seemed to me. Yet that old Wolfgang finally got it through his head—he appeared duller of wit than his wife—that to lose sight of Ephraim was to lose the money forever. Your little daughter promised to produce him when needed, and after considerable opposition they allowed him to

come away. I fancy they began to suspect me even. I fear, madam, I have visited Sobrante at an unfortunate time."

Mrs. Trent was paying but slight attention to his words. Her mind was already disturbed by many inexplicable things and would revert to Antonio's insinuations which, without Jessica's knowledge, she had also overheard. After a moment, recalled by high voices in the kitchen, she rallied, and apologizing for so doing, hastily left the dining-porch.

There were several gleaming pots and pans upon the oil cooking-stove and behind these stood Wun Lung, tenaciously grasping a meat dish and glaring unutterable things out of his beady eyes upon the excited woman who faced him, demanding:

"Give me that platter, monkey-face! Suppose I'll put your dirty victuals into my clean mouth or anybody else's? I've tasted your stuff before. A burnt bairn dreads the fire. Hand it over. I'll see if it's fit. There! That rice is boiling over."

The dish of savory lamb stew had been most daintily and carefully prepared after his mistress' own minute directions, but Wun Lung now slammed it upon the table with much violence and seized the pipkin of rice from the stove. With undue emphasis he placed this beside the stew and, advancing toward Mrs. Trent, made several profound salaams.

"Lat m'loman come-me glo. Good-by."

And for many a day thereafter Wun Lung served no more in that, his own beloved kitchen.

Not a whit disturbed was Aunt Sally. Revolution had become as the breath in her nostrils. Wherever she went old orders were reversed and all things became new. At a little town, with an unpronounceable Spanish name, which it suited her to call "Boston," she had her home-room in the house of a long-suffering woman cousin, whose ill-health afforded her infinite employment, therefore enjoyment. The invalid endured these ministrations because Aunt Sally also supported her, as well as ruled her; but she appreciated the rest which followed whenever the itching of Mrs. Benton's feet called their owner elsewhere. Between "Boston" and Sobrante the patriotic wagon vibrated, like a long-distance pendulum, and departing from either point carried everything belonging to its proprietor within it. "Boston" having become wearisome it was now Sobrante's turn.

"I haven't been so happy since I first trod shoe leather. Now, honey, you'll have good, clean fixings, with no opium nor rat tails in 'em," she gleefully announced, returning to the table.

"Aunt Sally, hush! What an opinion you'll give our guest of my housekeeping!" laughed Mrs. Trent.

"Pooh, child! Anybody that looks at you'll know you hate dirt. Now, eat, all. Only-you, Mr. Hale, I must insist you take a dose of this saffron tea. I steeped it while I was having that set-to with the Chinaman, for I thank my stars I can always do two things at once. And if I know the signs-Gabriella Trent, if that man hasn't got the janders or shingles, or malarial fever, don't you tell me a thing!"

"I certainly shall not tell you any such thing as that, dear soul. The trouble is, Mr. Hale, Aunt Sally is never so happy as when she has a sick person to nurse. If nobody is ill she does her utmost to make somebody so, with her uncalled for doses and stews. But-once be ill! Ah! dear Aunt Sally, I know how tender is your touch and how faithful your watch. God bless you!"

Not often was the gentle mistress moved to such emotion, and Mrs. Benton now put on her spectacles and regarded her hostess over them with a critical air.

"Land, honey! You must be coming down with something yourself! I never heard that janders was catching, but, heart of grace, it might be! Yes, in-deedy, it might be!"

The delight of her tone was equaled only by the sparkle of her eye. To have come to Sobrante, guided merely by the itching of a foot and to find two patients ready to hand, what mortal could ask more?

Possibly, with the intention of helping on their timely disorders, she heaped her neighbors' plates with the savory dinner, which was wholly due to Wun Lung's skill, and not, as she fancied, to her brief supervision.

When the meal was over, Aunt Sally retreated to the kitchen, after forcing Mrs. Trent to lie down and rest, "whether or no;" and to aid the lady's slumbers, there presently arose from without the lusty cries of two small lads who had returned from some prank, late as usual, and as usual, desperately hungry.

"I will have my dinner, so there, you old Aunt Sally! I will go tell my mother-I won't be spanked-I won't I-I-I--"

"Wonbepanked!" screamed another childish treble.

"Yes, you will, the brace of you. Spare the rod and spoil the child. That's what Gabriella does, all the time, soft-hearted dear that she is. A good, sound spanking once in six months is all that keeps you in a state of salvation. If it wasn't for me I don't know what in reason you little tackers would grow up to be. One thing I do know, though, and so do you, and that is-that while your old Aunt Sally is at Sobrante ranch you'll never be late to your victuals again."

In this events proved that the speaker was right, as, indeed, she had often been before on similar occasions.

Knowing that this little family jar would result in no serious harm to her idolized son, Mrs. Trent lay still and thought, but did not sleep. How could she? What a subtle thing is suggestion!

Poor, overburdened Gabriella Trent had known and trusted old Ephraim Marsh for many years; yet the words of Antonio, and now of this stranger within her gates, lingered in her memory and would not then leave.

Up in his pleasant guest chamber Mr. Hale felt within himself the increasing vigor of returning health, tempered for the moment, it may be, by a little indiscretion of diet; yet the assertion of that noisy old woman below stairs, that he was, despite all, on the verge of some serious illness, so worked upon his still weakened nerves that he could neither sleep nor forget them.

The result in both cases was unfortunate.

That evening Mrs. Trent forbade her daughter the rifle practice for which, promptly on his return, Ephraim had made special preparation. Her refusal hurt the old fellow, already sensitive from a previous injury, and he reflected, bitterly, as he once more sought his monkish chamber:

"After all, whoever dismissed me was right. I'm too old for use. I'd better never have come back."

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As for Mr. Hale, brooding and an unwise exposure to the night air on the previous evening, did bring on a slight fever. Worryment increased this and, like many men, he was impatient under suffering; so that when his bell rang sharply, demanding attention, he was in a fair way to require all that Aunt Sally or any other had to give.

Meanwhile, down at the adobe quarters, other suspicions were rife.

"What is that man doing here, any way? He don't tell his business, and he's asked a power of questions. He's wormed out of one and another of us all there is to learn about this ranch, and he hasn't let on a single thing about himself, except that he's a lawyer from New York. New York's a big village and all lawyers can lie. I'm bound to sound that chap before I'm many hours older," said Joe Dean, bringing his hands down heavily upon the table.

"I know a trick worth two of that. Set mother on him!" cried John Benton, gayly. "She'll ask more questions to the square inch than any other human being I ever met, and she'll have all his business, family history, and present undertakings out of him before he can say Jack Robinson. Lucky for us she got that itching foot just when she did."

So it was agreed; and thus, primed to the fullest investigation, Aunt Sally and her curiosity established themselves within their victim's sickroom. When they emerged from it, at daybreak, the one had been fully satisfied—with horror; and the ruddy face of the other had grown white and heartbroken as no single night of watching should have left it.

CHAPTER XI

THE GUEST DEPARTS

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"Well, mother! What are you doing, waking me out of my beauty sleep, this way?"

"Don't speak to me, John Benton. This is no time for fooling. Not till I've got my breath, knocked out of me by the plumb wickedness of this world. That I should have lived to hear such things and not died in my tracks!"

Upon leaving Mr. Hale's sickroom, Aunt Sally had traveled as fast as her nimble feet could carry her to her son's quarters, in the old mission, and had burst in upon his slumbers, with a mighty groan.

"What's up?"

"You ought to be, for one thing. There, lie still. I can talk and you can listen—and you'll need support 'fore I'm through. That man! Oh! that man!"

"Yes'm. Which one?"

"Shut up. You need spankin' as bad as ever you did. But—John, John! The vilest wretch that ever trod shoe leather! The best, the generousest, the noblest—and not here to say a word for his poor self."

"Mother, your remarks seem a little mixed. If you'll face the other way I'll have on my clothes in a jiffy. Can't 'pear to sense things so well, lying a-bed after daylight."

Mrs. Benton stepped outside the house and paced the beaten path with a tread powerful enough to crush all her enemies, had they been in her way. Swiftly, heavily, back and forth, with clinched hands and grim lips, the woman was rather working her indignation to a higher point than allaying it, and as the carpenter limped from his quarters he saw this, and thought:

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"She meant it. No time for fooling when she's stirred up that way. What in the name of reason can ail her?"

After a plunge of his head in the water of the general washing-trough, through which a fresh stream was continually piped, and a drying on the roller towel suspended near it, his wits were clearer. Finishing his toilet by means of his pocket-comb, he considered himself ready for her

story and for anything that it might entail.

"Well, mother?"

Aunt Sally paused and glared at him in such a vicious manner that he felt as if he were again that little boy of hers who needed the usual corporal punishment.

"Yes, but mother-what have *I* done?"

"Done? Nothing! Not a man jack of you! Let that viper warm himself at her very fireside, least to say, south porch, and not show him up for what he was. Land! The men! I never saw one yet was worth shucks, savin' hers and mine. If you was half the fellow your father was, John Benton, or that noble Cass'us was-oh! if ever *I* wanted to be a man in my life I want to be this minute!"

The carpenter darted into his chamber and reappeared with a vial and spoon.

"To please me, mother, 'fore you say any more, just take a spoonful of this dandelion relish. Made it myself, you know, and warrant no alcohol in it!"

The jester was rewarded by a boxed ear, but he had effectually arrested his parent's wandering thoughts, and she burst forth with her news:

"That viper-lawyer-man has come to this Sobrante to accuse Cass'us Trent of stealing! lyin! cheating! Cass'us, your best friend and mine. Says there's a power of money missing, that was all consigned to him, to purchase that Paraiso d'Oro for a community and never reported on!"

"What? W-h-a-t!"

John had laid his hand upon her shoulder like a vise, and she began to whimper.

"Needn't pinch me, child. 'Twasn't I said it. You told me to find out what he wanted here and I have. He pretends he lost his way, got off the road he was showed to take and met Lady Jess in the canyon. Says his own horse is up to Pedro's sheep pasture. Says--"

"*And you let him?* Had him right there in your power and didn't knock his old teeth down his lying throat?"

As John's wrath increased his mother's ebbed. She had passed her indignation on to another, as it were, and felt the relief of this confidence.

"No, I didn't. I left that for you to do. They was false ones any way and wouldn't have hurt none. Hold on! Where you going, son?"

For the carpenter had started forward, as if intent upon instant and terrible vengeance. Neither of them noticed that Jessica had followed Aunt Sally hither till a girl's voice implored:

"Don't! That would let my mother know and it would kill her!"

"Captain! You here? You understand?"

"Yes-yes. They waked me, talking, and I crept to the upper hall to stop them, so they should not disturb my poor, tired dear. Oh! I heard! I heard-every-single-dreadful word!"

"Well, I'm going to fix him for it."

"John, wait-wait. I must think. My precious mother--"

Jessica rarely wept. Now she flung herself into Aunt Sally's arms and sobbed in a way that set the carpenter raging afresh. One after another the "boys" came out from the closed or open doors along the row. Some because it was their usual hour for rising, others to learn the cause of these early voices. But one glimpse of Lady Jess in trouble grouped every ranchman about her and set each to hurling a torrent of questions upon that good woman, who held her, without pause for any answer.

But John held up his hand and told the story. It belonged to them all, as Jessica did, and the honor of Sobrante.

They heard it with little comment, save groans and occasional mutterings, punctuated by fresh inquiries of Mrs. Benton. Considerable mystery had been thrown about her cross-examination of her temporary patient, and after all it had proved the simplest matter in the world. Concerning his own personal affairs he was provokingly silent, but he was as ready to talk about his business in that region as she was to have him when, after a roundabout preparation, she brought him to it.

"I am in honor pledged to do my best for my employers in the East, and unwilling to remain here under false colors, so to speak, any longer. Who is the most responsible person here, excepting Mrs. Trent?" had been his words.

"I am," promptly replied Aunt Sally.

"Then you shall hear my story," and he told it.

The effect of it was to loose her tongue to its utmost. One may guess the listener heard himself portrayed in colors he failed to recognize and that he realized he had made a mistake in the selection of a *confidante*. However, his purpose had been to do away with all doubt concerning himself, and to do this with as little distress to his hostess as possible. For that reason he had believed a woman would be his best aid, but it proved that almost any ranchman on the place would have been safer than she.

"Well, I ought to have known that a female who talks so much must say something amiss, and I can't blame her for her indignation. In her stead I might have behaved worse; and the thing now is to get over this little weakness and go away about the miserable business, at once," he reflected. Then he watched her hurry out of his room and surmised whither she would turn her steps. Therefore, he was not surprised when, somewhat later, he also left the cottage to find himself confronted by great Samson, quietly, but significantly, awaiting the stranger's appearance. For the great fellow had naturally been appointed by his mates to "settle that critter's hash and settle it sudden."

"Good-morning, Samson."

Silence.

"It seems so wonderful to me to wake and find this changeless sunshine, day after day, as if no such things as storms could ever exist," said the lawyer, pleasantly.

Samson's grimness relaxed to a slight degree. "Some kind of storms blow in fair weather. Likely you'll meet up with one sooner'n you expect. Step this way, will you?"

The sailor's expression was so formidable that, for a moment, all the wild tales the lawyer had ever read of western desperadoes returned to test his already weakened nerves. But he was no coward, and knew that though in a most uncomfortable position, it was by no means a guilty one.

"Certainly."

Samson led the way, if walking closely beside the guest, as a constable walks beside his prisoner, may be termed leading. Nor once did he turn his angry gaze from the gentleman's face, and the riding-crop in his hand swung to and fro, as if longing to test itself against some enemy's body. The walk ended in the ranchmen's messroom, where Wun Lung, released from the cottage kitchen, had already been impressed into service, and was deftly preparing breakfast. Aunt Sally had disappeared, but Jessica was there, perched on a corner of the dresser, by which stood "Forty-niner," with his arm about her. All the other workmen whom Mr. Hale had seen were also present and an air of silent fury pervaded the whole assemblage.

The stranger's glance passed swiftly from one face to another and saw no kindness on any. Even the little captain's eyes were bent downward and her lovely face wore a sorrow it made his own heart ache to see.

Joe Dean lounged forward.

"Stranger, have you broke your fast?"

"No."

Another silence, during which the blacksmith poured a cup of inky coffee from the great pot, hacked off a piece of bread from a dusky loaf, and shoved them toward their unwelcome guest across the table by which he had sat down.

"Eat, and be quick about it."

The color rose in the Easterner's cheek, but he made no motion to obey, and after a brief waiting, seeing this, Joe threw the coffee out of the window and tossed the bread to the dogs.

"There's a horse outside. It's for you. The poorest we've got, because once you've bestrode him no decent man'll ever mount him again. He'll answer, though, to carry you beyond this valley, and Samson'll go with you to see you leave it for good. Then he'll turn the beast loose and may the Lord have mercy on your dirty soul. *Get!*"

Mr. Hale did not stir. His own eye gathered fire and the pink in his face grew scarlet, but his voice was calm as he inquired:

"Am I still at Sobrante, the home of gentlefolks? By whose orders, please, this present dramatic scene?"

"Yes; this is Sobrante. The home of gentlefolks—you spoke the truth for once. The home of Cassius Trent, the truest man, the noblest heart, the whitest gentleman the good Lord ever made. The home of a man! and not a free hotel for whelps! Ugh! If I had promised the captain—Lady Jess, let me off that word! I must at him, I *must-I will!*"

Joe's attitude was full of menace, but Mr. Hale neither moved nor took his own cool gaze from his enemy's face. Though Jessica had taken swift alarm and leaped down to place herself beside the smith and clasp his hand with her own.

"No, no. You promised, and I'm your captain. Soldiers obey their captains and you chose me yourself. You are not to hurt him nor abuse him, though, I, too"—here she wheeled about and faced her guest, crying: "hate you, hate you! Oh! that's wicked. That's rude. But, sir, how dared you say my father—the best man ever lived—kept—took—it isn't true, it isn't!"

The lawyer rose, somewhat unsteadily. The sight of the daughter's grief disturbed his calmness more than the affronts offered him by her bearded henchmen. It was to her that he addressed the question:

"Am I permitted to say a word in my own behalf, Captain Jessica?"

A growl ran around the room, but she held up her small hand, protestingly.

"Yes. That's fair. My father always taught me to be fair. I'm sorry I was—I wasn't polite--"

"No, you aren't," shouted Samson. "Don't you dare be sorry for anything but the kindness you've showed that skunk!"

"Samson, it was you made me captain!"

"All right. I give in. Be as fair as you like, I can't help it."

"Tell us all there is to tell. As you told Aunt Sally."

"Thank you, captain. I'll be brief. I came to California, representing a company, a syndicate, which had advanced large sums of money to purchase, improve, and stock a vast tract of land called Paraiso d'Oro. Though for a time due receipts and reports had been returned to the syndicate for several months these had entirely ceased. Unfortunately, the company had implicit faith in their consignee, and Paraiso d'Oro was but one of their many enterprises. I had been their legal adviser in other matters, and when my health failed from overwork, they suggested that I should come here and investigate their affairs, while I could recuperate at the same time.

"I set out on horseback from Los Angeles, my temporary headquarters, without a guide and with many erroneous notions concerning both the State and its people. You see, though I'd lived at the center of our national civilization--"

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"You're forgettin' Californy!" cried somebody.

"I'd led the narrow life of a man absorbed in one sort of business. I traveled out of my way, and lost it. Then I met your captain in the canyon and she courteously offered me the hospitality of Sobrante. Until I reached this spot I had no idea that it was part and parcel, so to speak, of that Paraiso I'd come to reclaim. Gradually this fact became clear to me and from that moment I have been anxious to get away from a hospitality I have no moral right to enjoy."

"Spoke the truth for once, liar!" grumbled Cromarty.

"You cannot feel it more than I, sir, nor more profoundly regret that it is my misfortune to have undertaken a business which has now become obnoxious to me. But a lawyer must look at facts. One Cassius Trent--"

"Take care!"

"Be quiet, Marty! Go on, Mr. Hale," ordered the little captain.

"Cassius Trent was the man whose hitherto probity and enthusiasm had enlisted the interest of his New York friends. He represented that his projected community would not only be an excellent investment for their money, but a benefaction to humanity. They believed him and-well, their money is gone, their community has not even a beginning, and the man is dead. He seems to have been a person--"

"A white gentleman, sir!"

"Who could obtain a strong hold upon the affections and confidence of all who knew him. I admire the qualities which gained your devotion and I admire your loyalty to him. I am charmed with the home he created in this wilderness-*for himself*-and I have the profoundest respect for his afflicted family. I wish I had not undertaken this trust. But I have so undertaken, I am sworn to my clients' interests, and I must further them to my utmost ability. If the missing money can be recovered I shall recover it, painful as my duty may be. And-that is all. Good-by, little captain. It is my sincere wish that I may find some explanation of this mystery, other than circumstantial evidence seems to point. If I so find I shall return and tell you. If not-good-by. Make my respectful regards to your mother, and thank you for my entertainment."

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He turned and walked to the doorway, nobody interfering; but there he paused and asked:

"That horse you mentioned? Can I purchase him of you? If so I need not trouble Samson for his escort, but will bid you, gentlemen, good-morning."

A significant look ran around the circle of intent and lowering faces. The lawyer's succinct explanation of affairs had impressed them, but it had not altered one fact which most mattered to those hardy countrymen.

A dead man, their idolized master and friend, had been accused of black dishonesty, and they had passed their own promise to their girlish captain not to injure the accuser.

But they had not promised he should go scot-free. To some men shame was worse than a bullet wound. It would have been so to them, and they did the stranger thus much honor that they ascribed him equal manliness.

As he stepped across the threshold Mr. Hale found both Samson and John Benton close beside him, at right hand and left; and when he was about to mount the superannuated beast, which a grinning stable lad held for him, he was pinioned and quietly hoisted into the saddle. Instantly, a brace of straps secured him and Samson's crop cut viciously at the animal's neck. Then the sailor sprang into his own saddle and, amid the insulting shouts and jeers of the assembled ranchmen, the unfortunate Easterner rode out of the mission courtyard-face backward.

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Captain Jess screamed and ran forward, but her outstretched hands could not reach her guest, already borne many rods away. Then she faced the jeering men, with an anger she had not believed it possible that she could ever feel toward her beloved "boys."

"Shame on you! Shame on you, every one! How dared you? And I thought-I thought-you were gentlemen!"

With arms tightly folded over her breast, as if to hold back the conflicting emotions within it, her blue eyes flashing, her small foot stamping, she defied and condemned them all.

A little laughter answered her, but this sound died speedily, and awkward glances shifted among the faces of the men. They were sorry to have offended the "Little One," and to have her indignant with them was a new and unpleasant situation, but they were not in the least degree sorry that they had administered some punishment to the maligner of their master. Most of them would have wished this punishment more severe, but the promise Jessica had exacted from them before this interview had prevented.

One by one, as they had first come upon the scene they retreated from it, though Joe Dean lingered a moment to ask:

"Won't you come share our breakfast, captain, and so bury the hatchet?"

She sadly shook her head. All her anger left her as suddenly as it had arisen, and there remained in her mind but one thought--there were people in the world who believed her father had been a thief. That was the hard and bitter fact which nothing could soften. The former trouble about the lost title deed, and the probable loss of her home seemed as nothing to this new distress. How was she to face it? How disprove it? How save her beloved mother from ever hearing it?

There came a step beside her and a strong arm about her shoulders. It was Ephraim Marsh; erect, resolute, protecting.

"Take it easy, daughter. It's you and me together'll nail this lie on the door of the man who started it. There's a blue sky up yonder and a solid earth down here. I'm good to trust the one and tread the other for forty miles a day yet, spite of my white head. If I have to travel this old State over its hundred and fifty-six thousand square miles, before I clinch that falsehood, I'll clinch it, if I live. If I don't-laws, dearie, I'm in the same poor box myself. There's them that believe me a-you know the word. Even your mother--"

"No, Ephraim! She never believed you anything but the splendid man you are."

"Last night, no shooting, and--"

"It was nothing. She was tired. Aunt Sally always tires her, at first, good as she is and much as we love her. Mother is so quiet and gentle herself--"

"I understand, darlin'."

"Ephraim, she must never know that dreadful thing the stranger said."

"Captain, she'll have to know."

"She must not, I tell you! What am I for but to take care of and love her? Ned-but Ned's only a little boy--"

"And you, my Jessie, are but a few years older than he."

"I'm older than you, I believe! Is it only two days since I met that man in the canyon and things began to happen? It seems forever. As if I'd only lived these forty-eight hours, and all that went before was a dream."

Ephraim stepped aside and regarded her shrewdly.

"Old words to come from so young a mouth, Lady Captain. Have you had any breakfast?"

"No. I don't want any. Have you?"

"No. But I'm going to have. As a rule, breakfasts are wholesome. Keeping your stomach quiet keeps your head clear. Things'll look more natural after we've eat. Share mine?"

"No, I mustn't. Mother would miss me and wonder."

"You often do."

"It's better you share mine to-day. Then we must plan. I heard you say that about you and me together. Will you help me? Shall we prove it wasn't true--to the rest of the world, I mean--as we know it? Shall we?"

"That's the rest of my life-job, darlin'. We'll begin it right away by getting a taste of Aunt Sally's good victuals. I hate her picra doses, but her cooking beats the Dutch."

"Afterward?"

"Afterward isn't touched yet."

Whether real or affected there had come a cheerfulness into the old man's tone which it had lacked a few moments earlier. After all he was not useless. Who knew his California as he did? If it were true that money had been sent to Mr. Trent's hands and was missing, then somewhere

was a man who had appropriated it. Whoever and wherever he was, he should be found, and Ephraim Marsh was self-appointed so to find.

Jessica's hand slipped under his arm, and her own face grew somewhat lighter as she walked beside him toward her own home, where Aunt Sally was keeping an anxious lookout and a most tempting breakfast.

"Bless you, Jessie! I'm glad you've come. Step right in, Ephy. Them muffins are so light they've nigh flown off the porch. Made with the eggs my hen-chicken laid, comin' along from Boston. Smartest fowl in the country, and only one I ever owned would brood and lay at the same time. I wouldn't take a fortune for that bird."

Aunt Sally's own cheerfulness was fully restored. With her to be busy helping somebody was, after all, her happiness. And she saw that she had never come to Sobrante more opportunely.

"Your mother isn't up yet, dearie. And I've had the tackers out and washed 'em good. Then I filled them with hot milk, and some of my salt-risin' bread I fetched along in my box, and put 'em to bed. I promised if they'd go to sleep again I'd make 'em each a saucer-pie, and they went."

In spite of her heavy heart, Jessica laughed.

"Aunt Sally, I don't believe there's another person could make them go to sleep at this time of day; not even my mother."

"Pooh! Her! Why, that little Edward knows he can twist her round his thumb easy as scat. He's too much the look of his father for Gabriella ever to be sot with him. You, now, you favor her folks."

Here, foreseeing that the talkative woman was off on a long track, Ephraim mildly inquired:

"Aunt Sally, did you bring that rheumatism-oil you had last time you were here?"

She put on her spectacles and looked at him over them, as was her habit. Never, by any chance, had she been known to look through them, and her explanation of wearing them at all was simply: "It's proper for a woman of my age."

"Ephy, you feel real bright, don't you? You and rheumatism! Why, man, you'll be getting married before you get rheumatic."

"Then I'll never need the oil."

She was not to be so easily worsted. If Ephraim was minded to be facetious, she'd match him at the business. Whereupon, instead of rehearsing the history of Gabriella's "folks" she veered round upon disease and gave them details of all the dreadful things she had ever heard till "Forty-niner" cried, "Quits! I'll not tackle you again."

Mrs. Benton's eyes twinkled over her cup, for she had joined them at table. She knew, as he did, that this was but foolish sport, yet that it had served their mutual purpose; which was to divert Jessica's thoughts from trouble and her lips from asking why her mother did not appear.

But the meal over, the question came, and the answer was ready:

"Why, I just coaxed her to lie and rest a spell. She knew that I'd look after things all right, and can make butter next grade to hers, if I can't equal. Anybody that's been worrying with a Chinaman as long as she has needs a vacation, I 'low. So she's taking a mite of one."

"Then I'll gather a bunch of roses and take to her. I'm glad to have her rest, and I hope-Aunt Sally, do you suppose she heard any of that dreadful man's talk? Did you tell her?"

"No; I didn't tell her. I'd sooner never say another word as long as I live than do such a thing. You needn't be afraid to trust your old auntie, child. There, run along and make her a posy."

But no sooner had Jessica gone into the garden than Aunt Sally's lips were close to Ephraim's ear, and she was whispering:

"She heard it, every word. She didn't say so, and I didn't ask. But the look of it in her eyes. Ephraim Marsh, I've got a heartbroken woman on my hands, and don't you dare to tell me a word 'at I haven't."

"Oh, that tongue of yours! Last night when you were yelling at him why didn't you think about other folks' hearts and be still? You've a voice like a fog horn when you're mad-or pleased, either!" cried this honest, ungallant frontiersman.

"I know it, Ephy. It's the truth. I realize it as well as you do. And I was mad. Since she heard, anyway, I wish now 'at I'd up and thrashed him good. I had laid out to put a little bitter dose in his coffee this morning, but he went away without taking any," she ended, grimly.

"Sally Benton, you're quite contriving. What's to be done?"

Before she could reply Jessica came back, her arms full of great rose-branches and her face bright with confidence.

"Ephraim, Aunt Sally, I've thought of something. It came to me out there among the roses, like a voice speaking; my mother must not and need not be told what Mr. Hale said. It isn't wicked to deceive her in this, for her own good. Often you've asked her to let you take me horseback trip to Los Angeles, stopping nights at houses on the way, with people who knew my father; and she's promised I should 'some time.' I think the 'some time' has come. She will be glad to have us go, for one thing, to find out about the feather markets and others that Antonio used to take care of,

but has left. Aunt Sally does two things at once; why not we? We'll hunt that man who took the money; and if I can't find the deed first-though, of course, I shall-we'll straighten that out, too. Isn't that good sense?"

"It's more; it's inspiration," responded "Forty-niner," enthusiastically. He had already decided to make this journey alone, for Jessica's sake; but with her as companion he felt that it would be as sure of success as full of pleasure. A little child working to clear her father's name of dishonor, and to save her mother's home-what evil could prevail against this noble effort?

It was like his simplicity and hers that neither thought of providing for difficulties by the way, or for any delay in finding the men and proofs they sought, when once they reached the distant city.

Aunt Sally was not so sanguine; yet it was not her part to discourage any attempt to set wrong matters right, and she merely nodded her head and remarked:

"It'll bear thinking on. Now, run along and see your mother."

"Has she had her breakfast? Can't I carry it to her?"

"S'pose I'd let that poor lamb go without her dawn-meal late as this? I heard her stirring the minute I got back into the house, so I fixed her some broma and poached her an egg, and made her go lie down again. You'll not find her hungry, child, 'less for a sight of you."

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Jessica ran to her mother's room, exclaiming:

"I'm so glad you're resting, dear. Were ever more perfect roses? And isn't it delightful that Aunt Sally should be here just now to look after things. Because--"

"Well, my darling? Why do you hesitate?"

"Mother, may Ephraim and I go on that trip to Los Angeles?"

Lady Jess had intended to be very careful and cautious, for once, and to test her mother's feelings on the subject she made her request. But frankness was her habit, and the question was out of itself, it seemed, and she waiting the answer with a beating heart.

"Why just now, daughter? And-has Mr. Hale gone?" she asked, in a peculiar tone.

"Yes. He has gone. He left rather-rather suddenly, but he sent his regards to you and his thanks. He said he might come back some time, but-I don't think he will. He said something to offend the 'boys,' and they let him take old Dandy. Samson went with him to show him the way."

Poor little captain, who had never in her short life had one secret thought from her idolized mother. This first experience did not come easy to her, and after one glance into the sad, yet amused, eyes watching her, she tossed secrecy aside and buried her face on her mother's pillow.

"Mother, mother! I am so unhappy. I'm keeping something back from you that I cannot tell you; that I cannot have you know, and I don't like it. But-it's right, it's best. So don't ask me, and, oh, mother--"

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"I've no need to ask you, sweetheart. I know, already."

"Know-what?" cried Jessica alarmed, and sitting straight again.

"All that is in your brave heart. All that Mr. Hale had heard against your father. All that you and Ephraim hope from this suddenly decided journey to a distant city."

"Why-how? And I'd only just thought it out, yonder in the garden!"

"I had begun to suspect, I hardly know why, that our late guest had come here as our enemy, or, rather, as an agent against us. Something held me back from confiding in him, as I at first wished to do. He is a gentleman, and doubtless honest, but he is not on our side. Besides, how and why he went away just as he did is plain enough. I have ears and I have eyes, and I heard all Aunt Sally's tirade last night, so could easily guess at his own part in the talk. Also-I saw him ride out of the courtyard. My little girl, for the first time in my life I blushed for Sobrante. Even if he had been a wicked man, which he was not, that was a dastardly insult. I am ashamed of your 'boys,' captain."

"And so am I. And I told them so, quick enough. Oh! they pretended not to mind my anger, but they were ashamed-inside themselves, I know. Now, for ever so long, they'll be so good 'butter would melt in their mouths.' You see."

"Apt pupil of Aunt Sally."

"Why, mother! How can you smile and take it so quiet? This awful-awful thing he said?"

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"To say a thing is not to prove it. The charge is so monstrous that it becomes absurd. Nothing hurts us but what we do, and your father never did a dishonorable deed, from the hour of his birth till his death. I am sorry for those mistaken people who think that he did, and I am thankful that he left a brave little daughter to set them right."

Jessica stared. For a long time past she had seen her mother anxious and troubled over matters which now seemed trivial in the extreme; yet this blow which had almost crushed her own courage but restored Mrs. Trent's.

"Then do you mean that we may go?"

"Yes."

"Oh, mother! Thank you."

"But you will go armed with the fullest information we can gain. We will examine all the papers Antonio left-if he left any. We will make a thorough search everywhere for that title deed. We shall probably find letters from this New York company to your father, and these will have the name, or names, of those with whom he did business at Los Angeles. I wish now that Senor Bernal were here. His knowledge would be worth everything in this emergency, if-he would give it. Well, he is not here, and we must do the best we can without him. I'm going to get up now and begin to look."

"Aunt Sally thought you ought to rest."

"This talk will rest me most of all."

The mother was now as eager as the child, and together they were soon engaged in opening Mr. Trent's desk and secretary, which his wife had not before touched since he himself closed them.

Alas! the search was an easy matter, and came swiftly to an end. Beyond a few personal letters from relatives and friends, there was not a scrap of writing anywhere. Even the ledgers and account books had been removed, and at this discovery the same thought came to both:

"Antonio."

"Yet, why? and so secretly. He was really the master here, and if, as he now claims, Sobrante is his, he has but to prove it, and we will go away," said the widow, trembling for the first time.

"Let us try the safe. That night before he went off in such grief, Ephraim gave me the key. He thought he was going forever, and I was to look in it some time-when I needed. We'll look now."

Mrs. Trent herself unlocked the clumsy iron box and found it empty, save for one small parcel. This, wrapped in a bit of canvas, was securely tied and addressed to "Jessica Trent."

The mother passed it to her.

"You open it, please, mother. It may be-it must be-that deed and maybe some other things-I couldn't wait to pick the knots, and I've no knife."

CHAPTER XIII

THE START

Nothing resembling a legal document was found inside the package; but, instead, were several neatly-arranged rolls of gold and silver money, with the denomination of each roll carefully marked outside; dollars, eagles, double eagles. With these was a scrap of paper, saying:

"All my savings for my captain. God bless them to her. E. M."

"Oh, mother! That big-hearted Ephraim! Was anybody ever so unselfish as he?"

"Or as unjust as I have been."

"How? What can you mean?"

Mrs. Trent did not answer, save by the tears in her eyes, though she was tempted to show her child all the base suspicion that had, for a brief space, dwelt in her own mind concerning "Forty-niner." A suspicion which Antonio had suggested, and her trouble made her too ready to accept. Then she reflected it were wiser not, and rose, placing the precious parcel in Jessica's own hands.

"Let us find that splendid old man at once. We cannot accept his sacrifice, but we must hasten to show him we appreciate it."

Ephraim was polishing his rifle in his own room when they came to him, and rose to welcome the unusual visit of the lady with more awkwardness than he commonly displayed. It was an honor she was doing him, yet he had far rather she had not come.

But he was forced back into his chair by Jessica's assault of clinging arms and raining kisses, and, catching sight of the parcel in her hand, began to understand.

"Oh, you splendid, darling, generous Ephraim! I can never, never thank you enough for doing this for me, but I could not ever possibly take it. Why, there must be hundreds of dollars there, my mother says, and that would mean almost all the years you've ever lived at Sobrante. I never knew anybody with such a heart as you, dear Ephraim."

The poor old fellow was far more distressed by her rejection of his gift than she could guess. His face drooped, he worked his hands and feet uneasily, he shifted his seat, and behaved in altogether a new fashion for the man who had hitherto borne himself so simply and naturally. Then the old suspicion returned to sting his loving heart, and he glanced up to study his mistress' face. To his surprise he saw it wet with tears, and that she was holding out her thin, labor-hardened hands to clasp his own.

"Ephraim Marsh, you have done me more good than money could bring. You have renewed my faith in mankind. In a world where live such men as you justice will be done the memory of my

dead husband. I thank you."

"Don't-don't mention it, Mrs. Trent. I wish it had been double, as it ought, only--"

"Ephraim, mother says we may go. You and I, as you said, 'together,' to make everything straight."

"What? You've told her then, Lady Jess."

"Of course. Or she guessed. How could I keep anything from my mother? And she's quite willing."

"I'm more than willing, Ephraim. I *want* you to go. I believe that good will come of the journey, though I am terribly disappointed by not finding any papers or letters to help you in the search for the men with whom Mr. Trent transacted his business. Antonio must have taken away all the records or put them in some place I cannot guess."

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"Then we'll find Antonio first."

"Of course. How simple of me not to think of that. Do you happen to know where he went?"

"No, ma'am, I don't. But you can always track a-well some critters by their scent. Wherever that scoundrel goes he'll leave a trail. I've a keen nose for the hunt."

"Don't judge him too harshly, Ephraim. Perhaps he considered that he was doing all for the best; and if Sobrante is his, he's welcome to it."

"Whew!" was the ranchman's astonished comment.

"Don't you understand, dear Ephraim? Losing a home is nothing to losing honor," said Jessica, earnestly. "We don't care half so much about Sobrante as that other thing."

"You shall keep both. Your home and our master's honor," cried the old man, fiercely.

"Yes, that we will!" echoed Jessica, clasping his hand again.

So doing she dropped the canvas bag on the floor, and, picking it up, Mrs. Trent would have restored it to its owner, as she so considered the sharpshooter. But he would have none of it.

"I've heard the little tackers call one another 'Indian giver.' I couldn't, ma'am, you know. It's Jessie's, now."

The mistress' face grew serious. She had not expected to find the man so obstinate. But she hated to wound him and turned the matter aside with the remark:

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"Let it rest so, then, for the present. I will keep it in the safe till you come back-if I can. Though I begin to feel as if nothing were secure at Sobrante, nowadays."

Ephraim pondered for a moment, then looked up with a relieved expression.

"Asking pardon, ma'am, I'm sure; have you got any-I mean much money handy by you?"

"No. I have not. Fortunately, beyond the wages of the men, not much ready cash is needed at Sobrante, where we produce so much."

"Yes'm. Yet I wouldn't like to set out on a journey that might be long, or even delayed for a spell, without considerable loose change. Better let the captain pay all expenses of the trip out of that little handful, and call it square."

"Square! That is even greater generosity than the first. Lying in the safe you might have found it again; but spent-Ephraim, I fear I'll never be able to repay such an amount. I must think out some other way."

"Don't you trust me, Mrs. Trent?"

"Am I not trusting you with the most precious thing in life-my daughter?"

"Then, mother, trust him about the money. It's good sense. We haven't any and we need it. Besides, it hurts him to refuse. Yes, we'll use it, Ephraim dear."

So it was settled; but it was not in Jessica's nature to keep the story from the rest of her "boys." Forgetting her angry feelings of the morning she called a meeting and spread the news among them. Much as she loved them, until the time of her recent appointment as "captain," she had tried to give them their titles of "Mr.," though not always remembering. Now she no longer tried. They were just her comrades, and when she stood upon the horseblock to address them it was with the joyful announcement:

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"John! George! Joe! Everybody! Ephraim and I are going away!"

She paused and looked around, but instead of the sympathetic pleasure she expected there were darkening looks and evident disappointment.

"Oh! but we are coming back again. Hark, what he did!"

Ephraim was away putting his few traps together against the morning's start, since, if they were to go at all, why delay? Else he might have silenced her then and there. But out it came, and be sure the sharpshooter's generosity lost not one bit in her telling.

"With this money we're going to hire lawyers and pay our lodging where we have to, and hunt up the men that know about business. Finally, to find the money-that other lot of it-that Mr. Hale said had been sent to my father by those New York folks. If they did send it they shall have it

back-if we can find it. If they didn't-they shall tell all the world they accused him wrongfully. We're going to find the man that made that title, if we can. We're going to save Sobrante, but we're going to save its honor first!"

"Hurrah! Hurrah! Glory to the captain!"

"And old 'Forty-niner,'" added honest John Benton.

They cheered him to the skies, and when the uproar had subsided, their small chief said:

"You are all to take the best care of Sobrante, and first-of my mother. Don't you let her worry, nor let Ned and Luis get hurt. And you must keep Aunt Sally here till I come back."

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Somebody groaned.

"Oh! that's not right. I couldn't go if she hadn't come. She'll look after everything--"

"That's the true word!"

"And I want you all to be-be good and not tease her."

"Hurrah! Hurrah! All in favor of minding the captain, say Ay!"

They swung her down from her perch and carried her on their shoulders everywhere about the old mission. They offered her all their possessions, including pistols and bowie knives, at peaceful Sobrante more useful for target practice and pruning vines than their original purposes. But she declined all these warlike things, saying that Ephraim would carry only his own rifle, and finally tore herself away from them to the anxious mother at the cottage, naturally jealous of each moment of her darling's company.

"Don't see how Eph. ever saved so much. Hasn't had any wages since ours failed, as I know of. Mine always go fast as earned, and thought everybody's did," said one, when Jessica had left them.

"Some folks have all the luck! Why didn't it happen to me to have money to give her? or to offer first to go hunt them liars? Shucks!" said Samson, in disgust. Though he had been back some time from escorting the stranger "off bounds," that task had left him in a bad humor.

"Well, the captain'd tell me envy was wicked, and when I was hearing her say it I'd believe it. But I do envy old eighty his chance," complained Joe. "Hello! there's Ferd! Come to think of it I haven't noticed him around these two days. Not since that stranger cast his ugly shadow on the ranch. Hi, there, Dwarf! Where you been?"

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"Where I seen bad doings."

"Right. Seeing you was there yourself. What doings was they?"

In ordinary the older men had little to say to Antonio's "Left Hand," but he afforded them diversion, just then, when they were all a little anxious and downhearted over their captain's departure on what seemed to some of them a wild-goose chase.

Ferd went through a pantomime of theft. Furtively putting one hand into his neighbor's pocket to instantly thrust it back into his own. He produced a buckskin bag and twisting some eucalyptus leaves into rolls, suggesting those of money, thrust these within the bag and that within his jacket. Then he glanced about with an absurdly innocent expression, threw his shoulders back, and stepped forward a few paces with so firm a step and erect a bearing that more than one instantly recognized the mimicry.

"Forty-niner."

Having produced the effect he had intended, Ferd slouched back into his own natural attitude and begged:

"Something to eat."

At that moment Ephraim had been approaching and was an indignant witness of this performance, nor was he less quick to see its significance than his mates had been. Also, to him that buckskin bag was a familiar object. With one stride he collared Ferd and shook him like a rat.

"You imp! What do you mean by that? And how came you by Elsa Winkler's pouch?"

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Ferd broke from his captor and his face changed color beneath its filth. He was one who was perfectly satisfied to live in a country where water was scarce; but, by way of fun, another ranchman caught him as he escaped from Ephraim, and forcibly ducked his head and shoulders in the washing-trough. After that he was let go and later on was given a liberal supper at the messroom. He ate this as if he had not seen food since he had gone away two days before, but he was greedy at all times, and the present instance excited no comment.

The morning came and all was ready for the start. Every person at Sobrante gathered before the cottage door, and each with his or her word of farewell advice or good will. Aunt Sally, fluttering with patchwork strips of already "pieced blocks," flung jauntily over either shoulder, her spectacles slipping off the point of her nose and her hands holding forth a fat fig pie, hot and dripping from the oven.

"I've been a-bakin' all night, Ephy. There's a pair of fowls, a ham, four loaves, some hard-boiled eggs, salt, pepper, sugar, tea, coffee, butter, dishes, five vials of medicine, some dish towels, some--"

"What in reason! How expect me to carry that great basket, as well as the saddlebags, and myself-on one horse? You're old enough to have sense-but you'll never learn it. One loaf--"

"Ephraim Marsh! Are you eighty years old or are you not? At your age would you starve the little darling daughter of the best friends you ever had? Here, Jessie. You get off that donkey. We'll wait till we can pick out some other man that--"

"Give me the basket; I'll carry it if I have to on my head!" interrupted "Forty-niner," indignantly. But he added to himself: "I can chuck it into the first clump of mesquite I meet."

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Jessica was upon Scruff, whose loss the small boys were bewailing far more than that of the girl herself. Without Scruff they would be compelled to stay within walking distance of the cottage, and this was imprisonment. Without Jessica-well, there were many things one could do better with Jessica away.

Mrs. Trent's face was pale but calm. Nobody knew what this first parting with her helpful child was to her anxious heart, but it was her part to send the travelers outward in good cheer.

"Put the saddlebags on Scruff, in front of Jessica. He's strong enough to carry double, and they're not so heavy. Few girls, in my days at the East, would have set out upon an indefinite journey, equipped with only one flannel frock and a single change of underclothing."

"But the flannel frock is new and so is the pretty Tam that Elsa gave me last Christmas. What do I want more? specially when there's this warm jacket you made me take, for a cold night's ride. Isn't it enough, mother, dear?"

"Quite, I think, else I should have made you delay till I could have provided more. Be sure to write me, now and then. One of the men will ride to the post every few days and fetch any letters. Good-by, and now-go quickly!"

She added no prayers, for these were too deep in her heart for outward utterance; but she felt her own courage ebbing, and that if the parting were not speedy she could not at all endure it. Until that moment she had not realized how complete was her dependence upon Jessica's protecting tenderness; and turning, toward her home hid thus the tears she would not have her daughter see.

But neither could Lady Jess have seen them, because of the sudden mist in her own. All her eagerness for the journey was gone, and her courage was fast following it. If the start were not made at once it would never be.

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"Good-by, mother. Good-by, all! Come, Ephraim! Go, go-Scruff!"

A moment later the travelers were disappearing down the sandy road, and upon those whom they had left behind had fallen an intolerable burden of foreboding and loneliness.

"Desolation of desolations! That's what this old ranch'll be till that there little bunch of human sunshine comes safely back to it. A crazy trip, a crazy parcel of folks to let her take it. That's what we are," said John Benton, savagely kicking the horseblock to vent his painful emotion.

"Oh, dear! Oh, dear! And I never remembered to put in that guava jell!" moaned a voice of woe.

"Then, mother, just trot it out to us for dinner," said her son, "we'll take that burden off your mind."

"You will? Have you a heart to eat good victuals, John Benton, when that sweet child has just thrust herself into a den of lions, and lawyers, and liars, and-and-things?"

"Oh, hush! Lions! The notion!"

"Well, you can't deny there's bears, anyway," she retorted, with ready dolefulness. "Ephy's shot 'em himself in his younger days."

"And ended the crop. Now you go in; and if I hear you downhearting the mistress the least bit I'll make you take a dose of your own picra," said this much-tried man.

CHAPTER XIV

THE FINISH

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It was a journey of something more than two hundred miles and they were almost a week on the way; riding for several hours each morning and evening; camping in some well-watered spot at midday; or, this failing, sharing the dinner of some friendly ranchman. Also, they slept at some little inn or ranch, and where their hosts would receive it, Ephraim delighted to make liberal payment for their entertainment.

Indeed, he felt a prince, with his well-filled purse, and would have forced all sorts of dainties and knickknacks upon his little charge, at each village they passed through, save that she resolutely refused them.

"You generous Ephraim, no! What money we need for the trip and after we get to Los Angeles is all right. But you mustn't waste it. Hear! I am older than you in this thing."

"But-I want you to have everything nice in the world, Lady Jess. Any other of the 'boys' traveling with you--"

"Could not have been so kind and thoughtful as you. Not one. Dearly as I love them I'd rather have you to take care of me on this long journey than any other single one. So do be good and not extravagant. And isn't it lovely to find how almost everybody knew of my dear father? Or, if they didn't know him for himself, they'd heard of him and of something he'd done for somebody. It makes the way seem almost short and as if I'd been over the road before."

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"He often passed this way, child; and whenever he went left pleasant memories behind him. He was a grand man, was Cassius Trent. Ugh! To think--"

"That will be all right, Ephraim. I know it. I feel it. And how I do love all the new places and things I see. I should never have cared to leave Sobrante but for this business; yet now I have left it I'm finding the world a big, splendid, lovely place."

"H-m-m! I reckon even this old earth could show only its best side to you, little girl. However, it *has* been pleasant and it's about over. Aunt Sally's provisions didn't have to go into the mesquite bushes, after all. What we couldn't eat we've found plenty of others to take off our hands. Even the medicine didn't go begging, and that'll do her proud to hear. Poor wretches who have to take it!"

"But they wanted it, Ephraim. Some of the women said they hadn't had a dose of medicine in years and seemed as pleased as if it had been sweetmeats. Now the basket is empty. What shall you do with that?"

"Leave it at the next place we stop."

They had set out upon their ride on Tuesday morning and this was sunset, Saturday. They were descending the slope of a mountain and the guide pointed forward, eagerly.

"Do you see that hazy spot off yonder? That's our City of the Angels! The city where we shall find justice and honor."

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"Oh, shall we be there to-night?"

"No. We might have been days ago if we'd ridden across country and struck the railway lines, but I wanted to do just as we have done. I knew you'd hear so much about your father it would do you good forever. We can go home the quicker way if we think best; and if we have good news to take will, likely, so think, I-I'm almost sorry we're so near the end."

"In one way so am I. Not in another. I long to begin to hunt for that money and the men who have it."

Ephraim sighed. Now that he was thus far on his mission he began to think it, indeed, as Joe Dean had said, "A good deal of the needle and haymow style." But he rallied at once and answered, cheerfully:

"There's a house I know, or used to, at the foot of this slope. I planned to sleep there to-night, make an early start in the morning, and ride the fifteen miles left so as to get to the town in time for the churches. To think you're eleven years old, Lady Jess, yet have never been inside any church except the rickety old mission."

"Do you like churches, Ephraim?"

"Yes. I do now, child. I didn't care so much about 'em when I lived nigh 'em. But they're right. There's a good many kinds of 'em and they get me a little mixed, arguing. But they're right; and the bell--It'll be a good beginning of this present job to go to meeting the first thing."

"Oh! this wonderful world and the wonderful things I'm learning! What a lot I shall have to tell the folks when I get home. Seems as if I couldn't wait."

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They found the little lodging-house, as Ephraim had hoped, though now kept by a stranger to him. However, the new landlord made them comfortable, charged them an exorbitant price--having caught sight of his guest's fat purse--and set them early on their way. "Forty-niner" did not complain. Their next and final stop would be with an old fellow-miner who, at Ephraim's last visit to Los Angeles, five years before, had kept a tidy little inn on one of the city's central streets. If this old friend were still living he would give them hearty welcome, the best entertainment possible, and what was more to the purpose--practical advice as to their business.

"The bells! The bells! Oh! they are what you said, the sweetest things I ever heard!" cried Lady Jess, in delight, as over the miles of distance there floated to them on the clear air, the chimes and sonorous tollings from many church towers.

"We shall be late, after all, I guess. That means it's time for the meetings to begin. Well, there'll be others in the afternoon; so we may as good take it easy and go slow."

This suited Jessica, who found more and more to surprise and interest her in every stage of their advance, and most of all as they entered the city. This was much altered and improved since the sharpshooter had himself last seen it, but even thus he could point out many of the finest buildings, name the chief avenues, and comport himself after the manner of one who knows enlightening one who does not.

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But soon Jessica saw few of the things which interested him and heard him not at all. It was the first time she had ever seen a girl of her own age, and now--the streets were full of them. In their gay Sunday attire, on their homeward way now from the churches whose bells had long ceased to

ring, they were here, there, and everywhere. They lined the sidewalks and glittered from the open electric cars. They smiled at one another and, a few, at her; for to them, also, this other stranger girl was a novel sight, just then and there. Besides the oddity of her dress and equipment, the eagerness and beauty of her face attracted them, and more than one pair of eyes turned to look after her, as Scruff scrambled along, unguided by his rider, and dodging one danger only to face another.

"That's a country girl, fast enough; and if she doesn't look out that uneasy burro will land her on the curbstone! Look out there, child!" cried one passerby, just as the animal bounded across the track of a whizzing trolley.

But this peril escaped, Ephraim grasped Scruff's bridle and presently led the way into a quieter street or alley, and thence to the wide plaza before the inn he sought.

"Thank fortune, there's room enough here to turn around in! And there's the very house. Hello! Lady Jess! I say, Jessica!"

Without warning the girl had whisked the bridle from his grasp and had chirruped to the now excited beast in the manner which meant:

"Go your swiftest!"

Scruff went. Following he knew not what, and terrified afresh at every square he traversed. Somewhere a band of music was playing, and the beating of the drums seemed to his donkey brain the most horrible of noises. To escape it and the ever-increasing throng his nimble feet flew up and down like mad; he thrust his head between the arms of people and forced the crowd to part for him; he reared, backed, plunged, and shook himself; but did not in the least disturb his mistress' firm seat, as with her own head leaning forward she kept her gaze upon some distant object and urged him to pursuit.

The crowd which made way for this eager pair was first angry, then amused. After that it began to collect into a formidable following. Poor Lady Jess became to them a "show" and Scruff's antics but meant to exhibit her "trick" riding.

Now Stiffleg was an ancient beast, which had been a trotter in his day; but his day, like his master's, was past. By good care and easy stages he had accomplished his long journey in fair condition; but he was a sensible animal and felt that he had earned a rest. So when Ephraim urged him forward after the vanishing burro he halted and turned his head about. If ever equine eyes protested against further effort, his did then; and at ordinary times "Forty-niner" would have been the first to perceive this appeal and grant it. He had always bragged that "Stiffleg's more human than most folks," but he forgot this now. He remembered only that his precious charge was fast disappearing from sight and that in another moment she would be lost in a great, strange city.

"Simpleton that I was! I never even mentioned the name of the tavern we were going to," reflected, "else she might tell it and get shown the way." Then came another startling thought. For fear of just such an emergency-why had he been silly enough to think of it?-he had on that very morning, as they neared their journey's end, divided their money into two portions and made her carry the larger one. She had objected, at first; but afterward consented, and with pride in his trust. "If any scamp got hold of her he'd rob her or-maybe worse! Oh, Atlantic! Giddap, Stiff! Giddap, I tell you!"

To the crowd this appeared but another feature of "the show." These rustics from the plains had evidently come into town to furnish entertainment for Sunday strollers, and Stiffleg's obstinacy was to them a second of the "tricks" to be exhibited.

However, it was a case of genuine balk; and the more Ephraim urged, implored, chastised, the firmer were the horse's forefeet planted upon the highway and the more despairing became the rider's feeling.

"Build a fire under him," "Thrust red pepper under his nose," "Tie him to a trolley car." "Blindfold him."

Various were the suggestions offered, to none of which did the sharpshooter pay any heed. The brass band accomplished what nothing else could. Blatantly it came around the corner, keeping time to its own noisy drums, and Stiffleg pricked up his ears. In his youth he had marched to battle and, at that moment, his youth was renewed. He reared his drooping head, a thrill ran through his languid veins, and, though still without advance motion, his hoofs began to beat a swift tattoo, till the towering plumes of the drum major came alongside his own now gleaming eyes. Then, he wheeled suddenly and-forward!

"Ho! the old war-horse! That's a pretty sight," shouted somebody.

Alas! for Ephraim. The unexpected movement of the balking animal did for him what was rare indeed-unseated him. By the time that it was "right front" for Stiffleg his master was on the ground, feeling that an untoward fate had overtaken him and that his leg, if not his heart, was broken. Music had charms, in truth, for the rejuvenated beast, and one of the sharpshooter's pet theories was thereby proved false. Had anybody at Sobrante told him that anything could entice his "faithful" horse away from him he would have denied the statement angrily. He would have declared, with equal conviction, that, in case of accident like this, the intelligent creature would have stayed beside and tried to tend him.

Now, lying forsaken both by Jessica and Stiffleg, he uttered his shame and misery in a prolonged

howl, as he attempted to rise and could not.

"O! Ough! Oh! My leg's broke! My leg's broke all to smash, I tell you. Somebody pick me up and carry me-yonder-to the Yankee Blade. If Tom Jefferts keeps it still, he'll play my friend. Oh! Ah!"

Some in the now pitying throng exchanged glances, and one man bent over the prostrate Ephraim, saying, kindly:

"Why, Tom Jefferts hasn't been in this town these three years. He went to 'Frisco and set up there. If there's anybody else you'd like to notify I'll telephone--"

"He gone, too! Then let me lie. What do I care what becomes of me now? Oh! my leg!"

The bravest men are cowards before physical suffering, sometimes. Ephraim would have faced death for Jessica without flinching, but that gathering agony of pain made him indifferent, for the moment, even to her welfare. This calamity had fallen upon him like lightning from a clear sky and benumbed him, so to speak. But it had not benumbed those about him. Within five minutes the clang of an ambulance gong was heard, and the aid which some thoughtful person had summoned arrived. Ephraim was tenderly lifted and placed within the conveyance, and away it dashed again, though almost without jar, and certainly without hindrance, since everything on the street gives place to suffering.

By the time the hospital was reached the patient had recovered something of his customary fortitude, but he was still too confused and distressed to think clearly about his escaped charge and what should be done to find her. As for Stiffleg:

"I hope I'll never see that cowardly, ungrateful beast again!" he ejaculated; then resigned himself to the surgeon's hands.

That which Lady Jess had perceived in the distance and had followed so wildly was the tall figure of a gentleman in a gray suit. He wore a gray hat and blue glasses, such as her mother had pressed upon Mr. Hale's acceptance during his brief stay at Sobrante.

"It's he! It certainly is he! Oh! Now I can tell him how sorry both mother and I were that the 'boys' behaved so rudely. And he's a lawyer. He's on the same business we are, if his is the other side. I must stop him-quick!"

This might have been an easy thing to do, under Scruff's present rate of speed; but, unfortunately, the tall man stepped into a hack, waiting beside the plaza for stray passengers, and giving an order was driven rapidly away.

For a long time Jessica kept that carriage in sight; then it turned a corner into an avenue, where were hundreds more just like it, it seemed to her, and she lost it among the many.

Even yet she pressed on determined. "In a city-it's just one city, even if it is a big one-I shall find him if I keep on. I must. Go, Scruff! The band is after you. Go! Go!"

The overtaxed burro had already "gone" to his fullest ability. He could do no more, although his mistress whispered "sugar," "sweet cake" and other tempting words. His excited pace dropped to the slowest of walks, his breath came hardly, and finally he leaned himself against a post and rested. When he had done so for some moments, Jessica turned him about and looked backward, expecting to see Ephraim close behind. But he was nowhere in sight; and in a flash of horror the girl realized that she was lost.

CHAPTER XV

A NEW FRIEND FOR THE OLD

"Lost! I'm lost! Right here in this great city full of folks. It seemed so easy to find Mr. Hale and it was so hard. There are so many streets-which one is right? There are so many people-oh! if they'd stop going by for just one minute, till I could think."

The passing crowd that had so interested now terrified her. Among all the changing faces not one she knew, not one that more than glanced her way, and was gone on, indifferent. The memory of a time in her early childhood when she had strayed into the canyon and became bewildered flashed through her mind. Was she to suffer again the misery of that dreadful day? But the day had ended in a father's rescuing arms, and now--

"I remember he told me then that if ever I were lost again I was to keep perfectly still for a time and think over all the things I'd seen by the way. After awhile I might feel sure enough to go slowly back and guide myself by them. But I can't think here. It's so noisy and thick with men and women. And I'm getting so hungry. Ephraim said we would have the best dinner his friend could give us. If he'd told me that friend's name or where he lived. Well, I'll mind my father in one thing; I'll keep still. Then if Ephraim should happen to come this way he'd find me sooner. But-he won't. Something has happened, or he'd never let me out of sight. If I didn't know the bigness of a city he did and would have taken care."

So she dismounted and led Scruff back beside the telegraph post, against which the weary animal calmly leaned his shoulder and went to sleep. Jessica threw her arm over the burro's neck and, standing so, scanned every passing pedestrian and peered into every whirling vehicle.

Something of her first terror left her. She was foolish to think anything harmful could have happened to "Forty-niner" so quickly after she had run away from him. She wished she had called and explained to him, but she had had no time if she would catch up to that gray-coated gentleman. After all they were still in the same city and all she needed was patience.

"That's what I have so little of, too. Maybe this is a lesson to me. Mother says impatient people always find life harder than the quiet kind. I wonder what she's doing now! and oh! I'm glad she can't see me. She'd suffer more than I do. It's queer how that man, in a fancy coat, with so many brass buttons, keeps looking at me. He's walked by this place on one side the street or the other ever so many times. I wonder if he owns this post. Maybe it's his and he doesn't like us to stand here, yet is too polite to say so. Come, Scruff, let's walk a little further along. Then he can see we don't mean to hurt his post."

Scruff reluctantly roused and moved a pace or two, then went to sleep again. The shadow of a building that had sheltered them from the hot sunshine passed gradually and left them exposed to the full glare from the sky. Both Jessica and the burro were used to heat, however, and did not greatly suffer from it. But this motionless waiting became almost intolerable to active Lady Jess, and the sharpness of her hunger changed into faintness. The sidewalks seemed to be rising up to strike her and her head felt queer; so she pulled the hot Tam from her curls, leaned her cheek against Scruff's neck, and, to clear her dizzy vision, closed her eyes. Then for a long time knew no more.

A young man sat down to smoke his after-dinner cigar before the window of a clubhouse across the way. Idly observant of the comparatively few persons passing at that hour, his artist eye was caught by the scarlet gleam of Jessica's cap, fallen against the curbstone.

"Hello! That child has been in that spot for two hours, I think. She was there before I went to dinner and must be dead tired. But she and the burro are picturesque—I'll sketch them."

He whipped out notebook and pencil and by a few skillful lines reproduced the pair opposite. But as he glanced toward them, now and then, during this operation, he became convinced that something was amiss with his subject.

"Poor little thing! If she's waiting for anybody she keeps the baby too long. I'm going over and speak to her. If she's hungry I'll send her a sandwich."

At his touch on her shoulder Jessica roused. Her sleep had refreshed her, though she was still somewhat confused.

"Oh! Ephraim! How long you've been! Why—it isn't Ephraim!"

"No, little girl, I'm not Ephraim, but I'm a friend. I'm afraid you will be ill standing so long in the hot sun. Are you waiting for anybody?"

The voice was kind and Jessica was glad to speak to any one. She told her story at once in a few words. The young man's face grew grave as he listened, still he spoke encouragingly.

"It's quite easy for strangers in a big place to get separated. Suppose, since you haven't had your dinner, as I guess, that you go with me and have some. Wait, I'll just speak to that policeman, yonder, and ask him to have a lookout for your Ephraim, while we're in the restaurant. There's a good place halfway down the block, and from its window you can watch the burro for yourself. I'll tie him, shan't I?"

"He's very tired. I don't think he'll need any tying. He's never tied at Sobrante."

"Sobrante? Are you from Sobrante? Why, I've heard of that ranch, myself."

"Have you? That makes it seem as if I knew you."

The stranger smiled and beckoned to the policeman, who proved to be the brass-buttoned individual that had taken so much apparent interest in Jessica, but had not spoken to her of his own accord. He came forward promptly now and the young man related to him what Lady Jess had said. Then asked:

"What would I better do about it? I thought of taking her to the restaurant over there and getting her some dinner."

"No. She'd better go to the station-house with me. The matron'll look after her and I'll have the donkey put in stable. I'll tell the officer who's coming on this beat now to keep an eye out for a countryman with a stiff-legged horse; is it, girl?"

"Yes. A bay horse, with a blazed face. The horse's name is Stiffleg and the master's, Ephraim Marsh."

The officer made the entry in his book, then took hold of Scruff's bridle and led the way stationward. Jessica looked appealingly into the young man's face and he smiled, then grasped her hand.

"Don't fear, child, that I'll desert you till I find your old guardian. There's nothing frightful about a station-house, except to criminals," he said, kindly.

However, Jessica knew nothing of such institutions and therefore had no fear of them. With the exception of Antonio's "crossness" she had met with nothing but love and kindness all her life, and she looked for nothing else. She was already happy again at finding two persons ready to talk with her and help her; and her pretty face grew more and more charming to the artist's view as she skipped along beside him toward the police headquarters, as this station chanced to be.

"You see, little girl, that when a child is lost in a city the first thing the friends think of is—the station-house. All stray persons are taken and messages are sent to it from every part of the town all the time. That Ephraim will remember that, if he's ever been here before, and he'll be finding you long before night. Till then you'll be safe and cared for."

Jessica did feel a moment's hesitation when she had to part with Scruff, but soon laughed at her own dismay.

"I felt as I must take him inside this building with me, for fear he'd be lonesome, too. But, of course, I know better. Why, what a nice, big place this is!"

By far the largest building she had ever entered, but her new acquaintances smiled at her delight over it.

"Not all who come here think it so fine," said the young man. "Eh, officer?"

"No, no. No, indeed, sir. Now, this way, please. I'll just enter the case at the desk and call up the matron. She'll tend to the girl all right. You needn't bother any more."

"Oh! are you going?" asked Jessica, her face drooping.

"Not yet. No law against my having a meal with this young lady, is there, officer?"

"If it isn't at the public charge, sir," answered the policeman.

"Oh! I've money to pay for my own dinner. See?" cried Lady Jess, producing the fat wallet Ephraim had given her and which she pulled from within her blouse, where she had worn it, suspended by a string.

"Whew! child! All that? Put it up, quick. Put it up, I say."

Instinctively she obeyed and hid the purse again, but her face expressed her surprise, and the young man answered its unspoken question.

"Very few little girls of your age ever have so much money as that about them. None ever should have. It's too great a temptation to evil-minded persons, and a good many of that sort come here. Ah! the matron! I'll ask her to show us into some less public place and I'll order a dinner from that restaurant nearby."

In response to his request the motherly woman in charge of the women's quarters offered him her own little sitting-room; "if they'll say yes to it in the office," she added, as a condition.

This was soon arranged, the dinner followed and a very hungry Jessica sat down to enjoy it. Her companion also pretended to eat, but encouraged her to talk and found himself interested in her every moment. He, also, promptly told her who he was; a reporter and occasional artist, on one of the leading daily papers. A man always on the lookout for "material," and as such he meant to use the sketch, he had made. He showed her the sketch, and explained that he would put an item in the next issue of his paper which might meet the eye of the missing sharpshooter and notify that person where to find her, if he had not done so before.

Jessica did not know that it was an unwise thing to make a confidant of a stranger, but in this instance she was safe enough; and it pleased her to tell, as him to listen to, the whole history of Sobrante; its fortunes and misfortunes, and the object of her present visit to this far-off town.

His business instinct was aroused. He realized that here might be "material," indeed. He was young and sincere enough to be enthusiastic. Times were a little dull. There was quite a lull in murders and robberies; this story suggested either a robbery or swindle of some sort, and on a big scale. His paper would appreciate his getting a "scoop" on its contemporaries, and, in a word, he resolved to make Jessica Trent's cause his own, for the time being.

"Look here, child, don't you worry. You stay right quiet in this place with Matron Wood. I'll get out and hustle. Here's my card, Ninian Sharp, of *The Lancet*. That's a paper has cut a good many knots and shall cut yours. I've heard of Cassius Trent. Everybody has, in California. I'll find that Lawyer Hale. I'll find old 'Forty-niner' and I'll be back in this room before bedtime. Now, go play with the rest of the lost children—you're by no means the only one in Los Angeles to-day. Or take a nap would be wiser. Look out for her, Matron Wood. Any good turn done this little maid is done *The Lancet*. Good-by, for a time."

Smiling, alert, he departed and Jessica felt as if he had taken all her anxieties with him. She followed the matron into the big room where the other estrays, whom Mr. Sharp had told her she would find, waiting to be claimed by their friends, but none was as large as she. Some were so little she wondered how they ever could have wandered anywhere away from home; but she loved all children and these reminded her of Ned and Luis.

Promptly she had them all about her, and for the rest of that day, at least, Matron Wood's cares were lightened. Yet one after another, some person called to claim this or that wanderer, with cries of rapture or harsh words of reproof, as the case might be. Jessica kissed each little one good-by, but with each departure felt herself growing more homesick and depressed. By sunset she was the only child left in the matron's care, and her loneliness so overcame her that she had trouble to keep back her tears.

"But I'll not cry. I will not be so babyish. Besides crying wouldn't help bad matters and I've come away from Sobrante on a big mission. Even that jolly Mr. Sharp said, 'That's a considerable of a job,' when I told him. He was funny. Always laughing and so quick, I wish he'd come soon. It seems to take as long for him to find Ephraim as it would me. I should think anybody could have

walked the whole city over by this time," she thought, in her ignorance of distances. Then she asked:

"When do you think they'll come, Matron Wood?"

The good woman waked from a "cat-nap" and was tired enough to be impatient.

"Oh! don't bother. If they're not here by nine o'clock you'll have to go to bed. You should be thankful that there is such a place as this for just such folks as you. Like as not he'll never come. You can't tell anything about them newspaper men. But you listen to that bell, will you? I don't see what makes me so sleepy. If it rings, wake me up."

The minutes sped on. In the now silent room the portly matron slumbered peacefully and Jessica tried, though vainly, to keep a faithful watch. She did not know that her weary companion was breaking rules and laying herself open to disgrace; but she was herself very tired, so, presently, her head dropped on the table and she was also asleep.

Ninian Sharp found the pair thus, and jested with the matron when he waked her in a way that sounded very much like earnest. "He would have her removed," and so on; thereby frightening Jessica, who had been roused by their voices, and looked from one to the other in keen distress.

"I did-I did try to listen for the bell, but it was so still and I couldn't help it. I'm sorry--"

"Pooh! child. No more could I. It'll be all right if this gentleman knows enough to hold his tongue," said the woman, anxiously.

"I shouldn't be a gentleman if I didn't-where a lady is concerned. And I judge from appearances it's about time Miss Jessica went to bed."

The girl's heart sank. This meant disappointment. She understood that without further words, and turned away her face to hide the tears which would come now, in spite of all her will.

Then the reporter's hand was on her curls.

"Keep up your courage, child. I've been hustling, as I said I would. I've found out a lot. I've had boys searching the hotel records all over town and I know in which one your Mr. Hale is staying. He'll keep-till we need him."

"But Ephraim? Have you heard nothing of him?"

"I heard a funny yarn about a horse with a stiff leg; that the moment the sound of a drum was in his ears coolly tossed his aged rider into the gutter and marched off with the brass band, head up, eyes flashing, tail switching, a soldier with the best of them. See-it's here in this evening's *Gossip*."

He held the sheet toward her and Jessica read the humorous account of Stiffleg's desertion. But there was no account of what had further befallen Ephraim, and it seemed but a poor excuse for his non-appearance.

She tossed the paper aside, impatiently:

"But he had his own two good feet left. He could have followed me on them? I-I-he was always so faithful before."

Mr. Sharp's face sobered.

"He is faithful still, but his feet will serve him poorly for the next few weeks. Maybe months. Old bones are slow to heal, and the surgeon says it is a compound fracture. When he fell into the gutter, as my co-laborer so gayly puts it, he 'broke himself all to smash.' He's in hospital. As a great favor from the authorities in charge I've seen him. I've told him about you. I've promised to befriend you and I'll take you to see him in the morning. I'm sorry that your first night in our angelic city must be passed in a station-house, but I reckon it's the safest till I can think of some fitter shelter. Good-night. My mother used to say that the Lord never shut one door but He opened another. Ephraim laid up-here am I. Count on me. Good-night."

CHAPTER XVI

A HOSPITAL REUNION

When Ninian Sharp sat down to smoke a cigar at the window of his club it was with no idea that he was then and there to begin a bit of detective work which should make him famous. For, though this is anticipating, that was the reward which the future held for him because of his yielding to a kindly impulse.

Through him, the helplessness of a little girl won for an almost hopeless cause the aid of a great newspaper, than which there is no influence more potent. It took but one hearing of Jessica's story to rouse his interest and to convince him that here was a "good thing if it could be well worked up." It promised a "sensation" that would result in benefit to his paper, to himself, and-for his credit be it said-to the family of the dead philanthropist.

After he had bidden Lady Jess good-night, the reporter called at the hotel where Morris Hale was registered and held an interview with that gentleman. The result of this was pleasing to both

men. They had one common object: the recovery of the missing money which had been entrusted to Cassius Trent. Mr. Hale wished this for the sake of his New York patrons, but now hoped, as did Ninian Sharp, that if it were accomplished it would also clear the memory of Jessica's father from the stain resting upon it. For the present, they decided to join forces, so to speak. By agreement, they went together to the station-house on the following morning, and found Lady Jess looking out of a window with a rather dreary interest in the scene. But she instantly caught sight of them and darted to the doorway to meet them, holding out both hands toward the lawyer and entreating:

"Oh! I beg your pardon for the 'boys'! And for us that we should ever have let it happen to any guest of Sobrante. Can you forgive it?"

The reporter looked curious and Mr. Hale's face flushed at the painful memory her words had revived. But he did not explain and passed the matter over, saying:

"Don't mention it, my child. Odd, isn't it? To think you should follow me so quickly all this long way. Well, you deserve success and I'm going to help you to it, if I can. So is this new friend you've made. Now, are you ready to see poor 'Forty-niner'? If so, get your cap, bid the matron good-by, and we'll be off."

Jessica obeyed, quickly; taking leave of Mrs. Wood with warm expressions of gratitude for her "nice bed and breakfast," assuring that rather skeptical person that these men "were certainly all right, because one of them had been at her own dear home and her mother had recognized him for a gentleman. The other-why, the other wrote for a newspaper. Even drew pictures for it! Think of that!"

"Humph! A man might do worse. But, never mind. This is the place to come to if you get into any more trouble. There's the street and number it is, and here's my name on a piece of paper. Now, it's to be put in the book about your going, who takes you, and where. After that-after that I suppose there's nothing more."

Ninian Sharp watched this little by-play with much interest, and remarked to the lawyer:

"That child has a charm for all she meets. Even this old police matron, whose heart ought to be as tough as shoeleather, looks doleful at parting with her. I think her the most winning little creature I ever met."

"You should see her with her 'boys,' as she calls the workmen at Sobrante. They idolize her and obey her blindly. Sometimes, their devotion going further than obedience," he added, with a return of annoyance in his expression.

As she stepped into the street, Jessica clasped a hand of each, with joyful confidence, and they smiled at one another over her head, leading her to the next corner where they hailed a car and the reporter bade her jump aboard.

"Am I to ride in that? Oh, delightful!"

"Delightful" now seemed everything about her. Friends were close at hand and a few minutes would bring her to Ephraim. That he was injured and helpless she knew, yet could not realize; while she could and did realize to the full all the novelty about her. The swift motion of the electric car, the gay and busy streets, the palm-bordered avenues they crossed, the ever-changing scenes of the city, each richer and more wonderful than the other, in her inexperienced eyes. She would have liked to ask many questions, but her companions were now conversing in low tones and she would not interrupt. Soon, however, she saw Mr. Sharp make a slight gesture with his hand and the car stopped. "Our street," he said, rising.

A brief walk afterward brought them to a big building, standing somewhat back from the avenue, with a green lawn and many trees about it. Above the several gateways of its iron fence were signs, indicating: "Accident Ward," "Convalescent's Ward," "General Hospital," "Nurses' Home," "Dispensary," etc., all of which confused and somewhat startled the country-reared girl. The more, it may be, as, at that moment, the gong of an ambulance warned them to step off the crossing before the "accident" alley beside the main building, and the big van dashed toward an open door.

Jessica gripped Mr. Hale's hand, nervously, and watched in a sort of fascination while white-garbed attendants lifted an injured man from the ambulance and carried him tenderly into the hospital.

"Is-is he hurt?"

"Yes, dear, I suppose so."

"Was it like that they brought Ephraim here?"

"Probably."

"Oh! how dreadful! My poor, poor 'Forty-niner.'"

"Rather, how merciful. But come; such a brave little woman as you mustn't show the white feather at the mere sight of a hospital van. Ephraim has been well cared for, be sure; and as he has been told to expect you he'll be disappointed if you bring him a scared, unhappy face."

"Then I'll-I'll smile," she answered, promptly, thought the effort was something of a failure.

Soon they entered the building, whose big halls were so silent in contrast with the street outside, and where the white-clad doctors and nurses seemed to Jessica like "ghosts" as they moved softly

here and there. Again she clinched the lawyer's hand and whispered:

"It's awful. It smells queer. I'm afraid. Aren't you?"

"Not in the least. I like it. I've been a patient in just such places more than once and think of them as the most blessed institutions in the world. The odor of chemicals and disinfectants is noticeable at first, but one soon gets accustomed to it and likes it. At any rate I do. But, see, we're falling behind. Mr. Sharp evidently knows his way well and we must hurry if we'd keep him in sight."

Indeed, the reporter was just disappearing around a turn of the broad staircase leading up into a sun-lighted corridor. He was quick and decided in all his movements, and had paused but for one instant to speak with an attendant at the door before he took his direct way to Ephraim's room.

"Why, I supposed he was in the general ward" said Mr. Hale, as he joined Ninian, who had to stop and wait for his more leisurely advance. 166

"He was, but he couldn't stand it. So I had him put into a private room and he's much better satisfied. He has money enough to pay for it and if he hadn't-well, it was just pitiful to see the old man's own distress at sight of the distress of others all about him. I'd have had to do it, even if it had taken my bottom dollar."

"True to your class! I've always heard that newspaper men were the most generous in the world, and now I believe it. Well, count me in, on this transaction. But when were you here?"

"Last night and-early this morning."

"Whew! If you put such energy as that into the rest of the business you'll make a speedy finish of it!"

"That's my intention. Well, child, here we are. Put your best foot forward and cheer up that forlorn old chap."

Jessica had paused to look down a great ward, opening upon that corridor, and was staring, spellbound, at the rows upon rows of white beds, each with its occupant, and at the white-capped nurses bending over this or that sufferer. The wide, uncurtained windows, all open to the soft morning air, the snowy walls, the cleanliness and repose impressed her.

"Why-it's nice! I thought it would be dreadful; and where is Ephraim? Can I go in? How shall I find him among so many?"

"Don't you understand? This way, I said, Lady Jess. The sharpshooter wants to see his captain." 167

She turned swiftly at that, and the smile he had hoped to rouse was on her face as she caught the reporter's hand.

"Why-how did you know *that*? Who told you I was Lady Jess, or captain?"

"Who but 'Forty-niner' himself? Here he is," and he gently forced her through an open doorway into a little room, which seemed a miniature of the great ward beyond. There was the same white spotlessness, another kind-faced nurse, and another prostrate patient.

"Ephraim! Ephraim! You poor, dear, precious darling!"

She was beside him, her arms about his neck, her tears and kisses raining on his wrinkled face—a face that a moment before had been full of sadness and impatience, but was now brimming with delight.

"Little Lady! Little captain! I'm a pretty sort of a guardeen, I am! But, thank God, I'm not the only man in the world, and you've found them that can help you more than I could, with all my smartness. Did you hear about that turn-tail, Stiffleg? Wasn't that enough to make a man disgusted with horseflesh forever after? Ugh! I wish I had him, I'd larrup him crossing before the 'accident' alley beside the main well! And to think you, Cassius Trent's daughter, spent your first night in town at a station-house! Child, I'll never dare to go home and face the 'boys' again, after that. Never." 168

"Don't talk too much, sir," cautioned the nurse, offering her patient a spoonful of some nourishment.

"No, Ephraim, I'll talk. Oh! what wouldn't Aunt Sally give to be here now! To think she's lost such a chance for dosing you!"

"Forty-niner" laughed and the laughter did him good; though he soon explained: "They say I'll have to lie here for nobody knows how long, without moving, scarcely. That pesky old leg of mine did the job up thorough, while it was at it. Thought it might as well be hung for a sheep as a lamb, I s'pose. Well, it was the luckiest thing ever happened—you getting lost and me getting hurt. That's the only way to look at it. But-Atlantic! How'm I ever going to stand it? Having other folks do for you and I, that'd give my right hand to help you-useless."

"Easily, Ephraim. If it's a good thing, as you say, why then it can't be a bad one. Here's your money. You must use it to pay for anything you want. Or give it all to Mr. Hale about the business. You know."

"Money! I don't want that. All I had they took away from me. Put it in the hospital safe till I'm ready to go out. But you can't live in a city without hard cash in every pocket. Oh! dear! I don't see what is to be done! One minute it all is clear and I think what I said about my accident being lucky for you; the next-I can't stand it. What is to become of you, little captain?"

"I'm going to stay right here with you."

"You are? You will?" demanded the patient, eagerly. "You wouldn't be afraid? But, maybe, you wouldn't be allowed. Hospitals are for sick folks and old fools that don't know enough to sit a horse steady. They're not for a happy little girl, who can make new friends for herself anywhere. No. I guess, maybe, that Mr. Hale'll find you a place, or get you on the cars to go home again. Oh! child, I wish you were safe back at Sobrante this minute!"

"And our work not done? Foolish 'boy!' As if I'd leave you alone, either, when you're ill and-and Aunt Sally so far away."

Ephraim groaned and Jessica looked toward the reporter, who was talking earnestly with the nurse, just outside in the corridor. She heard him say:

"If it could be arranged it would be a solution of the whole difficulty. Her board would be assured, and at the first opportunity she shall be sent to her home. For the present--"

She felt it no shame to listen intently. She knew that they were discussing herself and what was to be done with her. On that subject she had already made up her own mind; so she slipped her hand from Ephraim's and stepped to Mr. Sharp's side.

"I want to say right here in this hospital. I will not make anybody a bit of trouble. I will mind everything I am told. I'll not talk or laugh or anything I should not. I'll help take care of Ephraim and there's nobody who knows him here but me. He's the best man there can be, and he's old, though he doesn't look it. Please let me stay. Anyway until all the money is spent. There's enough for a while, I think. Please."

In answer to the reporter's look, rather than Jessica's words, the nurse replied:

"Yes, we do often have friends of the patients here. If there happen to be rooms empty and so to spare. But a child—we never had a child-boarder before. I'll consult the head nurse and let you know at once. Or, better why not go and see her for yourself?"

"I'd much prefer," said Ninian, who had more faith in his own persuasive powers than in hers. "And I'll take Jessica with me."

The result was that the little girl was allowed to "remain for the present," and was assigned a room very near Ephraim's. Upon her good behavior, as viewed from a hospital standpoint, depended the continuance of her stay.

"She can have her clothes sent here, but only what are necessary," added the lady, as she dismissed them.

"My clothes! Why—I don't know where they are."

"Whew! What do you mean? I—I never thought about clothes," said Ninian Sharp.

"Nor I, before, since I came. I had only a change of underwear and another flannel frock. Ephraim was to buy me more if I needed, though mother thought I should not. But what I did have were in the saddlebags on Stiffleg's back."

"And he marched off to glory with them, the old soldier, eh? Well, that's soon remedied. There are lots of stores in Los Angeles and lots of girls your size. I'll get a nurse to fix you out, when she can, and now, back to Ephraim and good-by."

CHAPTER XVII THE FINDING OF ANTONIO

For Jessica Trent there followed weeks of a quieter life than she had lived even at isolated Sobrante. "The behavior," which was to be a test of her stay, proved so pleasing to the hospital residents that some of them wondered how they had ever gotten along without her helpful, happy presence.

Very quickly she lost her first vague fear of the place and learned to hear in the once alarming ambulance gong the signal of relief to somebody. She modulated her voice to the prevailing quietude of the house and her footfalls were as light as the nurses themselves. To many a sufferer, coming there in dread and foreboding, the sight of a child familiar and happy about the great building brought a feeling of comfort and homelikeness which nothing else could have given. She was so apt and imitative that Ephraim often declared:

"All you need, Lady Jess, is a cap and apron to make you a regular professional. Take care of me better'n any of 'em, you do; and I'll be a prime experience for you, that's a fact. Another of the good things come out of my fool riding, I s'pose. You'll be able to nurse the whole parcel of us, when you get back to Sobrante. Beat Aunt Sally all hollow, 'cause you trust a bit to nature and not all to-picra."

"But you're not ill, Ephraim Marsh. You're just broken. So you don't need medicine. All you need is patience. And your nourishments, regular."

"I get them all right; but—*patience!* Atlantic!"

The old man sighed. It was weary work for him, the hardest he had ever done, to lie so motionless while he was so anxious to be active. He really suffered little and he had the best of care. Still, he sighed again, and, unfortunately, Jessica echoed the sigh. Then he looked at her keenly and spoke the thought which had been in his mind for a long time:

"Captain, you must go home. There's twenty to need bossing there and only one poor old carcass here."

Poor Lady Jess! She tried to answer brightly as was her habit, but that day homesickness was strong upon her, and at mention of Sobrante her courage failed. She forgot that she was a "nurse"; forgot the good "behavior," forgot everything, indeed, but her mother's face and Ned's mischievous affection. She dropped to her knees and buried her face in the old man's pillow while she sobbed aloud:

"Oh, 'Forty-niner,' shall we ever see that home again?"

Weak and unstrung, the patient moaned in sympathy, while tears fell from his own eyes; and it was upon this dismal tableau that Mr. Hale walked in, unannounced.

"Hurrah, here! What's amiss? Been quarreling? Just when I've come to bring you good news, too."

"Quarreling, indeed! Ephraim and I could never quarrel. Never. But-but-this isn't Sobrante, and we're-I guess we're awful homesick."

"That's a disease can be cured, you know. One of you, at least, can go home. If you wish, Jessica, I will put you on a train and arrange for one of your 'boys' to meet you at the railway terminus. But--"

"Hello, everybody!" called a cheery voice, and there in the doorway was Ninian Sharp, smiling, nodding, and embracing all three with one inspiring look. "What's that I overheard about 'home'? Been telling state secrets, Hale? My plan beats yours, altogether. We're all going 'home' to Sobrante, in a bunch, one of these fine days. *The Lancet* never fails!"

Jessica sprang to him and caught his hand to kiss it. He had not been to see them for some days and she had missed him sadly. Far more than Mr. Hale he made her feel that the mystery surrounding "that missing New York money," as she called it, would certainly be explained. It was he who, by questions innumerable, had recalled to her and to Ephraim the names of persons with whom Mr. Trent had ever done business. Incidents which to her seemed trifling had been of moment in his judgment. With the slight clues they had given him, as the first link in the chain, he had gone on unraveling the knots which followed with infinite patience and perseverance. He kept Mrs. Trent informed of the welfare of her daughter, and, without neglecting his legitimate business, did the thousand and one things which only the busiest of persons can have time to do. For it's always the indolent who are overcrowded.

"Oh! Mr. Sharp! Have you found it all out?"

"Not I. Hale, here, has found out some things, himself. But he's a lawyer, which means, a-beg pardon-a snail. If newspapers were as slow as the law-h-m-m-we might all take a nap. Look here, Miss Sunshine, you've been crying."

Jessica blushed as guiltily as if she had been accused of some crime.

"I know it. I'm sorry."

"So am I. I know why. Because you're shut up here like a dormouse when you've lived like a lark. On with your little red Tam and come with me. Our work is getting on famously, famously. If I could get hold of one person that I've hunted this and every other city near for I'd have the matter in a nut shell and the guilty man in-a prison. I've found-three or four more of those links I mentioned, Hale, and every man of them is another witness to the uprightness of one, Cassius Trent, late of Sobrante. I began this job for little Jess, but I confess I'm finishing it for the sake of a man I never saw. He was a trump, that fellow. One of the great-hearted, impracticable creatures that keep my faith in humanity. If we could only find that Antonio!"

"Yes. *If!* But when he rode away from Sobrante that day he seems to have ridden out of the world, so far as any trace he left behind. I'm getting discouraged, for without him all the rest falls to the ground."

"Well, discouraged? We'll just step out and find him, won't we, Lady Jess?"

She had hastened to ask permission to go out with her friend and had come back radiant, now, at prospect even of so brief an outing. It was quite as the reporter had judged; the close confinement of the hospital, after the out-of-door life at Sobrante, was half the cause of Jessica's depression, and she was ready now to fall in with the gay mood of Ninian Sharp and answered, promptly:

"Oh, yes. We'll find 'him,' since you wish it. But I don't happen to know which 'him' you want?"

"Why, our fine Senor Bernal. Who else?"

"Then let us go to the old Spanish quarter."

"I've been, many times. Sent others also. No. He's a wise chap and if he is in this town frequents no haunt where he'll be looked for so surely. No matter. It's a picturesque corner of the town and maybe a sight of some old adobes would do your homesick eyes good."

"Or harm," suggested Mr. Hale.

But they did not stop to hear his objections and were speedily on the car which would take them nearest to the district Jessica had heard of, both from Antonio at home and now from others here. A relic of the old California, whose history she loved to hear from the lips of Pedro, Fra Mateo, or even "Forty-niner" himself.

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But once arrived there she was disappointed. They were old adobes, true enough, and the people who lived in them had the same dark, Spanish cast of face which she remembered of Antonio. Yet there the resemblance ended. This was the home of squalor, of poverty that was not self-respecting enough to be clean, and of an indolence which had brought about a wretched state of affairs.

"Oh! is this it? But it can't be. Antonio's 'quarter' was a splendid place. The old grandees lived there, keeping up a sort of court and all the customs of a hundred years ago. It was 'a picture, a romance, a dream,' he said. Of an evening he would describe it all to us at home till I felt as if it were the one spot in the world I most wished to see. But-*this!*"

"Turn not up your pretty nose, for '*this*,' my dear little unenlightened maiden, is also a dream-a nightmare. Nevertheless, the very ground your lost hero boasted and embellished with his fancy. The more I hear of this versatile Antonio the greater becomes my longing to behold him. In any case, since we're here, we must not go away without entering some of these shops. You shall buy a trinket or two and present one of them as a keepsake to this fine senor, when you find him. Oh! that I had your familiar knowledge of his features, this absent 'grandee,' that if by accident I met him I might know him on the instant. See. This 'bazaar' is somewhat tidier than its neighbors, as well as larger, and there are some really beautiful Navajo blankets in the window. Unfortunately the pocketbook of a reporter isn't quite equal to more than a dozen of these, at fifty dollars apiece. Something more modest, Lady Jess, and I'll oblige you!"

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She looked up to protest and saw that he was teasing, and exclaimed, with an air of mock injury:

"Those or nothing! But when shall I learn to understand your jest from earnest?"

"When you produce me your Antonio!"

"Upon the instant, then," she retorted, gayly.

Upon the instant, indeed, there were hurrying footsteps behind them, the sound of some one breathing rapidly and of angrily muttered sentences, that were a jumble of Spanish and English, and in a voice which made Jessica Trent start and turn aside, clutching her companion's hand.

He turned, also, throwing his arm about her shoulders, lest the rush of the man approaching should force her from the narrow sidewalk. But she darted from him, straight into the path of this wild-looking person and seized him with both hands, while she cried out:

"It's he! It is Antonio! I've found him-Antonio Bernal!"

"Whew! A case of the 'unexpected,' indeed! The merest jest and the absolute fact. Hi! I'd rather this than be struck by lightning, and it's on about the same order of things, for it is he, as she claimed. He's more staggered than I am," considered this lively newspaper man. Then he thought it time to step forward, and remark:

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"Please present me to your friend, Miss Trent," and lifted his hat, courteously.

Antonio bowed, after his own exaggerated fashion, and with his hand upon his heart; but though his eyes rested keenly on Ninian's face he kept tight hold of Jessica's hand and his torrent of words did not cease for an instant. Now and then he lifted the little hand and kissed it, whereupon Lady Jess would snatch it away and coolly wipe it on her skirt, only to have it recaptured and caressed; till, seeing he would neither give over the hateful action nor stop talking, she folded her arms behind her and interrupted with:

"That's enough, Senor Bernal. This isn't Sobrante, but I'm your captain here, same as there. You come tell your story to Mr. Hale and this gentleman. See Ephraim Marsh, too. He's here in hospital with a broken leg. I'm in Los Angeles, also, as you see; and likely to find the same man you say has cheated you. That's what he's telling, Mr. Sharp," she exclaimed.

Antonio hesitated. He had frowned at her tone of command, but now, to the reporter's amazement, seemed eager to obey it.

"As the senorita will. That gentleman, who came last to Sobrante, was one lawyer, no? So the senora said. Fool! fool! that I was that I did not then and at that moment so disclose the secrets of my heart as was moved, yes. Let the senorita and the handsome friend lead on. I follow. I, Antonio."

Five minutes earlier, had Ninian Sharp been asked what he should do if he did find this strange person, he would have promptly answered:

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"Put him under lock and key, where he can do no harm and be handy to get at."

Now he found himself as certain that the fellow needed no restraint of the law, at present. That he was dreadfully unhappy and had become as humble as he had before been arrogant. What could so have altered him? And was it thus that the Lady Jess had all her "boys" in leading strings?

"I must look out for myself or I'll fall under a like spell," he laughed, as with the air of one who knows it all, though she had been over that way but once, Jessica explained to her late manager:

"This car will take us straight back to the hospital. We've not been away long and I think Mr. Hale will still be there. He'll be glad to see you. *Very glad*. He and Mr. Sharp have been looking for you. I think you can tell them something they're anxious to know. Ephraim is there, anyhow. He, poor fellow, can't go away, even if he wishes—yet."

Mr. Hale was still in "Forty-niner's" room and recognized Antonio with such an outburst of surprise that Ephraim opened his eyes, for he had been dozing, and fixed them on the newcomer, inquiringly.

"What! You, you snake! *you here?*"

"But certainly, yes. I, I, Antonio, at your service. Hast the broken leer? This is bad. Old bones are slow to heal. You will not shoot again at dear Sobrante, you."

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"Won't? Well, I rather guess it'll take somebody stronger 'n you to stop it."

Antonio shrugged his shoulders in a manner deemed offensive by the patient, who struggled to rise, but was prevented by Jessica's quick movement.

"Ephraim! Antonio! Don't quarrel, this very first minute. One of you is sick and the other half frantic with some trouble. Please, Antonio, go away now with Mr. Hale and Mr. Sharp. One must never make a noise in a hospital," said this wise maiden of eleven.

"Ah! so? But it is the lawyer I want, yet. The lawyer who will make a villain return the great money I have given. *Caramba!* If I had him in my hands this minute!"

Jessica lifted a warning finger and the manager lowered his voice. He even made an attempt at soothing Ephraim, but chose an unfortunate argument.

"Take peace to yourself, 'Forty-niner.' All must be told some day. *Adios.*"

"*Adios*, you foreign serpent! Old? Old! he calls me-me-old! Why, I'm a babe in arms to Pedro, or Fra Mateo, or even fat Brigida, who washes for us 'boys.' Old! A man but just turned eighty! Snake, I'll outlive you yet. I'll get well, to spite you; and I'll be on hand, when they let you out the lockup, to give you the neatest horsewhippin' you ever see. Old! Get out!"

Fearful of further excitement, the gentlemen hurried Antonio away, yet kept a keen watch upon his movements for, at that word "lockup," the man's dark face had turned to an ashen hue.

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As they left the hospital the every-busy ambulance rolled past them toward the accident ward. The others averted their eyes, but the Spaniard peered curiously within, and, instantly a shuddering groan burst from his lips. Inside that van lay the solution to all their difficulties; though Antonio alone had comprehended it.

CHAPTER XVIII

APPREHENDED

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The pleasantest task which fell to Jessica's hands, during her hospital life, was the distributing of flowers and fruits, almost daily sent by the charitable for the comfort of the patients.

The nurses received and apportioned these gifts; and, carrying her big, tray-like basket, Lady Jess visited each ward and room in turn, adding to the pretty offering some bright word of her own. For she now had the freedom of the house and knew the occupant of each white bed better, even, than his or her attendant nurse. The quiet manner which she had gained here, her ready help and loving sympathy, made her coming looked for eagerly; but the happiness she thus bestowed was more than returned upon her own heart. Could her "boys" have seen her they would have been proud, but not surprised, for to the appreciative words his own attendant gave his darling, Ephraim would instantly reply?

"Course. What else could you expect? Didn't she have the finest man in the world for her father? and isn't her mother a lady? Isn't she, herself, the sweetest, lovingest, most unselfish child that ever lived? But it'll be meat to feed the 'boys' with, all these stories you're telling me. They most worship her now, and after they listen to such talk a spell-h-m-m. The whole secret is just-love. That's what our captain is made of; pure love. 'Twas a good thing for this old earth when she was born."

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"But you'll spoil her among you, I fear."

"Well, you needn't. Little Jessica Trent can't be spoiled. 'Cause them same 'boys' would be the first ones to take any nonsense out of her, at the first symptoms. She couldn't stand ridicule. It would break her heart; but they'd give her ridicule and plenty of it if she put on silly airs. You needn't be afraid for Lady Jess."

On that very day, after Antonio had left the hospital with his friends, or captors, as the case might prove. Jessica went through the building with her tray of roses, and in the wing adjoining the accident ward saw a man lying in one of the hitherto empty rooms.

"A new patient. He must have been brought in to-day. I've never been to the new ones till I was told, but I hate to pass him by. I wonder if it would be wrong to ask him if he wished a flower! And how still he stays. Yet his eyes are very wide open and so round! He looks like somebody I've

seen-why, little Luis Garcia! 'Tis Luis himself, grown old and thin. For Luis' sake, then I'll try."

A nurse was sitting silent at the patient's bedside and toward her the child turned an inquiring glance. The answer was a slight, affirmative nod. The attendant's thought was that it would please Lady Jess to give the rose and could do the patient no harm to receive it. Indeed, nothing earthly could harm him any more.

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So Jessica stepped softly in and paused beside the cot. Her face was full of pity and of a growing astonishment, for the nearer she beheld it the more startling was the sick man's likeness to a childish face hundreds of miles away.

Her stare brought the patient's own vacant gaze back to a consciousness of things about him. He saw a yellow-haired girl looking curiously upon him and extending toward him a half-blown rose. A fair and unexpected vision in that place of pain, and he asked, half querulously:

"Who are you? An angel come to upbraid me before my time?"

"I'm Jessica Trent, of Sobrante ranch, in Paraiso d'Oro valley."

"W-h-a-t!"

The nurse bent forward, but he motioned her aside.

"Say that again."

"I'm just little Jessica Trent. That's all."

"All! Trent-Trent. Ah!"

"And you? Are you Luis Garcia's missing father?"

"Luis-Luis Garcia. Was it Luis, Ysandra called him?"

"Yes, yes. That was the name on the paper my father found pinned to the baby's dress. The letter told that the baby's father had gone away promising to come back, but had never come. The mother had heard of my dear father's goodness to all who needed help, and she was on her way to him when her strength gave out. So she died there in the canyon, and she said the baby's name was like the father's. I remember it all, because to us the 'Maria' seems like a girl's name, too. Luis Maria Manuel Alessandro Garcia."

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The man's round eyes opened wider and wider. It seemed as if his glare pierced the child's very heart, and she drew back frightened. The nurse motioned her to go, but at her first movement toward the door the patient extended his hands imploring:

"No. Not yet. My time is spent. Let me hear all--all. The child your father found--ah! me! Your father of all men! Did--did it live?"

"Of course it lived. He is a darling little fellow and he looks--he looks so like you that I knew you in a moment. He has the same wide brown eyes, the same black curls, his eyebrows slant so, like yours, he is your image. But he is the cutest little chap you ever saw. He is my own brother's age and they have grown up together, like twins, I guess. It would break Ned's heart to have you take him away from us. You won't now, will you?"

A pitiful smile spread over the pain-racked features, and the man glanced significantly toward the nurse. She smiled encouragingly upon him, but he was not misled. After a moment of silence, during which Jessica anxiously watched his drawn face, he spoke.

"Go, child. Your mission is done. Send a lawyer, quick. Quick. The man I wronged--the savior of my son! A lawyer, quick. Bring the suit case--the case! Let none open it but the child. Quick. Quick!"

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Higher authority even than her own convinced the nurse that obedience to his urgency was the only way now to allay the patient's rising excitement. The accident which had crushed the lower part of his body, so that his life was but a question of hours, had left his head clear for the present; and here, indeed, seemed a case for more than surgical treatment.

Fortunately, the needed "lawyer" was close at hand, waiting with the reporter and the half-distraught Antonio whose shriek of recognition had been Luis Garcia's welcome to the hospital. Unceasingly, the manager had declared that this was the man all three of them were seeking; had insisted upon returning to the ante-room of the hospital, and avowed that he would never leave the spot until the "villain" had been apprehended.

"He has misled and cheated me. I, Antonio! He has all my money. He has the savings of my life, yes. He has all that I did not yet pay, of the crops so good, to the Senora Trent. More, more. That money--which, ah, me! He told me, yes, a thousand million times, that I, and not that New York company, to me alone was the inheritance of Paraiso d'Oro. My money was to prove it, that inheritance, yes. To me was the power of attorney, was it not? of Cassius Trent, who was the so good man and the so poor fool at business."

"Look out, there, neighbor! Speaking of fools and business, you don't appear to have been so brilliant yourself," corrected Ninian, promptly.

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Antonio continued, heedless of the interruption:

"He was the great banker, Garcia, no? What then? Who would so safe keep the money from that far New York? With the master's wish I gave it to that bank. And the letters--*Caramba!* So high, to one's knees, to one's waist I pile them, the letters! All wrote of his own hand. All say by-and-by,

manana, he give me the perfect title and send back that which belongs, after all expenses, no? To them in New York."

"A pretty scheme. You don't seem to have profited by it greatly, as yet."

"I, profit? But I am now the beggar, I, poor Antonio. This day I come from resting in the houses of my friends and I find--what do I find? The bank is not. The banker is not, yes. His house where he lived more plain than our adobes at Sobrante, that house is closed. His man tell me this: 'He has gone away. One little, little trip, a journey. Across the sea. He will come back. Have patience, Antonio.' But my money? my papers? my inheritance so all but proved? Tush. He told me not that. 'When he comes back you can ask him, himself.' So. Good. He has come back. Here. I see him, sure. I--"

A summons to Mr. Hale cut short this fierce harangue, which had been repeated till their ears were tired.

The banker had come back, indeed, poor creature. By the very train on which he was to depart with his plunder--all rendered into the solid cash which would tell no tales, as he fancied--by this swift-moving juggernaut he was overtaken and crushed down. A moment earlier he would have been in time. But in haste and by a misstep he had ended all his earthly journeyings.

When the lawyer was called the reporter followed his friend and Antonio followed him, and when these three approached the little room in which the dying man lay, the nurse would have sent them back; but Garcia himself pleaded: "Let them be. What matters it how many hear or see? The dress-suit case. Bring it, and bring the child."

They obeyed and he bade them place the key in Jessica's small hand.

"Open it, little one."

But her fingers shook so that the nurse, in pity, pushed them from the lock and herself unfastened the heavily laden case. It contained no clothing, such as might have been looked for within; but rolls and packets neatly tied.

"Open them, child."

"Oh! please! I do not want to; I am afraid!"

"Afraid, Jessica Trent? Do you not yet understand? That is money, money--of which your father stood accused before the world as having stolen. Afraid to prove your father what you know him--an honest man!" cried Ninian in anger.

She understood him then, and in frantic haste obeyed. Roll after roll, till Mr. Hale said:

"Enough. His strength is failing. This scene is too much for him."

At that she pushed the gold away and, falling on her knees beside the bed, caught Luis Garcia's hand and covered it with kisses.

"Oh! thank you, Luis' father! God bless you, God take care of you!"

"Oh! the divine pity of childhood," murmured Ninian, huskily. "She forgets that it was he who wronged her in the fact that he has now set her right."

The sick man's face brightened, nor did he withdraw his hand.

"*You forgive me?*"

"Yes, yes."

"The little Luis. The son I never saw. What shall you tell him of his father?"

"That he was good to me, and that he suffered."

"More. Tell the boy this: I never knew he lived. I should have known, I should have searched. I did not. Ask him, too, to forgive me. And because of me, turn him not away."

The nurse motioned all the others to go out, and they went, Ninian Sharp himself standing guard over the dress-suit case the attendant had relocked until it was once more safely deposited in the strong box of the hospital, where even Antonio's greedy eyes could see it no longer.

But Jessica knelt on, awed and silent, yet now quite unafraid. And Luis Garcia still clasped her hand and fixed his fading gaze upon her pitying face.

"The mother--Ysandra. Where lies she now? Little one, do you know that?"

"Do I not? In the consecrated ground of the old mission itself. With all the good dead priests sleeping about her. Rose vines cover her grave and my own mother tends them herself. Little Luis is made to water it, sometimes, though, for that is a good way to keep her memory green, my mother says. Near by is where my father rests. Would--would you wish to sleep there, too, beside them both, and where Luis could bring flowers to you as to her?"

"I may? You--are--willing? Would--your mother--so kind--little Luis--"

"My mother pities and helps all who suffer. You suffer, poor man, and I wish that she were here to tell you 'yes' herself."

But he had closed his eyes and she could not know if he had heard her, though she was glad to see that the look of pain had almost left his features. She did not speak again but sat quite still until, at last, her hand grew numb and she turned toward the nurse, whispering:

"Can I move it? Will it disturb him? He seems to be asleep."

The nurse bent over her patient, then gently answered:

"Yes, darling. Your task is over. Nothing will ever trouble him again. He is at peace—*asleep*."

CHAPTER XIX ANTONIO'S MESSAGE

Jessica went back to Ephraim's room, to tell him this wonderful ending of their once almost hopeless search, and for long they discussed the story that was at once so strange, so moving, and yet so simple.

"Man proposes, God disposes," quoted "Forty-niner," with all the emphasis of an original philosophy. "If we'd set out to make up a fairy story we couldn't have beat this. But I'm so glad, it seems like I could get right up and dance a jig, smashed leg and all."

"Glad! Ephraim, I'm so glad, too, and the gladness is so deep, deep down that I don't want to dance. I just want to cry. And that poor man is little Luis' father. Oh! it is pitiful."

"Hush, captain. Don't you go to grieving over that scamp. A man don't get good nor bad all in a minute. It was hard enough, I 'low, for a fellow to be snatched out of the world that sudden. Yet, if he could speak for himself, he'd say a thousand times better that than what the law would have given him. Let him be. His part is done. He's passed in his checks and don't you hear that Heaven won't pay out on all the good ones. Now—what next?"

Both knew, yet both disliked to mention that which each felt. Till Ephraim swallowed something like a sob and remarked:

"The longer I lie here, like a log, the madder I get at myself and the weaker minded. I'm just about as ready to cry as a whipped baby. I know 'twas the best thing could have happened, my getting hurt, though why a plain, everyday break wouldn't have answered the purpose just as well as this 'compound fracture,' the doctors make such a fuss over and takes so long to heal, I don't see. Nor never shall. If it had been just ordinary bone-crackin' I'd been lively as a hop-toad by now, and ready to start right home with you this minute. As it is--"

"Oh, Ephraim! I hate to leave you—but I must get quickly to my mother! Don't you see I must? To smooth all those sad lines out of her dear face and make her happy again, as this news surely will. They'll be good to you here, and you can come the first minute they'll let you."

"Why not telegraph her? The boys go every day to Marion for the letters you and all send, and the postmaster is the operator, too. Why not that, and wait just a day or two. Likely I'll be cavortin' round, supple as a lizard on a fence, by then."

Jessica did not answer and Ephraim asked:

"How could you go, anyway, without me or some protector? Though I made a bad job of it once I wouldn't the second time."

"I don't know how, dear old fellow, and I do know how bitter disappointed you are that you can't be there to see my mother's face and get her thanks right away. But--"

Fortunately for both of these perplexed people, Ninian Sharp came along the passage just then, and one glimpse of his bright, helpful face cleared away Jessica's anxieties.

"You'll know what's best and how to do it, won't you, dear Mr. Sharp?"

"Certainly. That's my business. Straightening out the tangled affairs of the silly rest of the world! Fetch on your trouble!"

He was in the gayest of moods, elated over the successful termination of his tedious labors, though in his heart not unmindful of the tragedy which had brought his share in them to an end. What was left, the law's dealings with Antonio and the division and disposition of the recovered funds, belonged to Mr. Hale, and he very thankfully resigned these matters to that gentleman's capable hand.

"I want to go home. And I don't want to leave Ephraim."

"I want to go with you. And I'm going to leave Ephraim—because he'd have to stay awhile, whether or not. He will be an important witness for the prosecution, providing that New York Company bothers any further after having recovered all that belongs to them, with some that doesn't. I've a 'loose foot,' as I've heard that your 'Aunt Sally' also has betimes, and I mean to shake it out Sobrante way. If you'd like to travel in my company I can't prevent it, as I see!"

"Oh! you darling man! You mean—I know it, for it's just like all the rest of your great kindness—that you're going wholly on purpose to take me home!"

"Beg pardon, but indeed, I'm not. At this present moment I have no stronger desire than to see that wonderful ranch of yours and those 'boys' who've spoiled you so. Why, I couldn't stay away, after putting my finger so deeply into your family pie. I propose to start on the nine o'clock train to-morrow morning. Think you can be ready by then?"

"I'm ready this minute! No, I mean, as soon as I bid everybody good-by, and--and--"

"Do a little shopping, eh? That's what most young ladies delay for, I believe."

"But I'm neither a young lady nor have I any shopping to do. I couldn't have because I haven't any money, you see, even if I knew how to shop."

"Why?" demanded "Forty-niner," impatiently. "No money? I don't believe all ours is gone yet."

"Why, I forgot that. I really did. And I would love, if Mr. Sharp thinks it would be all right to use it when there is all this hospital board for both of us to pay, to take a tiny bit of a present to--"

"Everybody you ever knew, I'll be bound!" cried Ninian.

"I-believe I would. But of course I can't. So I'd best treat all alike and take nothing but our glorious goods news."

"I'm going to take that myself, part of the way. At the finish I'll let you carry the heavy burden and deliver it yourself into your mother's hands. Now, come sit down a minute. Ephraim, put on your own thinking cap, and if she forgets anybody you let me know. We are going to take something to everybody, just as you'd like. Now, begin. The mother-but she's settled, already. For her I've made a finished picture from a sketch I have, of a little yellow-haired girl asleep upon a piebald burro's shoulder. Ned? A train of cars. Luis, ditto. Samson-what for Samson?"

"Would it cost too much to take them each, all the 'boys' the same thing, and that would be a bright red necktie?"

"Cost not a bit too much and be a deal easier than thinking of separate things for so many. Next? Aunt Sally?"

"Oh! she's no trouble. A few bits of new calico 'print' for her patchwork would make her very happy."

They forgot nobody, not even Ferd whom Jessica so disliked; and at the end of the list she rather timidly suggested: "Antonio."

To that, however, both her friends cried a vehement "No!" Not a cent of their money should ever go to please such a man as the Senor Bernal.

"But, that reminds me. This Antonio himself wishes to have an interview with you before you leave Los Angeles. I want you, though, to feel at liberty to refuse this request if you so desire. He deserves no kindness at your hands."

"No. Don't you go near him, captain. He's a snake and snakes are unpleasant critters even after their fangs are drawn. Leave Antonio to me. When I get well I'll have a little score to settle with him on my own behalf," urged Ephraim.

"Why doesn't he come to me, himself? Instead of sending for me to him. Then I shouldn't have to trouble you to take me."

Mr. Sharp looked at Ephraim and smiled, significantly.

"I suppose because he cannot. Else so polished a gentleman would surely do so."

"Why cannot he? Is he ill, too?"

"Rather ill in his mind, but not in body. Simply, he isn't allowed."

"Won't the hospital folks have him?"

"Not at present."

"I believe you are teasing me. Where is Antonio?"

"At police headquarters."

"Oh! with Matron Wood?"

"Not with that good woman, I fear."

"Mr. Sharp, please, *don't* tease me any more. What do you mean?"

"Antonio is under restraint of the law. He is a prisoner, for the present. Detained until Mr. Hale can consult with his New York people and find out their disposition toward the fellow. He has done criminal things without, apparently, any benefit to himself. He says there is something on his mind that he must tell you. We'll call to see him on our way to the shopping district and get him over and done with. I've no desire to continue his acquaintance, myself."

Jessica's face grew serious.

"Oh! poor Antonio!"

"Quit that!" commanded "Forty-niner," with more sharpness than he often used toward his beloved lady.

"But, it is so terrible to be a-prisoner. That means that one can never go out into the fields or climb the mountains, or ride, or hunt, or anything one likes. He has done dreadful wrongs, and I never used to like him as well as I ought, but now I'm sorry for him. I can't help it, Ephraim, even if it does displease you."

"H-m-m. He brought his own misfortunes upon himself. But first he had brought worse ones on

his truest friends and innocent persons whom he never saw."

"Maybe he didn't know any better. Maybe--"

"Child, you are incorrigible. You'd pity-anybody. Yet, perhaps, you are right in a measure. Antonio strikes me as more fool than knave."

"Well, I'll be glad to say good-by to him, anyway."

It was a greatly altered Antonio they found. All his haughtiness was gone and his depression, his fear, was so abject that while Lady Jess pitied him even more than before, the reporter felt only contempt. It was he who cut short the manager's wordy explanations and commanded:

"Now, if you've got anything special to say to Miss Trent, out with it and have done. We must be off."

"Then leave her alone with me for five minutes, yes."

"No. What you can say to her must be said in my presence."

But Jessica petitioned for the favor, and Ninian stepped into an adjoining room, leaving the door ajar.

As soon as he was out of sight, Senor Bernal leaned forward, clasping his hands.

"It is the good turn I do. Well, then, it is the good turn you will answer, no."

"Of course. I'd do you any 'good turn' which was right for me."

"Then plead for me, my liberty. It is you, senorita, who have the so great, the strange power to move many hearts to your will. *Si*. You will plead, then, if I tell you-something-a little story-maybe?"

"I'm in no mood for stories, and you're talking in riddles as you've always been fond of doing. Say what you mean at once, Antonio, for I'm going home to-morrow. Home! going home!"

"Ah! me! And? But yes. I will. I will force myself. I will ask it. That-that-title? Know you of that?"

"How should I know?"

"Ephraim. Was not Ephraim at the safe one midnight? Is not Ephraim a little strange-here?" touching his own forehead.

Jessica turned away, indignant.

"No, but you are. The queerest, crookedest man I ever saw. If you've anything to tell me, just be quick, I am going. As for Ephraim, I wish, unhappy man, that you had half the goodness and honesty in your whole body that dear old fellow has in his littlest finger. He couldn't do a mean thing nor even think one, and if you sent for me to abuse him to me you might have spared yourself the trouble."

"Well, then. It is known, is it not? That when I shook the dust of Sobrante rancho from my feet I took away with me all the papers that appertained to the so great business of the place? Why not? Was I not to go back the master, and for the settlement of all affairs which I had with the Dona Gabriella?"

"You will please never call my mother by her first name again, Antonio Bernal. She is an American gentlewoman, and her title is Mrs. Trent. Understand? She is not afraid of you, nor am I, though she was patient and, for her children's sakes, would not quarrel nor resent your insolence. All that is changed. You can do us no further harm. My father's name is freed from all the shadow that your wickedness cast over it, and as for titles to property-poor! None of the Trents, big or little, care anything for property since we have regained honor! Besides, Sobrante isn't the only home in the world. They are everywhere, waiting for those who will take them. If we lose Sobrante, as I suppose we may, I-just I, Jessica Trent, a child, will make a home for my mother and my brother-somewhere. I am strong. I can work. I am not at all afraid."

Despite his meanness and cupidity, Antonio was moved. The girl was radiant in her courage and enthusiasm, and her disdain of what he could make her suffer was infinite.

"Good, senorita. When you speak and look like that I can no longer keep silence, I. The papers! It is possible, no? That among them, in my so great haste at leaving Sobrante, that little, yes, it might-it might be among those other papers appertaining to the so great business. *Si*. If I point the way, if I tell the secret retiring place of me, I, Antonio Bernal, you will plead and set me free? It is a contract, a bargain-yes?"

Jessica pondered. The temptation was strong to say "yes" without delay; but she had now learned to distrust the late manager of her mother's business, and answered, cautiously:

"I'll do what I can, Antonio, but if my mother forbids me to 'plead,' I shall not disobey her. You did what you pleased, and my friends say you will have to suffer the consequences."

"Ah! but it is the so old head on the so small shoulders. That wisdom was not of your own, senorita. But, I forgive the suspicion. Yes, I am magnanimous. I am generous, I, Senor Bernal, heir-rightful heir-to Sobrante rancho and all of Paraiso d'Oro. See! Behold! Did the Lady Jessica never hear of El Desierto, no?"

"The Deserted Ranch? Where Pedro says the spirits of dead people walk? Of course. Everybody has heard of that. Why?"

"Sometimes the 'spirits' keep hidden treasures safe. Yes. *Si*. Does the senorita know the trail thither, to that haunted place?"

"No. Nor wish to. Good-by, Antonio. I can wait for no more of your nonsense."

"The paper. The pencil, which the Lady Jess holds in her hand. One moment, that to me, if the senorita pleases."

"I brought these for my little shopping trip, which I'm to take with Mr. Sharp. I can't give them to you, but I'll lend, for a moment. Here they are. Be quick."

Antonio seized the pencil and rapidly sketched upon the pad a few dots and lines, suggesting a zigzag road and stations upon it. At the starting point he wrote "Marion," and at the end "Sobrante." Midway, and well to the north, where a curving course indicated an arroyo he marked "El Desierto."

Then he looked up, and Jessica reached forward to take back her possessions.

But with what he considered great chaft and cunning he thrust them behind him and smiled grimly:

"The promise, senorita. First the promise; 'I will plead for the liberty of Senor Antonio Bernal, so help me--'"

Unperceived by the artful manager, Ninian Sharp had entered the room from a rear door. He was tired of waiting for the interview to end and had overheard most of it from the outer room. He now quietly stretched out his own hand and possessed himself of the rude map, and then as quietly and instantly withdrew with it, calling as he did so:

"Come on, Lady Jess. Time's up. So is Antonio's little game; yet, thanks, senor, for playing it so openly, Good-day. *Adios*. Farewell. *Et cetera*. *Au revoir* and all the rest. We'll show you that title deed-if we find it!"

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CHAPTER XX

A RAILWAY JOURNEY

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The morning of departure had come and, trembling with both fear and eagerness, Jessica stood beside the reporter upon the station, waiting for the great train to move outward.

"Step aboard, Lady Jess. Homeward bound!"

"Oh! it looks so big and somehow dreadful. I can ride any kind of a horse, or an ostrich, and burros, of course, but--"

"But you don't know yet how to ride a railway carriage. Then let me tell you you'll find it so delightful you'll not want to get out when the journey's done."

"Don't you believe that, Mr. Sharp. The end of the journey, this part, at least, means, Marion, and that's but a bit of a way from my mother. Is everything ready? Scruff? Is he here?"

"Come and see the sorrowful chap in his moving stable if you wish. Though it hasn't moved as yet. He'll probably rebel against the state of affairs, at first; then be just as unwilling to leave the car as he was to enter it. It's a fine place for sleeping, and sleeping is Scruff's chief aim in life."

"He's had to make up for lost time, for he'd never too much sleep at home, where Ned and Luis were. Oh! to think! To-morrow, to-morrow--this very next day that's coming--I shall have my arms around those children's precious necks and feel my mother's kisses on my lips. I can't wait. I can't."

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"Humph! I shall begin to think you can wait and very contentedly if you don't step into this car pretty soon."

Jessica had never traveled by rail and the shock of the accident which had befallen Luis' father made her more timid than she had ever been before. She had pleaded to make the return trip by saddle, as she had come, but Mr. Sharp would not consent.

"Time. Time. We must make time, Lady Jess. A newspaper man never uses a week where a day will do. If he did--well, no knowing if we should ever get out a single issue of *The Lancet*. Come on. If there were any danger do you think I would make you face it?"

Thus shamed and by the friend who had proved so true to her interests, the little girl shut her eyes, held out her hands and was lightly swung upon the rear platform of the luxurious coach in which they were to make the first half of their trip. Later, they would have to leave the main line for a branch road, terminating at Marion, their postal station. From Marion, the thirty miles of saddle work, with the added detour on account of El Desierto, would be all the reporter fancied he should care for.

"Some day I'll come back to Sobrante, if I'm invited, and get that famous rider, Samson, to teach me the trick of 'broncho busting' or some other caper. But now, the engine can't travel fast enough to suit my impatience."

Nor Jessica, neither, after the first few moments of the journey. She forgot her fear in watching the swiftly moving landscape, and found it hard to believe that the landscape itself was still and she who was carried past it. This time there was none of Aunt Sally's bountiful luncheon but what seemed to Lady Jess something far finer—a dining car. To be sure, during their first meal in this, served by colored waiters whose unfamiliar faces distracted her attention, and swayed by the motion of the train, the girl's appetite was not worth mentioning; but by the time the supper hour was reached she was ready to enjoy almost everything which her companion ordered for her. It delighted him to observe how swiftly she comprehended and adapted herself to new things, and in his spirit of "teasing" he laid several harmless "traps" for her entanglement.

But she had now learned to distinguish his fun from his earnest and, after one keen glance into his face, would skillfully avoid the little slips of speech or manner that would have so diverted him.

"No, Mr. Sharp, I'm ever so ignorant of the way city people and traveling people do, but one thing Ephraim taught me, even on our quiet way out. That was: 'Use your eyes, not your tongue, and watch what other folks do.' So, if watching will prevent my doing awkward things, I'll watch, surely enough."

They were to sleep at Marion, and when they finally left the less comfortable car of the branch road at that town, it was very dark and no vehicles were in waiting to convey passengers to the one hotel of the place. Few persons stopped at Marion, except such as resided there or near, and such either walked from the station to their homes or had their own wagons meet them.

Ninian Sharp was disgusted. He was tired, his head ached, and he had anticipated no such "one horse" village as this. "Why, I thought it was your post town and all that."

"So it is. And a very pretty place by daylight, save that they don't irrigate."

"Which means there isn't a spear of grass within the town limits, doesn't it?"

"Almost as bad. But now we'll change places, if you please. I've been to Marion several times with my father and once since—since he went away, with Samson. There! They're taking Scruff out of the car and you must ride him. I know the way. It's only a mile, about, to the hotel. Of course, there's a lodging-house nearer, right by this station, indeed, but the hotel's much nicer. You'll get a better bed there, and we'd best go on."

"I'd rather sleep on the ground than walk a mile."

"You shall do neither. Didn't you hear me say we've changed places now? I'm so near home I am at home and I'm—the captain. Obey orders, sir, and mount Scruff's back."

He was too weary to protest and too ill. Subject to acute neuralgia, he was, like plenty of people, rather less courageous when he was in pain than at other times. Besides, now there was something of that decision in Jessica's tone which sick people find restful, and he quietly threw one leg across Scruff's back and let the girl do as she pleased.

This was to start forward over the unpaved, unlighted street at a swift unbroken run, which Scruff had some work to equal; but the speed brought them promptly to a wooden "tavern," from one window of which there gleamed a solitary oil lamp.

"Horrors! Antonio described a ranch called Desolation, or something like that, and I reckon we've arrived," lamented the reporter, jolted into fresh distress by the burro's trot.

Jessica laughed.

"Wait. Be patient, dear man. Within five minutes you'll be sleeping on a clean, sweet bed, and when you wake up in the morning it will be to a fine breakfast, a perfect day, and—Sobrante!"

Then she tapped on the window and called:

"Hello, there! Sobrante folks! Open the door, quick!"

A head was thrust out of another window, further along the narrow porch, and a sleepy voice asked:

"What's that you say? Who wants--"

"I do! Jessica Trent, from Sobrante. But last, right from Los Angeles city. Please be quick!"

In less time than seemed possible, for such a drowsy person to reach it, the door was flung wide and there rushed out upon the porch a man and a woman, who both seized Jessica at one time and in their effort to embrace her succeeded in hugging each other. Whereupon the landlady flung her stalwart husband aside and caught the little girl in her arms, to carry her within.

"Oh! but this is the darling home again! And is it good news you've brought, my dear? Ah! by the shining of your bonny eyes one can see that plain. Light up, Aleck! Light up! How can we have such darkness when the bairn is safe back? And begging pardon, lassie, who is this yon?"

Jessica presented her friend and added, quickly:

"Only for him I could never have done that business, Janet, Aleck. And it is done. Everybody--"

"All the countryside knows it already, Jessica Trent. It's ringing with it, as it rung with the story of a wave little lass who set out alone and unfriended, save for one old man, to clear her father's memory of a stain some ne'er-do-well had dared to splash it with; and how the old man broke his leg and lost the bairn; and, losing, she fell into wiser hands and all, and all. Why, the 'boys' are

here long before sun up; hours before mailtime, to get the latest news. Ah! it's proud is all this land because of you, my wee bit bairnie!"

Again was Jessica caught and kissed till her breath was gone; but released she demanded, and with disappointment in her tone:

"So the news is no news, and does my mother, too, know all?"

"Hasn't the sweet lady read the papers that the 'boys' have carried, loping to break their necks! Ah, lassie, 'twill be an ovation you'll get when once they sight your bonny head shining on the sandy branch road!"

Jessica turned toward Ninian Sharp with the first feeling of anger she had ever had toward him.

"The papers? Your *Lancet*, I suppose. But you knew, you knew how much I wanted to surprise my mother."

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"Even so. But could you expect a man to keep back such fine 'copy' from his office? If you did, or if I could, somebody else, like *The Gossip*, would have got ahead of us. It was public property, my little Lady, and private interests, or fancies, always yield to the great public. We'll discuss this further to-morrow. To-night I'd like to see the bed you promised."

Jessica caught the hand of her weary friend and begged:

"Forgive me. I forgot. And I suppose that the very feeling which made you so kind and faithful to us, strangers, made you faithful to that horrid old *Lancet*, too. Now Janet, you are to give Mr. Sharp your very nicest bed and breakfast, for he is tired and suffering."

"'Tis ready this instant. 'Tis always ready, lassie, though few come nowadays, to use it. This way, sir. After I show him I'll come for you, Lady Jess."

Jessica had not overpraised the neatness and comfort of this out-of-the-way hostelry, and Ninian Sharp slept dreamlessly till joyous voices outside his window roused him to the fact that morning and hunger had arrived together. Remembering, too, the long ride that lay before him and the necessity of finding a horse for it, he rose and hastily dressed. He had lost his neuralgic pains and his spirits were again such as Jessica had always seen him show. She, too, was up and waiting, and it looked as if her ovation had begun; for she was already the center of an admiring group yet held closest to the side of a big ranchman, grizzled and rugged, but beaming upon her and all the rest like an incarnate joy.

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"Samson, Samson, here he is! Mr. Sharp, dear Mr. Sharp, this is my biggest 'boy'!"

"Huh! Glad to see you, little one. 'Looks like you'd be quite a man when you get growed up,'" quoted the joker, giving Samson's hand a cordial grasp.

"Come on! Come on! You're the lad for us! Well, sir, you do me proud. You do Sobrante proud. You do all the world proud, and that's my sentiment to a t-i-o-n, sir! Breakfast's ready."

"Oh, Mr. Ninian, he's brought-my mother has sent you the horse that nobody else has ridden since my father did. Nimrod, the swiftest, gentlest thoroughbred that anybody ever rode."

"Sent him for me? Why, how could she know that we were coming?"

"Why shouldn't she?" asked Samson. "Him and John Benton was over yesterday, but to-day it was my turn. One of us has been every day since the captain left Sobrante; and since the good news arrived there's always been a led horse for you, sir. Would have been till the day of judgment, too, if you hadn't struck us afore. Reckon you aren't acquainted with our little settlement, sir."

"Reckon I wasn't, but I'm beginning to be. My! What a magnificent animal. And it solves the difficulty of finding a mount out to the ranch. I'm not much of a horseman, though. I don't know but I'd better stick to Scruff and leave Nimrod to Lady Jess."

Samson wheeled around and eyed the stranger, curiously. Then he advanced and held out his hand again.

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"Shake, Sharp. You're a man, even if you do live in a city, and the first one I ever met who hailed from such a place and didn't think he knew it all. You'll do. And you can ride. A baby could, that creatur'. If you can't stick I'll hold you on. Now, breakfast, I say."

This was Jessica's chance, and before they sat down to the bounteous meal which Janet had been hours in preparing she managed to draw Ninian aside and whisper a request, to which he nodded prompt assent. So nobody but they two knew what was meant when, as the three mounted and were about to ride away, she asked Samson:

"Do you know the trail to El Desierto?"

"Do I know a pisen serpent? What in the name of reason put such a forsaken hole into your head on this joyful occasion?"

"Never mind what, and never mind speech-making, dear old fellow. I have to call at El Desierto on my way to Sobrante and would like to know the shortest road."

"Is she-has she got a little 'touched' down there in your City of Angels and Scamps, eh?"

"Samson, am I still the captain, or am I not?"

"Captain, I salute. Ride on! You, Aleck, hitch up a board and take that trunk of Miss Trent's to her country seat, and be quick about it. Hurray! I'm so happy I'm looney! Here's for El Desierto and

CHAPTER XXI

BACK AT SOBRANTE

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For an hour and a half they rode swiftly along a comparatively level trail, though to Ninian Sharp's untrained eyes there was no road visible. How Samson managed to pick his way so undeviatingly over the dried herbage and sandy soil was a mystery; but neither the guide nor Jessica found anything strange in this. Those who live in wide solitudes grow keen of sight and hearing, and there were tiny roughnesses here and there which clearly marked to these experienced ranch people where other feet had passed that way.

Presently the roughness increased, and the trail climbed steadily toward a mesa, which seemed to the reporter but ten rods distant, yet was, in reality, as many miles.

"We turn here, captain. Shall I ride ahead?"

"Yes, Samson, but slowly. Scruff's been so idle all these weeks and grown so lazy he'll hardly move."

"He'll get over that as soon as he meets up with the tackers. My, but they've led Aunt Sally a life! And taken more medicine than was due 'em during the natural course of their lives. Say, Sharp, do you enjoy picra?"

"Never tasted the stuff."

"And 'never too late to mend.' Here, take this vial, I present it to you with my compliments. With the captain's respect. With the good will of the whole outfit."

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"But, beg pardon, I have no use for-picra."

"Don't delude yourself. You'll have to have it, outside or in. I'm a friend. I give you this bottle. Then, when Aunt Sally appears with her little dish and spoon, produce this from your pistol pocket and knock her plumb speechless. It's your only salvation. Now or never."

"All right. Thanks. A case of forearmed, I suppose."

"Exactly. Now-there she is!"

Samson rose in his stirrups and pointed forward with his crop. Upon a barren, wide-stretching tableland stood a cluster of adobe huts. Behind them a clump of live oaks, beside them a sandy, curving streak, an arroyo, lighter in hue than the surrounding soil, but parched and dry as if part of the desert itself; behind them, three mighty, jagged, upward-pointing rocks.

"There she is. The weirdest, lonest, God-for-sakenest habitation that fools ever made or lived in, quoted the joker, giving Samson's hand a cordial grasp. Hello! What's up captain?"

For Jessica had also caught sight of the desolate homestead and, having too low stirrups for standing, had sprung to Scruff's back and poised thus on his saddle, was straining her eager, excited gaze toward the distant El Desierto.

"My dream! The spot! For once he told the truth! Follow, follow me, quick!"

"Land of love! She has gone queer, and that's a fact. Does the mite think that there little donkey can outrun your horse or mine? After her, stranger, lest she do some harm to herself."

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Ninian smiled softly and touched Nimrod lightly, and in a moment all three were again racing over the mesa, side by side, the girl foremost, and the men reining in their horses lest they should forestall her of the goal to which she aspired. The reporter, as eager and almost as wise as she, but good Samson completely in the dark and growing a trifle angry over the fact.

When they came up to it the place seemed utterly deserted. The doors opened to the touch and in all but one of the three small buildings the windows were broken. The third was in better repair and was evidently sometimes still used by somebody. There was a bed, or cot, spread with blankets, a coal-oil stove, some canned meats and biscuits, and a well-wrapped gun.

But Jessica's attention passed these details over.

"The rocks! They are the very same as in my dream and he told me of them when he drew the map. Is that in your pocket, Mr. Sharp? Oh! is it?"

"Sure." He drew it forth and held it so that Samson, too, could see.

"Come! In the dream there was a little cave beneath the rocks and in the cave a box. You know it, Samson, the black tin box in which the valuable papers were kept. We could find it nowhere, mother nor I, but I shall find it here and in it-oh! in it-there will be that title deed! You look, 'boys,' I can't, I tremble so."

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Samson forced his great length downward and inward under the boulders and found, as Jessica had felt sure, a small but perfectly dry and well-protected cave. The rocks and live oaks screened it from the sight of those who did not know it existed, and it would never have been suspected that there was aught but solid ground beneath those jagged stones.

The horses and Scruff were willing to stand without tying, and Ninian was, in any case, too excited now to have remembered them. He saw that Lady Jess was trembling, indeed, and trembled himself. If this should prove a disappointment, how would she bear it?

But it was not to be that. From the little cave there presently issued a mighty shout. That is it would have been mighty had the space been large enough to give it vent. As it was, it came like the subdued roar of a wild animal, and it was almost surprising to see the soles of Samson's boots emerge from the opening instead of furry feet.

When he had crawled outward so far that he could lift himself upright, the sailor leaped so high that Ninian felt as if he were the one who had gone "queer" instead of Jessica, suspected. But this reason was obvious; for there in his hand was the veritable black tin box familiar to the girl from her earliest memory, and seen often enough by the herder to be instantly recognized.

When, at last, the box was in her own hands Jessica became very quiet, though her voice still trembled as she said:

"This belongs to my mother. It is for her to open it."

"No, captain."

"Not so, Jessica. If the deed for which she looked were not there it would be but a fresh distress to her. You look. It is your interest as well as hers, and if it is not there you can save her, at least, one disappointment on this day of your return."

The opinions of her two friends prevailed; and, since they had no key, Samson's great knife forced the lock, and stored within were papers and vouchers of great value to Sobrante, which the faithless manager had carried away for his own purposes.

The deed? Ah, yes. There it lay at the very bottom of the pile, and Jessica knew it at once for the queer paper which her father had shown her on the night before his death.

For a time she could only weep over it and caress it, remembering the dear hands which had held it before her, and the unforgotten voice which had explained its value and all about the necessary "recording" which must be made. Then she rallied, remembering, also, that other precious parent, alive and waiting for her and it.

"Keep you the box, Samson. I, myself, must keep and carry this."

She fastened it within her blouse and kept one hand upon it all the rest of the way. A brief and happy way, which ended in a mother's arms and in the wild welcome of every dweller at Sobrante. And when the mother's arms set their recovered treasure free for a moment there were all the "boys" ready and waiting to seize and carry her from point to point, telling how careful had been each one's stewardship and how they would never let her go again. Never.

As for Ninian Sharp he did not recognize himself in the hero they all made of him, nor did even Aunt Sally presume to offer him, so wonderful a man, a nauseous dose. But she was overheard to remark to Wun Lung, who had also joined the company unforbidden by his arch enemy:

"I do believe, Wun Lungy, that if ever that there handsome young man should go and get married I'd set him up in my fifty-five thousand five hundred and fifty-five piece bedquilt. I did lay out to bequeath it to Jessica, but, la! I can piece her another, just as willin' as not. What you say, Wun Lungy?"

"I slay, fool woman!"

For a time joy and surprise turned Ned and Luis speechless; yet they were sent to bed late that night, each hugging a sharp-edged train of tin cars and breathing, "Choo! choo!" as if a railway were a common sight instead of an unknown one.

But there came at last a quiet hour for mother and child, when they sat in close embrace, telling all that had befallen each during the days of separation.

"Oh! if dear Ephraim were only here, mother! I said it should not be a month before that title deed was found, and the month will not be up until to-morrow. Poor Ephraim! It was bitter hard to leave him alone in that hospital, well-liked and cared for though he is. If it hadn't been for him I could never have gone. And the 'boys' would have made such a hero of him. Even as they did of Mr. Sharp. Can't you guess how proud they'd have been of him, mother?"

When Mrs. Trent did not reply, Jessica looked up quickly and saw that dear face so near her own still clouded by a shadow of trouble.

"Why, mother! What is it? You look as if you were not perfectly, absolutely happy, and yet how can you be else-to-night?"

"Yes, darling, I am happy. So glad and thankful that I cannot put it into words. But Ephraim? My darling, at present, not for some days, if I were you I would not talk about Ephraim. You will be happier so. No. He is alive and getting well, so far as I know. There has been no later news than yours. Don't look so alarmed. Only this: the 'boys' have taken some queer notion about our 'Forty-niner,' and so I say he is probably happier just where he is to-night than if he were back at Sobrante."

"Oh! mother! Another mystery? and about such a simple, honest, splendid old fellow as my Ephraim? Well, never mind. I seem to be sent into the world to solve other people's 'mysteries,' and I'll solve his."

Eventually she did. But how and when cannot be told here. This is a story which must be related another time. But for the time Jessica was happy and all went well.

THE END.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK JESSICA TRENT: HER LIFE ON A RANCH ***

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