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Title: Over the Border: A Novel

Creator: Herman Whitaker

Release date: August 27, 2012 [EBook #40600]

Language: English

*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK OVER THE BORDER: A NOVEL ***

OVER THE BORDER

A NOVEL

BY

HERMAN WHITAKER

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NEW YORK
GROSSET & DUNLAP
PUBLISHERS

Published by Arrangement with Harper & Brothers

Books by HERMAN WHITAKER

OVER THE BORDER
THE PROBATIONER
THE SETTLER
THE PLANTER
THE MYSTERY OF THE BARRANCA
CROSS TRAILS

HARPER & BROTHERS NEW YORK
Established 1817

Over The Border
Copyright, 1917, by Harper & Brothers

Printed in the United States of America
Published May, 1917

TO
Jack London
IN MEMORY OF OLD FRIENDSHIP



*GORDON SEIZED ILARIAN WITH
HIS NAKED HANDS*

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I: THE THREE BAD MEN OF LAS BOCAS

The Three had chosen their lair wisely.

In the picturesque Spanish phrase, it "situated itself" midway of the desert, the great Mexican desert that is more varied in its heated monotony than a land of woods and fields and streams. Here it runs to sparse grass land under upland *piñon*; there spreads over wide, clean sands that reflect like burnished brass the intolerable glare of the sun. Now it marches for leagues with the yuccas that fling crazed arms and shrunken limbs like posturing dwarfs; again it is dotted with lonely *mesas*, monolithic masses that raise orange and vermilion facades out of a violet mirage. A magic land it is, made out of shattered rainbows, girded with crimson-and-gold mountains that wear around their high foreheads cooling bandages of snow; a land of deathless calms, cyclonic storms, torrential rains, peopled only by the vultures that wheel against the sky and the little golden dust-whorls which dance together over its heated face. A country where dwells the very spirit of romance; of which anything might be predicted and come to pass; therefore, as before said, the very place for a lair.

Secondly, the Three had shown a nice discrimination in the selection of a site. Its capacities in the way of offense and defense would have earned the instant commendation of a medieval baron, Mexican bandit, revolutionist, or "movie" director in search of an ideal robber's roost. Years ago a Yankee "prospector" with more faith than sense and money enough to have left prospecting severely alone, had kept a raft of *peones* busy for the better part of two years ripping the heart out of a mountain-top in a feverish search for fabulous gold. Rumors that still linger in Sonora *jacales* tell that the *gringo* worked under the direction of the spirits—or a spiritualist, which may or may not be quite the same. The results—to wit, a huge gap in the mountain and an abandoned adobe powder house, now serving as a residence for the Three Bad Men—seem to favor the rumor. Spirits were never good miners. But that is neither here nor there, the Three concerning themselves only with the natural fortifications they thus inherited.

The adobe stood well back in a semicircular gap, protected on three sides by the curving walls of the excavation. Behind them, the mountain dropped almost a thousand feet sheer, and the level bench in front of the house could only be gained by a narrow path that fell like a yellow snake down the steep slopes into thick chaparral. From its edge one overlooked the vast reaches of the central Sonora desert, an ashen sea of sage and mimosa shored in by far mountains that loomed dusky purple or stood out stark yellow as they happened to lie to the sun. Since the Yankee went back on his "controls," or they on him, a *sahuaro* cactus had raised its fluted barrel within the excavation, captaining a squad of dwarf yuccas that poked grotesque arms in pathetic entreaty out of the rubble. To these natural improvements the Three had added a *ramada*, broad porch of poles and cornstalks, in the shade of which they took their ease one hot nooning, two playing *pedro* at a rough wooden table while the third dozed and nodded with stool tilted back against the adobe wall.

It did not require more than a cursory glance to know the Three for members of that sad colony which is doomed by its past to remain on the wrong side of the Mexican border. Beginning with Sliver Smith, the sleeper; his drowsy lids hid blue eyes that were hard as chips of agate and exactly fitted his reckless face. Just now sleep had softened its lines and brought a certain underlying good-nature. But for the mouth and deep creases down each side of the nose, which bespoke passions violent and unrestrained, one would have put him down now for that which he had been—a cowman from the New Mexican ranges.

The other two, however, really looked the "bad man." "Bull" Perrin, the biggest and eldest, might have been especially cast by nature for the part. Big, burly, black-visaged, and heavy-

jowled, excessive drinking had dyed his face out of all relation to the creamy skin the gods had given him. The hot brown eyes under straight bushy brows bespoke a cyclonic temper. But though Bull conveyed the impression of an "ugly customer" at first sight, a physiognomist would have picked Jake Evers, his partner, as a far more dangerous man. The cold, bleak sparks of eyes in his lean, lantern-jawed face scintillated with cunning. But for a certain humor that lurked about the corners of his mouth, his face would have been utterly repulsive.

Yet after granting their "badness," there was about them no taint of the mean, rat-like wickedness of the city criminal. Their composite was of strong impulses, misdirected forces gone to waste, of men cast by birth in a wrong age. In the councils of a nation in the olden time, their strength, ferocity, would have gained them power and place; here, out in the desert, they exactly fitted their environment. As much as the horned toad in the sand at Bull's feet, as much as the lizard that coursed swiftly along the adobe wall above the sleeper's head; as much as the *sahuaro* and the tormented yucca, they belonged to the land. Its gold glowed in their bronze. It were a safe bet that—horses and cattle not being in question—they would, at a given emergency, live in the letter of its best traditions.

Looking at Bull and Jake as they sat at play, the former might be likened to a grizzly; the latter to a tiger, alert, stealthy, cunning, ferocious; qualities which sprang into evidence with startling suddenness when a shrill burst of woman's scolding presently disrupted the heated silence.

Apparently the noise issued from a white cloud that hid the doorway; but as this settled and cleared away, a buxom slattern of a Mexican girl stood revealed. While flicking out the last dust of flour from an empty sack she bitterly reviled the Three. Though delivered in Spanish, the substance of her complaint was international and goes easily into English.

"Flojos! Lazy ones! how shall one cook without flour? The coffee, too, is gone—and the sugar. Of lard or grease there is not a smear for the pan. You must go forth, to-day."

This was merely the text. While she enlarged thereon with copious illustrations to prove their worthlessness as providers, the two men at the table proceeded quietly with their play. It was the third that finally interrupted the harangue with the irascibility of one aroused from pleasant sleep.

"Shut up, Dove!"

In its literal sense the word stands for the most innocent of birds. But she chose to take the opposite meaning of the sarcastic Spanish.

"Si, señor! I am that or I should not be here now, cooking for three beasts." After a comparison between them and the lower animals that greatly favored the latter, she ran on with increasing heat:

"'Dove,' indeed? Then where is my price? Where are they, the fine clothes, the silks and satins and linen, the jewelry and laces you were to gain for me? Was it by this I was bought?" She held out her dirty black skirt. "I, that might be now sitting in the cantina of Ignacio Flores at Las Bocas, selling aguardiente and anisette to his custom? Si, señores, *where are they*, the velvets, ribands, and neck chains? I—"

It was at this point that Jake displayed his quality. Swinging swiftly around, he threw his knife, so hard and quickly that it stuck quivering in the door lintel close to the girl's throat before she had time to close her mouth.

"Here! don't be so careless." Bull's bushy brows drew down over his burning eyes in quick reproof. But his next remark proved that the interference was not based on altruism. "If you croak her, who's to do the cooking? Any corn left, Rosa?"

Whereas Sliver's rude interruption had merely stimulated her tongue; whereas, also, she had stuck out that member at Jake the instant she made sure the knife had missed, she now caught her breath with a little, frightened gulp. "Si, señor."

"Then make some tortillas and serve them along with the jerky," he called after her. "And bring us out a drink."

At this Sliver, who had resumed his doze, sat up again. His lugubrious exclamation, "Oh, *hell!*" caused the others to look up a moment later. With an empty demijohn held upside down Rosa stood in the doorway. She did not speak. But her tragic pose, vindictive nod, said quite plainly, "Now will you go?"

Neither did they speak. The situation was beyond revilings. Slowly Jake picked up and pocketed the cards. Sliver rose to his feet. In single file they marched down the path to find their horses. Indeed, they had caught the animals, saddled up at the stable on the flat below and were riding away through the chaparral before they recovered sufficiently to attempt to fix the blame

for the shortage.

Sliver—who, by the way, had gained his nickname under the law of opposites because he was short and stout—remembered that he had warned them several times “notter hit it so hard.” But his testimony lost force by reason of certain “lone drinks” in the absorption of which he had, by the others, been caught. Jake, on the other hand, had pleaded for more liquor and less flour the last time they stocked up at Las Bocas. By frank confession, moreover, he reduced the force of Sliver’s charge that he would never be satisfied with less liquor than “he ked swim in.”

“That’s right. I never really seen at one time more whisky than I felt I c’d drink.”

From this he went on with invectives against the wave of reform which, by its sudden flooding of the “Territ’ries”—as he still called the States of Arizona and New Mexico—might be held indirectly responsible for his present thirst. “For a cowman, like Sliver here, it don’t matter so much, him being used to dry spells out on the range. But for a man that’s dealt faro in a s’loon for a spell of years with two fingers of bourbon allus under his nose, it comes some bitter. Them was the golden days. What a man made in beef cattle or gold was his’n to plank down on a bar or place on a card. Till them pinch-faces from the Middle West descended like locusts upon the lan’, drought was unknown save by a few fool prospectors that got themselves lost in the desert. Locusts? I wrong ’em! A locust does live up to its natural instincts. Locusts is a blessing compared to pinch-faces. Why—” But certain lengthy reflections that established the place of the “Middle-Wester” beneath even the lowly bedbug in the scale of creation, must give place to his conclusion. “Si, señores! ’twas them druv’ me to rustling. But for them I’d still be living honest, dealing straight faro to all comers with on’y an occasional turn from the bottom of the box for the good of the house.”

“Pity for you!”

Bull’s pithy comment was enlarged upon by Sliver.

“An’ you-all needn’t to be howling so loud, either, about them dry spells on the ranges. We allus had it in the bunk-houses an’ ’twas a poor cook that couldn’t hide a keg in the chuck-wagon. As for your faro—’twas to play the odd card you wolves dealt from the bottom that I med my first rustle. But for you I’d be taking my copa right now out of the cook’s keg instead of dying of thirst in this lousy desert.”

There was real heat in the accusation, but the ex-gambler’s lean, leathery face merely split in a dry grin.

“If your mother bred you a fool, don’t blame me. The flea bit the dog, the dog bit me; I kicked the dog an’ killed the flea. Take a drink of water, Sliver; it all works out in the end. You next, Bull. Which was it—water, wine, or weemen?”

“None of ’em.” The big rustler shook his head. “Early piety did for me. Prayers morning, noon, an’ night; grace before meals; two long sermons on Sundays, an’ two hours, Sabbath-school, and what would you expect? I was so well brought up I jest had to go wrong. But if we don’t jog along we won’t make Las Bocas to-night.”

As Bull spurred on ahead, Sliver looked at Jake. “Say, he ain’t exactly what you-all ’d call frank in his conversings. If there’s a thing he don’t know about us—well, ’tain’t our fault. But him? When you come to think of it did you ever hear him say how he kem to take up rustling?”

The gambler shook his head. “In a gen’ral way—so gen’ral that I couldn’t tell jest how I got it—I’ve sorter gathered that he once croaked a man. But whether ’twas before or after he took up the profesh I couldn’t say. In the natural order of things, a rustler’s bound, sooner or later, to down some prying fool. There’s so many that try to mix in his business. But if it was before, Bull done it—I’ll bet you the gent had it coming.”

II: OVER THE BORDER

That night the Three put up at the *cantina* in the little adobe town of Las Bocas, where, by reason of occasional largesses to the leader of the revolutionary faction that happened to be on top, a welcome was always certain. Just now it was more particularly so because the present *jefe-*

politico, a Carranzista, varied his political activities by acting as “fence” in the disposal of their plunder.

In accordance with his advice, the following afternoon found them approaching the American border at a point far west of their usual sphere of operations. While they journeyed the sun slid down its western slant till it hung like a smoky lamp in the far dust of the desert. Behind them the sea of sage still ran off to distant mountains, but the sunset glow washed its dust away, draping the land in a royal robe. Ahead the grade was rising imperceptibly but steadily to a sparse grass country where the sage, *palo verde*, and yucca gave place to huge *sahuaros* that strewed the plain with their fluted barrels like the jade columns of some vast ruin. Among them roamed the flocks and herds of a pink-walled *hacienda* that nestled in a grove of lordly cottonwoods. As they rode past, the Three noted with appraising glances the sleek hides of a fine bunch of steers.

“Dress a thousand pounds of beef apiece,” Jake opined.

“Worth eighty pesos, gold, on the hoof, in El Paso,” Sliver yearningly added.

But their interest went no further—for reasons that appeared when, at sundown, they rode past the concrete pillar that marked the international boundary. Rustler that he was, drunkard and gambler, utterly worthless if the reports current on the New Mexican ranges were to be believed, Sliver’s eye nevertheless lit up at the sight of it; the glow on his hard face was not all sunset reflection.

“The good old U.S.,” he commented. “*Some* country!”

“He wasn’t talking that way las’ time we crossed.” Jake winked at Bull.

“Guess not. He was cussing Cristobel Columbo for ever having discovered it.”

“That’s right,” Sliver admitted. “But I was what you-all might call in a bit of a hurry with a squad of rangers streaking at my heels. Other things being ekal—”

“Which they ain’t,” Jake interrupted. “Mexico’s good enough for me. Mexico an’ revolution! For I tell you right now that if Porfirio Diaz was still boss, his rurales would have taken right holt where the rangers left off. Instead of dangling from a pine on the American side, we’d hev’ finished with a fusillado on this. But with the government switching every five minutes between Orozco, Villa, Huerta, Carranza, an’ the jefe-politicos an’ governors slaughtering each other between-whiles, it’s nobody’s business to look after us. We make our little sneaks across the border an’ return in peace an’ quiet. So ‘Viva la revolucion!’ That reminds me—where’re you heading, Bull?”

“Livingstone *rancho* on the Little Stoney.”

“Say, but that’s horses! Don’t they run ‘em into the corrals at night?”

The big rustler nodded. “All the easier to find, an’ after you once get them moving it don’t take three days to run ‘em over the line. Besides, Don Manuel tol’ me at Las Bocas yesterday that the Carranzistas are needing heavy horses for their artillery over on the Coast. He’ll pay fifty pesos apiece an’ take his chance on a five-thousand-per-cent profit after the old gentleman grabs the presidential chair.” He emphatically concluded, “*Horses, you bet!*”

“Some risky, cutting ‘em out?” Sliver, too, looked dubious.

“Not as much as you think. Did you never have some flea-bitten son of a gun rub down the bars while you slept plumb up against the corral an’ wake next morning to find nary a head in sight? A horse don’t like a corral any more’n a man loves prison. The bars once down, you kin trust ‘em to soft-foot it out to the open. Why”—his grin at the remembrance set a flash of good-nature in his hard face—“why, I’ve seen an old nag look back at a colt that kicked the bars passing out just like he was saying, ‘You damn young fool! now you’ve upset the soup!’ Leave it to me. I’ll work ‘em out on foot while you sit tight an’ hold my horse. Moon’s going to be jest about right, too. She’ll be taking her first peep about the time we get ‘em out in the clear. It’ll be a pipe, then, to saddle up fresh beasts an’ shoot ‘em over the border.”

The *rancho* for which they were heading lay still two hours away, and while they rode the *sahuaro* pillars gave place in turn to *piñon* and juniper thinly strewn over rolling grassland. Before night settled down, the wandering cattle-trails they had followed drew into the twin ruts of a wagon-road. Their going was timed by the moon. But it stole out from behind a low hill a trifle ahead of schedule. By its first dim radiance they made out the dark mass of the *rancho* buildings, house, corrals, stables, in a swale between two hills. It was, however, dark enough for their purpose, and, leaving his horse with the others, Bull went forward on foot.

It was nervous work, sitting there watching the buildings take form under the waxing moon. Their strained senses took every sound, smell, and sight; a dog’s bark, click of horns as a steer

scratched his forehead on the top rail of a corral, the impatient pawing of a horse, the warm cattle odor that floated on the night breeze. Dim, uncertain shapes seemed to form and fade in the nearer gloom. They were nervous as cats by the time a gun suddenly flashed under the dark porch of the house.

The croupy cough of a child plus the nervous fears of its mother did it. Not that the woman saw Bull when she drew the curtain and peeped out. But these days, with a new revolution breaking, as Jake put it, "every five minutes" over the border, the American ranchers along the international line slept always with an eye open for possible raids. So far as Bull was concerned, her whisper was just as fatal as though she had seen him.

"Pa! get up! I'm sure there's some one out there!"

Perhaps the rancher did see. Educated in objects moving through dusk, his plainsman's eye may have noticed movement. Or perhaps he shot on chance. In either case he was quickly informed by the roar and clatter of hoofs that followed, for though Bull did not expect, now, to get away with a single head, pursuit would be blinded and divided by stampeding the beasts. Dropping the bars while the gun continued to flash its staccato warnings, he started the animals out, leaped on the back of one; as soon as it cleared the huddle, went shooting down the trail, guiding the animal with the swing of his body.

Unfortunately, the whim that governs a stampede moved the other beasts to follow. So when the rancher and his men—in shirts and trousers, but not one without a gun—pulled their mounts out of the stables, their pursuit was guided by the distant thunder of hoofs. Neither did Bull's quick change to his own beast divert the stampede. When the Three galloped on, the scared animals still followed like dogs at their heels.

"First time my prey ever chased me!" Jake laughed harshly, looking back at the band. "If old man Livingstone don't follow too close we'll get 'em yet!"

Bull shook his head. "Not with the moon sailing up to her full an' the critters leaving a trail broad as a pike road. Listen to that!"

A sharp report punctuated the thud and clatter of the stampede; the first shot of a fusillade that grew hotter and hotter as the horses trailed off right and left, leaving the rustlers more exposed. As yet they were running in the shadow of a long hill where the light was poor. But half a mile ahead lay an open plain unbroken by cover.

"They'll shoot the lights outen us there!" Sliver prophesied. "Better make a stan' while we can."

"They *are* getting sassy," Jake agreed, as a bullet whizzed under his chin. "We'll have to teach 'em this ain't no turkey-shoot."

The deciding word came, as usual, from Bull. "They'd surround an' hold us for the posse. You ride on while I check 'em. If they try to round me it'll be up to you to take 'em from the rear. Get behind so's they don't see me turn."

In the faint light his sudden whirl behind a bush went unnoticed. He had already unshipped his rifle from the saddle slings, and through the upper branches he took careful aim. A hundred yards away Livingstone was coming at full gallop, about the same distance ahead of his men. Bull waited till he could see the old fellow's hair, silver in the moonlight, framing his angry red face. Once the sights lined up level between the eyes. But muttering, "I ked sure spoil your beauty, but—I won't," Bull lowered them to the horse's chest and fired.

With the report the beast plunged forward, head and neck doubled under, throwing his rider out in the clear. Though badly shaken, the old man was up the next instant, and as he ran for cover his sudden change of expression from anger to flustered surprise drew from Bull a grin.

"Teach you not to get so fresh."

At the crack of the rifle the others had also darted for cover, and as their guns began to spit and flash from the chaparral along the hillside, Bull laughed outright. "Not a rifle among 'em. Easy going! Hasta luego, señores! Some other time!"

One or two bolder spirits emerged from the chaparral as Bull rode out in the open. But they scuttled back like rabbits as he swung in the saddle with leveled rifle. Though they followed till the boundary pillar stood out, two hours later, a shining silver shaft under the brilliant moon, they preserved always a safe distance, and Bull denied Sliver's suggestion to "chuck a volley" into the dim mass.

"Kain't you leave your Uncle Samuel sleep? He ain't a-going to be moved off his 'watchful waiting' by the loss of no horse, but if we go to killing folks, he's sure going to take time to catch our goat b'twixt revolutions."

"To-morrow morning," Jake commented, grinning, "the morning papers will be running

scareheads an inch high about the 'Latest Border Outrage!' Meanwhile we'll be jogging home—" —without the horses," Bull dryly finished.

"An' Rosa, back at the roost," Sliver added, "howling for coffee an' flour an' grease."

Which reminded Jake of their former argument: "I told you we orter ha' bought more whisky. Nothing left but to ride back to Las Bocas an' hit Don Miguel for credit."

III: EVEN A RUSTLER HAS HIS TROUBLES

Las Bocas was slowly stewing in its native filth when the Three sighted it again at noon next day.

In all the world nothing reflects its environment more faithfully than a Mexican town. Southward, the great cities of Mexico and Guadalajara testify with their stately cathedrals, ornate public buildings, theaters, parks, and plazas, the flowering *patios* of lovely and luxurious homes, first to the richness of the central Mexican plateau, secondly to the fact that in normal times all the wealth of the republic drains to them. Oppositely, the northern towns with their squalid adobe streets, overrun with a plague of dirty children, dogs, vultures, pigs; desiccated by fierce heat, drowned by torrential rains; these in their place and turn are eminently characteristic of the arid desert. Save that it was a little smaller, a little dirtier, perhaps a little richer in the variety of its stenches, Las Bocas might serve as the type of all Mexican frontier towns.

As the wind blew their way, the Three smelled it from afar. But usage breeds indifference even to evil odors. If not actually homesome, the fetor bespoke a possible drink.

A quarter mile before entering the town they crossed the *arroyo* that gave it drink. Its waters also furnished an open-air laundry for two brown girls who knelt by its edge, pounding their soiled linen on flat boulders. These days of rampant revolution, a good girl had needs be careful, and at sight of the Three, dusty, unkempt, bearded, and gaunt from tire and travel, *gringos* at that, the two leaped up and fled toward the town.

Grinning at their fright, Bull and Sliver would have ridden on, but Jake, who never missed a trick, reined in his beast and began to examine the laundry with the eye of a connoisseur. Though the remainder of her be clad in rags, the humblest *peona* will have her lace petticoat, and the dozen or so pieces that were already spread out to dry on the neighboring bushes were really very fine.

"D'you allow to turn lady's maid?" Sliver spoke, as Jake bent to stuff the lingerie into his saddle-bags.

"Not till Rosa's had the refusal of it. This orter keep her satisfied for at least a month."

Grinning, the pair of rascals spurred their jaded beasts and overtook Bull as he entered a narrow gut of a street that followed the meanderings of the original cow-path to the *jefe's* house, a plastered adobe, limewashed in purple and gold, that faced the inevitable military barracks across a sorry attempt at a plaza.

If the small traders and artisans who constituted the bulk of the population had been addicted to such flights of imagination, they might have pictured the *jefatura's* yawning gates as a huge gullet through which, in normal times, their substance drained in taxes, fines, and imposts to Mexico City, the nation's stomach, there to be consumed by a hungry tribe of official hookworms. Now, of course, it was being deflected into the private pocket of the dominant revolutionary chief. Lacking the imagination, they cursed beneath their breath and waited patiently till the next revolution should bring a new tyrant to avenge them on the present oppressor.

The latest incumbent was at lunch under the peppertree in the *patio* when the Three dismounted at the gates. Fat and sleek and brown, his generally gross appearance was accentuated by pouched beady eyes, waxed mustache, unhealthy, erupted skin. As he sat there, shoveling in *frijoles* and *chile*, even a *peon's* slack imaginings could have easily established a resemblance—if not between him and a hookworm, at least, to some greedy parasite. The irritability, blind individualism, offensive conceit, treachery, too common to Mexicans, lay hidden

under the usual veneer of Spanish courtesy. The embraces, backpattings, effusive greetings with which he welcomed the Three would have graced the reception of a favorite son.

"Enter, amigos!" His welcome buzzed through the *patio*. "Sit down and eat. Afterward we shall look over the horses. You have bestowed them—where?"

But when he learned of their failure, the scorpion showed through the glaze of courtesy like a fly in amber. "*Carambar-r-r-aa*, señores!" His head wagged in a nasty way. "I had counted on the horses—to save your alive. On my desk lies a requisition from your gringo border police, demanding your bodies. Que desgracia!" The spite that scintillated in his beads of eyes gave his words sinister significance. "One would dislike to do it, if 'twere only through hate of your Government. But one has to account to his chiefs. Already they have inquired for you, and always I made answer, 'These are good hombres, useful to our cause.' But deeds count more than words. Horses for their artilleria would have proved your worth. But now—" a second nasty wag told that their failure left them as other *gringos*, to be despised, hated, persecuted. Having given the impression time to sink in, he suggested, "But there must be others? You will try again?"

"No use." Bull's gloom emphasized the denial. "This is the second time in a month that we've been chased across the border. They're looking for us all along the line."

"Si? Then must you go elsewhere. What of"—pausing, he looked cautiously around—"what of this side? In central Chihuahua there are many horse-ranchos, gringo ranches with fine blooded stock."

"But—"

The *jefe's* shrug anticipated the objection. "Si, si! 'tis Mexico. That is what I have always told my chief—'these hombres bother only the gringo pigs.'" With a covert grin at the safe insult, he continued, "But a gringo is a gringo, whether here or in your United States. If they be despoiled, we shall not shed many tears. There will be a complaint, of course, to and from your Government, and much writing between departments. In the mean time we have the horses. So—"

"But that's Valles's country, isn't it?" Jake put in. "He's a bad hombre to fool with!"

The *jefe* turned on him his evil grin. "What if the gringo ranchers had caught you last night? Hanging, amigo, is a dog's death. I would prefer the fusilado of Valles's men."

"What if he kicks to your people? Puts in a claim for our heads? You're working together, ain't you?"

Once again the *jefe* looked around. "Listen, amigos! Between friends one may show the truth. Already there is a cloud, a little cloud, no bigger than a child's hand arisen between us and Valles. If the horses are taken from a gringo *ranchito* in Valles's country, my chiefs will be the better pleased. What they have Valles cannot get in the days when the cloud grows big and black and bursts."

Sliver, who understood more Spanish than he could speak, here nudged Bull. "Ask him if he'll grub-stake the deal."

"Ask nothing!" Bull's hot eyes shot brown fire. "You heard him rubbing it into us, didn't you? If it wasn't that we need him I'd wring the little brown adder's neck." He went on, suavely, in Spanish, "My amigo questions me of the price. It will be the same—fifty pesos apiece, señor?"

Nodding, the *jefe* glanced impatiently back at his lunch. He appeared to have forgotten his invitation. Pleading an engagement, he bowed them out through the gates, then returned to his gorging while, hungrier, and even still thirstier, the Three rode down the street.

Usually they were not averse to an exchange of glances, or a flirtation—if the *hombre* was not in sight—with the brown girls who watched them from their doorways. But now their glances sought only the *cantinas*, whose open bars displayed a tempting array of bottles. While they looked their progress grew constantly slower, finally stopped in front of one whose owner was taking his *siesta* stretched out on the bar.

Jake looked from the sleeper to his companions, then at the bottles of anisette and *tequila* on the rough wooden shelves. "If he was drunk it 'u'd be easy—" As the Mexican disposed of the doubt, just then, by opening one excessively sober eye, Jake desperately concluded, "Say, kain't we raise the price among us?"

Bull tapped his empty pockets.

Sliver mourned, "All I've got is a Confederate five some one slipped me during my last toot in El Paso. I've carried it sence for a lucky piece."

"An' lucky it is!" Jake extended an eager hand. "After this revolutionary currency that's run off by the million on a newspaper press, these greasers are crazy for gringo bills. What if it has got Jeff Davis's picter on it? This fellow don't know him from Abe Lincoln. All gringo bills look alike to him. He'll never know the diff."

Neither did he. The note, when thrown with elaborate carelessness on the bar, brought in exchange at current ratios thirty-two *pesos* and some *centavos*, along with three stiff *copas*. Deceived by the size of the roll, the Three now proceeded to order from the *tienda* behind the bar coffee, sugar, maize, the grease of Rosa's desire, and other necessaries. With half a dozen bottles of *tequila*, it made a goodly pile on the counter, but the offer of the roll brought a second lesson in finance—to wit, that cheap money buys few goods. After segregating the *tequila* from the groceries, the merchant explained with a bow and shrug that the thirty-two dollars and some *centavos* aforesaid represented the value of either.

From the groceries, the glances of the Three passed to the *tequila*; then, with one accord, their hands went out and each closed on the neck of a bottle. They were already outside when, looking back, Sliver happened to catch the merchant's eye.

He grinned, answering Sliver's wink. "Si, señores, this time you shall drink with me."

That which followed was quite accidental. While the Mexican was setting out three glasses, Jake drew a pack of cards from his pocket and began to throw two kings and an ace in the "three-card trick." So deftly he did it that Sliver, who was really trying to pick the ace, failed half a dozen times in succession. Their backs being turned, only Bull noticed the Mexican's interest in the performance. Fascinated, he watched the flying cards.

"Looks easy, don't it?" Bull suggested. "Here, Sliver, give this hombre a chance."

Of course he succeeded, and, being Mexican, his conceit prodded him on to try again. He could do it! He'd bet his *sombrero*, his horse, his store, that he could do it every time! The Three being possessed of no other stake, he finally wagered the pile of goods, which still stood on the counter, against their bottles of *tequila*—and lost! In the course of the next half-hour, being judiciously led on by occasional winnings, there were added to the groceries six other bottles, the original thirty-two *pesos* and some *centavos*, a bolt of lace and linen for Rosa; but for a large, greasy, and infuriated brown woman who charged them suddenly from the rear of the store he would undoubtedly have lost his all. Further acquisitions being balked by her unreasonable interference with the course of nature as applied to fools, the Three packed their winnings in the saddle-bags and rode on their way.

As a rule a certain fairness is inherent in the externally masculine. Even a Mexican expects to pay his losings, and, of his own impulse, the *comerciante* would probably have let things go with a shrug. But not so his woman! The eternally feminine is ever a poor loser—perhaps because she has usually no hand in the game—and as the Three rode off she let loose an outcry that brought a gendarme running from around the corner.

"It is that honest Mexicans are robbed by gringo thieves while thou art lost in a siesta!" she assailed him. "After them, lazy one, and recover our goods!"

By her violence she might have lost her case. With an answer that was quite ungentlemanly the gendarme had already turned to go, when the two girls whom Jake had robbed of their lingerie came tearing up the street and added their outcries to the woman's clamor. And now the Three were surely out of luck. It chanced that for a week past this very gendarme had been making sheep's eyes at the larger of the two girls, and now the saints had sent this chance for him to gain her favor.

"They stole thy—" Delicacy gave him pause; then, his natural indignation increased by the nature of the robbery, he hot-footed it up the street and overtook the Three.

Ordinarily the arrest would have been accomplished with lofty Spanish punctilio, but in his heat the gendarme allowed his zeal to exceed his discretion, and thereby invited disaster. For as he seized Bull's bridle, the rustler reached over, spread his huge hand flat over the man's angry face, and sent him toppling backward into the kennel. He was up, the next second, long gun in hand. But in that second Jake's bleak eyes squinted along his gun, Sliver had him covered, Bull's rifle was aimed from the hip.

To give the Mexican policeman his due, he does not easily give up. If one man cannot bring in a prisoner, ten may. If they fail, perhaps a company can—or a regiment. The man's shrill whistle was really far more dangerous than his absurd long gun. Instantly it was taken up on the next street and the next; went echoing through the town till it finally brought from the *carcel* a squad on the run.

By that time the Three had backed up against a wall and stood with rifles leveled across the backs of their beasts. Every particle of human kindness, humor, that had showed in their dealings with one another was gone. Jake's long teeth were bared in a wolf grin. Sliver's reckless face had frozen in stone. Bull's head and huge shoulders rose above his breast, his face dark, imperturbable, fierce. Grim, silent, ferocious as trapped wolves, they faced the squad which took

cover while messengers brought an officer and company from the barracks.

Now it was really dangerous. The tragedy that lurks behind all Mexican comedy might break at any moment. In its uniform, that ragged soldiery set forth the history of three revolutions. The silver and gray of Porfirio Diaz's famed *rurales*, the blue and red stripes or fatigue linen of the Federal Army, even the *charro* suits of Orozco's Colorados, were all represented. But in spite of their motley the men were all fighters, tried by years of guerrilla warfare. Their dark brown faces showed only eager savagery. If it had depended on them, tragedy would have burst forth there and then. But the word had to come from the officer, who found himself looking down the barrels of three leveled rifles. It took him just five seconds to make up his mind on this fundamental truth—whoever else survived, he would die. The game was not worth the candle! Very politely he addressed Bull.

"Did I not see you, señor, at the jefatura just now?"

With Bull's nod tragedy resolved into comedy. Swinging round on the *comerciante* and his woman, the officer pronounced on their complaint. "They that gamble must expect to lose. Off, fool! before I throw thee in carcel."

Having driven in the moral with the flat of his saber across the merchant's back, he next took up the complaint of the girls. "How know ye that these be they that stole your garments? Only that they passed while you were at the wash? Then back, doves, to your cotes! These be friends of the jefe and no stealers of women's fripperies."

Stiffly saluting the Three, he marched his ragged soldiery away.

Five seconds thereafter the Three were again on their way—to the *cantina* where they usually put up.

"All we've gotter do now," Sliver chuckled as they rode on down the street, "is to rope a stray calf or a pig on the way home, an' Rosa'll be fixed for a month."

But, alas for Rosa! After they had stabled their horses and eaten, followed one of those debauches that occur when men with natural "thirsts" turn loose after a period of deprivation. During its course they spent first the thirty-two *pesos* and some *centavos*, drank up their own *tequila*, finally bartered the groceries to buy still more liquor for the rabble of *peones* and brown girls that flocked to the *cantina* like buzzards to carrion.

The "drunk" went through the customary stages from boisterous conviviality, singing, loud boasting, quarreling, fighting. Three times Sliver and Jake locked and rolled on the floor, tearing like tigers at each other's throats, nor let go till pried apart by Bull. Worse, because really terrible, was it to see the giant rustler, after the other two had lapsed into sottish sleep, sitting with his broad shoulders against the adobe wall, huge hands squeezing an imaginary throat, while his drink-crazed brain rehearsed the details of some past tragedy. Shortly thereafter he also rolled over in drunken sleep.

As they lay there, crumpled, limp, breathing stertorously, there was nothing edifying in the spectacle. It would be unfair to hint at a likeness between them and the swine that snored in the kennel outside; unfair to the swine, which never descend through drink from their natural estate. Drunkards and outlaws, they were probably as low, at that moment, as human beings ever go. Yet when they awoke, *sans* groceries, *sans* *tequila*, *sans* money, but plus three splitting headaches, they faced the situation with saving humor.

"Tough on Rosa," Jake said, with a rueful grin.

"If she's still there," Sliver doubted. "An' I'll bet a peppercorn to a toothpick she ain't."

"Chihuahua, now, or starve," Bull succinctly summed the situation. He added, grinning, "Anyway, we'll travel light."

IV: THE TRAIL OF THE COLORADOS

Five days later the Three looked down from a mountain shoulder upon the first and greatest of the Chihuahua *haciendas*.

Far beyond the limit of sight its level ranges ran. From the crest of the blue range in the

distance, their glances would still have traveled on less than half-way to the eastern limit. The Mexican Central train, then running southward in the trough between two ranges thirty miles away, had been speeding all day across lands whose ownership was vested in one man. The half-score of towns, hundred villages, in its environs were there only by his consent. Until the bursting of the first revolution had sent him flying into El Paso with other northern overlords, their thousands of inhabitants, shopkeepers, muleteers, artisans, *peones*, drew by his grace the very breath of life.

"Seems foolish even to think that one could own all that."

Jake's glance wandered over the desert that laid off its shining distances to the horizon. Here and there flat-topped *mesas* uplifted their chrome and vermilion façades from the dead flat. Very far away, one huge fellow raised phantom battlements from the ghostly waters of a mirage. It was altogether unlike their own Sonora desert. In place of the familiar seas of sage, cactus and spiky yucca were thinly strewn over a land whose unmitigated drought was accentuated by the parched windings of waterless streams. Gold! gold! its shimmer was everywhere; burned in the sand; in the dust whorls that danced with the little winds; in the air that flowed like wine around the royal purple of distant ranges. Lifeless, without sign of human tenancy, its solitary reaches were infinite as the ocean. Yet man and his works were not so very far away. Certain black specks that hovered or wheeled against the blue of the sky a mile away served as a sign-post.

"Vultures," Sliver pointed. "Must be something dead over there."

"Or dying?" Bull questioned. "Otherwise the birds 'u'd settle. These days it's as likely to be human as horse. We might ride down that way."

And human it proved to be when, half an hour later, they rode out of encircling cactus into an open space around a giant *sahuaro*. Head fallen back so that his face was turned up to the torrid sun; relaxed, limp as a rag, a man hung by his wrists that had been tied at the full stretch of his arms around the *sahuaro's* barrel. During the sixty hours he had hung there without food or water the skin had shrunk till it lay like scorched parchment on the bones of his face. In addition to the vultures that hovered above, others hopped or fluttered over the hot sands, or perched, patient as death itself, on the surrounding cactus. Now and then a bolder scavenger hopped upon his shoulder. But a slow roll of the head, sudden hiss of dry breath, would drive it away. At the approach of the Three the evil creatures rose in a black cloud, filling the air with the beat and swish of coffin wings.

"He's white! a gringo!" Bull cried it while he hacked at the cords.

"The poor devil!" Sliver spoke softly as he lifted and laid the poor, limp body on his outspread coat.

While he laved the shrunken face and Bull poured water, drop by drop, on the man's swollen tongue, Jake carefully parted the swollen flesh of the wrists and cut away the cords.

If old man Livingstone, or other of the border ranchers who had suffered through their raids, could have seen them at their merciful work, have noted their gentleness, heard their sympathetic comment, they would probably have refused the evidence of their own eyes. Though still too weak to even raise his head, they brought the man in an hour to the point where he was able, in whispers, to give an account of himself.

He was a miner and his claim lay on a natural bench that jutted out from the sheer wall of a great gulch in the mountains about a mile away. His house, a hut of corrugated iron, stood with a few rough work buildings up there. If he could only get to it, he'd be all right.

And he soon did. Lifted by the others to the saddle in front of Bull and cradled like a child in the rustler's great arms, he scarcely felt the journey. Viewed as he hung on the *sahuaro*, dirty, bruised, shrunken by fever and thirst, he might have been any age. But when laid on his bed, washed, fed with a quick soup compounded by Sliver out of pounded jerky and some pea meal he found on a shelf, he proved to be a typical American miner of middle age—short gray beard, hawk profile, high cheek-bones, eyes blue and hard as agate. By the time they had cooked for themselves—for even if his condition had permitted, it was now too late to go on—he had recovered his voice and told them all.

"It was the 'Colorados' that tied me up. I knew them by the 'red hearts' on the breasts of their charro jackets."

Even up into their far corner of Sonora had penetrated something of the terror associated with the name. Originally the "Colorados" had been Orozco's soldiers. But when dispersed by the collapse of his revolution against Madero they had split up into bands and overrun the northern Mexican states. Because of their frightful cruelties they were shot by the Carranzistas whenever caught. But though the spread of the latter power was driving them farther south, they still made

occasional raids.

"But I was lucky to get off with that," he said, after describing the beating that had preceded the tying-up. "They cut the soles off the feet of two of my *peones*, then drove them, stark-naked, through spiky chollas. When the poor devils fell, exhausted, they beat them to death where they lay on the ground. Surely I was lucky, for if it hadn't been that they thought I had money, and tied me up to make me confess, I'd have got the same. They left me to raid some *rancho*, but swore they'd come back."

Riding in, they had passed the dead *peones*, and, bad man that he was, Jake shuddered at the memory. "But why do you stay here, with that kind of people running loose?"

"Why do I stay?" The miner repeated the question, with heat. "The American consul in Chihuahua is always asking that. Why does any man stay anywhere? Because his living is there. We came here under treaties that guaranteed our rights in the time of Diaz when this country had been at peace for thirty years. Every cent I had was put into this mine, and I'd worked it along to the point where it would pay big capital to come in when that fanatic, Madero, turned hell loose.

"At first we naturally expected that Uncle Sam would look after our rights. But did he? Yes, by ordering us to get out—we that had invested a thousand million dollars in opening up markets for a hundred million dollars' worth a year of his manufactured products. Get out and have it all go up in smoke the minute our backs were turned!

"Luckily for me, I had no women folk to complicate the situation. But most of the others had. We'd thought, of course, that the mistreatment of one American woman would bring intervention, and so did the Mexicans till the thing had been done again and again. Since then—know what that Colorado leader replied when I threatened him with the vengeance of our Government?"

"Your Government!" he sneered. "We have killed your men, we have ravished your women, we have exterminated your brats; will you tell me what else we can do to make your Government fight?"

He concluded, with bitter sadness, "I was brought up to love and revere the flag; to believe that an American citizen was safe wherever it floated. But, men! I've seen it trampled in the mire, spat upon, defiled by filthy *peones*, then spread in mockery over the dead bodies of Americans who believed in its power to save."

In Sonora and on the west coast, so far, foreigners had suffered principally in their goods. But rumors and reports of excesses in the central states had found their way westward; enough of them for the Three to find all the miner had said quite easy of belief.

"It sure puts Uncle Sam in rather a poor light," Jake agreed. "He don't seem a bit like the old fellow that sent General Scott right through to Mexico City."

Bull's big head moved in an emphatic nod through a thick cloud of tobacco smoke. "Looks like the old gent had lost his pep sence he put the Apaches outter the scalping business an' got through spanking Johnny Reb."

Only Sliver, the optimist, stood by the accused. "Jest wait! D'you-all know what's going to happen one o' these days? That same Uncle Sam, he's mighty patient an' he's been handed a heap o' bad counsel; but one of these days he's a-going to get mad. When he does—listen! he's a-going to walk down to the Mexican line an' take a look at it with his nose all crinkled up like he smelled something bad. 'Things ain't quite right here!' he'll say, ca'm an' deliberate, that-a-way. Then he'll stoop an' pick up that line, an' when he sots it down again—it 'ull be south of Panama. Jest you-all wait an' see!"

"Wait? Wait?" the miner sarcastically repeated. "Seems as though I'd heard that before. Wait all you want. As for me—one thing I know. Unless your Uncle Samuel crinkles his nose pretty soon, there'll be darned few of us gringos left to see."

"Why not watch from the other side?"

"Watch hell!" The sudden firing of the hard agate eyes showed that, despite his wounds and torture, his just grievance, sorrow, and indignation over his fellows' wrongs, that despite all the indomitable American spirit, the spirit that dared Indian massacres in the conquest of the plains, the spirit of the Alamo which added Texas and California to the Union, the spirit that preserved the Union itself from disintegration, the fine old spirit of '76, still burned under all. "Watch hell! As I told you, we came here under treaties that guaranteed protection. We have a right to stay, and by God! we're going to stay! To-morrow I'll get together my *peones* and go right to it again; only"—he observed a significant pause—"the next time the Colorados come there'll be a machine-gun trained on 'em from up here on the bench. All I ask is that the Lord sends me the same bunch again."

In this stout frame of mind and recovered sufficiently to move about, the Three left him next morning. Looking back from the mouth of the gorge, they got a last glimpse of him between the towering walls, a solitary figure on the edge of the bench. A wave of the hand and he passed out of their lives—in person, but not in other ways. His was one of the stray figures that stroll casually across the course of a life and, in passing, deflect its course into alien channels. Not for nothing had he suffered torture. That and his talk last night had sown in Bull, at least, a certain leaven; the first fruits whereof showed in the sudden, vicious thump with which he brought his big fist down on the pommel as they rode along.

"I was thinking of what that fellow said las' night," he replied to Jake's questioning look. "To think, after that, we're out to rob our own countrymen for the benefit of a rotten little greaser."

"That's so." Sliver accepted the new point of view with his accustomed alacrity. "Damned if I seen it that way afore."

But Jake, always practical, sterilized this absurd sentimentality with a sudden injection of rustler's sense. "Aw, come off! You fellows may be out for Mexicans, but I'm for myself. We robbed our countrymen on the other side of the line, an' what's wrong with robbing them on this? I kain't see the diff. Business is business; we've gotter eat."

"That's right, too." Sliver caught the sense of it. "We've sure gotter eat."

But Bull's face grew blacker. The Colorado's boast, "We've raped your women, exterminated your brats," had aroused in him instincts older than the race; the instinct that set the gorilla-like caveman with bristling hair, grinning teeth, in the mouth of his cave; that sent the Saxon hind at the throat of the Norse rover; the instinct that has animated the entire line of men through eons of time to rise in defense of the tribal women.

He felt their soul agony, these tribeswomen of his, condemned to become a prey of *peon* bandits; and while the feeling swelled within him, his black brow drew down over narrowed hot eyes. His huge frame quivered with indignation as righteous as ever animated the best of the race in the defense of a common cause. And yet—

Business was business, they had to eat! The feeling left untouched their evil habit of life; compelled no immediate change of plan.

About midway of the afternoon the Three sighted the poles of the Mexican Central Railway, a gray line of sticks running off in the distance. As they drew nearer, a certain dark blur on the embankment resolved into the rusted ironwork of a burned train. The line here ran almost due east to round a mountain spur, and as they followed along it the rack and ruin of three revolutions passed under their eyes.

Linking burned trains, that occurred every few miles, long lines of twisted rails writhed and squirmed in the ditch. The desiccated carcasses of dead horses, small twig crosses that marked the graves of their wild riders, ran continuously with the telegraph poles. Far beyond their view they ran, those twisted rails, wrecks, carcasses, and crosses, for ten thousand miles throughout the ramifications of the *Nacional* railroads, to the uttermost corners of Mexico; and typical of the vast destruction was the burned station they came on at sundown. Topping a black hill that rose abruptly from the plain behind it, a huge wooden cross stood blackly out against the smoldering reds of the evening sky, futile emblem of the simple faith that had relied upon it to save the station.

While the Three sat their horses and gazed at the ruin, a whistle sounded, and out from the north steamed a troop-train, first of a dozen, whose glaring headlights spaced off the dusk which was now falling like a dusty brown blanket over the desert.

As the first rolled past Jake swore softly and Sliver exclaimed in surprise, for never before was seen such a sight. On it were packed some thousand *peon* soldiers, part of Valles's army on its way south to pursue the merry trade that had wrought the prevailing destruction. Unlike any other army, its guns, horses, munitions, and supplies were loaded inside, while the soldiers rode with their women on top of box-cars.

In their motley uniforms, regulation khaki or linen alternating with tight *charro* suits and *peon* cottons, they were exceedingly picturesque, and not a man of them but was belted or bandoliered with at least fifteen pounds of shining brass cartridges.

Under shelters of cottonwood boughs or serapes stretched on poles, their brown women crouched by clay cooking-pots, set over fires built on earthen hearths within a ring of stones; so while the *frijoles* and *chile* simmered and sent forth grateful odors, their lords gambled, smoked, or slept.

Nor did they lack music. On every car careless fellows sat with legs dangling precariously

over the edge, while they chanted in a high nasal drone to the tinkling of a guitar. Ablaze with vivid color, scarlets, violets, blues, yellows of the women's dresses and serapes, wreathed in the faint blue smoke of cooking-fires, the trains flashed out of and passed on into the brown dusk, while the guitar tinkled a subdued minor to their roar and rattle.

As the last rolled by a tall Texan rose alongside a machine-gun that was set up on the car roof and yelled to the Three: "Come on, fellows! We're going to belt hell out of the Federals at Torreon!"

It was the trumpet call of adventure; Adventure, the mistress of men, she who was largely responsible for their "rustlings," investing it, as she did, with the fireglows of romance. Subtract the long rides through hot dusks, sudden swoop on drowsy herds, the thunder of the stampede, the fight, pursuit, take away all this and reduce the business to its essence, plain thievery, and not one of the Three but would have turned from it in disgust.

If the train had stopped—perhaps their lives would have been deflected into those roaring, revolutionary channels that led on to death in the trenches outside Torreon. But it rolled on into the dusk, and as it vanished their eyes went to a light that burst like a golden flower in the window of a hut built of railroad ties. Five minutes thereafter they were in full enjoyment of that hospitality which, such as it is, may be had all over Mexico for "a cigarette and a smile."

While eating they extracted from their host, a simple *peon*, all the information necessary for the horse raid. To avoid "requisitions" payable in revolutionary currency wet from the nearest newspaper press, the *gringos hacendados* had driven their animals into the mountain pastures three-quarters of a day's ride east of the tracks. But omitting the details of the long ride next day over plains where the scant grass ran in sunlit waves ahead of the wind to the horizon, the history of the raid may proceed from the moment the Three sighted the first horses in the hollow of a shallow valley late the following afternoon.

Even at the distance, almost a quarter-mile, they could see the difference in size and condition between them and the common Mexican scrubs. After long study through powerful binoculars that played about the same part in their operations as a "jimmy" in those of a burglar, Bull exclaimed his admiration, "*Some horses!*"

"But—" Jake indicated five Mexicans who were herding the animals at a fast trot down the valley, "we're out of luck."

"Oh, I don't know." Bull handed him the glasses. "See what you make of 'em."

"*Colorados!*" Jake spied at once the dreaded ensign, the red heart on the blue *charro* jacket. "It's the same outfit that tied up the miner, too. Remember how he described the leader? 'About twice as tall as a common Mexican'? That fellow's six-foot-two if he's an inch."

"The gall of him," Sliver snorted. "What do you think o' that? After *our* horses! Well, they 'ain't got 'em yet. We'll jest ride along behind the hill here an'—"

But Jake, who was still gazing through the glasses, dryly interrupted. "No, you bet he hain't. I've a hunch that the gent coming over the hill, there, is the man that owns 'em."

As yet the new-comer was unseen by the Colorados, and as, without pause, he raced after them down the slope, Bull growled his admiration. "He's sure got his nerve."

"Mebbe he don't know they're Colorados."

Perhaps Sliver was right. As the raiders' backs were turned, the daring rider could not see the dreaded ensign. Or he may have thought that the marauders would fly at the sight of him; intended to afford them opportunity when he pulled his gun and fired.

"Here comes his army!" Jake croaked.

"Only a lad."

Bull, who now held the glasses, made out both the youthful face, white with anxiety, and the lithe swing of the young body in rhythm with the galloping horse. The anxiety was justified, for as he also raced on down the slope the Colorados swung in their saddles, let go a volley from their short carbines, and dropped the first rider and horse in his tracks. At the same moment the lad's hat, a soft slouch, blew off, loosing a cloud of fair hair on the breeze. If it had not, a shrill scream would still have proclaimed the rider's sex.

"Hell!" Bull's astonishment vented itself in a sudden oath. "It's a woman! a white girl—dressed in man's riding-togs!"

V: THE "HACIENDA OF THE TREES"

Strange is fate! From two points, perhaps the width of the world apart, two lives begin their flow, and though their mutual currents be deflected hither and thither by the winds of fortune, tides of chance, yet will they eventually meet, coalesce, and roll on together like two drops that join running in down a window-pane.

Now between John Carleton, owner of some hundred thousand broad acres, and the three rapsallions of Las Bocas the only possible relation would appear to be that which could be established by a well-oiled gun. Between them and Lee Carleton, his pretty daughter, any relation whatever would appear still more foreign. Yet—but let it suffice, for the present, that just about the time the Three had gained almost to the *hacienda* Carleton and his daughter had reined in their horses on the crest of a grassy knoll that overlooked the buildings.

A long pause, during which neither spoke, gives time for her portrait. Rather tall for a girl and slender without thinness, her fine, erect shoulders and the lines of her lithe body lost nothing by her costume; riding-breeches of military cord, yellow knee-boots, man's cambric shirt with a negligée collar turned down at the neck. Her features were small and delicately cut; the nose piquant, slightly *retroussé*. Her eyes, large and brown and widely placed under a low broad brow, vividly contrasted with her fair skin and tawny hair. The face, as a whole, was wonderfully mobile and expressive, almost molten in its swift response to lively emotion. Just now, while she sat on gaze, it expressed that curious yearning, half pathetic, that is born of deep feeling.

"Oh, dad, isn't it beautiful!"

The sweep of her small hand took in the range rolling in long sunlit billows; but her eyes were on the *hacienda*—*Hacienda de los Arboles*, named in the sonorous Spanish after the huge cottonwoods that lent it pleasant shade.

Built in a great square, its massive walls, a yard thick and twice the height of a man, formed the back wall of the stables, adobe cottages, storehouses, and granaries on the inner side. It also lent one corner to the house which rose above it to a second story. Pierced for musketry, with a watch-tower rising above its iron-studded gates, it was, in the old days, a real fort. Besides the long row that followed the meanderings of a dry water-course across the landscape, a cluster of giant cottonwoods raised their glossy heads within the compound, shading with checkered leafage the watering wells and house. Set amidst growing fields of corn and wheat at the foot of a range that loomed in violet, crimson, or gold, according to the hour, it was as pleasant a place as ever a man looked upon and called his home.

Carleton smiled as she added, "I'd hate to have been brought up in El Paso or any other prosy American city."

He might have replied that there were American cities she might find less prosy than El Paso. But he was well content to have her think as she did.

His own gaze, overlooking the prospect, expressed the pride of accomplishment with which men survey their completed work; nor was his satisfaction less because the buildings themselves were not of his creation. Coming here, sixteen years ago, with a nest-egg of two or three thousand dollars, he had leased and let, bought and sold with Yankee shrewdness; added acre to acre, flock to flock, until, at last, he was in position to buy Los Arboles from a "land-poor" Spanish owner.

To a man without imagination the fact that its foundations had been laid almost four centuries ago by one of Cortés's *conquistadores* might have meant little. With Carleton it counted more than its broad acreage. From a trove of old papers left by the former owner he had gathered many a story of siege and battle, scandal and intrigue, consummated within its massive walls. Instead of fairy-tales, he had told these to Lee during her childhood, so that medieval atmosphere had penetrated her very being.

They seldom overlooked the *hacienda*, as now, without making some observations anent its past. As in some vivid pageant, they saw the old Dons, their *señoras*, *señoritas*, savage brown retainers, in the midst of their fighting, working, loving, praying. By self-adoption, as it were, Carleton, at least, had allied himself with them, had come to think of himself as belonging to the family.

"Great old fellows they were!" Though he spoke musingly, now, without connection, she instantly caught his meaning, knew he was harking back. "Great old chaps! I was looking into one of our land titles the other day, and the records read in princely fashion. 'Between the rivers

such and such, of a width that a man may ride in one day,' that was a favorite method of establishing boundaries. No paring of land like cheese rinds; everything done by wholesale; no haggling over a few square leagues."

"And here comes one of them." Lee pointed her quirt at a horseman who had just topped the opposite rise. "Doesn't he look it?"

Surely he did. The *charro* suit of soft tanned deerskin with its *bolero* jacket and tight pantaloons braided or laced with silver; the lithe figure under the suit; dark, handsome face, great Spanish eyes that burned in the dusk of a gold-laced *sombrero*; the fine horse and Mexican saddle heavily chased in solid silver; the gold-hilted *machete* in its saddle sheath under the rider's leg, even the rope *riata* coiled around the solid silver pommel, horse, rider, and trappings belonged in that pageant of the past.

"It is Ramon Icarza," Carleton nodded. "He hasn't been here for a long time." This he repeated in Spanish when the young man rode up.

"Attending to the herds and the horses, señor. As with you, the most of our *peones* have run away to the wars. We have left only a few *ancianos* too feeble and stiff to be of much service. Still, with the aid of the women we manage. That last requisition for the"—his shrug was eloquent in its disdain—"cause. You paid it?"

"Had to—or be confiscated." With a grin comical in its mixture of amusement and anger, Carleton went on, "I raked up five thousand pesos of Valles's money and took it to him myself. And what do you think he said? 'I don't want that stuff. I can print off a million in a minute. You must pay me in gold.'"

Perhaps because humor has no place in the primitive psychology of his race, Ramon received the news with a black frown. "The devil take him! Yet you Americans are better treated than we, his countrymen. With us, he takes all. Those poor Chihuahua comerciantes!" His hands and eyebrows testified to Valles's scandalous treatment of the merchants. "First he demands a contribution to the *cause*. Those who refuse are foolish, for first he shoots them as traitors, then confiscates their goods. But the poor devils who contribute, see you, fare little better; for with the money he runs off a newspaper press he buys up the goods they have left. In the old days we used to curse the locusts, señor; but they, at least, left us our beasts and lands. Who would have thought, four years ago, that you and the señorita here and my venerable father would be reduced to become herders of cattle?"

"Oh, but it's lots of fun!" Lee's happy laugh bespoke sincerity. "I love it out here. They will never be able to get me back in the house. And that reminds me that we're almost due there for lunch."

"You'll stay, of course, Ramon?" Pointing to a couple of mares with foals they had brought in from a distant part of the range, Carleton added, "There's still another over in the next valley. If you will take these along, I'll get her."

Left to themselves, the young man and girl headed the mares toward the *hacienda*, riding sufficiently in rear to check the sudden, aimless boltings of the foals. The helplessness of the little creatures touched the girl's maternal instinct, and though their stilts of legs, wabby knees, long necks, and big heads were badly out of drawing, she exclaimed like a true mother over their beauty.

"Oh, aren't they pretty!"

Ramon agreed—as he would had she called upon him to admire a Gila monster. Not that he had always followed her lead. Close neighbors—that is, as neighboring goes in range countries where distance is reckoned by the hundred miles—their childhood had compassed more than the usual number of squabbles. Until the dawn of masculine instinct had bound him slave to her budding beauty, they had upset the peace and dignity of many a ceremonial visit by fighting like cat and dog. Lee knew, of course, his mother and sister, and not until she had extracted the last iota of family gossip did she bestow a sisterly inspection on himself and clothes. Having passed favorably on the material, fit, and trimmings, she reached for his *sombrero*.

"You are quite the hacendado, now, Ramon, in that magnificent hat. Let me look at it. What a beauty!"

While she turned and twisted it, fingered the rich gold braid, examined it with head slightly askew like a pretty bird, the natural glow intensified in Ramon's big dark eyes; a wave of color flowed through the gold of his skin. His mouth—too red and womanish for Anglo-Saxon standards—drew into a tender smile.

According to the cañons of fiction, this was wrong. A man with a black or brown skin must reserve his admiration for women of his race. Yet, with singular disregard, for writer's law,

Nature continued to weave for Ramon her potent spells. The sunshine snared in Lee's hair, rose blush of her skin, her womanly contours, the fine molding of her limbs, the sweetness of youth, all the witcheries of form and color with which Nature lures her creatures to their matings, affected the lad just as powerfully as if he had been born north of the Rio Grande.

On her part Lee ought to have resented his admiration. But here, again, Nature utterly ignored "best seller" conventions. Brought up among Mexicans, counting Ramon's sister her best friend, Lee felt no racial prejudice. Wherefore, like any other young girl possessed of normal health and spirits, she made the most of the situation. After sufficiently admiring the hat, she tried it on.

"How does it look?"

As she faced him, saucily smiling from under the enormous brim, there was no mistaking the "dare." Whether or no the custom obtains in Mexico, Ramon caught the implication.

"Pretty enough to—kiss!"

With the word he reached swiftly for her neck, but caught only empty air. Ducking with a touch of the spur, she shot from under his hand.

The next second he was after her. Along the shallow valley for a half-mile she led, then, whirling just as he rode alongside, she shot back along the ridge. At the end he overtook her, and, anticipating her whirl, caught her bridle rein. Leaning back, however, flat on her beast's back, laughing and panting, she was still out of his reach; and when he began to travel, hand over hand, along the bridle, she leaped down on the opposite side and dodged behind a lone *sahuaro*.

Sure of her now, he followed. But, dodging like a hare around the *sahuaro*, she came racing back for the horses; might possibly have gained them and made good her escape, if, glancing back over her shoulder, she had not seen Ramon stumble, stop, then clasp his right ankle.

"Oh, is it sprained?" she cried, running back. Then, as, reaching suddenly, he caught her, she burst out, "Cheat! oh, you miserable cheat!"

That all is fair in love and war, however, goes in all languages, and while she punctuated the struggle with customary objections whereby young maids enhance the value of a kiss, there was no anger in her protests. Wrestling her back and down, he got, at last, the laughing face upturned in the hollow of his arm; had almost reached her lips, when, with force that sent Lee to the ground, he was seized and thrown violently against the horse.

In the excitement of the chase they had completely forgotten Carleton, who had viewed its beginnings from the opposite ridge. By self-adoption he had almost, as before said, identified himself with the Spanish strain that had flowed for centuries through the *patios* and compound of Los Arboles. He had even come to think in Spanish; in custom and manner was almost Mexican. But in moments of anger habit gives place to instinct. The instinct that first formed and later preserved the tribe, pride of race, overpowered friendship. In one second the young Mexican, whom he had regarded for years almost as a son, was transmuted into the despised "greaser" of the border.

"You—you—" Choking with anger, eyes bits of blue flame, he strode at Ramon, fist bunched to strike.

But the blow did not fall, for, scrambling up again, Lee seized his arm from behind. "Oh, dad! dad!" Despite his struggles, she clung like a cat, defeating his efforts to shake her off. "Oh, dad! It was only a bit of fun! all my fault! I put on his hat! Please don't!"

If the young fellow had flinched, perhaps Carleton would have struck. But, head erect, he quietly waited, and presently Carleton ceased struggling.

"All right! I'll let him go—this time. But, remember"—bringing his clenched fist in a heat of passion into the palm of the other hand, he glared at the young man—"remember! when this girl is kissed—it will be by a man of her own breed. Get off my land!" After helping Lee to mount, he vaulted into his own saddle and rode away, driving the mares and foals before them.

In accordance with before-mentioned precedents, Ramon ought to have folded his arms and hissed a threat through gritted teeth. Instead, he stood very quietly, his face less angry than sad, watching them go. His little nod, in its firmness, would have become any young American; went very well with his thought.

"We shall see."

Mounting, he rode away to the northward, and not till he had covered many miles did he rein in his beast, so suddenly that it fell back on its haunches. His dark face expressed vexation mixed with alarm. "Maldito! I forgot to warn them that Colorados had been seen east of the railroad. I must go back."

On their part, Lee and her father rode on toward the *hacienda*. Though he glanced at her

from time to time, it was always furtively, for with a man's dislike of scenes he made no reference to that which had just passed. Nevertheless, it filled his mind. Man-like, he had watched her develop into womanhood with scarcely a thought for her future. If he had given the subject any consideration he would probably have concluded that, sooner or later, she would choose a suitable mate from the hundreds of American miners, railroad men, ranchers, and engineers that had swarmed in the state of Chihuahua before the revolution.

But with the clear vision of after sight he now saw that he had unconsciously depended on the race pride which had just manifested itself in himself to prevent her from contracting a mésalliance. Now, with consternation, he faced the truth that racial pride is masculine; contrary to both the feminine instinct and nature's scheme of things.

"I was a fool!" he berated himself. "A damned fool! She will have to go north—live in the States for a while."

These and similar thoughts were whirling through his mind when they came on a band of his horses at pasture under charge of an *anciano*, a withered old *peon*, whose age and infirmities had estopped him from joining the exodus to the wars. After cautioning the old fellow not to allow the animals to stray too far, Carleton plunged again into deep meditation.

Had he not been thus preoccupied he would probably have long ago discovered the five horsemen who were following at a distance, using the natural cover afforded by the rolling land; for he always rode with a powerful binocular in his holster, and often swept with it the prospect. Several times the glass would have shown him a row of heads behind the next ridge in rear. As it was, he had ridden to the crest of the rise from which they had looked down on the *hacienda* before habit asserted itself. He had no sooner leveled the glasses than an exclamation burst from his lips. "My God!"

"What is it, dad?" Lee swung in her saddle, looking back at him.

"Raiders! They are attacking Francisco! He has nothing but his staff! He's fighting them like an old lion! My God, they're chopping him with their machetes." It came out of him in staccato phrases. "Race in and send out Juan, Lerdo, and Prudencia with rifles! Stay there! Don't dare to follow!"

Digging in his spurs, he galloped away. For a moment the girl hesitated. Her eyes went to the *hacienda*, still half a mile away, then back to her father racing madly down the slope. There was no time to go for help! Loosening the pistol in her holster, she drove in her spurs and galloped after.

From Carleton's first appearance till the girl screamed all had passed so quickly that the Three could only sit and gape. From their original intent to rob Carleton it was a far cry to the reconstructed impulse to succor and save him, and it speaks well for them that they accomplished the revolution as soon as they did.

The scream had not passed unnoticed by the Colorados. The leader, who had turned to ride on, swung his beast, looked, then, as the girl dropped from the saddle to her knees beside the wounded man, drove in his spurs and galloped toward her. Heedless of her own danger, Lee was trying to stanch with her handkerchief the bloodflow from Carleton's chest, so lost in her agonized grief that she did not look up till the Colorado leaped down and seized her.

In this world there are savages who would have respected, for the time at least, her white grief. But this was the man who had tortured the miner and his *peones*; driven the latter naked through spiky cactus after he had cut the soles off their feet. She sprang up when he seized her, and as she fought bitterly, beating away his black, evil face with her little fists, his strident laughter mingled with her wild sobbing and carried to Bull behind the ridge.

For three days this man's boast had rung in his brain: "We've killed your men, outraged your women!" But though anger blazed within him, his tone was icy cold. "Look after the others. I'll 'tend to him!"

He had already pulled his rifle from the sling under his leg. Raising it now, he lined the sights, the same sights that had directed a ball through the brain of Livingstone's horse. While Lee writhed and twisted in the Colorado's arms, he dared not shoot. He waited until, at the double crack of his companions' rifles, two of the other Colorados pitched headlong from their saddles. Then, as their leader paused to look and, with a swift wrench, Lee tore loose and let daylight between them, the rifle spoke, sent its bullet whistling through his brain.

"Keep after them!" Bull called back as he rode on over the ridge.

But already Jake and Sliver's rifles were barking like hungry dogs. Trained to a hair in guerrilla warfare, the remaining Colorados had spurred their beasts behind the horse herd. At the first shot the band had stampeded, and now, urged on by the yells of the fugitives, who rode

crouched on their horses' necks, the scared animals coursed swiftly down the valley.

"The gall of them! *Our* horses!" Repeating his former observation, Sliver would have ridden after.

But Jake caught his bridle. His bleak eyes were scintillating like sunlit icicles. His lean, avid face quivered with subdued ferocity. "Don't be a damn fool! They're only using 'em for cover! We'll shoot along this side of the ridge an' catch 'em at the end of the valley!"

Meanwhile Bull rode on down the slope. After a surprised stare that showed her rescuers to be Americans, Lee had knelt again beside her father. As before said, Bull was no beauty. His black beard, bushy brows, hot red eyes, drink-blotched face, were of themselves sufficient to frighten a woman. Yet when she looked up sympathy illumined his countenance till it shone in her distressed sight as a clear lamp radiating human feeling. Without fear or doubt she turned to him for help.

"It's my father! I'm afraid—Can't you do something?"

So far Carleton had lain with his eyes closed. Now he opened them and spoke in detached whispers as Bull knelt by his side. "You're—American. I told her not to follow. Don't bother—with me. I'm shot—through lungs and stomach—bleeding inside. Get Lee—back to the house."

"Plenty of time," Bull soothed him. As a crackle of rifle-fire turned loose in the distance, followed by sudden silence, he added, "That 'ull be the last o' the Colorados. I'll fix you a bit, an' when my fellows come back we'll jest pack you home."

With a plainsman's skill in crude surgery, he tore up Carleton's shirt to make a pad and bandage which he twisted with a stick till the blood-flow stopped. This was no more accomplished before Jake and Sliver rode up, driving the horses ahead.

"They won't cut no more soles offen people's feet," Jake answered Bull's questioning look.

"Fine and dandy." Bull nodded. "You, Jake, rope a fresh horse outer the band an' ride like hell to the railroad an' wire El Paso for a doctor."

"No!" Lee eagerly suggested. "Wire the American Club at Chihuahua. These dreadful days all gringos help one another."

Freshly horsed, five minutes thereafter, Jake galloped away—but not before, cold, crafty, laconic, dissolute gambler as he was, he had left a comforting word in the girl's ear. "Don't you be skeered, Miss. I'll bring out a doctor, if I have to ride inter El Paso an' raid a hospital."

As he went out of sight over the next roll Sliver, with the girl's aid, lifted the wounded man up to Bull in the saddle. So for the second time within three days did the giant rustler bear like a child in his arms a *gringo* victim of the Mexican revolution. To the leaven that had been working within him was now added the most powerful influence that can be brought to bear on a man—a woman's heartbroken sobbing.

VI: BULL TURNS NURSE

Passing over into the next valley, they came on the body of old Francisco, hacked almost to bits. So far Lee had kept a strong grip on herself. But now she burst out crying.

"The poor fellow! He was faithful as a dog. We saw them cut him down, and that caused dad to lose his head. Otherwise he would never have tried to pursue them alone."

"He was old—an' died a man's death," Bull offered her rough comfort. "You couldn't wish him a better ending."

It was man's reasoning, therefore contrary to her woman's feelings, yet it helped to control her grief. She acquiesced at once when Bull suggested that she ride ahead and prepare a room.

By her departure Sliver was afforded an opportunity to get something off his mind. After a glance at Carleton, who had relapsed again into unconsciousness, he nodded at the horses. "Don't you allow I'd better leave 'em here? After we get through with him we kin come back an'—" He stopped, shuffled uneasily, under Bull's stare.

"You're dead right! Don't trouble to say it. I'd steal the horses offen a hearse."

Bull's glance dropped again to the unconscious man. Then, very slowly, he voiced his opinion,

formed on frontier code: "Wait till he's well enough to fight for his own. Till then—we leave him alone."

Stepping at a lively gait, they passed in half an hour under the *patio* gateway. Within, arched *portales* ran around three sides, supporting the gallery of an upper story. From the red-tiled roof above a wonderful creeper poured a cataract of green lace, so dense, prolific, that only vigorous pruning kept it from burying the *portales* beneath. In the center rose a great *arbol de fuego*, "tree of fire," contrasting its flaming blossoms with the rich greens of palms and bananas.

They were met at the entrance by a flock of frightened brown women, house servants, and *peonas*; for of the scores of men who had worked for Carleton before the wars there were left only three withered *ancianos* to bear his body up the wide stone stairway to a room that caught the fresh breeze from the mountains.

Here Bull redressed the wounds. His skill, however, was only of the surface. As it would require at least four days to bring a doctor even from Chihuahua, he felt that unless Jake materialized one out of the dry desert air Carleton would surely die. Nevertheless, he stoutly denied the possibility to Lee during the two days that he shared her watch.

Sliver, on his part, also did his best to cheer and comfort, relating marvelous tales of accidents and illnesses that, by contrast, made shooting through the lungs and stomach look smaller than a toothache.

"You she'd have seen Rusty Mikel, Miss, the time his Bill-hoss turned a flip-flop onto him. Druv' the pommel clean through his chest, it did. Yet he was up an' around, lively as a bedbug by candle-light, in less 'n five weeks."

Surely without them the girl would not only have broken down, but her father could never have survived to see the doctor, whose arrival was announced by a rapid beat of hoofs the following evening. For Jake had achieved the impossible, grabbed him, if not from midair, at least from a revolutionary-hospital train that had stopped at the burned station to bury its dead.

The doctor was American. But even as he dismounted at the gate Bull picked him for a "colonist." Just how, he himself could not have said. His premature grizzle, unhealthy pallor, might have been due to overwork. But a certain brooding quiet, seen only in those who have been cut off for long periods from communication with their fellows, impressed even Sliver. He remarked on it while they sat with Jake under the *portales* while he ate.

"Say! but he's whitish. Looks like he'd done time."

"He has," Jake nodded. "I had it from a Yankee machine-gunner in Valles's army that had got himself shot through both arms an' was being taken back to the base hospital with about a hun'ed others. When I landed at the burned station he was a-setting with his legs dangling out of a box-car door, watching 'em bury his *compañeros* that had died on the way.

"'Gotter do it quick,' he says. 'They don't keep worth a darn in this clime.'

"He'd met Carleton once in Chihuahua, an' 'twas him that sent the doctor an' tol' me about him while he was packing his grip. Seems that he'd belonged to a gang that worked insurance frauds on American companies. They'd insure some *peon* that was about ready to croak, paying the premiums themselves an' c'llecting the insurance after he cashed in. If he lingered 'twas said that they hurried him. That was never quite proved, most of 'em being too far gone to testify when they was resurrected. But the doc had furnished the death certificate, an' as the Mexicans ain't so particular about technicalities as our courts, he was sentenced to be shot along with his pals. If he'd been Mexican they'd have done it, too. But Diaz, who liked a bad gringo better than a good greaser, commuted the sentence to life imprisonment. He'd actually served twelve years—think of it, hombres! twelve years in a Mexican jail before the revolutionists let him out to serve on their hospital-trains."

"Twelve years!" Sliver echoed it. "An' just for croaking a few Mex? He orter ha' practised in New Mexico. They'd have give him a medal up there."

After Jake had eaten, the Three sat and smoked till the doctor came down. While eating he made his report. "If I could do any good I'd stay. But he will surely die to-night. It's going to be mighty hard on that poor girl. Like most of us"—his glance took in all Three—"Carleton didn't come down here for his health. It's bad form in Mexico to inquire about a man's past. Nevertheless, it's pretty well known that he killed the seducer of his wife and came here with the child when she was four years old. She's never been away since, and has no kin that she knows of. To run a hacienda, these days, is too big a job for a girl."

His deep concern showed an underlying goodness. Genuine sadness weighted his words when he gave his last orders from the saddle. "I've left an opiate in case he suffers. He may regain consciousness, but don't be deceived. It will be the last flare before the dark."

It happened at midnight. An hour before, Bull had put Lee out of the room with gentle force to take needed rest. He had then moved his chair to the door, which opened out on the *corredor*, to secure the free air his rustler's lungs demanded. Across the compound he could see the moon's pale lantern hanging in the branches of a yucca that upraised its maimed and twisted shape on a distant knoll. Northward the mountains loomed, dim and mysterious, in tender light that reduced the vivid chromes and blues of lime-washed adobes in the compound to pale violet and clear gold.

Gringo as he was, his people had lived under Carleton's hand fuller, freer lives than their forebears had ever known under the Mexican overlords, and, day or night, the *patio* had never lacked a dozen brown *peonas* on their knees at their prayers to the saints. Under the *arbol de fuego* in the center of the *patio* below three old crones had erected a small altar, and its guttering candles now threw splashes of gold up through the crimson dusk of the tree. Adding the human note which, by contrast, accentuated the infinite mystery of that still night, their mutterings rose up to Bull; bits of gossip sandwiched between prayers.

"Three crows perched here at sundown, Luisa. Thou knowest what that means?"

"Si; they were devils come for a soul."

"'Tis a pity that all gringos are doomed to the flame. The señor was a good master to us that had felt the iron fist of the Spaniard."

"The señorita? She that is so sweet and good. Thinkest thou, Luisa, that she also will be cast into hell?"

"Not if my prayers can save, Pancha. Three great candles, at twenty centavos the candle, have I burned on the altar of Guadalupe for her soul's sake. There is yet time for her. But the poor señor—" her pause doomed him. Nevertheless, with greater vigor they returned to their prayers for his saving.

The dim beauty of the night with its spread of moonlit plain, loom of distant mountains, querulous supplication rising under cold stars, combined to produce that awful sense of infinity that shrouds the riddle of life. If Bull was incapable of philosophizing upon it, to translate the feeling in thought, he still came under its sway. While it weighed heavily upon him, there came a gasp and feverish mutter from the bed.

In a second he was there. As he removed the shade from the candle he saw Carleton's face lit by the last flare. Recognition and intelligence both were there.

"Where is—Lee? Sleeping? Don't wake her. Listen! She—must not—stay here. Tell William Benson—he's rough and a bully—but honest and good. Tell him to get a permit—from the revolutionists—to drive my cattle and horses—across to the States. They will bring enough—to keep Lee for many—a year. Be sure—"

The halting voice suddenly failed. Even while Bull was reaching for a stimulant the soul of the man passed out into the mystery beyond the moonlit plains.

For a while Bull stood looking down upon him. Then, very slowly, he made toward the door that led to the girl's room. But as her tired face rose before him he stopped and shook his head. "Let her finish her sleep." Tiptoeing, instead, out to the gallery rail, he leaned down and softly called the old women.

VII: THE RUSTLERS ARE ADOPTED

"Well, I reckon this about lets us out."

The Three sat under the *portales*, heavily smoking. Bull puffed meditatively at a strong old pipe. Between lungfuls Sliver toyed absently with a cigarette. The necessities of dealing faro-bank had trained Jake in the labial manipulations of his fat native cigar. As all necessary readjustment could be made with the tongue or lips, his hands were thrust deep in his pockets, a proof of profound mental concentration. It was he who had spoken, and the "this" alluded to Carleton's funeral, which had taken place the preceding day.

It had been a quiet affair. William Benson, the nearest white neighbor, happened to be in El

Paso. Of a round dozen Mexicans of the better class, eleven were wearily waiting on the other side of the border till still another revolution should restore their territorial rights. The Icarzas, Ramon and his father, a bewhiskered *hacendado*, attended, with Isabel, the dusky beauty of the house. The Lovells, a small American rancher and his two pretty daughters, represented the hundreds of *gringos*, miners, ranchers, engineers, smelter men, who would have come in normal times. So these, with Lee, Carleton's *peones*, and the Three, had followed the rude ox-cart that bore him to the graveyard of a little adobe church in the hills. Their duty in the premises being thus consummated, the Three had resolved themselves into a committee on ways and means.

"Yes, I s'pose we'll have to move on." If not actually dismal, Sliver's indorsement both expressed regret and invited contradiction.

Bull did not speak. He was watching Lee and the Lovell girls, who had just then stepped out of her room across the *patio*. Phyllis, the younger, was to stay for a week, while Phœbe, the elder, returned home with her father, who had just brought the horses to the gateway. As Lee walked with her guests the length of the *patio* she took with her the sympathetic glances of the Three.

Nature mercifully provides her own anesthesia, stunning the victims of her catastrophes till the dangerous period of shock be passed. Later, the sight of Carleton's riding-whip, spurs, or gloves, carelessly thrown in a corner, would bring a violent recurrence of grief, set her agonizing once more before the great blank wall of death. But just now complete emotional exhaustion left her quiet and calm. Neither had she made any attempt to bury her youth under the frowsy trappings of grief. Even the black velvet riband she wore at her throat was purely accidental, a natural trimming of her dress.

Indeed, the other girls showed more outward sorrow. Though American born, they were almost Spanish in their coloring, and their dusky eyes, dark hair, rich cream skins provided a vivid foil for Lee's fairness. If their eyes were swollen and nose tips chafed, the fact merely accentuated their feminine charm. To the Three, deprived for years of association with any but the lowest Mexican women, they swam in sweetness and light. The graceful turn of a rounded neck, lift of a smooth chin, flexure of a lithe waist aroused powerful memories. Like a cleansing stream, the sweetness of their first young, cool loves swept through their beings, purging them, for the moment, of shame and dross and passion.

"Adios, you fellows!" Lovell's friendly voice came floating back from the gate. "Come and see us at San Miguel."

It was the climax; the climax of a week during which, in place of suspicion and distrust bred of the knowledge that every man's hand was against them and theirs against every man, they had met only faith and trust and friendship. The invitation instigated Sliver's muttered exclamation: "Lordy! I'd like to! but—"

"—it's no place for us." Bull nodded toward Lee. "It 'u'd be easier if she was provided for. Think of her, alone here, an' a new revolution breaking every other day!"

"Pretty fierce," Jake coincided. "But if 'twas left to that young Mex at the funeral yesterday— Ramon Icarza, wasn't that what they called him? If 'twas left to him she'd soon be—"

"—damned an' done for!" Sliver exploded. Hard eyes flashing, he added: "Come to think of it, the son of a gun did behave sorter soft. No Mex that was ever pupped is fit to even herd sheep for the little lady-girl. Hell! if I thought she'd look twice his way, I'd croak him afore we left."

"It wouldn't be unnatural, she being raised here an' not knowing much else." Bull's gloom was here pierced by a flash of thought. "I'll bet you that's what her father dreaded when he said for Benson to try an' get her up to the States. I wish the man was here so's I could tell him afore we left."

"Tol' her yet?" Sliver asked.

Bull nodded. "Las' night. Said she hadn't given any thought, yet, to the future."

The two girls were now coming back from the gate. At first they made to go down the opposite *portales*. Then Lee paused, gently disengaging her arm from the other girl's waist, and came walking on alone.

They rose and though she was, as before said, tall for a girl and well formed, she appeared childlike by comparison with their crude bulk. They felt it, and it drove in more keenly the sense of her loneliness.

"Oh, shore!" with his customary impulsiveness, Sliver cut off her attempts to thank them for their kindness. "We hain't done nothing worth while."

"Sliver's right." Jake's bleak eyes had grown almost soft. "You don't owe us anything. All that's bothering us is—"

"—that we kain't jest see how you're going to manage," Bull finished. "Your father's idea—"

He stopped.

Her smooth white brow had drawn up into a thoughtful little frown. "It isn't practicable. Valles would never permit us to drive horses across the border. We have asked him once before. And if he would—" Her sweeping hand took in the sunlit *patio*, the brown *criadas* soft-footing it along the *corredor*; the compound ablaze with barbaric color; the *peonas* gossiping in the shade at the well; all of that medieval life that wraps Mexico in the sunshine of the past. "And if he would—I could never be happy in the United States. I was brought up to this. I'm part of it, and it of me," she concluded, with a firm little nod. "I shall carry on my father's work."

The Three looked at one another. Bull's troubled look, Jake's dubious brows, Sliver's cough, all expressed their common doubt. "Can you do it, Miss, alone?"

"I sha'n't be altogether alone. Mr. Lovell and Mr. Benson will be here to advise, and I shall hire an American foreman. If you—" she paused, looking them over with sudden interest, then shook her head. "Of course, that's absurd! You have your own business. But perhaps you might know some one?"

The Three looked at one another again, the same thought in the mind of each. Well they knew how close they were to the end of their rope. As in a cinematograph they saw Don Manuel, insolent and threatening; the American border tightly closed; the *fusilado* against a 'dobe wall that would surely end their Mexican operations. Black as a thundercloud that dark prospect stood out against the sunlit peace of the past week. Yet, to do them justice, the girl's helpless situation affected them most. If they paused, it was with the natural hesitation of men surveying a new path.

Jake spoke first. "To tell the truth, Miss, we ain't exactly what you'd call rushed with business."

"Like all of us—upset by the revolutions." She jumped to the natural conclusion, "Were you—mining?"

A picture of the lair on the bench of the abandoned mine flashed before all Three. Not without truth was Bull's statement, "We ain't worked it much, of late."

"Peones all gone to the wars, I suppose?"

A sudden memory of Rosa's desertion permitted Sliver to say, "The las' we had left jest t'other day."

Her pretty face brightened. "Then you mean to say that you are free for the present?"

That was exactly what they had!

She went on, slowly: "I'll have to be frank. We own about a hundred and sixty or seventy thousand acres of land. But we haven't been permitted to sell any stock for two years, so have no ready cash. I don't know, even, whether I could pay a regular wage. But if you would take what I can scrape up and wait for the remainder till things quieten—"

"Don't you be bothering about that, Miss," Bull broke in. "We'll stay, an' when it comes that you don't need us any longer—"

"—we ain't a-going to bust you with no claims for high wages," Sliver concluded. "To tell you the truth, Miss, I'd be willing to work for my board jest to feel at loose on a range ag'in."

His enthusiasm brought her smile, and though it was but a wintry effort, it still added warmth to her words. "Then—now you are *my* men."

The accent on the "my" unconsciously expressed the deepest lack of her bereavement, the sudden check to the natural feminine instinct to own and care for a man. The isolation of herself and her father amid an alien brown people had undoubtedly tended to develop it in her to the fullest. Though Carleton had grumbled, man-like, at her pretty tyrannies in manners and modes, shirts and socks, he had, surreptitiously, hugely enjoyed it. Now, the stronger for her sorrow, that dominant trait broke loose on the devoted heads of the Three.

"*My* men!" It sealed their adoption.

"Phyllis, come here!" She was eying them with that microscopic feminine scrutiny that detects the minutest personal defect. Her gesture of despair when the other girl came up was so lovingly insulting it could not have been outdone by the best of mothers. "They are going to work for me, so we'll have to care for them. Do you suppose we can *ever* get them to rights?"

Phyllis wasn't quite sure, but as her interest while real was more casual, she held out hope. "They'll look better, dear, after they're washed and mended."

That was too mild for Lee. Nothing but revolution, drastic and complete, would satiate that hungry instinct. "No, they'll have to have new things. The store is run down badly, but it will supply their present needs."

With something of the air of convicts arraigned before a stern judge the Three listened to

certain other frank comments upon their appearance. As laid down, their reconstruction included shaves for Sliver and Jake, a beard-trim for Bull, hair-cuts for all three. To this they meekly agreed; took their new things with sheepish thanks when they were brought from the store; endured all with resignation, if not cheerfulness, up to the moment that she tried to quarter them in the house. Then the last shreds of masculine independence asserted themselves. They made a stand.

"If it's all the same, Miss," Jake pleaded, "we'd sooner bunk down in one of those empty adobes."

Sliver supported the rebellion. "You see, Miss, we're that rough an' not used to ladies' society —"

"An' we smoke something dreadful," Bull added his bit. "You really couldn't stan'—"

"Oh, I wouldn't mind it a bit. I love tobacco smoke. It's half of Mexico."

Deprived of their last weapon, the Three could only stand and fidget till Phyllis came to the rescue. Her interest, as aforesaid, being founded merely on the general principles of loyalty to her sex, she could afford to be generous.

"They'll want to play cards and generally carry on," she whispered. "Men always do. Let them sleep in the adobe and take their meals with you at the house."

A compromise thus effected, Lee marched the Three to their new abode. But this was not the end. Just as they were about to settle therein she turned loose upon them a veritable hornets' nest of brown *criadas*. All afternoon they found themselves encircled, as it were, by clouds of flying skirts, and when the flutter subsided the adobe stood scrubbed and dusted and furnished with *catres*, bed-clothing, wash-stands, chairs, and a table for the "cards and general carrying on." When the invasion, brown and white, finally withdrew, and the suggested changes in apparel and personal appearance were duly consummated, they were left gazing with something of awe and a great deal of wonder at their reconstructed selves.

"You look almost human," Jake gave his opinion of Bull. "A touch with a powder-puff an' I allow you might mash one o' them *criadas*."

Catching himself up short, Sliver walked to the door to expectorate. "It's dreadfully clean in here," he remarked, coming back. "But I reckon we'll sorter get used to it. Now if we on'y had a bottle o' aguardiente to hold a bit of a house-warming, it 'u'd—"

Bull looked at him with sudden sternness. "Look here! We've got the care of a young girl on our han's. There's going to be no boozing—at least on the premises. When you feel you kain't stan' it any longer, light out somewheres an' get it over."

"That's right," Jake lent support to the moralities. "Though it sorter looks to me like she'd adopted us."

As a matter of fact, the girls' talk, walking back to the house, quite favored the latter theory. While overseeing the housecleaning Lee had obtained temporary surcease from her grief. She laughed softly at Phyllis's remark, "Aren't they big and crude and funny?"

"Helpless and clumsy as children. But just wait till I've had them a month."

"Won't it be a little difficult? They're grown up; can't be treated like babies."

"Not a bit." Lee laughed softly again. "If one of them misbehaves, I shall quietly draw the attention of another to it. Mr. Jake will correct Mr. Bull; and Mr. Sliver, Mr. Jake. If they were girls they'd see through it at once. Being men, they'll feel quite perked up."

Why they should have thought it so funny is hard to say. Perhaps their merriment proceeded from that obscure source whence issues the disappointment of a woman after she has molded masculine clay in her own likeness, and wishes it back in all of its crudity again. In any case, as they looked forward to that most delightful of feminine visions, a crude man-animal, tamed and parlor broke, they laughed again.

VIII: "THE LEOPARD'S SPOTS"

It was not done with malice aforethought, for Sliver had not quite reached the point where "he

couldn't stan' it any longer." It just happened. Heavy drinkers may be divided into three classes—to wit, the sporadic, who break out in occasional wild debauches; the "steadies," who sop, sop, sop all the time; and a third class which combines the traits of the other two. Of the Three, Bull represented the first, Jake the second, Sliver the last and worst.

If Sliver had not ridden his horse along the crest of a certain hog's back on the chance that the cattle he was hunting might be in the ravine below, it might never have come to pass. If Napoleon Bonaparte, for matter of that, hadn't developed indigestion at Waterloo; if Christopher Columbus had followed the Church instead of the sea; if Julius Cæsar had been born a girl; if all the cats on all the famous fences of history had happened to jump the other way—this world would be quite different. So let it suffice that Sliver rode along the hog's back.

At its end the ridge ran out on a wide bench from which Sliver looked over the foot-hills, rolling tumultuously under a black blanket of chaparral out to the tawny valleys of the *hacienda* pastures. Below, he could see a path that ran with a silver stream at the bottom of the ravine. Its deep rut, no wider than the swing of a mule, marked it for one of those ancient highways whose place had been usurped by the Diaz railways. In its heyday the cañon had rung with the tinklings of the mule-trains that transported *aguardiente*, maize, tobacco, serapes, and cloths between Mexico City and Santa Fé. But of that great traffic there now remained barely enough to support the little *fonda* that lay with its mule *patio* almost at Sliver's feet.

Though no one was in sight, he set down certain moving black dots as chickens, goats, or pigs. Thus assured of tenancy, and thinking that he might pick up some news of his strays, he rode on down a trail that zigzagged through the chaparral.

Looking down from above, Sliver had noted the resemblance of the place to the lair back on the miner's bench in Sonora. The *ramada* of grass and cornstalks might have been the same. Only that she was younger and prettier, the Mexican girl who knelt before a *metate* grinding *tortilla* paste could have passed for Rosa herself. Though Mexican Indian, some vagrant Spanish strain had pushed up her brow, reduced her cheek-bones, shortened her waist, and lengthened her limbs. Masses of black hair framed her oval face. Her eyes were velvet pools; the nose small and well shaped. Her bare arms tapered from fine shoulders to small wrists, and if she followed Juno rather than Psyche in her luxurious molding she was pliant as a willow, carried her shapely poundage with an effect of slimness.

If Sliver noted these desirable personal assets, his interest therein disappeared after he had spied the sign, "Fonda," over the door. True, the month which had now elapsed since they entered Lee's service had not, however, been entirely "dry." At the close of each day's work the Three took their *copa* with the *ancianos* at the *hacienda* store in the Mexican fashion. But the application of liquor in such medicinal doses to a thirst like Sliver's was equivalent to the squirting of gasolene upon a fire. Now, as he gazed at the sign, spirituous desires flamed within him. It was with difficulty that his dry lips formed his question to the girl.

Was there a *copita* of *aguardiente* to be had?

Nodding, she rose, and as she let down a small wooden door in the wall Sliver's glance licked the rows of bottles within.

Tequila, anisette, *aguardiente*, *mescal*, every variety of liquid fire with which the Mexican *peon* burns out his stomach, stood there in deadly array. Beginning at one end, Sliver worked his way, during the next two hours, along the row, and had just started back again when, with some surprise, he noted a most curious phenomenon—to wit, the gray hair and deep wrinkles the girl had suddenly acquired. Quite unaware that she had resigned his thirst to her father, and was even then vigorously rubbing *tortilla* paste behind his back, he solemnly studied this startling metamorphosis. Drunk as he was, his cowman's instinct had kept him warned of the sun's declension. Sure, now, that he had had enough, he paid his score, gravely addressing his host, meanwhile, concerning his changed appearance.

"You she'dn't do it. It's—hard on the nerves. Keep it up an'—you'll drive your custom away."

Having climbed into the saddle, he remained there because of that merciful provision of nature by which a man may ride long after he has lost the power to walk. Realizing his condition, he left the business of going home to his horse. While it carried him down the cañon and out across the plains he concentrated his remaining energies on "The Cowboy's Lament," howling its one hundred and one verses at the top of his voice, sending warning of his coming a full mile ahead.

In the mean time Bull with Lee, Jake "on his lonely," had pursued the search for the strays in other directions. It chanced that luck rode with the former. Returning home at sundown, Jake

saw them driving the cattle along a shallow valley.

During the month which had elapsed since her father's death Lee had taken the only real panacea for grief—hard work. In addition to the management of the house *criadas*, she exercised a feudal overlordship over the *hacienda peones*. Besides hiring and letting, leasing of lands on charges, she acted as judge in their squabbles, adviser in their small affairs, comforter in trouble. In addition, her womanhood brought extra duties. She had to godmother the babes, attend christenings, doctor the sick, lend her patronage to the *bailes* and *fiestas*.

Most of these duties she discharged in the mornings. Afternoons she donned her man's riding-togs and rode out with the Three, rounding up strays, new-born calves, and foals. At nights her fair head might be seen under a golden aureole lent by the lamp, while she mended or made for them and herself. If it lacked the stimulation and color of city life, it was, at least, a healthy and honest existence. Already it had restored her shocked nerves, given back her roses. She had never been prettier than when, reining in, she looked back at Jake as he came up!

"We found them! *we* found them!" Her pride in the fact provoked Jake's smile. "They were up in the Cañon del Norte. Whatever in the world is that?"

It might have been anything from the last puff of a worn-out calliope to the yelp of a sick coyote, for at its best Sliver's voice rarely came within a quarter of a mile of a specified tune, and an hour's steady tearing into "The Cowboy's Lament" had not improved its tone. As the raucous strains came floating down the wind Lee burst into a bubbling little laugh.

"Mr. Sliver isn't hardly what you could call a singer. Is he—often taken like that?"

They could have answered quite easily, Sliver's vocal efforts being ever timed by his potations. Instead, they looked at each other in blank disgust. Nor was answer necessary, for just then Lee dug in her spurs and shot after a wild steer that had taken a sudden notion to go back to the Cañon del Norte.

"Piously drunk!" Jake swore loudly, as soon as she passed beyond earshot. "Wonder where he got it!"

"Search me," Bull shrugged. "The question is how to stop him. You know what to expect if he's loose an' drunk among all them *peonas*. You ride on an' head him off. Don't stan' any nonsense. Bat him over the can if nec'ssary."

The admonition was not required, for Jake was always thorough. Neither was it his habit to waste time on argument or persuasion. Having roped Sliver, ten minutes thereafter, from behind a convenient bush, he gagged and cinched him in his saddle, hustled him in by the back gate of the compound, had him lashed to his *catre* in their adobe before Lee and Bull arrived.

So far, all was well. Their real troubles began when at supper Bull replied to Lee's inquiry concerning Sliver's absence that he "wasn't feeling well."

She jumped up at once. "Oh, the poor fellow! I must go and see what he can eat!"

A vivid mental picture of the "poor fellow," gagged and lashed to his *catre*, filled them with consternation. Bull inwardly cursed himself for not having reported Sliver absent. But while he floundered, beating his brains for a second excuse, the crafty Jake supplied it.

"I wouldn't—really, Miss."

She stopped, half-way along the *portales*. He had spoken so earnestly. "Why not? Is it—catching?"

Bull would have replied in the affirmative, regardless of further complications. Jake shook his head. "No, it's just chills an' fever, a sorter constitutional ague he's taken with at this time o' the year. But—well, Miss, it's this way, Sliver's that bashful, though you mightn't think it to look at him, he'd die of shame if a young lady was to see him in his bunk."

She hesitated, then came back. "But—he ought to be looked after."

"He has been." Jake clinched the victory. "A copa's the finest thing in the world for chills. He's had a couple an' was sleeping like a babe when we came in."

She gave in with a sigh. "Then we won't wake him. But you must take him a tray when you go out."

But if her dominant instinct was thus, for the time, frustrated, it broke out more violently the following morning. When Sliver would fain have carried his aching head and sick stomach out to some secluded portion of the range, to be wretched at his ease, Lee "shooed" him like a sick chicken into a corner of the *patio*, there to be coddled and doctored with slops and brews compounded by her brown maids, every mother's daughter of whom had her own infallible "*remedio*." His real contrition was made none the lighter by the veiled jestings of his companions at meals.

"Invalid looks a bit better," Jake would opine.

"A week's careful nursing orter bring him around," Bull would add. Then while prodding him with secret gibes, they ate with a zest that turned his poor, burned-out stomach.

That night, moreover, he furnished the text for a rude sermon after they got him alone in the adobe. "I s'pose neither of you saints would ha' stopped even to smell of it," he sarcastically inquired, after confessing how and where he obtained the liquor.

"'Tain't that," Bull admonished him. "I'm pretty near due for a bust myself. But when it hits, you bet I'll go somewheres so's the sight of my hoggishness ain't a-going to offend our girl. No, 'tain't that you acquired a bun we're kicking at, but that you toted it back here."

"You bet y'u," Jake added. "Next time you're took that-a-way, have 'em hide your horse, then lie down with your nose in it an' don't budge till you're through. Have you done, now, or is there anything out there you forgot to drink?"

"Through? Oh, Lordy! Lordy!" Sliver groaned. "My liver's burned right out!"

"Bueno!" Jake nodded his satisfaction. "Then if you've finished I'm free to begin. My fingers has been itching to get into a game for a week. That's where you fellows have me at a disadvantage. All you've gotter do is to find a bottle, but mine's simply gotter have cards in it. I don't get off short of El Paso. I reckon some of that important mining business of our'n calls for my presence there day after to-morrow."

"All right, get it over," Bull agreed, after a moment's rumination. "Tell her at breakfast. She'll fix you up with the fare."

"'Tell her at breakfast'?" Jake looked his scorn. "An' have her running an' fixing me out with socks an' shirts an' things like I was going off on honest business. Not on your life! When she looks at me, so amiable and trustful, like she felt I was straight grain through an' through, I simply kain't fix up my mouth for a good lie. No, you fellows can jest give me all you've got. With any kind of luck it'll turn you big interest. You can tell her that I left in the night so's to catch an early train."

So real was his feeling, he did rise and leave before daylight. But thereby his moment of shame was merely postponed.

When Jake arrived in El Paso—But the less said about his sojourn there the better. His operations, which included the fleecing of some cattlemen, would not make edifying reading. He may be picked up again at the moment he was, as aforesaid, overtaken by shame, when Lee spied him, a week later, coming through the *patio* gateway.

"Oh, you poor man!" she exclaimed at the sight of his haggard face. "They must have worked you all night."

"Which they did work me overtime," he confessed to Bull, in the adobe that evening. "Five days an' most of the nights I sat inter one game. Look at this!"

The roll he held up contained two thousand and some odd hundreds of American dollars. "When I seen how the luck was heading my way I pulled a side partner into the game, for I saw what a chance it was to fatten Miss Lee's hand. He was a—

"What are you crinkling your nose at?" he hotly demanded of Bull. "This ain't no tainted money. I took it from some sports that had been buying horses from Mexican raiders. Mebbe some of 'em came from this very ranch. Anyway, in default of finding the real owners, who has a better right to their money than the little girl?"

"'Tain't that." Bull shook his head. "I was on'y thinking that I'd liefer you tried to give it her than me. She don't look like she'd take easily to charity."

"*That so?*" Jake regarded him cynically. "Now kain't you jest hear me a-saying, 'Please, Miss, will you please take this, you need it so bad?' But is there any reason why she should object to us investing a couple of thousand in horses?"

"No; but she will."

And Bull was right. When, next morning, Jake, speaking for the Three, made his proposition, Lee shook her head. "It's only a question of time before the revolutionists run off all the stock. Then where would be your two thousand dollars?"

"In the same box with yours—stowed safely away where we can't spend or lose it, till Uncle Sam makes Mexico pay our claims," Jake argued. "The risk we're willing to take, because we expect to buy cheap on that account."

At that she wavered; with a little more pressing, acceded. And thus by devious ways did the blind god of chance atone for many a former error, turning evil to good, if only for once.

IX: A PARTY AND ITS CONSEQUENCES

"Lady-girl's a-going to have a birthday."

The remark issued from the blue tobacco reek that filled the bunk-house. So thick it was the lamp on the table sent forth a feeble golden glimmer that barely revealed the sketchy outlines of the Three stretched at ease on their *catres*. But the title "Lady-girl," Sliver's especial name for Lee, stamped the remark as coming from him.

"That so?" Bull and Jake spoke in chorus. "How'd you know?"

"She asked me to write a piece, t'other day, in her birthday-album, an' looking through it I kem on her day."

"She asked me, too," Jake admitted. "What did you write?"

"Roses is red, violets is blue; sugar is sweet, an' so air you."

"A real nice piece, too," Jake commented upon this classic. "I like it better 'n mine." Nevertheless, with the secret pride of your true poet, he gave his own:

Under pressure, Bull also admitted a descent into poetry. "I ked on'y think of a verse that a girl once wrote in my sister's album when I was a kid. 'Tain't near as good as yourn."

"My pen is dull, my ink is pale;
My love for you will never fail."

"I think it's pretty fine," the others commended the effort.

After a thoughtful pause, consecrated by heavy smoking, Bull asked, "How old is she, Sliver?"

"Rising twenty, be the date."

"Seems to me we orter raise a little hell in honor of the 'casion—if it's on'y to keep her from feeling lonesome."

"Little bit close on the funeral," Jake tentatively suggested. "Jest about three months, ain't it?"

"Yes, for a regular party. My idea was just to tip off the Lovells an' have 'em drop in that day."

"We might shoot things up a bit, too," Sliver began, but Jake cut him off with utter scorn.

"This ain't no cowman's jamboree. Girls don't like any shooting except what they do with their own pretty mouths. A cake with candles 'u'd be my idee."

"Cake?" Sliver now returned the scorn. "Kain't you see these Mexican dames baking a real, sure-enough birthday cake made out of raisins an' curran's an' cit-tron peel, an' with spice fixin's to it? An enchilada stuffed with store prunes 'u'd be the best they ked do."

"Oh, I don't know." Bull poured the oil of quiet counsel on the troubled waters. "What about Mrs. Mills?"

He referred to the widow of an American rancher who, with the aid of her young daughter and a few *peones*, had kept their *rancho* going since her husband's death. "If one of us was to ride over to-morrow I'll bet you she'd fix up a cake, if 'twas only a three-layer chocolate. As for candles, candles an' beer-factories are the main products of Mexico."

Thus was the ball set rolling, not only for the party, but also toward consequences unforeseen; and it received a second fillip when Bull delivered his invitation to the Lovells at San Miguel midway of the following afternoon. It chanced that Phoebe's *fiancé*, a young mining engineer, had arrived the preceding evening, bringing with him a friend, a smelter man from El Paso. With the enthusiasm of youth they proceeded to enlarge upon the plan after Bull rode on.

"It would be a shame to leave out Isabel Icarza," Phyllis warmly declared. "She and Lee have always been such good friends."

Accordingly, a *mozo* delivered an invitation at the *Hacienda del Sol* about the same time that Bull dismounted at the widow's *rancho*.

The widow, a woman of thirty-five or six, whose comeliness indicated former real beauty, fell at once for the plan. While Bull was eating supper she began on the cake. Having met her but once before, he developed a certain shyness. But if his communications with her bordered on the formal, he yielded himself captive without reserve to Betty, her small daughter.

Though nearly thirteen, with the promise of being as pretty in her flaxen whiteness as Lee herself, isolation had conserved, if anything, the girl's childishness. Sitting on a chair opposite Bull, she prattled happily while they both seeded raisins, questioning him with an artless

directness that sometimes proved embarrassing.

Had he a father, mother, sister? Where did they live? What was his business? Married? Why not? And when he returned the usual answer that no one would have him she brought him to sudden and utter confusion.

"Oh, I'm so glad! Mother would take you, I'm sure. I'd just love to have you for my father. Will you please marry her, then she will never be anxious or fearful again?"

Her mother's merry laugh helped to cool Bull's blushes. "Don't be specially insulted. She says that to every one." Then, brave little soul though she was, she lifted a corner of the curtain that veiled an ever-present fear. "It's true that I get sometimes terribly anxious. Mexicans are lovely people when they're kept in their place. But since Diaz was overthrown they're like a school of naughty children, let loose without morality, discipline, or guidance to protect them from themselves. Sometimes I think we ought to leave, but if we did the place would be sacked and burned before we reached the railroad. So I'd rather take the risk than be a pauper in the United States. But there, I'm ungrateful talking this way instead of thanking Providence we've got along so well."

"That's the way to look at it, ma'am," Bull encouraged her. While a wicked flash shot from under his black brows he added, "If any one bothers you jest send for us."

"Oo-oh, but you looked fierce then!" the child gave a delighted shudder. "Do it again." Though a humorous twinkle sterilized the rehearsal, she consoled herself with the reflection: "'Tisn't the same. But I'll bet you're muy malo when you fight."

"It's a good thing if he is." From the sink, where she was washing currants, her mother surveyed with approval Bull's imposing bulk. "It was a great relief when we heard that you and your friends were staying with Lee."

Later, when Bull's shyness had somewhat abated, she spoke more intimately. From Ramon himself she had learned of his expulsion from Los Arboles. "Ramon is a nice boy, yet no one could blame Mr. Carleton," she said. "Yet what is Lee to do? Before the revolution she could have taken her pick from scores of young Americans, but now they're all gone." Laughing, she finished with a remark which was destined, later, to produce unexpected results. "I guess we'll have to import her a husband."

Bull's heavy rumble echoed her laugh. It broke out again when Betty cried out: "While you're at it get one for me. I simply won't marry a greaser."

Because of the unusual proceedings she was allowed to sit up. Caught yawning while the cake was baking, she fled to Bull's knee, from which strategic position she defeated her mother's best efforts to coax her to bed. Whereafter she promptly celebrated her victory by falling asleep. Curled against him in trustful comfort, she slept with her fair head pillowed on his mighty chest till, the cake finished, he carried her to bed. A *catre* had been moved out for him under the *portales*. But after silence and sleep descended on the house he sat for a long time on its edge, softly musing, the warmth of the child's body enwrapping his heart. Even Jake, whose sharp eyes had detected many an alien expression on that scarred visage of late, would have wondered at its tenderness.

Betty was still asleep when he mounted to leave next morning, but at the beat of hoofs she came running, bare feet and legs flying under her nightdress. Stooping, he swung her to the saddle before him. The pressure of her warm arms around his neck, soft lips on his cheek, put a thrill of earnestness into his farewell.

"Remember, ma'am, we'll come whenever you call."

A quarter-mile away he drew rein and looked back. Though smaller than Los Arboles, the *rancho* buildings grouped picturesquely in a pocket of the foot-hills. The rich purple and crimson blossoms of a bougainvillea vine that almost buried the house made a fine splash of color against the golden adobe walls and tawny pastures. Drenched in sunlight, roofed in by fleecy clouds sailing across the deep blue vault above, it seemed the abode of peace. But not so did Bull see it. It loomed through a dread mirage that squirmed with ugly fighting shapes.

Shaking his big head, he spoke aloud. "'Tain't safe for them here, 'tain't safe!"

So vivid was that dread feeling, presage of evil, the sweat broke on his brow. Into his mind shot a vivid picture of the miner hanging limply from the *sahuaro*, face turned up to the torrid sun. Around it, as in a whirling nightmare, revolved all of the horrors, outrages, and murders of three awful years. Turning, he shook his big fist at the northern horizon in fierce rebuke of the political lethargy and executive indifference on the other side of the border that had not only made the long list of outrages possible, but almost set the seal of approval upon it. Anger choked him. With the growl of a furious dog he turned again and rode on.

It may be laid down as a general principle that a woman never forgets and a man seldom remembers anniversaries. These tendencies are due to the fact that a woman lives principally in the past and present, a man in the future; while she observes past occasions, he creates new ones. Whether she be looking forward with youthful joy, or looking back with increasing regret, a woman specializes upon her birthdays. But, accustomed to her father's bad memory, Lee had not expected any one to remember; was accordingly astonished and pleased when, coming to breakfast that morning, she found the table decorated with trailing vines and a bouquet of wild flowers at her plate that had been picked by Sliver.

"Why—" she gave a little gasp. Then her shining glance accused the Three, whose sheepish grins loudly proclaimed their guilt. "How *did* you know? What's this?"

While she was unwrapping the tissue-paper in which Mrs. Mills had wrapped the cake the Three looked on with eager expectance, and were treated to a second bath of sunshine. "A *real* cake! Where *did* you get it?"

In a country where cakes, if not actually hanging on every tree, may be either home-grown or plucked from the counter of any pastry cook, her joy might have seemed exaggerated. But in that alien desert, stripped of its substance to the bare hot bones by repeated revolutions, the conjunction of a sure-enough cake with a girl's birthday verged on the miraculous. Nor was Lee's pleasure lessened after she heard at what pains it had been produced.

It was, of course, merely the first of the day's surprises, some of which were purely accidental, as when William Benson rode in at noon. As a matter of fact, his visit pertained to a defensive alliance against raiders, but, being warned in time, he straightway credited his visit to the birthday. A bluff Englishman, almost as big as Bull, hot-tempered and overbearing in manner, he fell with great joviality into the spirit of the occasion; kissed and congratulated Lee with the license of old friendship. His big, hearty laugh was resounding in the *patio* when the second irruption of the Lovells and their *fiancés*—for Phyllis had conquered the smelter man in record time—occurred midway of the afternoon. And they were no more than settled under the *portales* before, like some rich, dusky bird, Isabel Icarza came floating under the arched gateway into Lee's arms.

"But you surely did not come alone?" Though that was exactly what she might have done herself, Lee looked at her in horror.

"Ah no, querida! Ramon escorted me, and will return to-morrow!"

"You don't mean to say that he has—" Lee stopped, for she had caught, just then, a glimpse of him riding away.

"Your father—you remember—he thought—"

Isabel stopped in her embarrassed explanations for, like a scared white bird, Lee was flying through the gateway. Grabbing Isabel's horse from the *anciano* who was just about to lead it around to the compound, she leaped into the saddle and went flying down the trail.

Turning at the sound of hoofs, Ramon waited for her. It was the first time they had met since the funeral, and though embarrassment would have been quite natural, Lee's frank greeting put him at once at his ease.

"You were going away—on my saint's day?"

"It was out of respect for—"

She cut off his apology. "Yes, yes, but father was angry and unjust that day. He would have acknowledged it himself, had he lived. You must come back, at once, with me."

Not knowing the cause of her sudden flight, Bull had followed to the gateway. As he stood there watching the two returning, Benson's voice broke at his shoulder.

"That's the hell of raising a girl in this country. I spoke often to Carleton about it, but he was a lonely man and couldn't bear to have her away. I suppose that he felt she was perfectly safe with him."

Knowing him for Lee's sincere friend, Bull did not scruple to hand on the information he had gained from Mrs. Mills. Benson received it with a low, shocked whistle.

"And the poor man had to meet death with that on his mind? She hasn't seen Ramon since the funeral, you say? That speaks well for him. He tried to go, just now, too. He's not half bad. But when it's a question of marrying Lee, no Mexican need apply. But come on back in. She'll pick out in a second that we're talking about them."

During the lively chatter that whiled away the afternoon; at supper when the cake appeared in a glory of radiant candles; while the young folks laughed and chatted thereafter under the lighted *portales*, the two stealthily watched Lee and Ramon. Sliver and Jake having retired early,

Bull and Benson engaged in an interminable game of poker which left them free to discuss the proposed defensive alliance without neglecting their watch.

Before night fell the girls had distributed candles here and there among the foliage which now transmuted their waxen gleam into a greenish incandescence. Behind the creeper that fell in a cascade from the roof, the lamplit *portales* gleamed in half-circles of gold. The massed cluster of a bougainvillea dripped clotted blood down the façade of the gate arch. As the girls moved under the golden arches opposite, their white dresses might easily have been the fluttering wings of giant tropical moths, and, noting it, Benson paused in filling his hand.

"It's like a beautiful stage setting."

Bull's nod took in the bright faces, soft laughter, happy chatter. With a slow, indulgent smile he musingly watched the secret glances between the two pairs of lovers; artless subterfuges by which the girls achieved small personal contacts.

"Don't take much to make 'em happy, does it? A little laughter an' a little song; plenty of chatter an' some pretty clothes; a baby to love and a man to boss; 'tain't much, but Lordy, how many of 'em don't get it. If men 'u'd on'y keep on admiring in their wives the things they liked in their sweethearts, the divorce courts 'u'd go out of business. If I had a daughter, I'd marry her to a boot-black that understood the nature of women ahead of a merchant prince; for a man that says to his wife at breakfast, 'Why, how pretty you look this morning!' is a-going to get a reward that can't be bought with a million."

Just then Phoebe Lovell's clear voice floated across the *patio*. "What a lovely night! Let's go for a walk."

"All right. Wait till I get a shawl."

As the others moved off, Lee ran back into her room. They had passed through the gateway when she came out again, except Ramon, who took the shawl and threw it over her shoulders. For a few moments they stood talking under the lamplit *portal*, and, though the conversation was quite ordinary, the glow in his big dark eyes was sufficiently revealing. As Lee's back was turned toward them, her face told nothing. But just before they moved off she reached up and straightened the lapel of Ramon's coat.

Bull frowned. "D'you really think she's in love?"

Benson shrugged. "When a girl fusses with a young man's clothes she doesn't hate him."

Bull broke a second frowning pause. "You've knowed her almost all her life. Kedn't you put in a word?"

The Englishman made a wry face. "I did, about six months ago, when I first noticed this thing starting. But never again!" He laughed, a little self-consciously. "I never had any one sauce me so in all my life. Told me that it was none of my damn business; to go home and boss my poor wife. Said that she preferred Mexicans to English, anyway. Phe-e-ew! I never think of it, even now, without aching to spank her. No, counsel wouldn't help her."

"But she simply kain't be allowed to go ahead an' marry him." Bull's coal eyes flashed with the old wicked gleam. "Before that I'd—lay for him an' shoot him."

Benson regarded him dryly. "Your plan has the advantage of finality, but—it would lead to reprisals. Old Icarza stands well with Valles. If anything happened to his beloved son we'd be wiped out so completely there'd be no one left to mourn us. But why worry? We don't know for sure whether she even loves him. Give me two cards. I raise you three blues."

For two hours thereafter the two played and talked, arranging a code of smoke signals by day, beacons by night, to warn the *haciendas*. But under it Bull's thought still revolved around Lee and her problem. The party had returned from the walk, and Lee was shooing all her guests off to bed before his brow cleared and he uttered a low chuckle.

"What's the matter?" Benson looked up in surprise.

"Oh, jest something I was thinking of. I raise you two reds."

Not until Jake woke up when Bull entered the bunkhouse did his secret thought find expression. "Sure I noticed it," he answered Jake's remark concerning Lee's "likin' for that Mexican." "But leave it to me."

"What d'you allow to do?"

This time Bull laughed outright. "Mrs. Mills was saying, t'other day, that we'd have to import a rival. 'Tain't sech a bad idea."

"What d'you reckon to do—put an ad in the paper 'Wanted, a husband?'"

"Never you mind," Bull quietly replied to the cynical comment. "I'm going, to-morrow, up to El Paso."

X: WANTED—A HUSBAND

Departures are usually cheerless affairs, but the morning sun loosed a flood of gold into the *patio* where the party was in process of dissolution. William Benson had left with Jake and Sliver, when they went out on the range, so Bull sat and smoked alone.

It was very pleasant there. His after-breakfast pipe was always the sweetest of the day, and while puffing contentedly Bull observed with an indulgent grin two small brown *criadas*, darting with needle and thread and pins from room to room with first-aid-to-injured habits; the transparent flirtations, stealthy glances after the girls came out; the beauty of innocent sex, of youth in love—set his big rough heart aglow. The girls, with keen instinct for honest feeling, felt it. The young men, with natural respect for quiet power, admired his kindness and strength. Their farewells and invitations were hearty and sincere.

"You've promised and promised and never come yet—that is, for a real visit," Phoebe and Phyllis rebuked him.

The young men earnestly charged him, "We look to you to take care of our girls till we're in shape to look after them ourselves."

Not till the Icarzas bid him good-by did that kindly glow fade. Even when Isabel slid a small soft hand into his huge paw and turned on him the full power of her big Spanish eyes while uttering lovely felicities, he remained non-committal. He frowned hearing Lee accept an invitation for a visit in the near future. But when she came in, after they left, the hostile look had faded.

"Oh, didn't we have a lovely time?" She patted his arm. "And it was all due to you."

"And now I'll take my pay. I want to go up to El Paso."

"Oh, I'm so glad!" Darting into her room, she came running back with a fat roll of bills. "I felt dreadfully, yesterday, because you and Mr. Sliver and Mr. Jake had to wear your working-clothes. While you are in El Paso I want you to buy a nice suit apiece."

Now fine raiment, even of the vogue of the Western cow towns, was the last thing in the world that Bull's heart desired. But she looked so pretty in her earnestness, he found it hard to refuse. His laugh rumbled through the *patio*.

"Now that's real nice of you. But back up at the mine we've all got store clothes to burn. One o' these days, when the work ain't so pressing, Sliver kin ride over an' get 'em. Fifty'll be all I'll need."

"Oh *dear!*" she gave in, with a little disappointed sigh. "I did want to do something; you've all been so kind."

But she made up for the disappointment by busy preparations for his comfort. She packed her own suit-case with socks and clean shirts, then bossed the job while her *criadas* brushed and curried and sponged him. After tying one of her father's cravats around his neck she turned him round and round like a mother inspecting a school-boy, finally dismissed him with a gentle pat.

On the Mexican Central, trains were running, as Bull put it, "be how an' when," but fortune favored him. Catching a mixed freight and passenger at the burned station that midnight, he camped down on the rear platform to avoid the fetor of unwashed bodies and tobacco smoke exhaled by the mixture of *peones*, revolutionary soldiers, and fat Mexican *comerciantes* that jammed the only first-class car. When he fell asleep he could make out the dim outlines of another form that evolved under the light of the following morning into an American war correspondent.

"Morning, friend," he greeted Bull, cordially. "My name is Naylor. Yours? Glad to meet you, Mr. Perrin. Now if you'll tip this water-bottle for me, I'll do the same by you, and we can take off at least one layer of dust and cinders."

The operations placed them at once on terms that would have taken years to establish in civilization's cultured circles. Before it was over, Bull had learned that his companion was "on a little *pasear* between revolutionary battles," and had given, in return, some inkling of his own affairs. The young fellow's lithe, spare figure, clean face, fearless gray eyes, impressed him strongly, and while the train ambled along through the scrubby desert of sand and cactus toward Juarez, he eyed and estimated and measured him with a care that attracted, at last, the other's attention.

"Hey!" he demanded. "Is my nose out of plumb, or what?"

Bull warded off offense with the truth. "I happened to be looking for a man about your size."

Any chance of your changing your job?"

"That depends." The correspondent answered, breezily, but with caution. "Without being what you could call wedded to this sandy, thirsty, cutthroat business of Mexican revolutions, I like it better than anything else in sight. But what's your lay? Ranching?" He repeated it after Bull. "In central Chihuahua? Forget it, friend."

Bull eyed him wistfully. He fitted so closely to specifications. Finally, in desperation, he opened his simple heart; was explaining his quest when the young fellow burst out laughing.

"I beg your pardon." He raised a protesting hand against Bull's black glower, then went on with sympathetic seriousness: "But you'll have to admit that one doesn't see a man of your build every day in this matrimonial business. So there's a damsel in distress, hey? That alters the case. If it wasn't for a little girl up in San Francisco that I expect to marry some day when I become very rich and famous, I'd try and help you out, for I know just how you feel. It would be a damned shame to have her throw herself away on a Mexican. But you've laid yourself out some job. Not that you won't be able to find men, good-looking chaps at that. But to get the right one calls for some picking and choosing. But I tell you what I will do—I shall be up for a week and I'd love to give you a hand."

"Sure you kedn't tackle it yourself?"

The young fellow denied the wistful appeal. "Hombre! a million wouldn't release my girl's mortgage."

With a regretful sigh Bull struck hands on the compact. While they were talking the train had ambled through the brown adobe skirts of Juarez, the squalid Mexican town across the Rio Grande, whence they were presently shot by automobile over the international bridge into the spacious bosom of El Paso's largest hotel. Bull had calculated to go out, at once, on his search, but while they sat at breakfast there descended upon them a host of reporters and correspondents, ravenous for news and aching to dispense hospitality.

"Might as well put it off till to-morrow, Diogenes." His friend had already named Bull after the person who had such a deuce of a time hunting an honest man among the grafters and ward heelers of ancient Greece. "We'll devote to-day to the irrigation of our desiccated systems, then go to it mañana like hungry dogs. But safety first! Take a ten out of your wad and give the rest to the clerk."

Instead of one day, however, three passed during which Bull's huge bulk upreared alongside a hundred bars. In all that time he never went to bed, for, intensified by long abstinence, the outbreak proved unusually virulent. Generally the conclusion of his debauches found him broke. But, thanks to the correspondent's prevision, he awoke on the fourth morning, in bed at the hotel, with the bulk of his money still in the office safe. While he was draining the water-jug according to time-honored precedents, his friend appeared in the doorway of the adjoining room. His own head was swathed in a wet towel that almost hid his rueful grin.

"One never knows what one is starting. You certainly went the limit, Diogenes. Are you quite sure you're through?"

Bull nodded and put down the jug with a satisfied sigh. "It's a bit of a strain, this fathering an' mothering a lone girl, a feller's gotter keep so straight." He added, apologetically, "I was jest plumb ripe for a bust, but I reckon this orter hold me for another three months."

"Very well, then, let's get down to work. At intervals, while I could still see, I kept one eye open for possibles. But it's like looking for gold or diamonds; the supply doesn't touch the demand. The few prospects all proved to have attachments in the shape of sweetheart or wife. Good ones, I suppose, are so rare that the girls grab them at sight like marked-down waists on a bargain-counter."

After two days of vain search through the plazas and parks, hotel lobbies, streets, and bars of El Paso, Bull was almost driven to the same conclusion. Short men, tall men, thin men, broad men; some that were ugly, others handsome; well and ill clad from all walks of life—passed under his observation. The few he trailed were either engulfed within the sacred precincts of some bank or met at the doors of suburban bungalows and there warmly kissed by young and pretty wives. Without fulfilling the specifications called for in the potential husband, it would have been difficult enough to have enlisted an ordinary ranch hand for service across the line. At the close of the second day Bull reported as much to the correspondent when they met in the hotel lobby.

"Guess I'll have to give it up."

"Now if *that* was only free." The other bowed, just then, to a young man who had just walked in from the street. "Look at him! Five-eleven in his socks, hazel eyes, brown hair, good strong jaw, flat shoulders and flanks, deep chest; walks the earth like he owned it. Some dresser, too."

That mixed plaid cost a hundred at his New York tailor's."

"Some banker's son, I'll bet you," Bull grumbled.

"That or better. I had a little chat with him this morning. A 'varsity man by his accent and manner. Seemed to know the Mexican situation down to the ground from the Wall Street end, so papa's probably a broker. Holy snakes! Look at that! Neat work! Neat work!"

Walking up to the counter, the young man had held out his hand—evidently for the key of his room—while his indifferent gaze traveled around the lobby. The clerk, who departed in no wise from the casual specifications of his supercilious breed, glanced at the hand contemptuously. Turning, the young man spoke. Then as, without glancing up, the clerk answered, he snatched, hauled that superior person across the counter, and slammed him down hard on the floor. Next, as they came on, he felled one large door porter and three oversized bell-boys who had answered the clerk's yell. This done, he waited, expectantly, quietly surveying the wreck, the hazel eye admired by Naylor transmuted into hard steel flecked with dots of brown light.

Jaw, eyes, pose, all said, "Next!" But the "wreck" was complete. The oversized bell-boys ran off to answer imaginary calls. An automobile party at the door called for the porter's attention. Deserted, the clerk swiftly retreated behind his counter, behind which, from a safe distance, he issued defiant mutterings. With a slight nod that expressed comprehension and satisfaction, Hazel-Eyes sauntered across the lobby out into the street.

All had passed in the time required for the correspondent to reach the desk. He was back again in five seconds. "He's broke—owes two weeks' room rent. Clerk told him to get out; hence the scrap. Diogenes, we're in luck! Venus and Cupid are in the ascendant. He's our meat."

Grabbing Bull's arm, he hustled him outside, where they spied the quarry turning up a cross-street that led to the plaza. When he finally settled down on an empty bench, the correspondent nudged Bull in the ribs.

"Look at them!" He indicated the hundreds of men idling on the benches or sprawled out on the turf. "Last refuge of the broke, home of the out-of-works. That settles it. Bet you he hasn't the price of a meal. But, say! he's plucky. The beggar is actually smiling."

From the way in which the young fellow's glance wandered around the assembled out-of-works, it was easy to see that he rather enjoyed the novel situation. When Bull had noted and commented on the fact, the correspondent went on:

"Now, Diogenes, we must proceed with due regard for the traditions. When grand dukes, princes, and caliphs in disguise befriend some worthy person, they invariably begin by testing his honesty—see *Arabian Nights* and other authorities. Split a couple of tens off your wad and drop them as you stroll past him. I'll stay here and watch lest he be found wanting."

Bull managed it, too, quite cleverly, scraping the bills out of his pocket along with his tobacco-pouch. Watching closely, the correspondent saw the young fellow look, pick them up, then run and tap Bull's shoulder. Leaning back, he shook with silent laughter.

"And they say romance is dead," his thought ran. "*Dead!* while this big, black giant stalks around like a knight of old seeking a perfect husband for a girl he's known only a few weeks. Diogenes, my friend, Don Quixote had nothing on you. Of all the lovely, fine pieces of idiocy that ever helped to raise us out of the muck of commercialism, this is the very finest. And wouldn't it be queer if it worked? It's almost too good to be true, and yet—a girl that can move a man to do things like that must be remarkably worth while. Quien sabe? Perhaps it will end like all true romances, with a happy marriage."

Till the two settled down side by side on a bench, the correspondent watched. Then with a satisfied nod he rose and walked out of Bull's life in the same casual way he had entered it; to return once more, however, at a critical juncture, many months later.

Thus left to his own devices, Bull carried on the campaign with diplomacy quite foreign to his Goliath makeup. From thanks and casual observations anent the weather, he led by gradual stages to labor conditions as exemplified by the surrounding out-of-works. His simulated astonishment when the young fellow claimed community with them was remarkably well done.

"*No-o-o!*" he protested.

"Sure!" the other nodded. "I was turned out of my hotel only half an hour ago."

Quite in the fashion of grand dukes and caliphs, Bull still pretended doubt. "Broke, mebbe, but you don't belong with these. What was it? Wine, weemen, or cyards?"

The young fellow grinned a little ruefully. "A woman, yes, but not in the usual way. What would you think if I told you—But, pshaw! what's the use? It would sound to you just like any other out-of-work fairy-tale. Well, it may amuse you. If you really want to know, I'm here, busted and broke, because I refused a hundred thousand dollars' worth of gilt-edged securities and real

estate."

"A hundred thousand!" Bull's financial acquaintance having rarely risen above the sixty-a-month class, he could not repress his surprise.

"There, I told you. Nevertheless, it is true. I am here because I refused a hundred thousand—with a girl attached."

Bull's face fell. "I see. Folks wanted you to marry her an' you refused beca'se you'd already picked one for yourself."

The young man nodded. "Correct except in one or two particulars. I disliked the girl so much that her money couldn't tempt me. As for the one I'll marry, I haven't picked her yet. But I mean to when I'm taken that way."

Bull's face lit up with hope again as, with naïve frankness, the young fellow went into details; told how his father had set his heart on a marriage that would unite the wealth of two families. The girl, an only daughter, was desirable; pretty, accomplished, played, sang, and all that! They had been brought up almost like brother and sister, and there was the hitch!

"For a fellow doesn't want to marry his sister," he explained. "I know her so well she hasn't a surprise in her hand. When I hook up, it will be with a girl that can bowl me over at first sight and keep me guessing forever after. But the Relieving Officer"—he broke off, laughing at Bull's puzzled look—"that's my name for my father. He was always coming through when I got in debt at college, hence the title. He's a good old scout, but obstinate as—as—"

"—yourself?" Bull suggested.

"Right-o! Well, you know what happens when the irresistible force hits the immovable obstacle—something busts. That was me. Without even the last check the stern parent presents to the undutiful son in melodrama, I got. Of course the dear old gentleman wouldn't have me suffer. He supposed I'd presently come home to partake of the fatted calf; and just for fear that I might, I took my last money and bought a ticket West. So here I am, without money and without friends. Add it up and subtract the result—pick and shovel. I see them looming in the future."

"Oh, shore!" The caliph—that is, Bull—was proceeding very cautiously. "You'll get a job in some bank."

"Don't believe it. You see, I'd just come home from Princeton and had no commercial training. Anyway, I'd rather work in the open, ranching, or something like that. If I had a little capital, I'd buy in. As I haven't, I'm open for any kind of a job. But there, again, I've got no experience further than the fact that I can ride a horse. I'm afraid it's pick and shovel."

The abused and hackneyed psychological moment had arrived! The net was spread, the twigs limed, the cage door open! With great artfulness Bull proceeded to shoo the bird inside. He knew of a job—in fact, it was on the same *hacienda* where he worked himself! Of course it had the disadvantage of being located in Mexico, across the line where nothing was certain but death and "requisitions"! And there was always the chance of a scrap! He, Bull, wouldn't advise any one to try it that had too strong a grip on this life, for there was no saying just when one might be launched into "Kingdom Come." But for a man who liked action and would take a fighting chance—so forth and so on.

A disinterested listener would have thought these and kindred inducements were eminently fitted to scare the bird away. If so—Bull did not want him. But, sizing him for a lad of spirit with the romantic outlook of his years, he counted on their appeal. Nor was he mistaken. He had finished telling of Carleton's death at the hands of the Colorados, and was relating the accidental manner in which he and his *compañeros* had assumed the guardianship of Lee, when the young fellow thrust out his hand.

"Say, that's fine, old man! I'd be proud to have you take me in. My name is Nevil—Gordon Nevil, at your service. When do we start?"

"Whenever the train goes, an' that's be guess an' be God. It's billed to pull out from Juarez this evening, but we'll be lucky if it leaves before morning. But sometimes they do make a mistake an' start almost on time. So we'll go aboard to-night."

"What about clothes?" The recruit glanced down with distaste and dismay at his fashionable tweeds. "I can't punch cows in these."

"Hardly," Bull grinned. "You'd come out from your first bunch of pear chaparral naked as on the day you were born. Come on an' we'll see about an outfit."

It was found without any trouble in a convenient Jew store, and Gordon changed into it there and then. In cord riding-breeches, a brown army shirt, shoes, and leather puttees, topped with a conical cowman's hat, his length of limb, flat flanks, deep chest, appeared to even better advantage. Bull's expression, looking him over, would have fitted a match-making mama

surveying a pretty daughter arrayed for her début. His comment, "You'll do," would have surprised the recipient could he have divined all of its implications.

Thoroughly satisfied, Bull was producing the money to pay, when Gordon stopped him. "Here, you can't do that!"

"But you're broke."

"I still have these." He held out the tweeds. "How much boot do I get, Father Abraham?"

Already the Jew had felt with secret rumblings of the material, but he stood for his tradition. "Only vot iss on your feet. These ain'd much good. But you are a nice young veller. I make it an even trade."

"You'll chuck in that pair of chaps?"

With the customary grumblings that he would be ruined by his own generosity, the Hebrew eventually complied. While his customers were stowing away the *chapparros* and a few extras in a slop-bag, he made out a ticket for the suit, and pausing on their way out, their late owner read the legend which announced to the world that it was to be had very cheap for twenty-nine dollars and ninety cents.

Gordon burst into a merry laugh. "Father Abraham isn't on to real clothes. They stung me a hundred and ten for that in New York."

XI: GORDON'S DÉBUT

Starting "be guess an' be God," the train left Juarez at five the next morning. To avoid, as before, the jam in the one passenger-coach, Bull had climbed with his recruit on top of a box-car. Thus, when awakened by the jerk and rattle as the train plunged down and out of the first "shoo-fly" around a burned bridge; Gordon saw his first dawn break over the desert with a clear, fresh vision, intimacy of detail that could never be obtained through a Pullman window.

It was altogether different from the slow sunrises of his Eastern experience. A puff of hot, dry wind shook the velvet curtains of night, tossed and split them into shreds of black and crimson, suddenly revealing a wall of burnished brass behind. As yet the desert slept in purple shadow. But this paled to faint violet, then gray. As the sun rolled up out of crimson mists, the land appeared in all of its nakedness of hummocky sand a-bristle with cactus beard. There was also revealed the first of the burned trains and twisted rails which, with grave crosses and dead horses, were to run all day with the train, startling evidence of the cyclonic passion that had devastated the land.

"Destruction's the one kind of work a Mexican really enjoys," Bull answered Gordon's question. "You orter see them at it. They run the loop of a big steel chain under the rails, hitch it to a hundred-ton engine, then go shooting down the track, ripping it up at twenty miles an hour, spikes flying like sparks from a blacksmith's hammer. After cutting down the telegraph-poles, they hitch to the wires an' yank a mile of it away at a time. As wreckers, they can't be beat, for in four years they've completely destroyed mills, factories, smelters, railroads, property that took Porfirio Diaz and a thousand millions of foreign capital forty years to build."

"Are they still at it?"

The sudden illumination of the young man's face so palpably expressed hope that Bull had to grin. "Yes, farther south, where Valles is fighting the Federals. But this is his base line and he looks after it pretty close. Still"—his nod went beyond the distant mountains—"it's pretty much all bandit out there. Now an' then they attack the trains. There's allus a fifty-fifty chance for a scrap."

"That isn't so bad."

Bull grinned again as the young fellow turned with renewed interest to the scenery.

In comparison with the eons of time which have elapsed since man first took to walking uprightly, his written history is as a lightning flash in the night; civilization itself but a film over passions and instincts violent and deep. Now that every bunch of cactus offered a possible ambush, Gordon experienced a new sensation. Over the desert, vague as its shimmering heat,

invisible but real, settled that atmosphere of fear in which primitive man, in common with all animals, lived and moved and had his being.

The wrecks occurred almost invariably near cuttings through shallow sand-hills. From the cactus chaparral that clothed their tops, the revolutionary lightnings had struck sometimes twice or thrice; and when the train ran into one, Gordon would feel a prickling at the roots of his hair.

It was not fear. Some centuries ago his hair would have bristled like the ruff of an angry dog. Through disuse it had lost the knack. But the feeling was the same, the expectancy, repressed excitement of an animal expecting attack. The veneer of home and college influences had peeled away, leaving him the young male of the tribe, eager to prove himself by deeds; the commonplace exit of the train on the other side left him always slightly disappointed. Not till it finally ran out of the hummocky sand into the far-reaching levels of the great Mexican *haciendas* did he lose hope and return to the contemplation of the scenery as such.

"I'm glad we're up here." From the engine, puffing away at the head of a dozen intervening coal-cars, he looked back at the passenger-coach far to their rear. "I wouldn't exchange this for a Pullman."

"Well, don't imagine that you're traveling second-class," Bull grinned. "I had to slip the conductor five pesos extra. But it's worth it. You'd suffocate down in that car; not to mention the chance of some *peon* spitting in your face. By the way, if that ever happens to you, take it an' grin. Sure!" He answered the young fellow's look of disgust. "That is, unless you want to feel a knife in your belly. If you're German or English, or b'long to any other nationality that looks after its people, you might resent it an' get away. But, thanks to our Government's policy, it's open season for Americans all the year round. They bag a few, too, every so long."

"Would *you* stand for that?"

Bull shrugged. "Kain't say, till I've been tried. But it's good advice, nevertheless. Seeing, though, that you don't like it, you'd better be toting a gun. Take one of mine till we get home.

"Here, here!" he hastily struck down the barrel as Gordon drew a bead on a telegraph-pole. "Valles shot eight of his own soldiers jest t'other day for plugging insulators. Besides, it's waste. Every bullet is worth a life—mebbe your own."

"Maybe his own!" Again Gordon felt the prickling hair—in fact, as they rattled and jerked along there was scarcely a mile of the road that failed to produce it. Here it was a station, sacked, and burned, with a few miserable *peonas*, ragged and half-starved, begging for *centavos*. There a huddle of bones, residue of a hanged wire-thief, at the foot of a telegraph-pole. A broken rifle-butt, rusted cartridge-clip, empty brass shell, told with eloquent tongues stories of which Bull supplied the details.

Somewhere between these two stations a Mexican general, a prisoner of war, had been thrust down between two cars and ground under the wheels! That great adobe house with black windows staring like empty eye sockets from the fire-scarred walls had been the home of a Spanish *hacendado* whose three lovely daughters had been carried off by raiders. Death and torture, ravishments, farms laid waste, lives maimed and ruined, the full tale of fire and sword belonged in the landscape.

Yet to youth, egotistic masculine youth, even horrors may be romantic. Awed pleasure inhered in the thought that he, so lately from Princeton, the spoiled son of a wealthy father, was a possible subject for bandit tortures!

He found it all so fascinating that the day passed like an hour. Before he was aware of it the sun's great red orb sank behind a huge black mountain. The desert faded once more to gray, violet, purple. For a while the oil smoke from the laboring locomotive laid miles of soft dark pennon against a crimson sky. Then this also faded and left them rattling along through heated dusk. Sprawled at length on the running-board, the young fellow gazed up at the fiery desert stars, in a luxury of content. He was lost to the world when the train stopped at the station at midnight.

"We'd better go right on," Bull said. "We'd get no sleep here for the fleas, an' desert travel is easiest at night. By morning we'll be into the grass country an' kin take a nap while the animals graze."

With an additional horse hired from the Mexican station agent they moved off at once and had passed into the range country before day broke over its long grassy rolls. Breakfast, a nap, then three hours' more travel brought them to the shallow valley where the Three first saw Lee and Carleton charging the Colorados. Indeed, Bull was telling of it when, just as on that other day, she came galloping over the opposite rise in chase of a runaway mare with a colt at its side. *Riata* swinging in rhythm with her beast's stride, she shot down the slope, made her cast, took a

turn around the saddle-horn and brought the captive up skilfully as any *vaquero*.

"Pretty neat!" Gordon exclaimed. "That boy can ride!"

"You bet you!" Eyes sparkling with pride, Bull slyly added, "Sliver himself, that was born with a rope in his han', don't throw a better loop than Miss Lee."

"*What?*" As, sighting them just then, Lee swung her hat, emitting a clear cowman's yell, her knotted hair fell down on her shoulders, Gordon exclaimed, "Why, it—it *is* a girl! In this country do they usually wear—"

"No more 'n they do in the Eastern States," Bull dryly filled in the hiatus. "On one thing the Maine Methodist jines hands with the Mexican Catholic—they both cover their weemen from chin to toe-p'int. Ever sence the revolution, Miss Lee's been doing *vaquero*'s work, an' what kind of a job d'you reckon she'd make of it going 'round in skirts? If you don't mind, I'll ride on an' help her with that critter."

The light that had flashed over the girl's face at the sight of Bull spread into an illumination that included white teeth, mouth, and sparkling eyes when he rode up. She thrust out her hand with an impulsive feeling.

"Oh, I'm *so* glad you have come home! I missed you dreadfully."

"*Home!*" And she was happy because he, "Bull" Perrin, the notorious rustler, had returned *home!* Earth held no terror that could have sent that tremble through his huge frame. It was with difficulty that he controlled his voice.

"Anything wrong? Sliver or Jake been misbehaving?"

"Indeed, no!" She laughed, merrily. "They're like two old hens 'tending an orphan chick. But—well, you know a girl, even as independent as I, must have some one to lean on, and I was uneasy while you were gone."

A dew of moisture quenched the brown fire in the giant's eyes. His sudden seriousness issued from a vivid memory of his late debauch. Whereas for twenty years past they had been matters of course to be forgotten with the passing of the morning head, he now felt convicted of sin. The shadow marked a resolution.

He spoke very gently. "I hope that you'll allus feel that way." Then, with mock sternness that covered deep emotion, he went on: "But what are you doing out here on your lonely? Some one will get a wiggling for this."

She laughed saucily up in his face. "Then it is due to me. I gave them the slip. Who is—" She nodded toward Gordon, who had almost caught up.

Bull briefly sketched his history. "Young chap I found dead broke in El Paso. He's the right sort." Perhaps because he divined the probable effect on her feminine psychology, he added: "He's from the East—college man—wealthy family—turned out because he refused to marry a fortune. I tol' him you'd likely hire him."

"I would in ordinary times." She looked at Gordon, who had now reined in. "But I cannot pay regular wages just now."

"He's willing to wait, like us," Bull began. "He's—"

"—out for experience," Gordon put in. "To tell the truth, Miss Carleton, I am absolutely green. I doubt whether you'll find me worth my board."

He had doffed his hat and the attitude of respect accentuated the quiet reserve of his tone and manner. After a thoughtful pause, during which she took him in from top to toe in a quick, feminine survey, she broke out with a comical little laugh. "If it wasn't so nice, it would be ridiculous. While the gringos on other haciendas are simply streaking for the border, you men insist on working here for nothing. Whatever is the matter with you?"

She may have read the answer in Gordon's eyes and resented the indignity it offered her independence. Or the feeling underneath her sudden stiffening may have rooted deeper. Be a young man ever so comely, a girl ever so pretty, there will flash between them on first meeting the subtle challenge of sex; instinctive defiance based through love's history to the far time when every girl ran like a deer from a possible lover and only gave in after he had proved his manhood by carrying her off. It passed in a flash, for, noticing her stiffen, Gordon reduced his gaze to respectful attention.

Subtle as it was, Bull had still noticed the by-play. "Looks like she'd taken a down on him."

But even as the doubt formed in his mind it was removed by her laughing comment: "I suppose I'll have to stand for it. But you must be starving. Let us get on to the house."

As they rode along, moreover, Bull noted certain swift, stealthy glances with which she took complete census of Gordon's clean profile, strong jaw, deep chest, flat flanks; signs of a secret and healthy curiosity.

"She's a-setting up an' taking notice." He winked, as it were, at himself. "I reckon, Bull, you kin leave the rest to natur'."

XII: THE RECRUIT IS TRIED OUT—IN SEVERAL WAYS

"Well, what do you-all think of him?"

Bull's question emerged from the thick tobacco reek which invariably mitigated the severity of their evening deliberations.

It pertained, of course, to the new recruit, concerning whose merits or demerits Jake and Sliver had reserved judgment during this, his first week. When they had come from supper straight to the bunk-house, Gordon had taken his pipe and gone for a stroll around the compound, which was never more interesting than when clothed in the mystery of a hot brown dusk. The lights and fires, like golden or scarlet blossoms; the soft brown faces glimpsed in cavernous interiors by the rich glow of a *brasero*; the women's subdued chatter; laughter wild and musical as the cooing of wood-pigeons—all had for him perpetual fascination; and while he sauntered here and there, looking, listening, the Three held session on his case.

"What do we think of him?" Jake slowly repeated the question. "It's a bit soon to jedge, but if he's half as good as he looks, he orter do."

Sliver, however, was more critical. "Too darned nice-looking fer me. I hain't got much use for these pretty boys."

"*Pretty* yourself!" Bull swelled like a huge toad with indignation. "He ain't no pretty boy! You-all orter ha' seen him clan up that hotel lobby in El Paso."

"A *ho*-tel clerk, an' some bell-hops!" Sliver sneered. "Why, a good cowman 'u'd jest about as soon think of hitting a lady. 'Fore I allow him even a look-in with Lady-girl, he's gotter show me. If you-all ain't afraid he'll spoil, jest send him an' me out together to-morrow."

"All right, señor, he's your meat." Bull's grin, provoked by a sudden memory of the thwack with which the hotel clerk had hit the lobby floor, was veiled by tobacco reek that reigned beyond the lamp's golden glimmer. "Only, don't chew him. Kain't afford to have his scenery damaged."

"Nary a chew," Sliver agreed. "Twon't be necessary. I'll take him in two swallows."

In this wise was Gordon apprenticed to Sliver for the period of one day, to learn, in course thereof, such lessons in cow and other kinds of punching as it might bring forth. When they two rode out, armed cap-a-pie as it were, with rifles, saddle *machetes*, and a brace of Colt automatics, in addition to the usual cowman's fixings, it is doubtful whether North America held a happier young man than he. Out of the thousand and one lovers who had awakened to the knowledge that this was their wedding-day, some might have been equally happy. But none more so, for Gordon was also espoused—to Adventure, the sweetest bride of real men. It may be safely stated that no bride ever surveyed her trousseau with more satisfaction than Gordon displayed in his "chaps," spurs, guns, and *riata*.

This enthusiasm, however, he cloaked with a becoming nonchalance. He wasn't in any hurry to tell all he knew. His few questions were to the point, and between them he maintained a decent reserve. Also he adapted himself quickly to new requirements. Sliver observed with satisfaction that, after one telling, his pupil abandoned the Eastern, high-trotting, park fashion in riding and settled down to a cowman's lope. In fact, so quiet and biddable was he, Sliver began to feel secret qualms at the course he had marked out for himself; had to steel his resolution with thoughts of Lee.

"'Twon't do to have no pretty boys pussy-footing around her," he told himself. "He's gotter show me, an' if he don't—out he goes."

Opportunity soon presented itself in the shape of a momentary relapse, on Gordon's part, into the old habit of riding. Sliver seized it with brutal roughness.

"Hey! that milk-shake business may go with missies in pants that ride the parks back East, but if you-all expect to work this range you'll have to try an' look like a man."

Gordon stared. It wasn't so much the words as the accent that established the insult. Just as

Bull had seen in El Paso, his hazel eyes were suddenly transmuted into hard blue steel flecked with hot brown specks. Sliver felt sure he was going to strike; experienced sudden disappointment when he rode on.

"*Santa Maria Marrissima Me!*" He swore to himself in sudden alarm. "Is he a-going to swallow it?" But the next moment brought relief. Gordon was rising in his stirrups with the regularity of a machine.

With the quick instinct of sturdy manhood, Sliver sensed the motive, the wise hesitancy of a new-comer in starting trouble. "Calculated it would get him in wrong with Lady-girl. He's putting it up to me!"

Even more loath, now, to push than he had been to begin the quarrel, there was nothing left but to go on. So, riding alongside Gordon, he began to deliver himself of a forcible opinion concerning his mode of riding. "Why, you blankety, blank, blank of a blank—"

The rest of it was cut off by a crack between the eyes that toppled him out of the saddle. He was up again, hard eyes flashing, as Gordon leaped down, and as he rushed, broad round body swaying above his short hairy chaps, Sliver looked for all the world like a charging bear.

A clever writer once described a terrific combat between two sailors in two words, "Poor McNab!" Sliver was almost as terse in describing his defeat to Bull and Jake that evening.

"Gentlemen, hush! He leaned over as I took my holt, grabbed me round the waist from behind, straightened, an' away I flew over his shoulder an' kem down spread-eagled all over the grass, plumb knocked out."

Returning to the combat: When Sliver gathered his shocked wits together and sat up, Gordon stood looking down upon him, hands on his hips, quiet, determined, yet with an inquisitive twinkle in his eye.

Sliver answered the twinkle. "Say, that was sure a lallapaloo. I've wrestled with bears an' once choked a cougar till he was gol-darned anxious to quit. But I draw the line at earthquakes. If you-all 'll please to tell how you done it, I'll shake han's an' call it squar'."

"Done!" Gordon broke out in a merry laugh. "And I'll promise, on my part, never to ride like that again."

"For which I'll be greatly obliged; that hippity-haw, side-racking gait does sure get on my nerves."

Striking hands upon it, they mounted and rode on.

They were heading for a mountain valley, enormous green bowl hemmed in on all sides, that could only be reached by a single rough trail. Watered by a running stream and knee-deep in lush grass, the difficulty of approach and sequestration rendered it almost raider-proof. But as it afforded pasture for barely a third of Lee's stock, it was their habit to send the animals out in relays to remain under charge of an *anciano* for a week at a time.

As they rode along, Sliver's secret satisfaction revealed itself in many a stealthy glance. At first they expressed that feeling alone, but presently there entered into them a leaven of doubt. Their way now led along the foot of the hog's back from the crest of which Sliver had obtained his first view of the *fonda* on the other side, the discovery of which caused his first lapse from grace. The slight doubt was explained by the thought that accompanied his glance upward at the ridge.

"He's a fine upstan'ing lad an' kin take his own part. But that ain't all. Supposing he drinks? We-all jest kedn't stan' for any young soak around Lady-girl."

In view of his own shortcomings, his grave shake of the head was rather comical. Nevertheless, it was quite sincere; likewise his emendation: "'Course we wouldn't have him no canting prig. He orter be able to take his two fingers like a gentleman, then leave it alone."

Reining in suddenly, he asked, "D'you ever take a drink?"

Gordon looked surprised. "Why, yes, on occasion. But you don't mean to say—"

"Come on!" Sliver's manner was quite that of the "mysterious stranger" of melodrama who demands absolute faith in those he is about to befriend. It is feared, however, that both it and his thought, "It's a fine chance to try him out," cloaked certain strong spirituous desires.

Quarter of an hour's heavy scrambling up and down rutted cattle tracks brought them out in the *fonda* dooryard. From above Gordon had noted its golden walls nestling beside the stream in a bower of foliage. His eyes now went, first to the two *ancianos*, a wrinkled old man and woman, who dozed in the shade of the *ramada*; then to the girl who knelt by the stream pounding her soiled linen on its smooth boulders. Though he knew Spain only through pictures, the tinkling bells of a mule-train going up the cañon added the last touch, vividly raised in his mind the country inns of the Aragonian mountains. But for her darker colors the girl with her shapely poundage might easily have been one of their lusty daughters. She had risen at the sight of

Sliver. With unerring instinct she now walked inside, let down the wooden bar window, and set out a bottle of *tequila*.

Through all, her big dusky eyes never left Gordon. With what would have been brazenness in a white girl she studied him. But her gaze was wide and curious as the stare of a deer, and caused him no offense. When their eyes met, she smiled, but, unskilled in the ways of her kind, he missed both its invitation and question till Sliver put it in words.

"She wants to know who you are an' all about you," he translated her rapid Spanish, in which her small hands, satin arms and shoulders played as large a part as her tongue. "She says her father an' mother are about ready to cash in. If you'll stay here an' be her man, you'll stan' right in line for the *fonda*."

It was sprung so suddenly, Gordon gasped. "Cash in?—the *fonda*? Say! You're fooling?"

Sliver raised his right hand. "Take my oath!"

"Then *she's* fooling."

"Nary!" Sliver grinned. "She's serious as a New England housewife in chase of a bedbug."

Now Gordon's merry laugh rang out. "Is this leap year, or does this sort of thing go all the time down here? Her proposal calls for a priest, I suppose, and a marriage license?"

"Nary." Sliver grinned again. "Ladies of her class get along very nicely without them artificial aids to marriage. All she wants is for you to settle down here with her to housekeeping."

"Why—but—" He still half believed that Sliver was joking; but, looking at the girl, he saw for himself the smoldering flame in her dusky eyes. This time his laugh was a little confused. "Please tell her that I'm dreadfully sorry, that I appreciate the high compliment, and if it wasn't for the fact that I don't expect to stay long in this country I would give her nice offer my most distinguished consideration."

Any further doubts that he might have entertained would have been effectually dispersed by her dark disappointment when Sliver translated. A touch of pity mingled with his amusement; moved him to add, "I hope that you put it nicely."

"Sure," Sliver breezily answered. "I told her that you said for her to go to hell."

"Oh, well"—Gordon recovered his breath again—"at least that puts the whole business beyond further doubt."

"Don't you believe it." Sliver gave a third and last grin. "She says that you-all kin always find her here if you happen to change your mind."

"Now that's very nice." Really pleased under his amusement, Gordon brought the little comedy to a graceful end. Unsnapping the leather watch-fob that bore his initials worked in gold, he laid it in the girl's hand. "A fellow doesn't get a proposal of marriage every day. Tell her for a little remembrance."

"And now for another drink."

But as Sliver reached for the bottle Gordon seized his arm, and any doubts as to his sobriety were removed then and there from the cowman's mind. "You've had two already, and I'm not going to stand by and see you burn your stomach out. Come on, gol darn you! or I'll hand you one."

His smiling good humor removed the offense. Nevertheless, the curious brown specks were floating again in the blue of his eye.

Sliver knew the threat was real. "Just this one?"

"Well, if you'll down it quick and come on."

With feelings that had hovered between gratification at Gordon's sobriety and regret for his own, Sliver drank, bade the girl "Adios," and mounted again. Standing in the doorway, her glance followed them, enwrapping Gordon's upright figure with its dark caress. Just as they crossed the stream at the foot of the path, her face lit with sudden remembrance. Turning at her call they saw her coming at a breathless run.

"Kain't bear the parting," Sliver interpreted the action.

But his grin faded as he listened to her voluble talk. "She says that four strange Mexicans stayed here last night. They didn't belong to this country, an' they questioned her closely about the different haciendas. They were 'specially curious about our horses. Us being gringos an' her Mex, they naturally concluded she'd be ag'in us, and they would have been right but for the fancy she's taken to you. So they opened right up; asked all about the mountain pastures an' whether we kep' a close guard. She says they was heading for there. While I go after 'em, you ride like the mill tails o' hell an' bring out Bull an' Jake."

That crude but strong expression accurately described Gordon's progress homeward. While his beast scrambled like a cat up one side of the ravine, slid like a four-footed avalanche down the

other, and streaked like a shooting star up and down the long earth rolls, he learned more of horsemanship than during all his previous years. Lee, who saw him coming from the upper gallery above the *patio*, nodded her approval. Such haste, of course, had but one interpretation—raiders; and by the time Gordon dashed into the compound she was already mounted and a fresh beast waiting for him.

"They are up in the Cañon del Norte," she answered his inquiry for Bull and Jake. "Come on!"

"You are surely not thinking of—"

Before he could finish, however, she shot under the gate arch; was off at a speed that kept him galloping his hardest to keep her in sight. Not until she slowed down on the rough trail that led into the cañon, within sight of Bull and Jake, who had just roped a foal for branding, did he catch her. But it was just as well, for that which he would have said came with more authority from the lips of Bull.

"All right, Missy. There's on'y four, so you don't need to be skeered. You kin go right back home with Gordon an' leave us to take keer of them."

"Indeed I won't!" she exclaimed, hotly. "I'm going, too! I am! I am!" She cut off his remonstrance. "I am! I am! *I am!*"

It was the first time their wills had clashed. Bull glanced at Jake, who shook his head—not that he required support or intended to waste time in fruitless argument. "You mean that?" His glance, grave with stern disapproval, came back to Lee.

It hurt her. But though her lips quivered, she answered, doggedly: "I do! I *won't* go back."

"Very well. We've no time to waste. Ride on while I cut this foal loose." But as she obeyed, with one flick of the wrist he roped her above the elbows from behind. Then, in spite of angry protests that ended in tears, he cinched her little feet from stirrup to stirrup.

"Now take her home." Handing the lead rope to Gordon, he leaped into the saddle and galloped after Jake.

Till they disappeared, Lee looked after, wavering between anger and tears. Tears won. Bowing her fair head, she wept unreservedly for fully a minute. Realizing then that she was gaining nothing but swollen eyes and a red nose, she stopped crying and turned to Gordon with a little laugh.

"Isn't this ridiculous? Please untie me."

But now she found herself gazing into the sullen face of a young man who, through her, had been cut out of a real fight. He shook his head.

"You *won't*?"

"No."

"Why?"

"You'd go after them."

They looked at each other. Her eyes were now gleaming brightly above two red spots; but he met their gaze with stubborn obstinacy.

"You mean to say that you are going to take me home tied up like a veal calf?"

He nodded.

Biting her lips, she looked at him again. "Do you realize, sir, that you never set eyes on me till a week ago?"

"Sure!"

"Also that you are my hired man?"

He nodded again.

"Very well, you're fired! Now untie this rope, then get off my land!"

But even this was turned against her. "I don't have to. I'm no longer your servant. I'll get off your land, yes—after I've delivered you at your home."

If looks could kill, to use that hackneyed but still expressive term, he would have died there and then. But they don't, and, masking his own disappointment with a hypocritically cheerful whistle, he turned his beast and rode down the cañon, towing her behind.

It was dreadfully humiliating, and, being a girl, she cried some more—this time for sheer anger. But soon her tears dried and she fell into deep musing. Soon a small smile restored its softness to her mouth. Her voice, seductively pleasant, mingled with the tramp of hoofs. "Won't you *please* untie me? The rope is hurting my arms."

He stopped, pulled her horse up alongside, and as he began to fumble with the ropes she turned her head so that he could not see her smile. It was transmuted into a flash of fury when, finding the rope a little loose, he drew it tighter.

"I thought you were a gentleman!" she shot it viciously at his back as he rode on. "Gentlemen

don't tie up ladies!"

"Ladies don't fire men for obeying orders. You needn't think I'm enjoying this. Just because you shoved in where you were not wanted, I have to go back."

She did not like that, either. What girl would? Once more she bit her lip, yet, for all her anger, a touch of respect mingled with her resentment. Concerned principally with his own disappointment, he rode on without looking back and so missed the little persistent wriggles by which she gradually freed one hand. Soon she was able, by leaning forward, to reach and draw her saddle *machete*. Indeed, she worked with such caution that he got his first warning when, with one slash, she cut the rope between them. By the time he had swung his beast around she was going like the wind back up the cañon.

Her mocking laughter came floating back.

XIII: AMERICAN RUSTLERS VS. MEXICAN RAIDERS

Shoving rapidly into the mountains, Sliver ascended with the trail in a couple of hours through upland growth of *piñon* and juniper to the height of land, a pass riven by earthquake or subsidence between twin jagged peaks, from where he overlooked the valley pasture.

Like a great jade bowl, bisected by the silver line of a stream, its wide green circle, miles in diameter, lay within a broad ring of purple chaparral. Over its surface black dots were scurrying toward the corrals at the northern end, and under Sliver's glass these resolved into horses that were being rounded up by four Mexicans; for he could see their peaked *sombreros*, tight *charro* suits, even at that distance. Turning the glass on the *jacal*, a rude hut of poles and grass thatch near the corrals, he looked for Pedro, the *anciano*.

"Poor old chap! they've sure got his goat." While clucking his commiseration, however, he shifted the glass to a patch of white on a near-by tree, and it immediately resolved into the old fellow's blouse and *calzones*. "No, they've just tied him up. Then these ain't no Colorados. It's Felicia's gang, all right, all right." He added, chuckling, "Four nice little raiders in a pretty trap, along comes Jake and Bull, then there was none."

And trapped they were. Except where the stream slipped out over a precipice between two narrow walls, the mountains rose sheer around the Bowl, unscalable save where the trail rose by precarious zigzags to where Sliver held the pass a thousand feet above. At few places was it possible for two horsemen to ride abreast. At that point there was barely room for one; if necessary, he could have held it, alone, against a score. But it was not. Watching closely, he saw the raiders first drive the horses into the corrals, then settle down for a *siesta* in the shade of the *jacal*.

"Going to bring 'em up at sundown," he muttered, "in time to make the first run by night."

So certain he was of it that he did not scruple to take a sleep himself; cat-napped, with occasional squints down into the valley up to the moment that he was awakened by the hoof-beats of Jake and Bull's beasts. The glass then showed the raiders working the horses out of the corrals. As the herd thinned out to single file at the trail, one man took the lead; a second and third fell in at even distances; the last brought up the rear.

"They know their business," Bull commented on the manœuvre. "It's easier to keep 'em moving." He grimly added: "And easier for us. The line will string out for a quarter-mile, so I'll go down that distance an' hide in the chaparral. Let the last man pass me before you hold up the first. Then, while one of you keeps him covered, t'other can take away his tools. I'll keep 'em moving on up till you've got the other three."

While Jake took away and tied their horses, Bull gained his position. By that time the leading raider had gained a like distance uphill and, peeping, Bull watched the thin file of animals wriggling like a slow black snake up the yellow trail. So clear was the air he could hear, above the thud and scrape of hoofs, the raiders calling to one another. Now they were directly beneath him; so close that he could plainly see the leader's face, ugly, pock-marked. As he withdrew into the chaparral Bull carried with him an irritatingly haunting remembrance. Somewhere, though

he could not place it, he had seen the man before! He was still puzzling over it when Jake's command rang out in Spanish:

"Hands up!"

The leader looked and complied, persuaded by the black muzzles, wicked eyes, that looked down from the rock above. The second and third men did try to turn, but were blocked by the file of animals. An attempt to pass would have sent them down, bounding from level to level to the floor of the valley below. The fourth man swung his beast around only to find himself looking into Bull's rifle. So while Jake covered the operation from above and Bull from below, Sliver disarmed and bound the raiders.

After the captives were arranged in line under a *copal* tree upon a little plateau, where the trail began to fall downhill on the other side, Bull stood frowning down from his height on the man whose face had aroused that haunting memory. "I've a hunch that I've seen this chap afore."

He would have been more certain of it had he noticed the fellow's look of recognition and fear only a moment before. But now his ugly countenance was veiled in that ox-like stolidity which a Mexican *peon* can so easily assume. He shook his head in dull negation to all of Bull's questions. He did not come from any of the neighboring *haciendas*! They had never met before! His *pais* was far—it might have been anywhere in a thousand-mile circle implied by the wave of his hand.

"Yet I could swear to him." Bull looked musingly at Sliver. "Pock-marked, too. Where have I seen him afore?"

Sliver shook his head. "Can't prove it be me. All *peones* look like so many peas in a pod; some mebbe a bit uglier than others; an' pock-marks ain't no distinction with two-thirds of 'em pitted like a nutmeg-grater."

"That ain't the question before the house, neither," Jake put in. "All I'm bothering about is whether to hang or shoot 'em. Hanging is what I was brought up to, but shooting's more fashionable down here. I'd allow they'd likely prefer it."

"Shooting's too good for 'em." In a spasm of virtuous indignation, Sliver shook his fist at the captives. "Hanging's slower an' hurts a heap, an' if it gets about that the gent that meddles with our stock is in for a slow, choking they ain't a-going to be near so careless."

"There's something in that," Jake conceded. "An' this *copal*'s got nice stout limbs. We kin use their own *riatas*, an' that'll be what the Tombstone editor used to call 'poetic justice.' Hanging goes."

Bull was still staring at the raider, but, taking his consent for granted, they proceeded to fit the *riatas* around the prisoners' necks. Jake had, indeed, thrown the slack of the last over a bough when there came a rattle of stones and scrape of hoofs on the trail below. Grabbing his rifle, he slid with Bull and Sliver, each behind a tree. One second thereafter their guns were trained on the spot where the trail debouched on the plateau.

Meanwhile, with Gordon in pursuit, Lee had led the race into the hills. Her blood mare was the fleetest animal she owned and, had she chosen, Gordon would have soon dropped out of sight. But she contented herself with just holding a lead.

Unaware of this, Gordon made repeated attempts to catch her with sudden bursts of speed. Perfectly aware of it, on her part, she would wait till his horse's head almost touched her leg, then shoot ahead with a little laugh. Her face, looking back at him, was hard as her laugh—eyes bright and shining, nose contemptuously tilted, mouth one scarlet line.

To be defied, drawn on, mocked, and teased with low, derisive laughter is not a situation that any man loves. But if thoroughly angry, mad clear to the bone, Gordon's face revealed only dogged hope. For Chance was riding with him. If Lee's beast slipped or tired. If she were a second late with the spur. One of the three was fairly certain, and the belief set a gleam in his eyes that caused her a quiver of apprehension.

"Oh, he's mad enough to beat me!" she told it to herself. "I wonder if he would."

Nevertheless, every time she looked back at that dogged face she felt a sense of security. With raiders at large, it was just as well to have him around! The thought was in her mind when, with him only a few feet behind, she shot over the edge of the last steep out upon the plateau.

"Oh, my *goodness*!" It burst from her in sudden fright.

The Three, of course, were out of sight. The natural droop of the *copal*'s outer branches hid the halters, and she saw only the four raiders, unevenly grouped, and three rifle-barrels aimed from behind the tree. As she reined her beast back on its haunches Gordon swung his animal sideways between her and the raiders, and, quite shamelessly, she accepted the protection.

"Beat it quick!"

Already he had pulled his gun, and but for the fact that Bull just then stepped out in the open the question of hanging or shooting would have been decided for at least one of the thieves. As it was, his readiness served one purpose—reduced the heat in Bull's eyes.

"Put up your gun, Son, the job's done." Pointing at Lee, he sternly inquired, "But what's *she* doing here?"

Now fright, plus Gordon's chivalrous behavior, had driven the last vestige of anger out of Lee. She spoke before he could answer. "Don't blame him. He did his best to take me in."

"Then who shall I blame?"

"Me!" The coals of her anger sent forth a last flash that was immediately quenched by her mischievous smile. "Or blame yourself for leaving me the machete. I wiggled and wiggled till one hand was free, then cut the rope."

Combined with the smile, her little illustrative wriggle completed his rout. He turned to hide a grin, but was betrayed by his shaking shoulders. Noting it, she flashed with feminine quickness from defendant to accuser. She pointed at the halters.

"*What are you going to do?*"

Sliver and Jake had now come out. The former answered, "We was jest about to bump 'em off, Miss."

"What? *Hang* them?"

"Now look a-here, Lady-girl!" Sliver burst forth in indignant remonstrance. "Didn't we catch 'em red-handed? An' d'you allow we're a-going to let 'em loose to try again?"

"But *hang* them? Just for stealing? Of course, if they were Colorados, but—" She stopped, clasping her hands in sudden fear. "Oh! they killed him—poor Pedro?"

"Nary; jes' tied him up," Sliver quickly reassured her. "I seen him wiggling through the glass, an' the big thief, there, says they didn't harm him."

Sighing with sudden relief, she returned to the charge. "Then if they spared *him*, why are you going to kill *them*?"

"Look a-here, Missy," Bull now intervened. "'Twas agreed between Benson an' all the hacendados to make an example of captured raiders. If you once start letting 'em off, there won't be a head of stock left in all this country at the end of a year. That was why I wanted you to go back, an'—"

"I'm glad that I didn't."

Up to that moment the raiders had accepted the situation with Indian stoicism. Two of them were still puffing cigarettes Sliver had placed in their mouths while Jake adjusted the nooses. But their fatalism did not preclude hope. Though Lee had spoken in English, the language of pity is universal. They knew she was interceding, and now the fellow with the pock-marked face loosed upon her a veritable torrent of Spanish.

They were poor *hombres* with families back in their *pais* reduced to the point of starvation by incessant revolutions. Of themselves they would never have conceived this great wickedness! They had been tempted to banditry by an evil one with the offer of a great price! For themselves, they cared not! A few kicks, a gurgle or two, and there would be an end! But their women? And the little *niñas*? These would be left in continual suffering!

Children? It drew instant response from dominant maternalism, the deep instinct that caused Lee to tyrannize over the Three. Dismounting, she began to question the prisoners concerning their families and women. Their number, names, and sex? Were they good children? Had they been duly christened by the priest? Their dispositions and traits? Thus and so on till from a lynching-bee the occasion was in danger of lapsing into a catechism. For, once started, the bandits were equally willing. Oblivious of nooses and bonds, they plunged into family history and reminiscence, reminding each other of this or that, and while they related and recalled, the sullen hardness died out of their faces, leaving them soft and human.

Vividly, as in real life, Lee saw their corn-stalk *jacales* with their brown wives in the doorways looking anxiously from under shading hands for their men's return; their small, nude children playing in the hot dust. Here was little Pancho, who would some day be a great *vaquero*, roping chickens and cats with a string *riata*, then dragging them, captive, to the feet of chubby Dolores, who was, as her father swore by the saints, sweet as the Infant in the arms of the Blessed Virgin. It was then that she turned to the Three, her face aglow.

"This man has three little girls. The others all have families. They were driven to steal by want. Under the same circumstances any one of us might have done the same thing. If you had and were caught, how would you feel?"

"Under the same circumstances, they might have done the same thing!" She was looking at Bull, but as her glance returned at once to the prisoners she did not see him flush. He looked at Jake, who looked at Sliver, who looked away.

A busy and useful present soon buries the memory of a doubtful past, and beyond the pleasant span of to-day's existence the old rustler life of yesterday loomed very far away. The fact that, by tacit consent, it was now never mentioned among them had helped to bury it more completely. But now, perhaps more vividly for the lapse, there rose in the mind of each the spiteful bead eyes, scorpion utterances of Don Miguel in Las Bocas, urging them to raid these very horses. Small wonder if they looked away, or that, as their glances returned, they exchanged sheepish grins.

"Under the same circumstances," Bull answered, slowly and truthfully, "*we-all 'u'd expect to hang*. But if you feel different"—his glance interrogated Sliver and Jake—"it goes as you say. On'y, if you let 'em go, we'll have to run 'em out of the country in fairness to the other haciendas."

"Of course." Lee joyfully accepted the compromise. "We'll take them home now, and tomorrow Sliver and Jake can run them out."

This settled, and while Sliver rode on down into the valley to free the *anciano*, Bull and Jake cinched the thieves securely in their saddles. Then, driving them and the horses ahead, with Lee and Gordon following, they started down the trail.

Now the spectacle of four men trussed for hanging is not to be seen every day—let us say, on the streets of New York—and though Gordon had looked on with breathless interest, he could hardly believe that the business would have been carried to a conclusion.

"Do you really think they would?"

Lee looked at him in surprise. "Of course! You know Valles has issued orders for hacendados to shoot raiders on sight; that is"—she added it with a little sigh—"all but his own."

Her tone was so casual, he felt convicted of vast and unlimited greenness. But where, according to the lights under which he had been raised, he ought to have suffered a severe revulsion, he actually experienced a thrill. This juxtaposition of life and death, the violence and quickness with which events rang their changes, somehow stripped away the veils from the riddle of existence, reduced its complex terms to their basic factors. Here in the mountains, desert, plains, they were very simple—to eat well, sleep well, fight well, and die well, even as these thieves, comprised the whole duty of man. The thrill recorded his acceptance of the terms.

While they were riding down and down the sun lowered its great crimson orb till it hung, transfixed, on a distant peak. The mountain steeps above, spurs, and ridges beneath, were washed in its dying crimson. Deep purple filled the hollows; faint violet clothed the distant plains. Over all a cloud-flecked sky spread its parti-colored glories. Mountain and plain, cañon and deep ravine, it was a scene infinitely wild, infinitely beautiful, and as he looked over it all Gordon took his breath in a deep sigh.

"This is life! I hate to leave it."

"Leave it?" If Lee's surprise was assumed, it was exceedingly well done. She went on, with a low laugh: "Oh, I see! Papa wins out. The prodigal will return to marry the beautiful heiress and live happy ever afterward."

"Who told you? Oh, Bull, of course. Now that comes of owning a blabbing tongue. Confound him! Well, since you want to know, I won't. In my present mood, New York is the last place in the world I want to see."

"Then you have tired of us—*so soon?*"

"Or you of me? You forget—*I'm fired.*"

She noted the subtle accent, and equally subtle was her reply. "Why, yes, so you *were.*"

Then, looking at each other, they both laughed.

XIV: NEMESIS DOGS THE THREE—AND IS "DOGGED," IN TURN, BY LEE

Midnight saw the prisoners safely bestowed in a 'dobe that had served the old Spaniard, Carleton's predecessor, for a jail. During the remainder of the night the Three stood guard in turn and Gordon, who relieved Sliver at daybreak, was still at the door when Lee came out of her bedroom on the upper gallery.

Goodness knows she was pretty enough in her man's riding-togs, but now a flowing kimono added the softness and mystery a man loves best in a woman. As she moved forward to the rail and stretched, looking off and away to the mountains, the loose sleeves fell away and Gordon obtained a distracting glimpse of polished arms, small white teeth, in a round red mouth, all set in the blazing gold of her hair. Seeing him, she cut off the yawn and smiled.

"You must be dreadfully hungry." Her clear call floated across the compound. "Come to breakfast. I'll send Miguel to keep watch."

She was already seated at the table under the *portales* when he came in, and as he took his seat Maria, the smaller of the two house *criadas*, reported the Three as being still lost in sleep.

"The poor fellows!" Lee commented, distressfully. "They must be dead. Don't awaken them."

Thus, after the crowding events of the previous day, which included a fist fight, proposal of marriage from one girl, wild chase after another, a bandit raid and lynching-party, all rendered more impressive by the dark ride through warm, mysterious night, Gordon now sat *tête-à-tête* with his pretty employer.

The *patio*, with its arched *corredors*, cool as a grotto under flooding greenery, the bird song, and exotic flowers; flame of the *arbol de fuego*; glimpses in the crypt-like kitchen of a *criada* down on her knees rubbing *tortilla* paste on a stone *metate*; the soft stealth with which Maria moved around the table on nude feet; all these helped to deepen those profound impressions. And while he watched Lee's small hands fluttering like butterflies over the breakfast things, and gained confirmatory glimpses of the polished whiteness of her arms, came still others.

Two brown girls, who stood twisting their skirts in the gateway, moved forward at Lee's word.

"They wish to take my advice about following their lovers to the wars," she summed for him their Spanish. "I explained the risks of hunting them among twenty thousand revolutionists, and advised them to wait till they came home. But they say that is too indefinite. They may be killed, and there is no one to marry them here but the *ancianos*, and they already have wives. So they are going—to join the rag and bobtail in the wake of the revolution."

After the next client, a wrinkled old woman, had followed the girls out, Lee burst out in merry laughter. "She was telling me of a miracle that occurred at the funeral of her brother, who worked for William Benson. It appears that he had only his dirty cotton calzones to be buried in, so his wife begged a worn white suit from Mr. Benson. The poor old fellow had been reduced by sickness to a rack of bones, and you could have rolled him in it like a blanket. And here came the miracle! The weather, you know, was exceedingly hot last week, and instead of burying him at once they waited till some relatives from a distance had arrived. And when the coffin was opened for them to take a last look—lo! the miracle!

"'For Saint Joseph,' she said, just now, 'had wrought a most wonderful thing, señorita. Whereas Refugio had lain in the señor's clothes like a nut in a withered shell, he was now so large and handsome they fitted him like his skin!'"

He laughed so heartily she was drawn on to tell him more, and pleased herself thereby as much as him. For to be really happy, a girl must have exercise for her tongue, and with all their genuine devotion the Three offered but a limited field for conversation. Naturally laconic, their communications touched principally upon flocks and herds; and holding, as they did, the traditional frontier viewpoint concerning Mexicans—to wit, that they ranked in the scale of creation below the Gila monster—they shared neither her affection for, nor understanding of, her brown retainers.

But Gordon, with his quick and reciprocal feeling, made an ideal listener. From the "miracle" she ran on with anecdotes and happenings, some quaint, others amusing, several tragic, that revealed with a vividness beyond the power of description the mixture of love and treachery, simplicity and savagery, ignorance and idealism, religious faith and gross superstition, that go into the making of a Mexican. While she talked and he listened, there was established a community of feeling which was destined to produce immediate results.

"What is it, Maria?" Pausing, she looked up at the *criada* who had just carried the prisoners their breakfast.

"They wish to speak to me," she translated the girl's answer, "alone. They say it is very important."

"Better let me go with you." Gordon rose. "I can wait outside."

"Surely." She accepted, at once, his offer, and when, moreover, he followed in after Miguel opened the prison door, she offered no objection.

Neither did the raiders—for reasons that quickly developed. "It matters not, señorita." The man whose face had caused Bull such disturbance shrugged his indifference when Lee explained that Gordon spoke no Spanish. "'Tis of the others, your servants, I would speak."

While crossing the compound she had puckered her smooth brow over the mystery—without gaining any inkling to break the force of the communication. While the fellow ran on, hands and shoulders helping out his torrential Spanish, Gordon saw her expression pass through surprise, incredulity, doubt, finally settle in deep concern, when, with emphasis that carried conviction, the other three testified to the truth of their fellow's words.

"I— Oh, do you know what they say?" Distressed, she turned to Gordon with blind instinct for help. "I really don't know whether I ought to tell you. It so dreadfully, pitifully concerns our poor friends. You have been here such a short time, yet—I feel that you can be trusted. They say—"

But the tale, as elaborated and filled in by Gordon's cross-examination, is best summed. Not for nothing had been Bull's "hunch." The haunting face fitted the *charro* who had held their horses that day at the *jefe-politico's* gate in Las Bocas. When the Three failed to return with Carleton's horses, that astute person—the "wicked one" of yesterday's talk—had sent out others. In return for the *señorita's* great kindness in saving their lives—but principally, if the truth be known, because they feared to be sent out under convoy of Sliver and Jake—they wished to make grateful return by warning her against these evil ones; these wolves in sheep's clothing that had slunk into her fold! Followed a recital of their border raids that lost nothing by reason of the details being filled in from imagination! They were terrible *hombres!* *Muy malo!* greatly desired by the *gringo* police for dreadful crimes!

"Don't you suppose they are lying?" Gordon suggested.

She shook her head. "Their story is too literal. When a *peon* lies, he goes the limit. Some terrible tale of atrocious murder and torture would be the least; something beyond mere banditry, which is scarcely a crime in their eyes. Then it is corroborated by a lot of little things. You know they were riding my horses yesterday and were differently dressed, yet this man described their horses and clothing as he saw them in Las Bocas, just as they were the first day they came here. And do you remember how they looked at one another yesterday when I said that any of us might have done the same thing?"

Gordon nodded. "They did look queer, and do you recall Bull's answer? 'Under the same circumstances, we-all 'u'd expect to hang.' He spoke so slowly, looking at the others, and they both nodded."

"Then see how they came here—started up, as it were, out of the ground. In Mexico one doesn't ask strangers embarrassing questions. It would be like throwing stones at random in a city of glass. But if they stay with you, one generally learns something of their past. But theirs is wrapped in mystery. I know no more of them than on the day they came. It is probably true."

Her tone was quiet, indeed so casual in its acceptance of the fact that Gordon wondered. In El Paso he had been greatly impressed by the knight-errantry of the Three in espousing the cause of a lonely girl. During the last week he had seen for himself their simplicity of heart, rough kindness, genuine devotion; and now this land of surprises had confounded him again with its juggler's changes of good and evil. These kindly fellows were, after all, cattle-rustlers, but one remove from bandits.

To him it was a most astonishing situation. In New York, where folks were sharply divided into the sheep and the goats, it would have been easily solved; one would have merely rung for the police. But here, where everything seemed to go by contraries, anything might happen. Accordingly, he looked at her and waited.

But she did not answer his unspoken question. She was looking at him, yes, with wide, distressed eyes. But he felt, without understanding, that she was looking across that queer situation. He had a sudden, vivid suspicion that he was on trial in her mind instead of the Three. He was certain of it when she spoke.

"What would *you* do?"

Ten days ago he would undoubtedly have viewed the case under his previous lights and have pronounced it one for the police. Now he answered from the larger charity that belonged to the land: "You remember what you said yesterday and repeated a moment ago—under the same circumstances we might have done the same thing? It isn't what they *were*; it's what they *are* that counts."

"Oh, I *knew* you would say it!" She impulsively thrust out her hand, and as the small, firm fingers locked with his in a strong grip, he knew that not only had he emerged victorious, but also that his answer had established between them a real bond. Eyes shining, she ran on: "They saved my life, helped to nurse my father, have been so kind and good and dear! If they had been the vilest criminals it would make no difference to me. They are my people, my *men!*"

"Of course they are!" Gordon cordially agreed. "Now what about these fellows? What will you tell them?"

Doubt clouded her shining enthusiasm. "I don't quite know. What do you think would be best?"

"The truth. If what they say is true, and we believe it is, they can't be bluffed. But it won't do to have them believe you knew nothing of this. I'd hint that though you were not acquainted with the details, you were perfectly aware of your servants' past, but that they are now leading honorable lives. Clinch it by adding that you hope they will do half as well with their chance."

"Fine!" Her face lit up again, and when, having put it all into Spanish for the thieves, they went outside, she thanked him for the counsel. "I knew you could help me. Now just one more thing—this is all between you and me. No one else must ever know—especially them."

"We'll forget it ourselves."

Once more her small cool fingers locked with his, and, smiling brightly, she went back to the house, leaving him to resume his guard till the prisoners were taken away by Sliver and Jake.

After they were gone there entered into Gordon's mind a small doubt. Supposing the raiders talked? Spread their report of the Three through the desert country? It remained, that little doubt, like a thorn in the side till it was drawn by Sliver and Jake when they returned the following night.

"We'd calc'lated to hand 'em over to the vaqueros at Hacienda El Reposo, an' have them chase 'em beyond their bounds," Jake explained. "But at the railroad we ran into a Valles colonel that was drumming up recruits. He grabbed 'em offen our hands that quick they hadn't time to kick."

"By now," Sliver added, "they're three hundred miles south on their way to death an' glory."

"But the little girl mustn't know that," Bull's heavy bass rose in caution. "She was that sot on returning 'em to their women and children, it 'u'd half break her heart."

"Not a whisper," the two agreed, but Sliver added, with a chuckle, "Alle same, they'll stay put an' trouble her no more."

Inwardly Gordon echoed it, "They'll trouble *you* no more."

While the others were away Bull had also been doing some thinking, and after Gordon went out for his evening stroll through the compound he laid the results before them. "Say, I've placed that chap."

"Which chap?"

"Fellow with the pock-marks. D'you remember the mozo that held our horses at Don Miguel's gate?"

"No-o-o—" Jake began, but with memory thus stimulated Sliver recalled him.

"Julius Seize-her! you're right!" As the possibilities of the late situation flashed upon him he gave a low whistle. "What an escape! We've had some close calls in our time, but none to beat it. 'Twas lucky he didn't recognize us, for he'd sure have peached, an' I wouldn't have Lady-girl to know for a cold million."

"Nor me," Jake added. "But it ain't likely—now."

"Thank God for that!" Sliver exclaimed it with almost religious fervor. With deep thankfulness Bull repeated it in his mind.

XV: BULL AND THE WIDOW CONSPIRE

"Ain't that queer?"

The Three were in full enjoyment of the noon smoke on the broad plank bench in front of

their 'dobe. Though Lee always encouraged them to smoke in the house, they preferred it there—partly through a rooted instinct that, no matter how cleverly she dissemble, woman is the natural enemy of “Lady Nicotine,” regarding her always as a formidable rival; secondly, because, while sitting at ease, the life of the compound passed under their eyes. Just now, when Sliver’s remark broke the hot noon silence, their attention was concentrated upon Gordon, who sat in the doorway of a 'dobe opposite, playing with a chubby girl of three, while its dark mother looked on with a pleased smile.

“Ain’t what queer?” Jake sent a stream of smoke rings writhing through the warm air. “There’s so many queer things down here I’ll have to ask you to come again.”

Sliver nodded at Gordon. “Ain’t it odd how he cottons to them little Mexes? To me they’re no more’n little brown dogs. Did you know he sat up night afore last with a sick one?”

“No-o-o-o!” Jake’s surprise knew no bounds.

“He did. Kid had a sore throat that looked like diphtheria, an’ he sat there all night a-painting it with kerosene. Brought it ‘round, too, he did.”

“Kain’t understand’ it.” Jake shook his head. “For my part, I’d sink the country under water twenty minutes if I could, an’ drown the hull brown b’iling. But let me tell you, Son, them peculiar interests of his’n ain’t going to hurt him none with Missy. If there’s anything a girl likes in a man it’s to see him make over kids. Marks him for a good daddy, I s’pose, an’ without actually reasoning it out that way it’s what they’re all a-wanting.”

“Don’t seem to have feazed her much as yet,” Sliver grumbled. “Look at him. A fine lad, straight an’ strong an’ true, eddicated an’ well raised; now where in hell ked you find a better match for Lady-girl? But though he’s been here two months, there’s nothing doing. Sometimes I ketch myself wishing he’d hand her a crack like he give me. It ‘u’d make her sit up an’ take notice!”

Jake approved the diagnosis. “They’re real friendly—friendly as a brace of bugs in a rug. She likes to chin with him. When he’s telling, evenings, about New York, an’ university doings, her eyes shine like clear wax candles, but ‘tain’t fer him. She’s jest a-seeing an’ a-doing an’ a-being what he’s telling. Sure she likes him an’ him her, but, as you say—there’s nothing doing.”

Bull ripped out an oath, but his feeling was so sincere, his disappointment so deep, that the profanity was like unto a consecration. “Makes me feel like knocking their damn young heads together.” As, rising, he tapped the ashes out of his pipe on his huge palm, he added: “I’ve gotter ride out to the valley pastures this afternoon, an’ while I’m that far I’ll jest go on an’ have a word with Mrs. Mills. She’s that clever I’ll bet you she’d have ‘em hitched be this if she’d been here.”

“Say!” Sliver’s nod followed Bull as he walked away. “Third time this month—once beca’s he’d heard Betty was ailing; again ‘cause it was rumored raiders had been seen around her *rancho*; now beca’s he wants advice. D’y’ know, I believe it’s the widow herself. Whoopee! kin you think of it! Old Bull an’ her an’ domestic bliss an’—”

“D’you reckon it’s anything to josh about?” Jake sternly interrupted. “I uster laugh at the very idee of living straight an’ sorter scorn them as did, but let me tell you, hombre, that after a man touches forty there ain’t a thing in the world left for him but a wife’s smile across the table an’ children’s hands clutching his knee.” His bleak eyes, lean, sarcastic face, had lit as to a vision. Now the illumination died and left it even colder. “After the pleasant time we’ve had here, that old hell an’ ruin life looks like a bad dream. I’ve thought, sometimes, I’d try to quit it. I would with jest half of Bull’s natural goodness. But I’m bad clean through to the bone. Why, I’m fixing even now, while I’m talking, for a bust. My system’s that dry I ked drink up a lake, an’ my fingers is itching to get into a game.”

“Me, too.” Sliver, always reflective, took the color of Jake’s mood. “I’ll soon be due for a night at the *fonda*.” He added, with comical pathos: “You bet, I’ll go an’ lie down to it again. But I do wish Felicia, out there, would put in a better brand of p’ison. I suffer so when I’m through.”

“Sure.” Jake accepted the inevitable with fatalism that almost amounted to satisfaction. “One of these days I’ll take a tumble an’ go back to the old life till it’s cut off by the sheriff’s rope. But Bull—”

Seven hours of steady riding brought Bull to the rise from which, on his first visit, he had looked back on the widow’s *rancho*. The low sun filled the pocket in the hills wherein the buildings stood with fluid gold that set the chrome-yellow walls off in a blaze, fired the red masses of the bougainvillea with deeper flame. It also set a glow on Bull’s face, revealing a softness, expectancy that could not be credited altogether to his mission. A few yards to his right stood an old 'dobe wall, relic of some former building, and so absorbed was he in his musing that he never noticed a

rifle-barrel projecting through a crack till a voice broke the golden silence.

"It will pay you, señor, to watch more carefully. One could shoot the eyes out of you with perfect ease."

As Bull turned quickly, a dark face rose above the old wall. Oval in outline, the features, nose, brows, mouth, were all straight, emphasizing its naturally cold expression. Strangest of all, investing it with a weird, uncanny look, the eyes were blue. No hint of a smile warmed its ruling bleakness when he answered Bull's question.

"Si, the señora is there. Ride on, señor. I shall watch here for a little while."

Five minutes later, while Betty sat on Bull's knee, the widow explained the apparition. "That was Terrubio, my Mexican foreman. He's very faithful. Always he gets up and takes a look around two or three times in the night, and he does as much work as two ordinary Mexicans. He used to be a bandit in the old days; and once, when the rurales were hot on his trail, he hid in an old stable of ours. We found him next morning, almost shot to pieces. After I'd nursed him back to health Mr. Mills got his pardon from Diaz on condition that he'd stay with us and behave. That's over ten years ago. He's been with us ever since, and that old bandit reputation of his has been our best protection."

"That's fine, ma'am," Bull made hearty comment. "It takes a bad man to scare a bad man. I'll feel easier for knowing this."

The widow had already dismissed Terrubio's woman, who served as her *criada*, for the night. Now while she hustled around preparing Bull's supper he looked on with huge content, his glance, in its respect and constancy, very like that of a mastiff. Several times, in passing, her skirts brushed him, and at each slight contact he blushed and trembled. Perhaps they were not quite accidental. At least she was fully aware of the effect, for each time she turned quickly to hide a smile. When, at last, she sat down with plump white arms folded on the table to watch him eat, the glow on his face was certainly not due to his business, though he introduced it then.

"Two months he's been here, ma'am," he concluded his tale of woe, "an' nary a thing doing."

"Why, what did you expect?" Her pretty, plump figure shook with laughter and Betty joined her childish merriment. "Did you think it would happen in the first five minutes? Now just consider—what good would she ever have of a man that would fall as easily as that? They talk of love at first sight, but let me tell you that those are the kind that fall out at second. It takes a slow horse for a steady pull and a slow man for a lasting love. It's good that he isn't impressionable, for he'll go down all the harder for it. And you yourself wouldn't have liked Lee to fall in love with him at once. But she isn't that easy kind. The man that gets her will have to win her. But tell me the symptoms. How do they act?"

Bull gave the diagnosis—they appeared to like each other! Were very friendly! She liked to hear him talk! He couldn't think of anything else!

The widow had checked off each count with a little nod. Now she burst out laughing. "Is that all? My goodness! Mr. Perrin, how blind you men are! That isn't much to go on. Did you ever see him touch her, or she him, accidental, as it were?"

Recalling the effect of her brushing skirts, Bull blushed, and under the stimulus of personal experience he divined the inwardness of the question. "Sure! She was showing him how to hog-tie a steer t'other day. It lashed out an' upset them an' for a minute they was that balled up you kedn't tell t'other from which. Didn't seem a bit anxious to let go, either."

"That's favorable," the widow nodded thoughtfully. "Looking at it from a distance, I should say what was needed is a little competition. It's the life of love as well as trade. A man and a girl are like fire and tow. They'll go along, nice as you please, till a little rivalry blows up like a wind, then—up in a blaze they go. Has Ramon been at Los Arboles since Mr. Nevil came?"

"A couple of times. But Gordon was out with us on the range, an' Ramon was gone afore we kem in."

"It's a pity he hadn't been there. He'd feel the same about as we do, and he wouldn't be human if he didn't try to cut Ramon out. Let me see." She mused for a while, chin propped in her hands. Then her face lit up. "I know! I'm having a birthday next week. I'll make a little party and invite Ramon and Lee. You'll see to it that Gordon brings her here?"

"But then Bull won't be able to come," Betty's small voice piped, indignantly. "And you told me only yesterday that you weren't going to ask any one but him."

Now the widow blushed. But she braved it out. "So I did, dear, and I'd rather have him. But when Lee's happiness is at stake we'll have to give up our own pleasure. And you mustn't call him that. 'Tisn't respectful. Say Mr. Perrin."

"But Jake and Sliver do it, and he said I could—didn't you, Bull? There, you see!" Thus

triumphantly vindicated, she was proceeding with further revelations. "Mother will be thirty-sev—" when the widow clapped her hand over the small, traitorous mouth.

She broke into a little, conscious laugh. "I know it's silly. But was there ever a real woman that would own up to her age? I won't acknowledge to a day over thirty."

"And you look five years younger than that, ma'am," Bull gallantly replied.

He was paid, of course, with a brilliant smile, and, the conspiracy thus consummated, they gradually drifted into one of those pleasant talks, warm, intimate, communicative, which have been banished from the hectic, electric cities, but still linger where the habitants of the mountains, forest, desert, range, spend long evenings under the golden lamplight or flickering fire-blaze. From news of their countryside, rumors of raids and revolutions, neighborhood gossip, it passed on to a closer, more personal note, touching their thoughts, hopes, aspirations.

In the course of it Betty exercised her usual privilege and went to sleep in Bull's arms. But though, when he retired, the warmth of the soft child-body enwrapped, as before, his heart, his thoughts were not of her. Long after the silence of midnight wrapped the dark house he dismissed a waking dream with the brusque comment:

"'Tain't for you, Bull. You killed all that years ago, with your own hand."

He repeated it next morning, looking back on the *rancho* from the last rise. "No, Son, 'tain't for you."

At that moment Betty and her mother stood in the doorway watching his distant figure, and had he been close enough to see and hear he might have read denial of his thought in both the child's words and the widow's reflective smile. Said reflection was due to a lively memory of his sudden reddening when she had left her hand in his just a shade longer than was necessary. She blushed, now, and cut off Betty's words with a sudden squeeze.

"Mother, I just know he's falling in love with you. Wouldn't it be nice if he asked—"

XVI: ONE MAN CAN TAKE A HORSE TO WATER, BUT—

The sun shone brightly on the morning of the widow's birthday. Not that there was anything sensational in the fact. Except in the rainy season, the sun always shines brightly in Chihuahua—altogether too brightly for a white man's comfort, so while waiting for Lee, Gordon led their horses into the shade of the 'dobe where dwelt his little playmate. Seated in the doorway, under the pleased eyes of the brown mother, he was initiating the chubby thing into the mysteries of "cat's cradle" with a loop of string, when Lee came walking across from the house.

At the sight of the two heads bent over the "cradle," the girl's face lit up with a soft glow that was not belied by her mock severity. "Hello, Brother! What are you doing to my godchild?"

"Is this she?" Rising, he swung the child up on his shoulder. "I had just about made up my mind to adopt her myself."

"Let me see—" Lee's smooth brow achieved a thoughtful wrinkle. "She's about one-fiftieth of it. You know I am padrina to all that have been born here in the last fifteen years. But this is my favorite, and I cannot suffer you to steal her allegiance as you tried the other night. Oh, you needn't blush! Maria brought the news with my coffee. She was loud in your praises. 'Don Gor-r-don sat with Refugio's sick babe all night. What a husband for some happy señorita!'"

"That was very nice of Maria." He laughed. "Only, I'm afraid there's nothing doing. Girls of this size get me going, but after they grow up—somehow I lose interest."

It was an awesome confession to make to a girl whose mirror reflected far more than the average of feminine looks. Like a stag of ten tines that paws the forest mold in the pride of freedom, he had marked himself for the slaughter. It was the due of her sex that his pride be humbled. The soft glow changed to a gleam; but her attention was drawn just then by the prattle of two children who, unaware of the proximity of the parties of the first and second part, were conducting a make-believe housekeeping around the corner.

"Now I shall be Don Gor-r-r-don, and thou the señorita," came a voice, gruff with masculine authority. "Only we be married."

"But will they be married, Pancho?" piped a softer treble.

"Si, that will they. Only an hour ago I heard thy mother and old 'Lupe talking at the well. 'Is not Don Gor-r-r-don a fine man, and she a woman with never a duenna to her name? 'Tis shocking, Amalia, but gringo blood runs colder than Spanish; their ways are not ours. Yet, cold or hot, this may not end without marriage.' This is what old 'Lupe said to thy mother."

Rich color swept from the roots of Lee's hair down to her neck. She hastily hid it from the observation of the party of the first part; then, remembering that his Spanish was still confined to a few jerky sentences, she regained her composure.

"Woman!" "Don Gor-r-r-don" was speaking again. "What is this—the tortillas burned once more? Have I not told thee to be more sparing of the wood I gain with my sweat? And this chile? 'Tis sour as swill, fit only for swine."

"Then it should suit thee very well," came the softer voice, with unexpected spirit.

"A-r-r-r-h!" It was an excellent imitation of the angry howl with which Don Gor-r-r-don's father resented household rebellions. "Thou wouldst answer me? Thy mouth is too big! Take this to fill it!"

Followed a wail and as Lee rushed around the corner to the rescue, Don Gor-r-r-don scuttled like a little pig under her arm and dived into the house. Having comforted the small housewife, Lee returned to Gordon.

"Panchito is not quite so afraid of girls as you," she teased him. "They were playing house. Because the beans were not quite to his liking, he handed Dolores one on the mouth."

He laughed. "The young dog! At least he has a good working idea of the proper relation of the sexes."

This, indeed, was tempting Providence! The little gleam appeared again and lingered till, taking her foot in one hand, he lifted her to the saddle without perceptible effort, when it was wiped out by pleased surprise.

Strength and tenderness? Age-long experience has taught woman to value these above all else in man! A skilful diagnostician—the widow, for instance—would have noted and approved her unconscious content as they rode out through the gates and followed the trail up and down the long earth rolls. Sometimes, when the vagaries of travel forced him ahead, her little stealthy glances were not nearly so unconscious; displayed a curiosity both healthy and sincere. And when, as occurred quite frequently, their frank interest was broken by a return of the little gleam, the diagnostician would still have concurred. For it displayed nothing more than the pride proper in a sex which has handled—and mishandled—man, directed his policies and intrigues, set him at the wars, made his peaces, used him as a catspaw to pull its private chestnuts out of the fires of love and hate, while the poor, blinded being imagined all the time that he was following his own ends.

He "lost interest in them after they grew up." Indeed! Why, the freshness of the morning, the creak and odor of hot leather, rhythmic beat of hoofs, sunlit roll of pastures within the hedging mountains, all the sights and sensations which he mistook for joy in the ride, were nothing more than a setting for her lovely youth. The ebb and flow of her color, easy flexures of her lithe body, counted as much in nature's cosmogony as the rush of the winds, flush of sunset skies; only, as yet, he did not know it. The "fire and tow" still lacked a "wind."

They headed, at first, out on the trail which led through Lovell's *rancho* to the widow's; but presently Lee swerved toward the hills. "It is rougher," she said, "with a few bits of stiff climbing, but both shorter and prettier. It follows an old, old mule trail up a wooded cañon past a country *fonda*. There I'll show you the prettiest Mexican girl in all Chihuahua."

"At the *fonda*? Then I have seen her."

Her quick look said quite plainly, "Oh, *you have*?"

"Sliver took me there the day we caught the raiders. Pretty? I should say!" He added, laughing, "She made me a very nice proposal of marriage, adding the *fonda* as an extra inducement."

Her expression now said, "Oh, she *did*?" But as she looked away, he failed to see it, got only her words, "And you had the heart to refuse?"

"Sad to relate."

"And you haven't even been to see her again?"

"No time."

She took her answer from his unconcern rather than the words. And yet, as they rode along, she gave him little brooding looks that expressed—perhaps not altogether disbelief so much as that rooted and reasonable doubt which her sex invariably entertains when another woman is in

question. As they rode around the end of the spur and proceeded up the cañon her glances grew in frequency; finally settled in a stealthy watch as they approached the *fonda*.

"There's your beauty—attired like a bride for her groom."

Lee nodded at Felicia, who was coming up from the stream with an *olla* of water gracefully poised on her head. For a cushion she had twisted a handful of scarlet runners into a thick chaplet, and, escaping from under the *olla*, half a dozen vivid tendrils streaked the black wavy mass of her hair. With her velvet pools of eyes, satiny arms and shoulders, pliant, shapely figure, she might have been a golden Hebe bearing wine to Aztec gods. Small wonder if Gordon stared at the pretty picture overmuch for his companion's taste.

His interest undoubtedly instigated her addition, "Perhaps she hasn't lost hope?"

She did not, either, like his laugh, for it seemed just a bit conscious. While drinking a glass of native concoction, barley water flavored with seeds, she kept a stealthy watch that was none the less efficient because masked by gay chatter with the old man and woman who came hobbling out of the house. She saw not only the dark glance that followed and enfolded Gordon in a lingering embrace, but as the girl reached up, handing the glass, she caught a glimpse of Gordon's fob dangling within the golden bosom at the end of a chain of beads.

At first she recognized it only for an American-made trinket. But under pretense of admiring the hand-made lace edging on the girl's chemisette, she managed another peep and saw the leather worked with Gordon's monogram in gold.

"Ah, *ha!* señor!"

Her mental ejaculation expressed on the surface only mischief. But under it a deeper feeling moved like a stir of wind through sultry heat. Was it the widow's "wind" fanning an unsuspected flame? Perhaps. At least when, looking back after they rode on, she saw the same dark gaze following, enwrapping Gordon, she was seized with sudden unhappiness. Plainly as the day that dark gaze spoke:

"I am yours!"

After they had ridden on, out of sight, and her beast was scrambling after Gordon's up the mule trail that rose in a series of zigzag staircases, the little queer looks at his back asked a vital question.

XVII: —BUT TWENTY CANNOT MAKE HIM DRINK

When they rode in to the *rancho* that afternoon, the "wind"—that is, Ramon—had not yet "blown in"; so there were no complications to interfere with the widow's first attempts at diagnosis of the "case." She noticed at once that, instead of springing down and taking her and Betty in one hug according to her fashion, Lee swung one leg over the pommel, then sat, quietly waiting, till Gordon reached up and lifted her across to the veranda.

"Promising," she inwardly commented.

A cold shower, that followed greetings and introductions, interfered temporarily with the diagnosis, but after Lee had emerged, all pink and white and cool, and had sat down to make her toilet in the widow's bedroom, that lady pursued her investigations with the abrupt remark:

"Ramon is coming."

"Yes? Isabel too?"

An imperceptible nod marked Mrs. Mills's belief that the indifference was not assumed. She went on to mask her plot. "No, it was quite accidental. I wrote some time ago to ask just where my line ran along their eastern boundary, and Ramon replied that he would come over and show me to-day."

"Oh, I hope he does. Ramon is such a nice boy."

She was now powdering her nose. The widow made mental comment. "Never missed a dab. William Benson's a fool—though, of course, she may have changed her mind." This she proceeded to find out. "Your new man seems nice?"

"He is." Followed a long description of Gordon's night vigil with the child. She concluded

with a characteristic reservation, "But—"

"But what?"

"He's been going to see Felicia at the *fonda*. Sliver took him there, one day, and he says that he has never been again. But—she's wearing his watch-fob in her bosom— Yes, yes! I know! A *peona* will beg the shoes off any man's feet. She might easily have got it at one sitting. But—"

Her nod conveyed her feeling that, allowances having been generously made, young men whose watch-fobs are found in *peonas'* bosoms, will bear watching. "Of course that is nothing to me, and, as you say, he is very nice. I like Bull better than any of them. Dear me! why isn't he twenty years younger? Then I could marry him. Oh—"

She paused, gazing at the widow, for, though the latter was exceedingly subtle, the subtlety of one woman is plain print for another. A little smile, sudden lighting of the eye! The widow stood betrayed.

Lee jumped an enormous distance to her conclusion. "Oh, wouldn't that be just too lovely! Is it—settled?"

The widow, of course, shook her head.

"But it will be."

"How do you know?" She was quite willing to be convinced.

"How do I know?" The words issued, delicately scented, from dabs of powder. "Just as if it depended on *him*. Just as if any woman—who hasn't a harelip—can't marry any man she wants."

Thus turned, in a twinkling, from a diagnostician into a "case," Mrs. Mills tried to cover her confusion with a little laugh. But it was so self-conscious she might as well have made oral confession. Being an honest person, she owned up with a hug.

Meanwhile, having been captured by Betty as he emerged from his bedroom dressed and refreshed by a cooling shower, Gordon was being subjected to an equally keen if less discreet examination.

Betty's major premise agreed marvelously with Lee's and was stated with the startling directness of childhood after a prolonged survey of the subject from different distances and points of view. "I like you—only not so well as Bull. You're nicer-looking, but—" A long pause emphasized more powerfully than words how woefully he fell short in other ways. "I'm going to marry him when I grow up—that is, if mother doesn't beat me to it!"

"Any danger of that?" Gordon laughed.

"You bet there is. Bull's dead in love with her, and she—of course, she doesn't admit it, but *I know*."

"Well, well, isn't that fine!" Gordon really meant it. "Congratulations, I suppose, are not yet in order."

"I should say *not!*" Betty's blue eyes widened with horror. "Don't you *dare!* I'm not too big, yet, to be spanked"—she wriggled, reminiscently—"and when mother's real mad she goes the limit. Nevertheless, it's true." After a second calculating survey, she concluded, "But if she grabs Bull, I *might* marry you."

"If you only will," he pleaded, "I'll be *so-o* good! Can't we consider ourselves engaged?"

After a moment's thought she doubtfully shook her blond head. "No, I'm afraid not."

"Why?"

"Because."

"Because doesn't answer anything. If you reject me, I must know why."

"Because I'd only be disappointed again." She added, with a little sigh: "All the nice men are sure to be married before I grow up. You'll fall in love with Lee."

"*I?* With *Lee?*" His real surprise showed how little that contingency had occurred in his thought. Curiosity mingled with a touch of apprehension colored his accent. "Now how do you figure that?"

"Because you'd be a fool if you didn't."

The answer, in its dread plainness, caused him to stare. "But—but, you know, I am only her hired man?"

"That wouldn't count—if she liked you." After another examination: "And she might do worse. *Gee!* if I were only a man!"

"Yes?" he prompted. "If you were a man?"

"I'd love her so hard she'd just have to give in. I'd—"

But further revelations were just then cut off. Back in the bedroom her mother had remembered the possibilities of that small, frank tongue. Answering her call, Betty ran off, leaving Gordon, however, with plentiful food for thought.

During the last two months he had seen Lee—riding the range, a pretty lad; presiding at meals, a still prettier girl, excessively feminine in her care for himself and the Three; mothering her brown retainers; a girl clean of mind, clear-eyed, wholesome as a breath of wind off the sage. Yet, somehow, she had not stirred his pulses. He acknowledged it with a touch of shame. What the deuce could be the matter? Was there something wrong with his head?

Presently he gained an inkling—he had been wearing another's colors! She whom adventure claims has eyes for none else. The color and romance of this land had fired his imagination, opened a whole world to his view. Coral isles of the Pacific, palm-fringed and begirt with thundering surf; copra and pearls, magic words; the head-hunters of the Solomons; deep forests, quaint grass villages of Java and Borneo; the inland rivers of China; Siberian steppes; rock temples of Tibet—these and a thousand other names and places had juggled their terms in his brain. Some day he would see them all, following adventure's trail!

He had calculated to go it alone, but now began to wonder if that were really necessary. A sympathetic companion doubles one's joy in beautiful things! Come to think of it—Lee would fit very nicely in a Java forest! He saw her fair hair, a golden aureole, shining in the dusk under giant tropical fronds. She looked well, too, at the tiller of the gasolene-launch in which he was wont to explore, in imagination, the upper waters of the Hoang-ho! Now she was clasping her hands and holding her breath in pleasure and awe at first sight of the Chinese Wall dragging its massive stone coils over mountain and plain. Indeed, in the course of the next half-hour they two explored the major part of the earth's fair surface, and not a place in it all where Lee did not belong.

Subconsciously, propinquity and isolation had worked their customary effects. If not actually in love, the young man was in a highly dangerous, not to say inflammable, state of mind when, in the midst of his dreamings, the weathered-oak door at the end of the *corredor* swung in and there, framed in its golden arch, bathed and powdered and fresh, stood that flower of the ages, a modern girl!

It cannot be denied that, given a decent superstructure, it's the feathers that make the bird. Lines that not only stood the test of, but actually triumphed over, Lee's severe man's riding-clothes, took a billowy softness from a pretty voile gown. The silk orange stockings under the ruffle harmonized with a narrow orange and black stripe in the dress. The riband that bound her yellow curls in a girlish coiffure rhymed again with a silk sweater of peacock-blue. A pair of white pumps, that ran like frightened mice under the skirt completed a costume which, without understanding, Gordon knew to be in excellent taste.

"Why, Sister!" he returned her greeting of the morning. "What killing clothes!"

"Right, Brother!" she answered, in kind. "That's what they're for."

Of course he threw up his hands. And of course she laughed. And of course there was more of the perfectly foolish, but perfectly necessary, badinage with which callow youth imitates its elders' wit. But under all, behind his glow of admiration, Lee sensed new feeling. And she reacted to it—though not altogether in a way that suited the widow, who had followed her out. For if her color heightened, the dangerous gleam still sparkled in her eye.

"I wonder what she's up to?" The thought formed in Mrs. Mills's mind.

She soon found out, for just then the "wind," alias Ramon, "blew in."

"Oh! I'm *so* glad to see you!"

With a swish of skirts that spread a delicate odor of violet along the *corredor*, Lee ran to meet him as he leaped from his horse. Then, giving him both hands, she inquired after his father, mother, Isabel, aunts, cousins—goodness knows! the category might have embraced every one of his *peones* if she had not been warned by the deepening of the young fellow's rich color that it was about time to let go.

"Just a bit too effusive," the widow made note. Aloud she broke in, "You are forgetting Mr. Nevil, dear."

"Oh, I beg your pardon!" But the glint in her eye took it back and she managed the introductions with malicious skill. "Ramon, this is Mr. Nevil, our latest acquisition."

"Just as if he'd been a horse," the widow inwardly commented. To prevent further mischief, she took Lee in to help her set the table.

On first meeting, two women look in each other for possible enemies; two men for possible friends. Ramon, with his gentle, deprecatory manner, was so different from the Mexican of American fiction, skulking ever with a knife behind a bush, that he came to Gordon as a revelation. His great Spanish eyes glowing softly in the dusk under his huge gold-laced *sombrero*; the *charro* suit of soft leather that so finely displayed his lithe build; his fine horse and silver-

crusted saddle—made such a figure as, in the prosaic East, is to be seen only on the stage.

Gordon, on the other hand, with his frank, breezy manner, appealed just as strongly to Ramon. After the exchange of cigarettes and a light they settled down to a friendly chat. Naturally the conversation ran from Gordon's impressions of the country to a review of its troubles, and in course thereof he obtained an astonishing glimpse into the Mexican point of view.

"I do not know of myself," Ramon replied to his question concerning the outcome, "but one could not listen to my father, who is old and wise, without forming some opinions. No, señor, we shall never settle our troubles ourselves—because, first, it isn't in us; second, we do not try. Any settlement will have to come from the outside—but that we should fight. You would have every Mexican in the country at your throats. Even we, the Icarzas, and dozens of others who are now living on your side of the border, all of us who would have so much to gain and nothing to lose by a gringo occupation, would turn against you. Like careless wives we should resent the intrusion of a neighbor to set in order the house we are too lazy to clean ourselves. To tell the truth, señor"—he concluded his frank opinion with a gentle shrug—"we should fight any attempt on your part to limit our 'God-given right'—as your political speakers would say—to cut one another's throats and run off with one another's women as we have been doing for thousands of years. We hated Diaz because he kept us from it. Since his overthrow we have done our best to make up the arrears."

So quietly was the analysis made, Gordon could not but laugh. "I think your father must be a bit of a cynic."

"No, señor." Ramon repeated the gentle shrug. "He merely knows us. In your schools—I know this, for I spent a couple of years in one of your big military academies—you teach that every American boy has a chance to be President. This, of course, is foolish. In the average life of your one hundred of millions, there can only be ten Presidents, so forty-nine million, nine hundred and ninety thousand others of your men have no chance at all. Now we do not teach that. We are simply born with the belief that each one of us is going to be president, if he has to kill all the others. Moreover, in actual practice, we cut without scruple the throats of those who come between us and again what your political speakers would call 'our God-appointed place.' As there are many millions of us ingrained with this belief, some bloodshed is bound to result.

"Also my father knows you Yankees. You desire peace, not because it is right, but in order that you may pursue your commercial wars. Between our wars we are good friends, visit and love one another till the time comes for another killing. But you pursue your commerce with absolute ruth. Nothing, to you, the ruin of a competitor; nothing the crushing of children's and women's lives in your sweat-shops and factories; no principle of morality or humanity can stem the tide of your greed. Your warfare is far more inhuman than ours; slays its tens of thousands to our thousands; starves your children, debauches your women in a way that is unknown with us. For when they are not hacking one another to pieces our *peones* live in rude comfort on the haciendas with enough to eat and drink, no more work than they feel like doing, merriment enough in their bailes and fiestas. No, we prefer our own wars; do not in the least desire the slums, sweat-shops, rapacity, and greed that go with your system."

"In other words," Gordon suggested, "'you prefer the frying-pan to the fire'?"

For a moment Ramon looked mystified. Then, as he grasped the application of the strange proverb, he laughed. "Exactly, señor. Why trade devils?"

"So that is how you Mexicans feel?" Gordon commented on these strange ideas after a thoughtful pause. "Then why did you ever let the foreigners in? Now that a hundred thousand of them have invested billions here under guarantees from Mexico to their respective countries, you can never turn them out."

Ramon's nod conceded the fact. Not now were the hands of time to be set back. The evolutionary process which was sweeping his country from its ancient foundations, laid in a pastoral age, into the vortex of a detested commercialism, was not to be stayed.

"Why did we do it? *We* did not. It was the work of Porfirio Diaz. Lerdo de Tejada, whom he overthrew, held to the Mexican idea, and would have built a Chinese Wall around the country to keep the foreigners out. But after him—Diaz, the Flood!" Flicking the ash carelessly from his cigarette, he concluded, with a shrug: "No, we cannot throw them out—now. Some day you gringos will swallow us up even as you swallowed Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, Alta California. But in the mean time—we shall fight."

From these lines the talk turned to more intimate things and, if let alone, they would undoubtedly have become friends. But just then Lee returned and plunged again into family

gossip, cutting Gordon out. In fact, she did it so completely that he looked up, surprised, when she addressed him half an hour later.

"We are going for a little walk. You may come—if you choose."

He didn't *choose*! As the blue sweater and orange stockings moved off alongside the *charro* suit and jingling silver spurs, however, his face displayed that mixture of exasperation and bewilderment that is common to two creatures under the sun—to wit, a bull being played with the *capa* by a skilful *matador* and a man under torture by a woman.

When they disappeared around the corner, wrath surged within him. Here the creature whom, less than an hour ago, he had elected to wander with him through Java forests and on a personally conducted tour of China had first flouted him openly, and was now throwing herself at the head of a—well, a blanked, blanked Mexican! It was hard to swallow, and yet under his wrath the "wind" was fanning another flame into quite a respectable blaze.

If he could have seen the celerity with which Lee replaced their relations on the usual basis after she and Ramon passed from sight, Gordon might have felt better. But he did not, and when they returned almost an hour later she behaved just as badly, if not worse. Until the going down of the sun, in biblical phrase, and then some, she flirted shamelessly while Gordon exhibited, on his part, the customary phases. In lack of another girl of flirting age, he concentrated his attentions, at first, on Betty. But growing desperate as the evening wore on, he started a flirtation with the widow, whose looks and years brought her well within the limit. Being neither prim nor prudish, she, on her part, threw herself into the fray with a certain enjoyment and helped him out. But never for a moment was she deceived.

"Flirting their young heads off against each other," she summed the situation.

With secret amusement she observed the dignity of Gordon's good-night at the close of the evening, and the excessive cordiality of Lee's answer; also the stiffness of the bows between the young men.

A certain restraint in the girl's good-night to herself caused her inward laughter. Nevertheless, she observed the scriptural injunction not to let the sun go down on one's offense. She entered with Lee into her bedroom, and, judging by the low laughter that escaped under the door, she quickly removed it. Nevertheless, she was not prevented, thereby, from a correct judgment of results.

"On the whole honors were even," she mused while making her toilet. "I wonder who will score to-morrow?"

It was Lee.

"I'm coming home later," she gave Gordon his orders, after breakfast. "You can go now. Mr. Icarza will ride with me."

There was nothing for it, of course, but to obey. Saddling up, he rode away, but not before the widow had handed him a hastily scribbled note that contained—at least so she said—the recipe for a liniment Terrubio used on their horses which he had promised to Bull.

Going back into the bedroom, she caught Lee watching Gordon behind the curtains. "That's downright cruelty," she scolded.

"Well?" Lee shrugged. "Didn't he say, yesterday morning, that he didn't take any interest in girls after they grew up?"

"But he does."

Very illogically, but quite naturally, Lee answered, with a little laugh, "I know it."

Nevertheless her eyes softened as she watched the lonely figure—that is, they softened until it turned from the beaten trail and headed on the path by which they had come in. Then they flashed. "Oh, he's going back by the *fonda*!"

"Ah-ha!" the widow mused. "Now we shall see."

She did, for having given Gordon barely time to pass from sight, Lee routed out Ramon from a comfortable smoke, mounted, and rode after.

XVIII: THE "WIND" BLOWS CONTRARY

In the fundamentals of feeling poor humans are very much alike.

A university training confers no immunity from jealousy, and as he rode into the hills Gordon's thoughts exhibited all of the phases customary with plowboys and professors who have been flouted and flirted and flurried till they can hardly say whether they are standing on their heads or their heels. He assured himself, of course, that he "didn't give a damn"! and smoked a pipe to prove it. But after a few puffs the pipe burned out in his hand, wasting its fragrance on the desert air.

The flashes that fitfully broke his brooding again marked sudden impulses to go back, punch Ramon's head, and lead Lee away by one pretty ear. Mentally he twisted it till she cried out; whereupon he would let go with the admonition, "There! that will teach you to behave!"

Once he even turned to go back. But sanity intervened. He rode on—madder than ever. Also—but, as before said, his thoughts and feelings conformed to the universal type. Let it suffice that when, hours later, he saw the *fonda* lying like a cup of gold in the ravine below he was in a highly reckless state.

Up to that moment it is safe to say that no thought of Felicia had been in his mind. But when suffering from injured pride, vanity, or love, plowman and professor alike proceed to "take a hair of the dog that bit them" by turning to the nearest maid. Of husbands that have been so caught on the rebound, wives obtained, as it were, on a ricochet, the number shall never be told!

In accordance with this natural law, Felicia's pretty face now flashed up before Gordon's eyes. His exclamation, "Aw, take a drink and forget it!" might, metaphorically, be applied to the *fonda's* liquors less than to her.

A *peona's* life gravitates between her grinding at the *metate* and laundering on the river boulders, with spells of "drawnwork" between. Having put out her "wash" and bathed herself in the stream, Felicia was making her toilet before two inches of cracked mirror she had propped on the lintel against the wooden bar shutter when Gordon came riding down from above.

From her smooth forehead, her cloud-black hair fell in dark waves around a spotless chemisette whose low cut and lack of sleeves revealed the satin-gold of her shoulders. Under the same circumstances a white girl would, of course, have fled. But at the sight of him, alone, she spat out a mouthful of hair-pins that interfered with her welcoming smile, led his horse in under the shady *ramada*, then proceeded calmly with her toilet.

Toward both Sliver and Lee she had displayed a certain sullenness, the dull resentment born of racial oppression, but now while she combed and arranged her hair she flooded Gordon with smiles. And how she talked! eyes, hands, body, shoulders, and tongue going together in a way that would have given the most loquacious of white girls twenty yards start out of a hundred and beaten her to the tape.

The tongue Gordon could not understand. But the big eyes, small hands, golden shoulders told in the language of the universe that she was exceedingly glad! To a young man who had been recently flouted and flattened, the nose of him held down, as it were, on the grindstone of a girl's contempt, it was very soothing. He bathed in the subtle flattery. Like a spring tonic, it percolated, a healing oil, through every pore of his wounded vanity, restoring, revigorating his self-esteem. So he looked on approvingly; even made admiring note of the perfect arms and shoulders.

Her toilet concluded, Felicia surveyed it a few inches at a time in the cracked bit of mirror. Then letting down the wooden shutter, she filled two *copas* of anisette and, leaning on one shapely elbow, pledged him in Spanish.

"Salud y pesitos, señor!" (Health and a little money!)

In clinking glasses, she touched his hand, but he did not find the contact unpleasant; neither took alarm when she refused a *peso* note—even after he had filled and drunk again.

A *peona* refusing money? It was contrary to instinct and tradition! Had he known that, or her private mind, he would have moved on; for he was not only naturally shy with girls, but also responsible beyond his years. But being absolutely ignorant of *peona* nature, and in fine fettle for sympathetic philandering, he leaned against the bar and chatted as best he could, with his little Spanish helped out by signs.

When she suggested that he would learn more quickly if he had a *diccionario* with "long hair" he laughed, but failed to catch the personal application. Again, if, as on the former occasion, she had repeated the offer made through Sliver, he would also have laughed. But now that she was sure, or thought she was, of her game, she enwrapped herself in a savage modesty; masked advances under alluring retreats.

To tell the truth, as the anisette fulfilled its ordained purpose and burned up his shyness in its

consuming flame, he found the flirtation so delightful that an hour slipped by unnoticed. During that time the "long-haired *diccionario*" was in constant use. While her father and mother dozed under the *ramada* he consulted it about the scenery and natural objects, trees, chickens, pigs; the path, stream, and hills. But when, irresistibly, the range of his questions narrowed to nearer objects—fingers, eyes, hair—the lesson passed the boundaries of etymology into the domain of love.

He was well over that border before he realized it—how far he did not guess until, when he had asked playfully the Spanish for "kiss," the *diccionario* answered swiftly, not with the word, but with the action to illustrate it.

XIX: A KISS—ITS CONSEQUENCES

If Gordon had happened to look behind him before riding on down into the cañon, he might have seen with the naked eye two black dots crawling like flies along the high bare flank of a mountain far behind. Under a binocular the flies would have resolved into Lee and Ramon. Further, in that clear, dry atmosphere, a good telescope would have revealed both the girl's worried expression and Ramon's glowing ardor. For just as the "wages of sin is death," so the wages of flirtation—especially if the party of the second part be of Latin blood—is apt to be disaster. Lee was now reaping where she had sown, garnering in full measure, heaped up and pressed down, last night's consequences.

With a girl's keen intuition in such things, she had seen it coming and had thought of turning back. But after her summary dismissal of Gordon, that would have appeared ridiculous—besides, though she would not have admitted it, there he was riding on to a rendezvous with that *dreadful* girl! How she regretted, now, the flirtation! How she berated herself for sending him home! But, there being nothing else to do, she had ridden rapidly, staving off the inevitable with a stream of excited chatter—Ramon's family, *hacienda* affairs, the scenery—while she dodged like a chased rabbit she secretly wondered at herself. Supposing this were six months ago? Say, on the morning she had put on his hat? Would she have doubled and dodged? She knew better! She could not say, herself, what her answer might have been! But she *did* know that she would have let him speak.

If then, why not now? Was it Gordon? Her pride—bolstered by irritation, for with a woman's illogic she charged her present plight to him—her pride rose in arms at the thought! Nevertheless, it did not prevent her from riding hard on his trail; nor from holding Ramon off with an effort great as a physical strain.

But it was all in vain. Her retreats, though real, were alluring as the mock ones which, at that moment, Felicia was practising on Gordon. And their effect was the same. Her efforts were as bags of sand piled to check a rising torrent. Stayed for a time, it rose the higher; presently leaped over and swept all before it.

A remark of hers concerning his father's age precipitated the flood. "Si, he has many years." Then, his dark, handsome face aglow, Ramon ran on: "Yesterday he was saying that he would be content to pass could he but see me settled with a wife. I told him it depended on"—he paused, then added the *tu* of lovers—"on *thee*. If—"

"Oh, Ramon!" she pleaded, in wild distress. "*Please—don't!*"

But the dam was gone! In terms that would seem extravagant in English, but flowed naturally in the eloquent, rhythmic Spanish, he told his love. Sunshine and star fire; moonlight and bird-song; the bloom of spring flowers; loom of the mountains; wide spread of the desert—all were she! Warmth, light, happiness, from her proceeded! She was his universe. In her all beauty dwelt! And so on. To a girl who loved him, it would have been delightful wooing. Six months ago she would have listened, charmed; perhaps have been persuaded. But now—it filled her with dismay.

"Oh, you poor Ramon!" She held out her hand in remorse and pity, but when, seizing it, he tried to draw her to him, she pulled away. "Oh no! *no!* Oh, what a miserable creature I am! Here

I have played—”

But she got no further. Realizing with sympathetic intuition that the moment was unpropitious, he stopped her. “There is no hurry. I did not intend to tell thee for a little while. But there is no harm done. Thou hast always known it.”

“Oh yes.” Tears dimming the blue eyes, she nodded. “Yes, but—” Then realizing that argument would but reopen the case, she accepted the compromise. “No, I won’t answer now. Wait.”

“If there be any one else—” His brow drew down over somber, threatening eyes.

“Oh, there isn’t!” She was conscious, herself, of over-emphasis. But she repeated again. “There *isn’t*, Ramon!”

“Bueno!” His face cleared. “Then I am content.”

Now she was conscious of vast relief as though at the passing of imminent danger. Relief from what? She refused to think.

Content with her reassurance, he laughed and chatted again as they moved on, but it was a miserable girl that rode beside him; one torn between remorse and a dread curiosity concerning feelings which she obstinately refused to examine. When, finally, they rode down into the cañon, curiosity and remorse both gave place to indefinite apprehension. Without trying, she learned more of herself while they followed the zigzag staircases down and down than she dared to contemplate.

Their first view of the *fonda* showed, of course, only the roof and walls. But from the lower levels they sighted, first, Gordon’s horse tied to a post of the *ramada*, then the young man himself leaning at ease across the bar. Ramon, who was riding ahead, obtained first view of the “long-haired *diccionario*,” which was now being consulted in the matter of hair and eyes.

“The señor seems to be enjoying himself.”

His laugh came floating back. Passing around the next turn, he did not see Lee rein in her beast. Sitting her horse, still as a marble statue, she watched from across the stream the girl’s head go up and meet Gordon’s in a kiss.

For a disinterested spectator the scene would have had vast interest. The chrome-yellow walls of the *fonda*, toned under the eaves by Time’s green brush; the great shading trees through which the sun sent down a greenish lace of light; the stream singing musically among its glazed brown boulders; all formed a proper setting for the forest love which knows no other sanction than that of the eye. The beauty and abandon of it all would have thrilled the aforesaid disinterested spectator; have carried a theater by storm. But Lee was neither disinterested nor an audience—in the accepted sense. She saw only the abandon. Conscious of a deathly chill at her heart, white as the aforesaid statue, she just sat her beast.

In taking the last turn, Ramon’s horse dislodged a pebble, and as it rolled down the bank and splashed in the stream Gordon broke the girl’s clasp. Ramon was still out of sight, and Gordon’s glance of startled inquiry rose to Lee sitting above, so still and quiet.

“My God, she saw it!”

Even as it flashed upon him he was convicted of a vast and sudden change wrought in himself by the last twenty-four hours. Only yesterday he had assured Lee, with sincerity, that he lost interest in grown-up girls. Now, just because she had caught him in a little gallantry, the whole world had gone to smithereens!

“Competition is the life of love!” Mrs. Mills might have added—sometimes its death. The “wind” had blown with a vengeance—from opposite ways. Sitting above, Lee shook under its chill. Below, Gordon shivered. Though only a few seconds passed before she rode on down and joined Ramon in front of the *fonda*, it seemed to both a deathless age.

After passing a pleasant word with Gordon, Ramon had called for a drink, and till Felicia brought her a glass Lee sat quietly talking. But as the girl looked up, revealing the soft glow in her great dusky eyes, Lee stiffened and looked at Gordon.

“I am glad that we overtook you. Señor Icarza has asked me to marry him. You shall be first to congratulate us.”

Gordon’s glance had risen to hers in wonder and consternation. Then—the tricks fancy plays us! *Fonda* and ravine faded into a glade in a Java forest where the light broke down through giant fronds and twined a golden aureole around her fair hair. From that great distance, without recognizing it for his own, he heard a voice.

“I wish you all happiness!”

The crash of Lee’s glass as she threw it among the stones brought him back to the sight of her riding at full speed down the cañon.

Ramon was looking after her, transfixed with wonder.

Gordon's practical Anglo-Saxon instinct was first to assert itself. He spoke very quietly. "We'd better catch her before she breaks her neck."

XX: SLIVER IS DULY CHASTENED

Had Lee been really trying to break her neck, she could not have ridden more recklessly.

Where the mule path crossed and recrossed the stream, she took it in successive leaps. Once from the crest of an abrupt declivity her beast launched out like a flying bird, yet picked up its stride and flew on full forty-five feet beyond. Unconsciously, she bent to avoid the oaks that reached down gnarled hands to snatch her from the saddle. Possessed by but one impulse, to escape, she raced down the cañon and out upon the plain.

Had she given full rein to her feeling she would have galloped on and on and on over the receding horizon into a strange world that knew naught of her affairs. But as the violence of the exercise drew the blood from her brain, responsibility resumed its sway. Of her own accord she slackened speed and allowed Ramon, whose fast beast had outrun Gordon's, to catch up.

Taught, by long experience, to expect from her always the unexpected, he had set the wild flight down as one of her customary pranks. "Little Wicked One!" he called, coming up. "Have a care for my happiness if not for your neck!" But when, in place of the shy confusion of a newly engaged girl, she turned on him a face of cold distress, the glow faded from his own. "Why, *queridita*? What—"

"I want you to leave me now." She cut him abruptly off.

His big eyes widened. "After raising me to heaven would you plunge me in—"

"Ah no, no!" She impulsively thrust out her hand. "You have earned far more happiness than I shall ever be able to give. But—"

"Si? But—"

She gave him a little wan smile. "When you come to understand girls better, you will never demand a reason. Men always know why they do a thing, but girls act from feeling; most of the time without knowing the cause."

"But—"

"Ramon," she looked at him with sweet severity, "if I had told you on top of the mountain what I said back there—wouldn't you have been content?"

"Assuredly! It was only—"

"Yes, yes! Now listen. I want you to go, now—and stay till I either send or come. It won't be long—I promise."

"Bueno," he shrugged. "Though minutes will be ages!"

Her hand was still in his. After raising it to his lips, he swung his beast, with a wave of the hand at Gordon in the distance, galloped off to the north.

His departure left her free to review the situation—with little satisfaction. From every angle one fact stood out—in a moment of pique she had engaged herself to a man who, no matter what might have been, she now knew she could never love. Of course it was possible to break it. But even in her desperation she never thought of that.

"You flirted with him," she berated herself. "Led him on to an avowal; accepted him out of spite. You are a mean, despicable, miserable *thing*, and now you'll go through with it."

It never occurred to her that, being so "mean and despicable" it might be against Ramon's interest to inflict herself upon him. Having, with her girl's illogic, made up her mind, she felt that peculiar sense of comfort which men obtain from duty done and women from self-sacrifice. She turned and looked back to see how that other criminal—the chief, if unconscious, cause of it all—was getting along; and though he was too far away for her to read his face, his bent head revealed a comforting dejection.

As a matter of fact, he was just as miserable as—as she could have wished him to be. At first his thoughts and feelings had run in a personal groove. At one fell swoop certain excursions into

Java forests and to the Chinese Wall, not to mention other desirable and lovely places, had been swept into the discard of broken dreams. Never would tropical sunbeams break down through giant fronds to twine that golden aureole about a certain head! In consideration of his recent awakening to her values as a traveling companion, he was just as sore and silly and jealous as any young man could possibly be. And just as her reflections had, in womanly fashion, turned to self-sacrifice, so his rose, in masculine style, to high, moral grounds.

"It's a damn shame!" he told himself. "Ramon seems a good sort, but—no greaser is good enough for her!" While the bright, hard specks floated up in his eye, he added, "And it isn't going to be."

For a while he entertained a notion to catch up and cleanse himself by open confession. But realizing that two glasses of anisette plus a vagrant inclination—even if the latter were based on a sense of injury—might not appeal to her woman's logic, he kept his distance. Metaphorically, a quarter-mile of misery stretched between them, across which the dejected droop of her shoulders, his hanging head, wirelessly their hopelessness.

"Poor girl!" he pitied her.

"He's feeling terribly," she told herself, with mournful satisfaction.

Nevertheless, when he came up after she drew rein a half-mile outside of Los Arboles, her face was composed in the sweet gravity becoming to her heroic mood. "Our friends"—she nodded toward the distant buildings—"are quite prejudiced. For the present, I wish you would keep it to yourself."

He bowed with equal gravity, and they rode on in silence.

At the sight of Bull, waiting for them at the *patio* gate, Lee did cheer up a little—partly because of a natural instinct to hide her hurt, more largely from the sense of protection his presence always gave. Sensitive in all that concerned her, however, he had caught both the droop of her shoulders and Gordon's air of gloom.

He was not to be deceived. "Been fighting. Wonder what it's all about."

He learned, partially, when Gordon handed him the widow's recipe for "liniment," after Lee had gone in and they were unsaddling at the stable. It ran:

"Dear Friend,—Sliver took Mr. Nevil to see Felicia at the *fonda* the other day, and Lee caught her wearing his watch-fob. It made her so mad she flirted her head off with Ramon." In her ignorance of later developments, she had concluded: "But there is no harm done. She likes Mr. Nevil, and if you can just keep him away from the *fonda*, I am sure things will turn out all right."

Bull read and reread the epistle a second and third time for his own pleasure, regardless of its sense. In its reverent tenderness there was something pathetic in the way he touched with his big forefingers the signature "Your friend, Mary Mills." Gordon had almost finished caring for the horses before Bull placed the note in his shirt pocket after carefully wrapping it in a piece of newspaper. The ceremony completed, he fished for further information.

"Any one else there?" he inquired, nonchalantly.

"Young Mexican," Gordon replied, with what, for him, was excessive curttness.

"Ramon Icarza, I reckon." Bull went innocently on: "He an' Miss Lee were almost what you could call raised together. She thinks a good deal of him—"

"No reason why she shouldn't."

Nevertheless, the tone caused Bull to duck behind Lee's horse to hide a chuckle. "Jealous! green-cheese jealous. Mary—" he paused, reddening, for never before in his thought had he used her given name. He repeated it with lingering delight. "Mary—was right. We've sure stirred 'em up. On'y we'll have to 'tend to Felicia at once."

His mind thus made up, he proceeded to Felicia's solution with the characteristic directness he gave to any problem. When, after supper that evening, Gordon went straight to the bunk-house, Bull herded Jake and Sliver into the stable to deliberate by lantern-light.

"You-all never orter ha' taken him there," he charged Sliver. "Here we go an' import this young fellow at no end of trouble an' expense, then you herd him right into the arms of another girl."

"Aw! she don't count." Sliver excused himself. "She's Mex an' wild girl." He sagely added: "You see, I was that anxious to make sure he didn't drink. We kain't have no young soaks 'round Lady-girl."

His solicitude drew Jake's satirical grin. "You wasn't looking for a drink yourself, heigh? As

for her being Mex an' wild—you damn fool, don't you know that at his age wild girls draws like wild honey. He's be'n there once an' he'll go again."

"If he ain't stopped," Bull qualified.

"If he ain't stopped," Jake nodded. "An' it's up to you to do it."

"But how?" Sliver's broad, round face struggled like a full moon in clouds of helplessness. "How in the 'tarnal kin I stop him?"

"By 'quiring vested rights in the premises," Jake nodded sagely. "If you marry her he kain't come 'round."

"Marry her? Me? Marry a Mex?" Sliver almost yelled it.

"That's what." While his thin lips parted in his characteristic wolf grin, Jake went on: "Anyhow, what's your idee in shying an' rearing this-a-way at domestic happiness wuss 'n a colt at flying paper? Why, other men rush for it like 'twas—"

"Sticky fly-paper," Sliver ungallantly supplied. "An' once they're in—*good night!*"

But Jake ignored the interruption. "You-all orter take shame to yourself. Marriage is nature's most holy an' necessary ordinance. Don't all the preachers tell it? An' what would become of the census without it? But here, instead of accepting your lot with thankfulness an' thanking your stars that a girl can be found that's damn fool enough to take you, you-all go a-holding up your head an' howling like a hungry coyote."

While Jake thus orated, Sliver's expression of obstinacy was leavened by fleeting hope. "If you b'lieve all that—what's the matter with you marrying her yourself?"

Jake's thin lips parted again in his sarcastic grin. "I've no calling for it. You see I'm that soft by nat'er any woman could crush my tender feelings. But one glance at your brutal count'nance would tell even a blind man that your wife would be kep' in her place. Besides—was it me that took Gordon up there?"

"Quit your fooling," Bull interposed. Then, unconscious of the humor of the situation, aware in his simplicity only of the danger to his cherished plan, he faced Sliver. "Yes or no—will you do it?"

"No, I'm da—"

"You won't?" Bleak eyes pin-points of steel, teeth bared in a snarl, knife flashing blue in the lantern-light, Jake sprang from the pile of corn fodder on which he was sitting. "You upset the beans we put to b'ile an' refuse to pick 'em up?"

Almost as quickly Sliver's knife took the lantern gleam, and as they circled, looking for an opening, the friendly habit of the last months dropped away. They were again the rustlers, wild, fierce, united against man and his law, but equally ready to fight among themselves. But before they could close, Bull's bulk pushed in between. One shove of his great hands sent them staggering back.

"Cut it out! We can't stand for no blood-letting around Miss Lee." Towering in the lantern-light, he turned to Sliver and laid down the law. "You an' us have ridden an' fit together for many a year. So far you've never failed us an' I don't believe you will. We brought this young fellow in, as you know, to cut that damn Mexican out, an' you've sp'iled our game by throwing him in Felicia's way. Now it's up to you. If you make good—we go on. If you don't—there's the trail."

He could not have taken better ground. Where threats would have provoked only further obstinacy, the appeal won. While putting up his knife, though, Sliver glared at Jake.

"I'll knock your block off the first time I catch you alone on the range." Addressing Bull, he went on: "Of course if it's to help Lady-girl, you bet I'll go the limit. But what d'you-all expect? That I'm a-going to cinch her with a priest an' license?"

"That'd be more loving-like; she'd appreciate it, too."

"Shut up, Jake! We don't care so long as you acquire enough title to shoo Gordon off. Here's fifty pesos. For half that, old Antonio 'u'd sell her along with his soul. You kin settle the details with him. Of course you'll have to live out there for a whiles—mebbe till this Ramon business is knocked out of Miss Lee's head."

"What! An' cut out the range?" Sliver exclaimed in horror. "Me hang around there a-selling aguardiente to *peones*?"

"What's left after you get through," Jake began, but was cut off again.

"No, we can arrange the work so there'll be plenty for you within easy riding."

"So's you won't be drug too far away during the honeymoon. She wouldn't stan' for that."

Though a model in force and brevity, Sliver's answer transcends print. He wound up with the complaint: "All right, I'll go, but I see my finish. I'll die on Felicia's grub."

"Couldn't be any worse than Rosa's," Jake comforted. "You managed to live on that."

With a certain resignation, but still grumbling, Sliver set out next morning. To make sure that he followed program, Jake and Bull packed his kit and even escorted him a mile or two on his way. Throughout all these preliminaries, Sliver's mien was rather that of chief mourner at a funeral than a groom on his way to his bride, and just before they left him he even advanced a belated plea.

"Don't you allow we ked get some one else?"

"With all the men in the country off at the wars?" Bull shook his head. "Besides, no *peon* could hold her down. She needs a strong hand."

"It's either you or Gordon," Jake added. "You'll have to sacrifice."

Not until they turned homeward after his lone figure had faded behind the next rise did they consider how the affair was to be broken to Lee. "'Tain't going to be so dreadful easy," Bull frowned thoughtfully, "she being a girl and prejudiced. She'd hardly cotton to sech primitive nupt'als as Sliver is likely to consummate."

"I she'd think not!" Jake looked his horror and scorn. "You'll make a mess of it. Better leave it to me."

Bull was quite willing, but though he had looked for some embroidery on the bare facts, the woof of romance Jake wove through the warp of fact at lunch that day made him choke on his food and gasp. A tale of secret love and stealthy visitations, a reluctant lady gradually won, ornamented with priests and licenses and other trimmings necessary for feminine approval, were woven into a consistent narrative that proved how much Bacchus gained and the Muses lost when Jake enlisted in the former's service.

"No, Missy, you ain't a-going to lose him," Bull answered, on his part, Lee's troubled question. "He'll take care of things over that way."

"Well—" Lee laughed, a little choked laugh, "I hope he'll be—happy." Then becoming conscious of Gordon's gaze, she dropped her glance to her plate. But not before he had read its meaning.

"Why hadn't this happened a week ago!"

XXI: THE WIDOW TO THE RESCUE

Who shall interpret the feelings of a high-minded maid who is bent on wrecking her own and two other lives through a mistaken sense of honor?

Broadly, one might hint at rebellions sternly repressed, at doubts and misgivings, secret tears, agonizings of spirit that affected Lee's flesh during the next week till her roses paled, eyes grew dark and heavy.

Not that she was altogether unhappy. A woman's life is her feelings, and if they be sufficiently intense she obtains from their exercise a certain mournful satisfaction—akin, no doubt, if a little paler, to the ecstasies of a martyr. But into these innermost recesses, innocent springs of the woman soul whence flow endless capacities for devotion and self-sacrifice, into these it is not given to the eternally masculine to enter. Accordingly, during the following week Gordon perceived only a surface resignation that manifested itself toward him in a quiet, sisterly manner.

A blunt male, his psychology was much more simple, fluctuating between desperation, depression, determination, and despair, the composite of which showed on the surface as a decided case of the sulks. Yes, it has to be set down that he followed the customary and unheroic masculine precedent, returning for Lee's sisterly solicitude more than the average brotherly brusqueness.

Nature having neglected to insert a compensating balance in the feelings of the eternally masculine, the poor fellow was utterly miserable. Despite the fact that, up to a week ago, he had regarded Lee with neutral friendliness, he now desired more desperately than ever to place her in a certain Java forest adorned with the regalia of a honeymoon. What is more to the point,

under his sulks he was determined to do it.

Summing them, he sulked and she grieved up to the moment that a *mozo* rode in, one day, with a package from Ramon.

Though it held only a single flower, she easily read the message, "May I come?" and though she returned a single line, "I'm coming to see Isabel next week," the flower had done its work.

The concrete fact behind its bloom emerged from mists of procrastination and stared her boldly in the face. Its reflection set such misery in her eyes that, without understanding, Gordon's sulks gave place to pity. Bull, who knew even less, was moved to send a *mozo* with a note to the widow.

Straight to the point the epistle ran:

Dear Ma'am,—The young man, he's a-moping like a moulting chicken an' Miss Lee's that peaked and pale and down-hearted you'd hardly know her. T'other day a *mozo* brought her some sort of a package from Ramon, and ever since she's looked wild-eyed and scared as a canary in fear of a cat. There's something queer going on. It wouldn't take you more'n a minute to find it out, and you owe us about a dozen visits, anyway. Couldn't you take a day off and come?

She came, of course, the good, kind soul, with Betty, under guard of Terrubio and the bandit reputation which gained so much from his weird eyes. The gods and goddesses willed it that they fell in with Gordon returning to the *hacienda* at the close of his day's work, and the widow seized the opportunity like a skilful general. After permitting Betty and Terrubio to ride on beyond earshot over the slopes that were dyed a glowing apricot by the low sun, she opened on Gordon.

"Now tell me all about it, young man."

He looked at her, surprised, then laughed. "You mean all that I would have said if I hadn't been ordered home that morning? All right. Of course I don't have to tell you that I love you madly, and if it wasn't for the fact that Bull would wring my neck, I should propose at once. Really—"

"Nice boy!" She laughed merrily. "To comfort your poor mother. It was simply disgraceful the way you flirted with me, almost compromised me with my own offspring. 'I was just ashamed of your dreadful behavior, mama,' Betty told me, afterward, 'trying to take poor Lee's beau from her.' Nevertheless, I found it very encouraging."

"My mother?" He achieved an excellent example of that species of cachinnation known as the "horse laugh." Then, with sincerity of accent and feeling that caused her a little blush, he ran on: "My mother, madam, is more than twenty-eight. Yes, I said twenty-eight. Add to that eyes as clear and young as—"

"Make it Lee's."

"As Betty's. A fine, soft skin, pretty nose, figure—um! just right. Why—"

"Yes! yes!" She held up her hand, laughing. "But we mustn't waste time. You know I'm on your side. Tell me—what happened?"

"That's easy—she's engaged herself to Ramon."

"What?" Her shriek of horror and surprise caused Betty and Terrubio to look back. Her next question showed the keenness of her intuition. "Why, whatever did *you* do to her?"

He told—of his anger, jealousy, pique, attempt to soothe his ruffled vanity by flirting with Felicia. He told all with candor and humorous insight into his own feelings that robbed the narrative of conceit. He told even of the kiss and that Lee had seen it. "Though I don't see how that could have anything to do with her engagement, for she announced it the next second."

"She sent him off within the next hour—with only a kiss of her hand—hasn't seen him since—nor communicated with him till the other day—has looked like a frightened bird ever since." She told off the items with amused contempt. "How stupid men are! Why, it is plain as day. He asked her to marry him, yes, on the way. How could she escape after the way she had flirted? But she had either refused or held him off. But when she saw you kiss—"

"My God!" It burst on him. "What a fool I am! Why did I—"

"Don't blame, yourself. She was more in fault. The question is—not what is done, but what to do."

"I had thought, at first, of quitting this to join Valles. It would be lots of fun and I was so darned mad—"

"And leave *her* to *him*?" She looked a little scornful. "Why—"

But he cut in. "You bet I won't! He'll never marry her—if I have to carry her off."

"And I'd help you do it," she warmly declared. "At present Ramon is all right, and if you could put up, like preserves, so he'd keep, it wouldn't be so bad. Yes, he's all right—but, so are the young of any kind, a lamb or kid, little frog, tiny snake, and there's nothing cuter in the whole world than a baby pig. But after it grows up—good Lord deliver us!

"And it's the same with Mexicans. They are the prettiest babies; nice young men. Ramon, with his fine color and wonderful eyes, is too handsome to live just now. But after a while he'll grow stout and lazy from over-feeding and acquire pimples and blotches till his face looks like a scorched hide. Right now he's so romantic he'd twang a guitar all night under Lee's window. After a while she wouldn't be able to sleep for his snores. Now he'd fly at her bidding. Later, she'd fly at his. She would live behind bars while she was young; go without love in her middle age, be tyrannized and bulldozed all the time."

"But do you think she would *really* do it?"

"Indeed, yes! She's highly idealistic, and was trained by her father in the old ideas. Now that she has given her word, it will take wild horses to pull her from it—or wild men."

After a sidelong glance that gave her the hard glint of his eyes above the firm mouth, set jaw, she went on, with a little satisfied nod: "Now listen! Ramon will be easier to handle. Being Mexican, he's sensitive as a tarantula, irritable as a scorpion, jealous as a cat. Now that she's promised, he will look upon her as his, body and soul, and if her glance so much as strays in any one else's direction, he'll be ready to kill. It ought to be quite easy to provoke him to the point where he will either break the engagement or give her cause. In other words, you must force him to play your hand."

She continued, with a little deprecatory laugh: "I know it's a low-down trick, but it may stave off something worse. Before he would let Lee marry Ramon, I feel sure Mr. Perrin would kill him."

A mischievous grin broke up Gordon's grimness. "So we are not altogether disinterested. We could never stand to see Bull get in bad."

She laughed softly, happily, looking away, and lapsed into silence which endured while they rode up and over the last slope that laid the *hacienda* at their feet.

Its walls and courts, *patio*, painted adobes, lay, a small city of gold magnificently blazoned by the rich red brush of the setting sun. The glossy crests of the shading cottonwoods flamed a deep apricot under a sky that spread its glories of saffron, and cinnabar purple, and umber, down over the horizon. All about them the pastures laid an undulating carpet, violet in the hollows, crimson on the hills. From the stubby chimneys soft smoke pennons trailed away till lost in the smoldering dusk of the east. Up through the clear air came a soft cooing of woman voices broken by laughter, low, sweet, infinitely wild.

The widow lowered her voice in harmony with the peace of it all. "It is a great prize."

He nodded. "It's beautiful, but—I'd love her as much in rags."

Noting the honest eyes, the widow believed, yet could not refrain from teasing. "Yet—a week ago you hardly gave her a thought."

He looked at her in naive wonder. "Isn't it queer—how sudden it gets you?"

She nodded. "That's the beauty of it."

XXII: LEE, TOO, IS CONFESSED

As, in the seclusion of Lee's bedroom that night, she and the widow sat side by side, talking at each other in the wide mirror while making their night toilets, a "movie-man" would have given his head to reproduce the scene with its witcheries in the way of unbound hair, filmy white, glimpses of polished shoulders. But in his absence these may be left where they belong—behind the secure guard of Lee's oaken door. Sufficient for the present is their conversation.

"So we've engaged ourself, have we?" As with Gordon, Mrs. Mills went straight to the bat.

"Why—" Pausing with comb and one yellow curl held in midair, Lee looked her utter surprise

at the smiling face in the glass. "Mary Mills! *whoever* told you?"

"This and these would be enough." The widow touched the girl's pale cheeks and shadowed eyes. "But I caught your young man, coming in, and made him confess. So we got mad—because he kissed another girl, and took it out of him by engaging ourself on the spot? Oh, you little fool!"

Dropping the curl, Lee straightened and stiffened till she looked in the filmy nightrobe like a cold and classic marble. "If it had been Phyllis or Phœbe Lovell, or any other nice girl, I wouldn't have cared. But—a peona."

"Well, what of it?" Assured, now, of the truth of her surmises, the widow went confidently forward. "She's mighty pretty."

"But a *peona*! And you know *her*."

"Yes, and I know *him*—better than you do. Now look here, my dear—" Followed a little lecture on the creature, Man, that showed she had profited by her married experience. "A man is a *man* and there's no sense in trying to have him anything else. When a girl loves, she excludes, for the time at least, all others from her life. But a man—while he may love one girl with all his strength, he can still see beauty in others. Nature made him that way and we have simply got to stand for it. Now if Gordon had been ten years older, I'd have allowed you real reason. After thirty a man's kisses mean something. But at Gordon's age they are thistledown and light as air, belong to vanity rather than love. A young fellow is so proud of having kissed a pretty girl that he swells up like a turkey gobbler and struts in his self-esteem without thought for anything else. Then, you, yourself, are mostly to blame. Why—"

Next a little lecture on the sin of flirting, with appropriate personal applications which were, however, interrupted by the person. "*You* didn't flirt with *him*, of course."

"Goodness, child! don't bite me! I couldn't see the poor boy crushed into the face of the earth. Now listen." After detailing Gordon's confession, of the injured pride, anger, pique that he had tried to solace in Felicia's smiles, she concluded, "But you—after driving him to desperation go and make the vital mistake of your life."

"And you think that was the way of it? That he didn't really *mean* anything?"

"Didn't he tell me so himself?"

"Well—" she pondered, looking at the widow in the glass, then suddenly collapsed on the other's warm shoulder. "Oh, I'm so glad! I—I *hate* him!"

The widow, being a woman, quite understood these contradictions. "Of course you do." She gently fondled the fair head. "How much?"

The head rose in order to execute a vehement nod. "I hate him so much I—I could just *kill* any other girl that tried to take him!" With a wild sob the face burrowed again into the soft shoulder.

"Well, they'll try, all right."

The head rose again, startled eyes, big and brown, staring from the glass. "Do you—really think so?"

"What do you expect—a nice boy like that to mope and pine for the rest of his life with ten million girls of marriageable age running loose in the United States? What brought him here, anyway—bolting to escape one girl's noose. Take my advice and rope him quick."

"But I'm promised, now, to Ramon."

"Call it off."

"Oh no." Sitting up straight, she shook her head. "I cannot ruin his life."

"Hum!" The widow coughed. "You cannot ruin his life? So you intend to bless it by devoting to his service affections that belong to another? Also to cut him off from the greatest thing in the world—the real love of some other woman? Ruin his life, indeed? Lee, I always credited you with a little sense."

"There is something in that." She snatched at the hope. "The best thing is to tell him I don't love him and leave it to him to decide."

"And he'll do it, have no fear!" The widow tossed her head. "Ramon's nice, but he cannot rise above his race, and you know very well there's neither reason nor justice nor the instinct of fairness in it. Fancy a Mexican giving up a girl because she loves another! He'd resent even the suggestion, take his revenge after marriage."

The gleam of hope had died. She sighed. "I can try."

"Oh, you little fool!" In her irritation the widow bestowed a smart slap on the girl's shoulder. But she spoiled the moral effect the next second by gathering her in her arms. "Don't you know that up in the States girls take on a new beau every Saturday night and break the engagement the following Sunday?"

But the precedent produced only a second envious sigh. "I wish *I* could do it. I guess I wasn't

brought up right.”

“’Tisn’t training; it’s heredity. You’re your father over again; will go your own way. I wash my hands of you.”

That charitable process known as “washing one’s hands of anybody” was, however, the last thing Mrs. Mills was capable of. The assertion simply marked a change of plan which, rising early next morning, she inaugurated when she caught Bull on his way to the stables.

Though he had sat next to her during the long pleasant evening that followed supper last night, the others’ presence had debarred private communications. Content to hear her voice running with Lee’s in happy chatter—so content, indeed, that he forgot for the time being the impending trouble—Bull had smoked furiously in the dusk till they retired to bed.

He listened, now, in silence while the widow told of Lee’s engagement. But the sudden lowering of his black brows was far more dangerous than any threat. She laid her hand on his arm in sudden alarm.

“Easy, my friend. Don’t be too quick. She isn’t married yet, and won’t be—if you leave it to me.”

More powerful than the plea was her gentle pressure. Apart from certain accidental contacts, before mentioned, which had caused him such pleasurable embarrassment, it was the first time she had actually touched him. Big, burly, black giant that he was, he still trembled like a school-girl; trembled so violently that she felt it and dropped both her hand and her eyes. Transferring the embarrassment to herself, that helped him mightily. He was the first to break a confused but happy silence.

“What do you want me to do?”

“Nothing, just now, except to let Gordon ride with me a piece of the way home.”

It was impossible to overlook his sudden disappointment. With characteristic frankness she did not wait for him to tell it. “I’d rather have you; there are so many things I want to consult you about. Dear me!” Her little vexed face was very comforting; it expressed such sincere feeling. “These young folks certainly do make one a lot of trouble. Betty wanted you *so* badly at my party—and so did I; but we just had to ask Gordon to help Lee out. But I’m going to settle this business right quick. And when it is all over—you will come and make us a real visit, won’t you?”

Wouldn’t he? His nod and effulgent grin expressed happiness in the prospect beyond the powers of his slow tongue. Satisfied, she proceeded.

“So let me have him this once. Lee is going to ride a few miles with us, and before she comes back—”

But the matter of her communication is covered by her talk with Gordon, whom she caught coming out of the bunk-house five minutes later.

“I argued with her half the night,” she told him, walking along at his side. “Goodness me, young man, you don’t know what you are up against! Such obstinacy! Lucky for you that it is balanced by a sweet temper and strong sense of justice. All I gained was her promise to beg off from Ramon. She plans to go over and see him some time this week, and if she does—well, with Isabel loving her to death, the old man tendering sage advice, and Ramon passionately pleading his cause, they’ll have her to the priest and married before she has time to think. She mustn’t go.”

“But if she is so obstinate—” Gordon began.

“I’ll take care of that. I shall call on Ramon on the way home and explain the true state of his lady’s heart. Of course he’ll raise Cain and probably damn me for a black-hearted liar, but I can stand it. The point is—he will come right over here. In the mean time you must get busy. A declaration in hand is worth two suspected, and though I’ve hinted very strongly that you are not altogether indifferent to her sweet self, it will make Ramon’s task ten times harder if she hears it from your lips. Now listen!”

The rest was plot, dark and devious. Lee had promised to ride with her a few miles on the homeward journey, and Bull would detail him, Gordon, for her escort. Coming back, he would have all the time in the world.

XXIII: IN WHICH THE WIDOW GOES AND SLIVER COMES

As thus arranged, the program was carried out after breakfast. Very artfully Bull waited till the party was almost out of sight before he sent Gordon galloping after. Even then the plot was endangered when, turning at the sound of hoof-beats, Lee saw him coming. Her face clearly expressed her determination to send him back, but in the nick of time the widow spoke.

"Oh, let him come! The poor fellow is suffering enough."

Lee's nod and faint smile, riding on, revealed a queer mixture of happiness and apprehension, which was wiped out by amused astonishment when, just as Gordon came up, a lone figure hove in sight, coming from the opposite direction.

"Why—it's Sliver!"

And Sliver it was—though difficult to recognize by reason of a complex embroidery of scratches, bumps, and bruises. His own broad grin broke through, however, when Lee inquired after his wife.

"She was fine an' dandy when I seen her last, which, was in the shank of the evening two nights ago." Lovingly fingering a huge bump that occupied a central position in his altered scenery, he went into the intimate details of his matrimonial venture. "Till then it had all been lovely. She'd sorter cut up a bit, at first, me an her padre having fixed up the match without any of her 'sistance. But after I'd given her a fair larruping with a saddle strap, jest to show who wore the pants, as the saying goes, she come right into camp; snuggled in like a kitten. Sure, she behaved real domestic till Fernando, that hawk-nosed arriero from San Ramon, blew in with his mules two nights gone. I orter 'a' suspicioned him, he was that free in handing out drinks. But I didn't—leastways not till Felicia laid me out with one whack of a cordwood stick from behind. The rest I got from the mirror an' the padre when I woke next morning and found him doctoring my map. She an' Fernando had gone off together."

"She's gone!" Lee gave a little hysterical laugh. "For good?"

"An' then some—they're off to the wars." Gently massaging the bump, Sliver added: "She'll stay there if she's wise. It'll be a 'tarnation sight less risky than coming back. She was for cutting my throat, but neither the padre nor Fernando would stan' for that, they being afraid of 'The Black Devil' an' 'The Python,' which they call Bull an' Jake. 'For I knew, señor, that they would follow us to the ends of the earth if any harm came to thee,' the old fellow tol'. But they made her free of my map, an', as you see, she done a good job."

"Oh, I'm so sorry! I must go back and care for your face."

With Lee's exclamation the props trembled beneath the widow's plot, but Sliver restored their stability. "It's cheap at the price. Many's the man up home that gets as bad or worse an' is stuck, to boot, for lawyer's fees an' al'mony. Don't you bother 'bout me, Lady-girl. All I need is a bit of salve, an' Maria kin get me that."

As Sliver rode on, the widow looked at Lee, who returned her meaning glance. Neither looked at Gordon, who discreetly watched Betty. But the thought was the same in the minds of all three. "Thank goodness, she's gone."

For a while Lee hesitated and debated whether, after all, she ought not to go back, and she reined in, startled, when a long howl presently drifted over the rise behind which Sliver had disappeared. A coyote, in its death agony, might have equaled the sound. But as, presently, the tortured notes resolved into the opening bars of "The Cowboy's Lament," she giggled and rode on for another five miles. Sliver was happy!

While Lee was kissing Betty good-by the widow managed to pass a whisper to Gordon. "Now don't let her escape! And remember—look out for Ramon to-morrow."

He nodded and, looking back from behind the crest of the next rise, she saw for herself how well he obeyed. Lee had made to get off at a gallop, but had reined in when he spoke, and now they were riding side by side, deep in earnest conversation.

Nodding, the widow rode on, but stopped again for a last look while she could still see over the rise. She was practically invisible when Lee looked back, protesting, as Gordon grabbed her bridle and pulled her beast alongside. Her pointing finger said, quite plainly:

"They will see!"

The widow gasped, for with one swift reach he snatched Lee out of the saddle and set her before him.

XXIV: UNDERSTANDING

Had she heard the conversation which preceded that bold action, Mrs. Mills would have been still more impressed. Determination is the natural foe of diplomacy. Warned by one single, furtive glance that Lee intended to make off, Gordon plunged at one smash through her fence of reserve.

"Do you intend to keep that engagement?"

Coming from a young man whom one hated so vindictively that one could "just kill any other girl that tried to take him," the question was well calculated to arrest attention. Neither was its force lessened by the fact that it was *his*, not *hers*—perish the thought!—outrageous conduct which had caused said engagement!

The audacity of it caused her first to gasp, then draw rein and stare at him in utter surprise; finally to ride slowly on while preparing an answer that should not only wither him, there, in the saddle, but also hide the tumult of fright and pleasure in her own breast.

Her glance said, "You certainly have got your gall with you!" But her answer was much more dignified, "By what right do you ask?"

"The right of a man who loves you."

It was a fine stroke; established at once his freedom to meddle with her affairs. His right in the premises would have been upheld in any ancient court of love. Though she tried to conceal it from herself, it was so conceded by one girl's fluttering heart. As a matter of fact, she had been aching for a week to hear him say it; yet, with that natural cruelty which is displayed alike by cats and maids in torturing mice and men, she proceeded to deny it.

"Yes?" she raised cool brows. "Judging by what I saw in the cañon—it must be recent."

She looked for him to wither, but—the fellow refused! He did not even flinch. On the contrary, he just looked at her with shining earnestness; sat his saddle so trim, erect, irritatingly handsome, that she couldn't help taking notice. No, he was not to be side-tracked by such light subterfuge! He swept it away with masculine bluntness.

"I thought so myself—but now I know. It was all so strange, wonderful, picturesque, this new life, that I was blinded. I knew that I liked you, but never paused to analyze my feelings, and it wasn't till you shot that announcement at me a week ago that I awoke—awoke to the fact that all of it, the beauty, romance, centered on you. Since then, the life and light have faded, leaving it drab and drear."

This was not all. Laying it down, as it were, for his major premise, he built thereon, worked, and enlarged, and embroidered while she played with the coils of her *riata*. As an oratorical effort, it could not compare with fire and passion, melodious swing of Ramon's rhythmical Spanish. But what it lacked in eloquence it made up in sincere, vibrant feeling. The stronger for its reserves, it was just such a talk any honest young Anglo-Saxon might make to his lady-love. And if judged by its effects, it must be regarded as successful, for long before he finished two large tears made small splashes on her pommel.

"When—when did you find this out?"

She had intended it to be light, if not satirical; but the little hesitation, helped out by a sympathetic quiver, basely betrayed her hunger for more.

Be certain she got it—in detail, not a thing left out. With a touch of poetry, now, he told of his marvelous discovery on the morning they had ridden over to the widow's together that the sunlight proceeded from her hair; also the freshness of the morning, roll of tawny plains, breath of the chaparral, all that was beautiful in creation.

There was also some mention of the hair in connection with a certain Java forest, with passing reference to the Chinese Wall and a voyage he had intended to make up the great Asian rivers. Not having personal experience in their navigation, said references were rather vague, but her imagination abundantly supplied the requisite flora and fauna from magazine articles and pictures. Porcelain towers, orchids, giant palms; deep jungle temples; the crowded boat life of the Yangtse-Kiang, junks and sampans with their cargoes of saffron-faced, slant-eyed Celestials, men, women, and children—especially children—her imagination improved on the lovely dreams she had so cruelly disrupted. He concluded with that:

"And you smashed it—all to smithereens."

For a while she rode in silence. Apprehension and fright had given place to sorrow that contended tumultuously with delight for possession of her soul. "I'm sorry," she spoke at last. "So sorry, but—you provoked it."

"Why! How?"

He was reminded, of course, that he "lost interest in girls after they grew up." She added, a little vindictively, "And *you* didn't flirt with Mrs. Mills?"

"Only in self-defense. Sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander, isn't it?"

But she denied this bit of ancient wisdom. "No, it isn't! And—and you *kissed* that dreadful girl! I—oh, I could have *killed* you!"

"Why?"

She was looking at him now, and the compound of bright anger, pleading and defiance, regret, love, hope, and despair that alternately flashed and swam in the wet eyes gave sufficient answer. It was then he plucked her from the saddle; crushed her to him with force that squeezed out, for the moment, the anger, regret, despair, left only love and hope.

Ensued the usual delirious moment when poor mortals conquer time and eternity, set at naught the black riddle of existence. Her face buried in his shoulder, his in her hair, they clung to each other while his horse moved slowly forward and hers went careering on over the next earth roll.

Elsewhere on this globe some three thousand millions of souls were coming and going on the ordinary business of life at trade, barter; feasting or fasting; mourning or making merry; dying, some hundreds of them, every second, to make way for a new spawn of life. Beyond the blue loom of the mountains men were robbing and murdering, hunting one another like beasts of the jungle in the name of this or that "cause"; committing frightful infamies in the sacred name of love. Swaying hither and thither, that tide of lust and carnage might sweep at any moment over these sunlit plains.

Yet, blind to it all, oblivious of the past and future, conscious only of the present that had bloomed in sudden glory, sufficient to themselves as the first man and woman in Eden, they rode forward lost in an illumined dream.

It lasted, that wonderful, bright ecstasy, until, turning up her face, he made to kiss her. Then, by a thought of Ramon, was she abruptly recalled to unpleasant realities. She laid a determined, if gentle, hand over his mouth.

"You mustn't."

"Why?"

"You forget—I am still engaged."

"Why—so you are!" Laughing, he tried to dodge her hand, but desisted when he saw she was in earnest. "You surely don't intend—"

"No, indeed!" She read his thought. "I had believed, at first, that I ought. But Mrs. Mills showed me how unfair it would be to marry Ramon while—"

"Say it."

"While I loved *you*."

For a girl who had just restated her engagement to another man, she behaved most disgracefully during a long silence that was broken only by the measured tread of the horse. Snuggling in closer, she re-entered that illumined dream, and made no attempt to check the kisses he showered on the soft palm of the restraining hand. It was, no doubt, some realization of her misbehavior that caused her to sit up, presently, and pull it away.

"This won't do. For the present we'll have to behave like ordinary persons."

"But your horse is gone," he protested when she gently put away his arm. "You can't walk."

"No, but I can ride behind you in the Mexican fashion. Stop, while I change."

He would have preferred it as it was, but when, after mounting behind him, she slid her arm about his waist, he had to concede the Mexican habit its own delights. It was surely nice of her to allow him to cover her hand.

"The young people," she explained, "are not allowed to do this—only husbands and wives."

"Poor young people!" he pitied. "But, on the whole, quite right. It would never do to have them cavorting over the country like this; too much of a strain on the conventions. Indeed, I think we ought to conform ourselves at once."

"How?" Just as if she hadn't known what he meant.

"Let's ride into San Carlos, get a license from the jefe and be married at once?"

The bold proposal drew only a soft laugh. "To think that, up to a week ago, he didn't even see me—except as part of the scenery. No, amigo, till to-morrow we are to be ordinary persons. Then I shall go and tell Ramon."

"And if he refuses?"

"I shall break it myself."

It was in his mind to say that she could not go alone. But he remembered that Ramon would probably arrive at Los Arboles before she started. He turned again to the delightful present.

"And after that?"

A little pressure at his waist made answer.

Reaching behind, he drew her other arm forward till her hands clasped in front, then squeezed his own elbows down tight over hers. Thus, oblivious once more of the toiling billions, revolutionists beyond the mountain's loom, they rode forward again in that illumined dream, two foolish, happy souls at loose in the spheres.

XXV: LOVE AND BUSINESS

In those days of raids and "requisitions," the customary oversight of the herds on the Chihuahua *haciendas* had grown of necessity into a system of patrols. At Los Arboles not a day passed without Gordon and the Three describing a circle around the *hacienda*.

Riding south after the others left, Bull had covered only a few miles before he spied a lone horseman topping a distant ridge. As the rider drew near the first indefinite outlines resolved into the square, hard figure of William Benson. Scarcely a week had passed without a visit from the Englishman. From the first he had accorded Bull the respect due to his quiet strength. Later, this had developed into a real liking which showed in the smile that wiped out, for the moment, his native harshness.

"Heard the news? The Carranzistas have given Valles a lovely trimming. He didn't stop running till he reached El Oro."

Bull's black brows rose. "We'd allus allowed Valles could whip twice his weight in Carranzistas. So long as they keep on killing one another off, we sh'd worry."

Nodding, Benson went on. "Valles lost heavily in horses, and is looking for fresh mounts. One of his colonels came to my place yesterday and offered me a thousand pesos apiece for all I have."

"Gold?"

Benson's big mouth split in a sardonic grin. "Valles money, amigo, beautifully printed on butcher paper. He must have used up all the newspaper stocks in northern Mexico."

"And you sold?"

"I'd cut their throats first. It may come to that, but just now I see a way—if not to pull even, at least to avoid complete loss. Between us we can pretty nearly equip Valles with fresh mounts. The beggar has gold—hundreds of thousands, perhaps millions, in the El Paso banks, and my idea is for us, you representing Lee, to go down to El Oro and offer him all that we have for a low price in gold on condition that he permit us to drive our other stock across the line. If he accepts, we then go out of business till order is restored."

"Fine idea!" Bull added. "Could you let Mrs. Mills in on it? She was telling last night she didn't know where to turn for living expenses."

Benson heartily agreed. "Only too glad!"

"And when do you start?"

"To-morrow night. There's a freight going down."

"All right. Pity you hadn't come earlier. Mrs. Mills left only a couple of hours ago. But I'll ride over this afternoon, get her written authority, then meet you at the railroad."

Riding back to Los Arboles, they perfected their plans. They were, indeed, in sight of the buildings before Benson switched the conversation to Lee. Her oldest and stanchest friend, it was his right to know, and Bull told all, from his plotting with the widow down to the disastrous ending in the sudden engagement.

"The little spitfire!" Benson grinned. "Hello! What's that?"

It was Lee's horse galloping down a distant slope toward the *hacienda*. In that wild country a riderless beast generally bespoke tragedy. Without a word they galloped off in the direction from which the beast had come; rode at top speed until Benson, who had gained a lead, suddenly

reined in.

A bunch of chaparral intervened, at first, between Bull and the object at which the other was pointing. Then, rising in his stirrups, he saw Lee and Gordon on the one horse; at least in Bull's sight it was a horse. In that of the lovers, horses, plains, *haciendas*, and other commonplaces of ordinary existence had vanished, leaving them unconscious of time and space, proceeding magically through the aforesaid illumined dream.

Perhaps some touch of their feeling wirelessly across the intervening space, for Benson's harshness melted, delight burst like sunlight through Bull's truculence.

"That's too good to spoil," Benson whispered. "Let them go by."

They had passed over the next ridge before Bull spoke. "I tol' you Mrs. Mills could do it. She's a right smart woman."

"A fine woman!" Benson echoed. "I don't know what you are thinking about. Now if I were single——" He burst out laughing at Bull's blush. Instantly it was drowned in brighter scarlet. But this faded as Bull noted the kindly twinkle in the other's eye. He shook his head in deprecation.

"What c'd a nice woman do with a bear like me?"

"That's her business. I'm not denying that it would some job." Benson critically surveyed Bull's great bulk. "But if there's anything in the world a woman loves it is making a man over, like an old dress. After she finishes, she generally realizes that she's spoiled the material and wishes him back as he was. But in the mean time she has had her fun. I'll bet Mary Mills is just itching to try her hand on you."

"Do you really mean that?" Bull looked up with sudden hope—that quickly died. He shook his big head. "She deserves something better. I'd only spoil her life."

Nevertheless, he relapsed into deep thought, returning only monosyllables to Benson's talk. The little seed thus planted rooted deep in his silence.

Strange is first love with its intense desire for purity! Cleanliness is next to Godliness, and Godliness is Love. Thus Cleanliness must be next of kin to Love.

If this be doubted, observe a ten-year-old boy, self-convicted of water-marks on his neck and soil in his ears enough to grow potatoes. See him scrub himself with profuse use of soap till his countenance shines so that it might serve as a mirror for the small charmer who has ensnared his budding affections with her bright curls. Watch him, later, a man grown, solicitous about his daily tub, careful of his raiment, choice in cravats! Later his wife shall drive him with revilings to his bath! Coming to cases, observe Gordon in the bunk-house after a cooling shower, carefully arranging his tie on the bosom of a brand-new shirt.

Now observe a girl, a vestal in purity, delicately perfumed, flowering in her ribands and laces like a pretty bud. At some time all of them earnestly desire that they had been born men. Yet one moment there is when they are unfeignedly glad to be women. So Lee, who was perhaps even a bit more boyish than the average, came to lunch in a soft white dress with a flower at her throat, powdered and delicately perfumed, bright hair framing happy eyes, every soft line and fold proclaiming her womanhood. Like an emanation, soft and effulgent as moonlit mist, the fullness of her content proceeded from her, wrapped her in a bright atmosphere in the midst of which she softly brooded. Not that she was silent. She laughed and talked; seriously discussed Benson's schemes. But that was all of the surface. Behind the chatter she lived in the enchantment of her dream.

It was too marked to pass unnoticed. But if Bull and Benson saw the clinging of glances, sensed the pulsing feeling, they observed with the friendly indulgence of experience the young man's honest devotion, the girl's shy happiness. During the long hour they sat talking after lunch, no silly jest marred its beauty. Except for a greater kindness of manner, with delicacy quite foreign to his harsh exterior, Benson gave no hint of his understanding up to the moment he rode away.

Then for a brief moment Bull was taken into the dream. While Gordon went for his horse, Lee packed his saddlebags with clean things for the journey, and was giving him the usual last critical inspection. As he stood smiling down on her, hugely pleased, her eyes rose from the tie she was arranging to his; and as she read their sympathy and intelligence, she clasped his neck and hid her face against his broad breast.

Until the beat of hoofs at the *patio* gate announced Gordon's return, he held her to him with one arm while the other hand gently patted her shoulder. Neither spoke. Words would have told less. When she withdrew and walked with him to the gate, she was soothed and comforted as any girl that ever made a confidante of her mother.

When she ran back after the quirt he had purposely left on the table, he had time to pass a word to Gordon. "Remember, she don't leave this house to go *anywhere* alone!"

Gordon nodded, and, satisfied, he rode away with Lee's last charge floating after him, "Come home soon!"

The words were still ringing in his ears, he still felt the firm, cool clasp on his neck, when he drew rein at the first rise and looked back at the *hacienda*. From one corner, where an *anciano* had burned some rubbish, rose a lazy pennon of smoke, but the brown girls, women, and children who usually filled the compound with restless life were in full enjoyment of the noon *siesta*. Within its bright walls, the place dozed in the pleasant shade of its towering cottonwoods.

Somehow the stillness recalled to Bull's mind the Spaniard's house he had shown Gordon from the railroad—sacked, burned, its vacant windows staring like empty eyes over the desert. His face clouded. He moved uneasily in his saddle, but presently the golden peace that incited the memory worked its own remedy. Jake and Sliver and Gordon were there, and the place was still far beyond the surge and swirl of the revolution.

"And I'll be home again in less than a week," he encouraged himself.

Home! It recalled again Lee's words. He felt her clasp, thrilled at the memory. He, "Bull" Perrin, the rustler! Around his neck that had been in constant hazard of the halter for a dozen years, this fine, clean girl had thrown her arms. His tender musing over the wonder would have excited the scorn of a city man, *blasé* and stale from the constant presence and attentions of pretty women. But it was sincere. While he rode on over the hills and plains, the thought warmed his heart, quickened the seed planted therein by Benson, freed his soul from the bonds of his great humility.

"Of course it's damn foolish for you even to think of it," he chid himself. Nevertheless, he did, slowly, heavily, taking stock with minute exactness of his own demerits. How great they were none knew better. The rustling, of course, he had abandoned along with certain gross habits of life. But the liquor? These periodical debauches? Was he strong enough to conquer them?

"If I c'd only ride into a town an' either leave it alone or take a man's fair allowance," he mused. "But kin I? Mebbe with a fine little woman like that to help me." But the next instant he shook his head. "An' have her take the chance? No, no, hombre, you're crazy. You put all that behind you by your own act years ago."

Yet this conclusion did not end the argument. When, at sundown, he drew rein at the accustomed spot and looked down on the *rancho* buildings now dyed a flaming apricot he took his breath deeply. With its bougainvillea draping walls and porches in rich purple clusters, its pretty *patio* and outside kitchen garden, it was just such a home as would fit the dreams of a common man. Instantly his mind filled in the picture, the man and woman sitting after supper on the veranda, he with his pipe and paper, a child on his knee, she with her sewing. A thousand intimacies were supplied by his lonely, hungry soul, and when the picture stood complete he burst out with a great resolve.

"By God, I'll do it! You're a-going to walk like a man into town an' come out without teching a drop!"

From where he was sitting he usually could see—either Betty at play on the veranda, her mother moving in and out, or Terrubio moving around the stables. To-night silence wrapped the place. From the west, as on the south where he sat, the land fell rapidly toward the *rancho*, and as he rode forward, puzzled, the silence was explained. Over the western ridge the widow, Terrubio, and Betty came riding, and reached the house just as he rode up.

"Though we brought bad news to his son," she explained the delay, "the old Icarza would not permit us to leave till we had broken his bread. How did Ramon take it? Just as I said he would—out came the Mex in in all of its nasty selfishness, blind conceit. She was promised to him and he would hold her to it! He'd kill any one who interfered. Goodness! you never *saw* such fireworks! He showed no trace of the real pride that would have kept one of our boys from showing his hurt; and still less consideration for Lee. It was"—she gave a little sniff of disgust—"just sickening. I was almost sorry she couldn't have been there, for it would have effectually cured her remorse. But she'll get it to-morrow, for he's going over to plead his own cause."

Unease swept Bull's dark visage. After a brief statement of his mission he voiced his apprehension. "But if he's coming to-morrow, I don't know but I orter go back."

"Nonsense!" Mrs. Mills pooh-poohed the idea. "It's all fireworks—and there's Sliver and Gordon and Jake."

To which Betty added a direct command. "You are just going to stay here. We haven't seen you for ever so long, and mama is just dying to tell you her troubles."

"Tea and trouble," the widow laughed. "A genuine woman's party."

When he lifted and placed her with one swing on the veranda she allowed one hand to remain on his shoulder, and he was not so ignorant of woman nature as not to recognize the liking behind the action. While she bustled around, adding dainties to the meal Terrubio's woman had ready, he watched her with an expression that she, on her part, could not fail to interpret. And whereas, on previous visits, she had managed all kinds of accidental contacts, watched with mischievous delight for the effect, she was now filled with pleasurable confusion that manifested itself in an almost girlish shyness.

When, afterward, they moved out upon the veranda, Bull's dream of an hour ago was almost fulfilled. For Betty snuggled as usual in his arms, while the widow busied herself with a bit of sewing—a fine excuse that lent itself to the lowering of eyes, permitted stealthy glances.

While they were at supper, the sun had slid down to the western horizon. Pools of deep indigo now filled the hollows. Above them the plains ran, a deep violet sea broken with apricot foam where the crests of the great earth waves rolled high, ran off and away around the bases of gold and crimson mountains.

It was unearthly in its beauty, and while they could not have put their feeling in words, it filled both with that sense of vastness before which man in his littleness quails. Often the widow paused in her sewing, and as Bull saw that infinite loneliness reflected in her face, the big, simple soul of him melted with love and pity. Till the lights faded and she no longer needed its excuse, she alternately sewed and gazed; then when warm gloaming settled over all, wiped out the loneliness with its friendly gloom, she recovered her voice.

"Oh, I had almost forgotten."

It was that which she had seen in the morning—to wit, Gordon snatching Lee out of her saddle.

"And oh, isn't it nice to think that she'll be settled, at last, with that fine boy!"

Happy in the conclusion, she began to sketch a picture of them settled happily at Los Arboles. Her voice, as she ran on, took a little quiver that powerfully expressed her own loneliness, inspired in Bull an intense desire to seize and squeeze it out. Instead his arms tightened around the child.

"Not one marriage in a hundred turns out what it might be. But with the exception, when respect, friendliness, affection, and a sense of duty are reinforced by love—well, it's the nearest to heaven that poor humans ever gain." She added, with a sigh: "Excepting that it gave me this child, my own wasn't all that it might have been. She's been a joy and comfort, but—in a few years more she'll be marrying, herself. Then I'll be again alone."

"Why did *you* never marry?" Betty's small, soft voice stole out on the darkness from the depths of Bull's embrace.

The stock excuses rose to his lips—but did not pass, for through the friendly gloaming he was aware of a rustle. His face turned toward it.

"I never felt myself fit."

"Why, that's just nonsense!" Betty indignantly declared. "Any woman that wasn't a downright fool would be glad to have you. I know one that would give her best shoes—"

"Betty!"

But the small rebel ran on, "Well, she would—even if I can't tell you her name."

Once more Bull faced a stir in the darkness. "I've led a hard, rough, bad life. No decent woman would ever want me."

Now he saw the dim whiteness of her face turning to him. Her quiet voice took up the argument. "It's a thin, pinched nature that's always good. A big, strong one is liable to be led astray by its own force before wisdom comes to teach and chasten. In the long run I don't know but that it gains by it in charity and loving-kindness. Wickedness of the flesh doesn't count so much as wickedness of the heart; the inward vileness that rots and corrupts; and I've seen as much of that in the churches as among downright sinners." She concluded with the very words that Gordon had used with Lee. "It isn't what you *were*, but what you *are* that counts."

From a second warm silence issued Bull's vibrant rumble. "You think a man that has lived hard has a right to speak, to a good woman—providing he's put it all behind him?"

Low, but confident and firm, her answer thrilled through the gloaming. "I do, and—she'd *love* to help him."

Almost without his volition, Bull's huge paw stole out. He half hoped she wouldn't see it. He had begun to withdraw it when, like a dim white dove, her hand came fluttering and nested in his.

Every life has its golden hour. That was Bull's, and, like a pearl shining in the mire, it stood out from the blackness of his past life. Though neither spoke, the peace and quiet, surety of perfect understanding, settled upon them. When, presently, Betty resumed her chatter, they listened or joined in. After she fell asleep they relapsed again into happy silence; just sat like a shy boy and girl, hand in hand, till she rose and carried the child off to her bed.

To meet her, next morning, was to Bull something of an ordeal, but her quiet smile restored at once the perfect understanding. Her sense of proprietorship showed in the way she fussed over his coffee and eggs, berated him for his lack of appetite. Her final inspection before he left could not have been outdone in severity by Lee herself. But nothing was said. She knew that he would speak in his own good time.

Except that her hand clung a little in parting, it differed little from their usual. "I shall look for you when you return." Her call after him reiterated ownership.

His answer confirmed it. "I shall come here, ma'am, straight from the station."

Indeed, the real parting came when, reining in at fifty yards, he looked back over his shoulder. With both hands on Betty's shoulders, slightly dejected, yet with her honest, level gaze sending out trust and hope, she stood watching him go, as the race of wives and mothers have stood throughout the generations. And just as, throughout time, the sight of a woman's trust and child's faith have urged real men on to big deeds, so the sight of them set the ex-rustler's heart swelling within him. As, with a last wave of the hand, he turned again and rode on, the spirit within him equaled in love and reverence that of an ancient knight-errant starting out in pursuit of the Holy Grail.

XXVI: A SETTLEMENT

About the time Bull started, Lee and Gordon rose from the breakfast-table under the *Los Arboles portales*.

Perhaps with sympathetic intuition, for they exchanged an amiable grin, Sliver and Jake had already passed out. It is true that Maria and Teresa, the small brown *criadas*, were peeping from the crypt-like depths of their kitchen. But even had she been aware of their vast interest, Lee would not have withdrawn the hand which, as they rose, had somehow tangled with Gordon's. Reflected and thrown up from the yellow wall, the strong morning lights bathed the flesh of her arms, face, and neck with suffused amber, wove a soft glow in the mesh of her hair. So different from her usual boyish activity, her gentle quiet, combined with the warm air, suffused lights, to create a dreamy spell. Goodness knows how long they would have stood if Maria had not come out to clear the table.

Then Lee spoke. "Such sloth! This will never do if I am to go to El Sol and return to-day. While I dress will you please get my horse?"

When Gordon reached the stable Sliver had already gone, but Jake had lingered to say a word. It was very much to the point. "Say! Bull tipped me off as how the young greaser was likely to show up an' raise some hell to-day. Don't you allow I'd better hang around?"

He nodded, however, when Gordon explained the situation. "Missy don't know he's coming, hey?—thinks she's going over there. Then they'll meet on the way. Mebbe I'd better tag along."

But to this Gordon's pride would not consent. "Don't you think I can take care of her?"

"No one better," Jake hastened to appease. "But, say! If he doesn't show up, don't you let her go on over there—not if you have to rope an' drag her home."

"Like we did before?" He smiled at the memory. "This time I'll not leave her the saddle machete."

"Little bit too smart for you that time," Jake grinned in sympathy. "Take care she don't spring a new one. She ain't so very slow."

Nevertheless, in the face of his apparent acquiescence, while apparently heading out on his usual beat, he whirled behind the first ridge and, proceeding at a fast lope, had covered five miles of the way to El Sol, the Icarzas' *hacienda*, by the time Lee came out. Slowing down, then,

he rode more leisurely, had covered another mile when, over the crest of a ridge, he sighted Ramon coming at a gallop down the opposite slope. A clump of mesquite and *palo verde* afforded convenient cover. Forcing his beast in, Jake stooped low and watched Ramon go by, so close that his stirrup whipped the bushes.

It had never been Jake's habit to notice Mexicans. But now he noted with surprise the change in the young man's face. The lines deeply plowed down the nose under the cheeks, the hardening of the red, womanish lips, the vindictive black sparkle that had contracted his great dusky eyes into burning black dots, added ten years to his age.

"The Mex is souring in him," Jake inwardly commented. "That guinea's liable to try an' hurt some one. Glad I came."

Allowing Ramon to pass on, Jake then rode after, and so, progressing from ridge to ridge, keeping always the height of land between them, was less than fifty yards behind when, peeping over the crest, he saw Lee and Gordon coming up the slope.

Another bunch of chaparral afforded cover, and after tying his horse in it, Jake crawled up to the ridge and looked over.

It was not without argument that Gordon had obtained Lee's consent to accompany her. When she found him standing with two horses at the gate, her brows rose in a troubled arch.

He understood that she hesitated to accuse him of bad taste, and quoted Bull's last orders to remove the impression. "He said that you were never to ride alone."

The responsibility being thus shifted, she felt able to speak. "It is rather— Really, I don't see how I can do anything else."

"Why go at all? Why not write?"

She shook her head. "I've known him since childhood—and have treated him badly. I owe him an apology and it will have to come from my own lips."

It was reasonable enough from her point of view, but not from his. If Ramon were an American he would have said, "Go, ahead; take your medicine!" Being Mexican, discretion bade him remain.

"At least let me ride with you part of the way. I will turn before you reach El Sol."

"Oh, that will be all right," she had conceded at once.

He had felt certain, of course, that they would meet Ramon. But the usual witcheries, sweep of the tawny earth-waves under the bright sun, satisfying thud of hoofs on the trail, creak and smell of hot leather, had combined to blind him to all but her presence. Now, before he could turn, Ramon reined in before them.

Like Jake, they noticed at once the sardonic furrows, set mouth, frown above the glittering eyes. With his youth had vanished that veneer of refinement which conceals natural Mexican grossness. Like veins in a stratum revealed by a landslide, selfishness, conceit, violence, revenge, lay exposed. With the natural instinct of good breeding, Gordon had half turned to withdraw. But even if one glance at the passion-torn face had not checked the impulse, it would have been killed when Lee backed toward him. Shocked and a little afraid, she gazed at Ramon before she spoke.

"Are you ill? You look so—"

"So it was true, what the señora told me yesterday!" He spoke in low, strained tones. "It was true, though I did not believe; refused to believe. But now I see. It is true that you used me as bait for your fishing."

"Ramon!" She raised her hand, but he switched suddenly from denunciation to appeal.

"No! it is not true! It cannot be! She lied! I will not believe it even though you tell me yourself!"

From this he ran on with an appeal, hysterical and disconnected, which reflected as in a clear glass the nature of his love. In it was no appreciation of the feminine personality with its delicacies of feeling, refinements, inconsistencies, helplessness, all the illogicalities that render it charming, as much or more than its faith and love. In terms of blind egotism, it expressed only his passion and jealousy, fatuous conceit. As in a clear glass, under a powerful light, he revealed himself so that even a woman blinded by love could not have failed to see. In the middle of it Gordon heard Lee take a long breath, and knew it for thankfulness. Yet her relief did not kill her poignant regret for the part she had played.

She spoke softly, pityingly, when he stopped. "Ramon, I'm sorry. It was wicked of me to draw you on. But to marry you would be far worse. What can I do to make up?"

He told, with anger and offense. She had promised to be his wife! It was a betrothal! as binding in Mexican eyes as marriage! He had announced it to his father, mother, sister, friends!

His conceit cropped out again as he pictured himself, jilted, in their eyes. Angered by his own imaginings, he was growing abusive when she cut him quietly off.

"I was on my way when we met, to own and ask pardon for my fault. I had counted on our old friendship and your generosity to make it less difficult. But I see, now, my error. There is nothing left but to bid you good-by."

Now came the ultimate revelation, that passion of furious jealousy which drives the Mexican *peon* to cut off the hands, slash the face and breast, of his love. His eyes narrowed to shifting, insane sparks. Hand raised, as though to strike, he spurred his beast forward.

"You—you—"

He got no further, for one hard dig of the spur shot Gordon's horse in between. From English to Spanish the argument had run, but from Lee's answers Gordon had gathered enough. Though slower, his beast was heavier than Ramon's, and while forcing horse and rider sideways with a steady pressure he issued his orders:

"That's about enough for you! Get!"

Ramon's hand flew to his saddle *machete*, but he did not draw, for Gordon's had gone to his gun. Leg pressed against leg, they manœvered their plunging beasts; without drawing a weapon fought the old fight of the brown man and the white; the struggle which began when Cortés imposed his will on the Aztec emperors; was continued by the Puritan forefathers against the American Indian; which has been fought to the same conclusion all over the world. And from the two faces—Gordon's cold, hard-eyed, Ramon's distorted with black fury—the cause of that inevitable ending might have been read.

So close they were Gordon could see the palpitation of light from the insane waverings of the other's eyeballs steady under a doubt. He felt rather than saw the Mexican's sudden swift reach for his knife. Even more swiftly he snatched, and with a sudden wrench of the other's wrist sent the knife flying and bore him back flat in the saddle. For a moment he held him, then with a powerful shove his horse sent Ramon's beast stumbling sideways and broke the grip. Wheeling in a circle, Ramon faced them again.

So far Lee had looked on distressed. Now she spurred forward and caught Gordon's arm. "Let him go!—please!" Her anger gone now, sorrow quivering in her voice, she added, "You will, won't you, Ramon?"

His fury, passion, wild jealousy had settled in dark calm. "Yes, I am going *now*. But the next time—." He wheeled and galloped off.

Till the tip of his *sombrero* vanished behind the ridge Lee watched him go, distress and relief mingling in a wintry smile.

"Don't give him too much of your pity," Gordon consoled. "One disappointment doesn't make much of a dent in such egotism as that. After a while he'll find some pretty señorita to take him at his own valuation."

"I hope so." Her smile brightened. "Though I still feel guilty. But if he hadn't behaved so ridiculously I should feel much worse."

Gordon nodded toward the ridge. "You heard his threat. Do you suppose he'll—"

"Oh no!" Her hair flew in a cloud under her vigorous shake. "After he's had time to cool off he'll forget and forgive. But just to think"—her glance displayed an even mixture of mischief and reproach—"just to think that all this trouble was caused by you kissing that horrid girl!"

"Why—" he gasped, under the sudden attack. "Well, I'll be— Say! Who drove me to it with her disgraceful flirting?"

"Did it make you feel *awfully* bad?"

"Did it?" The thought of his miserable unhappiness was still powerful enough to cloud his face, and she noted it with a little quiver of satisfaction. "Let's forget it." Snatching her hand, he worked his horse in against hers and tried to draw her to him. "There's a momentous question I wish to consult you about; one you refused to consider yesterday. Will you—"

But she pulled away. "Not yet. First there's something I want settled. Was it really pique that—made you kiss her?"

He wanted to laugh, but refrained, for under her smile he felt her earnestness. "Nothing else."

"You're sure?"

"Sure!"

"Cross your heart to die?"

He performed that solemn and ancient function, and if she still entertained a doubt she stuffed it away down in consciousness.

"Very well." With a little sigh of content she let her head fall back on his shoulder and a whisper escape from her upturned lips, "Now—you may."

From his covert on the ridge Jake had observed the meeting, talk, struggle, Ramon's retreat, also something which was hidden from the lovers in the valley below—the fact that, after crossing the ridge, Ramon had dismounted, pulled his rifle from the saddle slings, and crawled back on hands and knees to the edge of Jake's covert. By that time the little tilt concerning Felicia was over, and as Lee's head went to Gordon's shoulder Ramon raised the rifle.

A shot at that short distance would have pierced them both, but as Ramon's eye dropped to the sights a sharp order issued from the covert, "Throw up your hands! damn quick!"

A quick, startled glance showed Ramon the lean, grim face through a break in the chaparral. Not for nothing had the *peones* named Jake "The Python." In moments such as this his lean personality, deadly eye, conveyed that very impression—of a snake coiled to strike. As Ramon's hands went up, he stepped out and, crouching behind the ridge, took the other's rifle and drove him downhill to his horse.

Having extracted the cartridge both from the rifle and from the revolver in Ramon's holster, he threw the weapon at his feet. "I reckon I orter plug you, an' I would for two cents. It'd be set down to raiders, which fixes it very nice. Sure, I reckon I orter do it, but if you've got a few thinks to the contrary spit 'em out."

It was no idle threat. The vicious gleam of the cold gray eye told that. But in place of fear Ramon's face showed almost relief. "Very good, señor. There is nothing you could do that would suit me better."

The cold eye flickered. "Hell! you're too anxious. I couldn't make up my mind to do it that quick—an' there's a few things I want to find out. For one, what's your idee in wanting to drill them young folks?"

Ramon told—this time without the fireworks.

Jake summed it briefly. "Promised you, then threw you down. That's hard luck. But there's one thing you Mexes can never get into your hot heads—the right of our little American queens to change their pretty minds as often as they damn please without any gent's consent. You was damn lucky that she ever give you a smile. If I conclude to change my mind on plugging you, have it writ up large in your family tree that oncet an American girl let herself be engaged to you for nearly five minutes. Now supposing I refrain from my desire to make you into a corpse, d'you reckon you could keep a promise and not make any attempt on their lives?"

While he was talking Ramon's face had stiffened in defiance. He shook his head. But instead of anger, a small gleam of admiration lit Jake's hard eyes. Raising his gun, he aimed full at the other's breast.

"You have just two minutes to make up your mind."

"One minute!"

For a time it seemed as though he would have to shoot. But just before the time expired, Ramon spoke. "For myself, I do not care. But I have an old father and mother, whom my death would surely kill. I promise."

"All right." Jake dropped the rifle in the hollow of his arm. "I allow that I'm foolish for trusting a Mex, but the little Missy allus liked you. On her account we'll take one chance. Here's your cartridge—only don't load till you're off this range. An' remember"—a cold flash emphasized the order—"after this our boundary is your dead-line. Cross it again—you'll be shot like a panther, coyote, or other varmint."

Returning to his horse, he watched the other mount and ride away. A glance in the opposite direction showed him Lee and Gordon, going hand in hand up the opposite slope. Till they had gained across to the next valley he remained where he was. Then, riding in their rear, with a sharp eye always behind, keeping the width of a valley between them, he followed home.

Riding steadily and hard, Bull made the railroad just as the sun dipped and hung like a smoky lamp on the smoldering horizon. From a distance he had spied Benson leaning in the doorway of the box-car which served the Mexican agent for a telegraph station. The Englishman called to him across the tracks.

"There's a battle pending down the line. Troop-trains have been streaking through all day carrying Valles's reserves from Chihuahua. Don Pedro, here, says another is due to stop for water in half an hour. If we hand the comandante a few compliments, he may take us along."

"Half an hour?" Bull snorted. "That means half the night an' then some. We'll have time for supper an' a sleep."

But for once the railroad went back on all precedents. Just as the crimson tip of the sun slid down behind a black-velvet mountain, the train came puffing in loaded with the usual picturesque rag-and-bobtail of brown soldiers, women, and children clustered like hiving bees on top.

"Must be yesterday's train a bit overdue," Bull defended his theory, as the cars clicked by with slowing rhythm. "The comandante'll be in the passenger-coach ahead. We'd better to mosey along an' brace him."

But their passage was much more easily gained. A man who sat with legs dangling from the open doorway of a box-car emitted a whoop.

"Ole! Diogenes! Como le va! What of our matrimonial venture? How did it pan out?"

It was Naylor, the correspondent, Bull's friend and Cupid's aide. As his car rolled slowly up, there hove in sight placards that announced the titles of certain American papers in dignified Spanish that their oldest subscribers would never have recognized. But there was nothing foreign in the half-dozen of friendly faces that filled the doorway. From the dignified visage, with its short, gray beard and trim mustache, of their dean, down to the boyish face of a field photographer, all joined in a composite welcoming grin.

"Weekes, Mason, Martin, Roberts, Cummings." The correspondent breezily ran off the names. "There were more before Santos-Coy, Valles's chief of staff, stuck us all up against a wall the last time our government clapped one of its hit-and-miss embargoes on munitions. Valles saved us, but after that most of the fellows skipped out. So we have lots of room. Come right up."

A partition divided the car into kitchen and living-quarters. Bunks rose in a tier of four at the end of the latter. Four more could be slept on long lockers at each side of the table which was being set for supper by the Chinese cook. From the oldest to the youngest, the correspondents were on edge for the approaching battle. At supper their talk ran on its possibilities.

"If Valles is beaten again," Weekes, the gray-haired dean, summed the conversation, "our government will throw another of its silly flip-flops and turn him down. And then—"

"—this corresponding job won't make good insurance."

"And then—" the dean began again.

"We'll hit for El Paso before Santos-Coy grabs us again."

"And then"—the dean triumphed over interruptions—"God pity the poor gringos in northern Mexico."

Bull's friend nodded. "Valles's army will scatter into bands that will rake the country with fine-tooth combs for the least bit of plunder. You had better get your girl and her fellow, Diogenes, and come out with us."

Later, when they had all climbed up on the roof and sat watching the oil-smoke from the laboring locomotive whirl and twist, then float away and lay its great sable plumes against the rich reds and golds of the evening sky, they gave expert opinion on Benson's mission.

"If Valles wins, so do you," the dean opined. "He needs horses worse than money, and, as you say, has slathers of it in the El Paso banks. But if he loses—hit for the border at once. I saw him the other day after the first defeat, and hell couldn't produce his equal. He was crazy; a maniac; a tiger gone stark, staring, frothing mad.

"And lose he will. How do I know?" He answered a challenge. "It's a mere problem of mathematics, the first equation of which was worked out in the battle the other day. Given two men of equal military ability, the one with a trained mind is bound to win. The other fellow, as you know, is a college man—a college man against a bandit." He turned to Bull and Benson. "It's a cinch that he'll win. If I were you, gentlemen, I'd wait the event."

Benson shook his head. "If we see Valles now and strike a bargain, we can get our cattle across the border before he's all in."

"Good enough reasoning," the dean admitted. "But—ever since the first defeat he's been in one of his towering rages. Even his own generals hardly dare go near him."

Benson shrugged; with British obstinacy he clung to his point. "It won't be the first time I've

seen him in his rages. He may be dangerous—to Americans, but John Bull looks after his people and even Valles is careful of how he flies in the old fellow's face. I shall go to see him at once, and if he refuses—well"—his voice grew harsh and menacing—"he'll hear the truth about himself."

Not knowing him, the correspondents received it in silence. While they smoked Benson went on in his hard, rough voice. "I tell you, amigos, that your people have made a sad mess of this whole Mexican business. For three years, now, you have been trying to apply the principles of your Declaration of Independence to a race which won't have evolved to a point where it has the faintest understanding of them for a thousand years to come. You stand on your Monroe doctrine, but refuse to take up its obligations and give alien nationals the protection you will not allow their own government to extend. While your statesmen prattle about the sacred right of revolution and Mexico's ability to settle her own affairs, the country is overrun with bandits and mobs of pelados who are killing off the decent people and destroying billions in property they never created.

"Bah!" he snorted his disgust. "Don't talk to me of republics. Do you suppose that either England or Germany would have stood for the anarchy which rules here? For centuries John Bull has been ruling brown peoples and he knows his job. 'Be good and you'll be happy!' he tells them. If they're not—they get it, hot and heavy, on the spot where it will do most good. The brown man is all right in his place—which isn't on top of the white man—but your government, so far, has failed to perceive it."

He went on from a pause: "Republics are incapacitated by nature in any case for the job. They are too divided in their counsels—swayed to-day by capital that will accept any dishonor rather than jeopardize its revenues; to-morrow by sentimentalists who hold up hands of horror at the very thought of war; governed most of the time by a ridiculous yellow press. Individually, you Yanks are good people, but taken collectively, as represented by your government and papers, you are hypocritical, weak, hysterical, sentimental, without dignity or force. You are grown fat with wealth, soft with luxury, too lazy and indifferent to undertake your responsibilities abroad, and if you were not, you lack the first essentials—centralized federal authority and military strength to enforce your will. If you do anything here it will be accidental—such as when the blowing up of the *Maine* aroused one of your periodical brainstorms, stung you into action. But in the mean time the destruction of Mexico will be complete. There will be nothing left of the civilization built up at such enormous pains by Diaz and which it was your duty to maintain."

Silence followed, the uncomfortable silence that attends the digestion of unpalatable truth. While they talked, the cars had resolved into dim masses that swayed and swung through hot dusk that was splashed, here and there, with the red glow of charcoal cooking fires. On those immediately ahead and behind, dim sombreroed figures still loomed in half-gloom. The flash of a match occasionally set a dark face out in startling relief. The tinkle of a guitar accompanying a high, nasal *peon* chant, mingled with the roar and rattle of wheels. For some time its whine rose under the stars before the voice of the dean broke the silence.

"What you say is true—most of it. We have been tried in the balance and found wanting. We've neglected our duty to the Mexicans and our own people—that's the hell of it! But nations, like individuals, learn their lessons through painful mistakes. We've had bad leadership and worse counsels—so much of it that it would almost seem that we were irrevocably stamped as incapable. But it's only a phase. Under it all the heart of the people still beats sound and true. Sooner or later its voice will be heard. And when it is—the bleating of the sentimentalists will be drowned in the tramp of marching men."

"You bet you!" It rolled out in chorus.

"In the mean time," a voice added, "what's the matter with a little drink?"

Instantly the recumbent figures rose in a shadowy mass, and as its units made their way down over the edge of the swaying car, the correspondent jogged Bull's elbow. "Come along, Diogenes!"

But though a flame, sudden and fierce, had leaped within him; though he trembled under the intensity of his desire, he shook his head. "Thanks, I'm not drinking."

"Why—Diogenes? Whatever is the matter? If parental responsibilities do this, damned if I know whether I'll ever dare to hook up—providing my San Francisco girl ever consents. Is this straight?"

"Straight."

Warned, perhaps, by a certain earnestness, the other answered: "All right, old man—only—if you change your mind, come on down."

Bull made no answer, could not, for as he lay there, huge bulk stretched out on the running-

board, face turned up to the stars, every ounce of his energy, even the bit that would have been used up in speech, was consumed in the fight against the furious desire that brought the sweat starting on his brow, shook him like a leaf. Out of the rack and bang of the swinging cars, click and roar of the wheels, his ear presently picked the clink of glasses. Out through the lamp-lit doorway floated Benson's rough voice.

"Well, here's to Uncle Sam! wishing him better counselors and quicker understanding!"

Bull heard no more, for he had rolled over, buried his face in his arms to hide from his snuffing nostrils whiffs of spirits. Once he half rose, looking toward the ladder. But, strengthening his resolution, there rose in his mind just then a picture of Betty and her mother as he had seen them at parting—her hands on the child's shoulders, stooped in slight dejection, yet radiating faith and trust.

Lying down again, he lay, hands clasped under his head, gazing up at the fire of stars, while his mind traveled back to the *ranch*, lived over and over again the slow, sweet hours of last night. Below, an undertone to the roar of the speeding train, he now caught the hum of talk. But he took no heed—even when it ceased. He dreamed on till a hand shook his foot.

"Aren't you coming down to bed?"

"No; I reckon I'll lay out here. It's cooler." He did not acknowledge to himself his fear of sniffing the spirituous odors.

"All right, only don't roll off." The correspondent paused on his way back to the ladder. "Say! did your friend mean what he said? Or was it just talk?"

When Bull answered with a sketch of Benson's violent temper, illustrated by a few instances, the correspondent shook his head. "Well, don't let him see Valles alone." Going down the ladder, he called back, "If you should change your mind about the drink, you'll find the jug on the table."

Instantly it materialized in Bull's vision, a round stone jug and glasses, as solid and real as though it stood within the reach of his hand. Nor could he shut out the vision, as he had the odor, by burying his face. With the cars swinging and swaying through the night, shut out, it stood forth clearer than ever. He saw himself snatching out the cork; felt the burning liquid coursing down his throat.

"My God! why did I come? I'll never be able to stan' it!"

The thought of the temptation, ever present, growing more powerful through the coming days, gaining in strength while he grew weaker, brought out of him a cry of dismay: "I'll never be able to stan' it!" Then, very quickly, "I'll have to! If I don't—then I'm no fit man for her!"

The thought brought her face again in all its sweet wholesomeness. Through the warm dusk, as it were beside him, he saw her hand fluttering like a homing dove into his. He felt it lifting, raising him above his temptation. The memory of its soft pressures strengthened and comforted. Presently his fingers relaxed their convulsive grip on the running-board. Exhausted, he fell asleep.

XXVIII: A "REQUISITION"

Slipping in over the patio wall, a golden sunbeam struck behind where Gordon sat writing and flooded the *portales* with topaz lights. From the kitchen came the soft spat, spat of *tortillas* in the course of shapement between Teresa's palms, competing splash and flop of Maria's cloth as she washed off the brown-tiled floor. No other sound disturbed the morning freshness, for Gordon had risen early to get off a letter with Lovell, who had dropped in last night on his way to El Paso to attend Phœbe's wedding.

So engrossed was he that a gentle agitation of the sheet which hung across Lee's bedroom doorway on the gallery above passed unnoticed. The rail hid from his view the small, bare feet, but he missed a glimpse of white shoulder, flash of brown eyes under her hair's bright tousle, round, red mouth opened in a yawn before, seeing him, she hastily dropped the sheet. He did not see her even when she came out in kimono and slippers and soft-footed it down the stone stairs at his back. Though, sitting up on her heels, Maria looked on smiling, Gordon's first notice came

from the soft palms that slipped over his eyes.

With loose treachery the kimono sleeves had slipped back and he could feel the soft coolness of her forearms on his neck and cheeks; wherefore it is not to be wondered at that he found difficulty in guessing whom she might be. Jake, Sliver, Maria, Teresa, Lovell, the *ancianos*, he was enumerating by name all the women, children, cats, and dogs of the *hacienda* when she cut him off.

"Your stupidity is suspicious, sir. But it punishes itself. If you had guessed right I might have given you a—"

He took it—in triplicate, then pulled her down on his knee. "To my father and mother," he replied to her question. "I thought it was about time I dropped them a line—haven't written home since I came down."

"What?" She uttered a small shocked scream. "You've let them suffer all this time in suspense and alarm?"

He looked up in innocent surprise. "Why should *they* suffer? I didn't."

He hadn't? Her hands went up, appealing to the wide heavens against such utter lack of imagination—but dropped again quickly, owing to a second base treachery on the part of the sleeves.

"Oh, you men! What fools women are ever to bother about you. *You* didn't suffer? *Oooooh!*" She pulled his ear till he yelled. "If you ever dare to treat me like that!"

"That would be impossible, for you see we shall always be together."

After he had placed the customary seals on this affidavit of intent, she asked: "But why this sudden plunge into correspondence—after such long abstinence?"

"To inform them," he replied, with great dignity, "of a certain momentous change impending in my condition."

"Oh, you are telling them about—*me*? May I see what you have written?"

She could! And did! With one arm around his neck, heads so close that his face was hidden in an aura of flying hair, she began. As her eyes passed along the lines, her smooth cheek came harder and harder against his. Her clasp on his neck tightened until, just before she sat up, it had evolved into a bear hug.

"Oh, what a liar they will think you!"

"To guard against that, I want you to let me have the photo in the silver frame on your writing-table. Seeing's believing."

Of course she declared it "wasn't a bit like her" and the rest of it. Nevertheless, she brought it and, having resumed her perch on his knee, picked out the bad points and dwelt thereon while her eyes appealed for the contradiction which he voluminously furnished. While he severally and *in toto* denied her scathing indictments and substituted therefor panegyrics, she glowed radiantly and finally gave consent.

"Only you are so blind. They'll hate me when they see it."

"Trust dad for that!" he laughed. "He still has a soft spot for a pretty damsel. When he sees this—well, he'll go straight out and buy a fatted calf."

"But your mother and sister? They'll never forgive me for taking you from that other girl."

"Wrong again! They weren't a bit anxious about it. It was all my father—with his nonsense about rounding out fortunes. They'll love you as much as I—no, that's impossible! But they'll love you, all right."

A little thoughtful gleam now explained itself. "That other girl? You never told me about her. Did you ever—kiss her?"

"Lots of times." Laughing, he held her as she tried to break away. "At parties, when I was a kid—and when we played 'post-office' and sich."

"Never since you grew up?"

"Never."

"Oh, well," she sighed, "I suppose I'll have to forgive you since you were so very small, and it's such a long time ago I'll really have to—make up."

Some of the arrears were paid right then. In fact, it was not until she had demurred at paying all that he tapped the letter. "And now—what about the date? Shall I tell that we will be married by the time they receive it?"

Her hair flew in a bright cloud under her vigorous shake. "Such impatience! Aren't you happy?"

"Happy?" His voice rang with sincerity. "Happier than I ever thought possible, but—"

"But—?"

"I want to be happier still."

He meant and thought it. But she with her woman's intuition knew this, their love time, for what it was—the flowerage of their lives. Later would come the ripe fruit—content mixed with the joys and sorrows that form the substance of life; but then this hour would have passed forever. Like all women, with whom love is always the great end, she would have drained its last sweet essence. But like all women, she was not at all displeased by his impatience. Presently she yielded to it.

"After—after Bull comes home."

In the course of the argument she had coiled up on his knees, and the shy consent issued from the ambush of hair that hid her profile. Wrapped in his arms, soft and warm, she lay in blissful content for some time before he spoke.

"If Bull were here now, we could have gone up with Lovell and have made it a double marriage. Why, what's the matter?"

She had sat up with a little shiver. "Oh no! I could never be happy in one of those great hotels, huge human warrens!" Coiling up again, she allowed him a peep into her girlish dreamings. "I never saw him, he who was to be my all. His face was always dim, indefinite, as a bright moon behind a cloud, but he felt—like you. In my visions he always took me into the wilds—the hills, woods, cañons, and it is there we must go.

"It would be lovely if we could have taken horses and a pack-mule and gone down the length of the Sierra Madres—at first alone, later traveling with the arrieros up the mule trails to the snow-line, then down on the other side through giant cañons. We should have seen only the simple folk of the country. But the revolution has made that impossible. But this we can do—go to the priest and jefe of San Carlos, who are both old friends of my father's, to be married, then ride straight out to the mountain pasture and keep house there all by ourselves till—till we feel like coming home. I will cook while you look after the horses, and we can play that we are simple *peones* and be—oh, *so* happy!"

Nothing could have appealed to him more strongly. It was almost as good as a Java forest! He wondered at himself. "How perfectly lovely! Why didn't I think of that myself?"

"You would have, in time. Oh!" She sprang from his knee at a stir and tinkle of water. "Mr. Lovell is up. I must shoot up-stairs and dress."

"You'll go out with me to-day?" he called after her.

"No." She bent down over the rail to answer. "I promised Jake to go with him to Cañon del Norte to look at the colts."

"Twice with him, twice with Sliver, and only once with me?" he protested. "'Tisn't fair."

But all that he gained was a little soft laugh that came floating out from behind the sheet.

From his third of the wide circle which he, Jake, and Sliver now described about the *hacienda*, Gordon came in at sundown to the rise from which he and the widow had looked down on Los Arboles. It had become his daily habit to pause there and look for Lee returning with Sliver or Jake—and to-night he saw all three, small dots on the crests of great earth waves—then to sit and muse while the declining sun washed the wide world with its resplendence.

As on that other evening, the hacienda lay with its walls, painted adobes, *patio*, and compound aglow and plumed with soft smoke. As then, the plains lay, an undulating carpet of crimson and violet away to the burning hills. But—in place of soft woman voices, laughter low and wild—there came floating up to him a frightened murmur broken by a cry.

"Beast! she is but a child!"

Startled, he looked more closely and now saw, first; half a dozen horses standing with trailing bridles in the center of the compound; then as a flash of brass caught the sunlight, their riders straggling among the adobes.

"Raiders!" he thought, then noting their khaki, he changed it to, "*Revueltos!*"

A glance north and south would have shown him the others coming in at a fast lope. But at the cry, thrilling in its human anguish, wild in its panic, he was seized with excitement blind and savage as the blood fear which turns a band of peaceful cattle into a snorting, bellowing herd. Digging in his spurs, he shot down the slope, in through the back compound gate just as a woman came staggering back through the doorway of the nearest adobe, felled by a blow on the mouth.

From within issued a wild, hysterical sobbing. At first Gordon's sight, blinded by the bright sun, showed him only a convulsive movement in the half-gloom, but as they swung back into the light of the doorway he saw a slim brown girl struggling in the arms of a *revuelto*. The elder sister of his little playmate, she herself was but a child, but this helped her no more than her

heartbroken sobbing.

“Señor! Señor! Pity of Mary!”

At sight of the girl a cold shiver went down Gordon’s spine. Blind, breathless, choking, conscious only of a savage impulse to rend and tear, he rushed in, tore the girl out of the man’s arms, and threw him violently against the wall.

So savage was the impulse he had never thought to use a weapon till the fellow reached for his long gun. Then, suddenly aware of death looming imminent there in the half-gloom, he grabbed his automatic and fired, aiming with the natural intuitive precision with which one points a finger. He felt the rush of a body past him through the smoke. Then, stepping to the door, he saw the man run a few steps, fall, and roll over.

Suddenly aware that he, Gordon Nevil, had killed a man, intensely surprised at his lack of emotion, commonplace acceptance of the fact, he stood with the smoking pistol in hand until, with a sudden rush, the mother pushed him back in, then slammed and barred the door behind them.

The next moment came a scurry of feet, and the door quivered under a heavy shove. But it was not the varnished leaf of civilization, designed to keep out conversation. Barred top and bottom and three inches thick, it withstood a violent hammering.

The instant she was released the girl had dived like a scared rabbit under the canvas cot in the far corner and lay there, still as a mouse. But, picking up the knife which the dead man had wrenched from her hand, the dark mother ranged herself alongside Gordon. Though he understood very little of her whispered Spanish, the gleaming intelligence of the burning eyes, eloquent gestures, carried her meaning.

“They say to bring fire and burn down the door.” Her quick motion simulated the lighting of a match, followed by the upleap of flame. Whispering: “Tira! señor, tira! Shoot! Shoot!” she pointed at the window.

It was merely a square hole, flush with the thick wall on the outside, and barred with heavy oaken staves, and the *revueltos* were hugging the wall. Nevertheless, with a quick thrust of his weapon between the bars Gordon fired two shots along the wall. Though the bullets flew at random, there followed a quick scurry of feet.

Watching from one side of the window, Gordon now saw the men working, in swift rushes, around the corrals to the stables, from behind which they could command his window. Indeed, he had no more than moved back before—zip, plug! zip, plug! zip, plug! the bullets began to stream in through the window and plump in the back wall.

Presently, with a sharp, splitting ping! one pierced the door just above the woman’s shoulder. Reaching hastily, Gordon pulled her close against him; then, standing against the thick wall between the door and window, they waited—in deadly silence, for the fire had suddenly stopped. So still it was, he could distinctly hear the woman’s excited breathing and an occasional sob under the bed.

“Tempting me to look out,” he read the silence.

But he was wrong. A minute thereafter came a soft patter of nude feet and the voice of Maria, the little *criada*, called through the bars:

“It ess good now, señor, for you to come. Don Jake say for you help with those evil ones.”

The instant he stepped outside the situation explained itself. Warned, first by the firing, then by women who came running out to meet them, “Don” Jake and Sliver had quietly made their dispositions. At the back gate Sliver and two *ancianos* now stood with leveled rifles. Two more poked deadly snouts over the low *patio* wall, Lee and Jake behind them. And now they had leadership the women were swarming like brown hornets out of the adobes, brandishing knives, cleavers, *machetes*, a hysterical, dangerous mob.

In accordance with their outlaw tactics, Jake and Sliver had both aimed at the leader, and, cut off from escape, with still another enemy behind him, he had taken the hint. Arms reversed, rifle muzzle resting on the ground, he stood with his four companions. To give them their due, they showed no fear. Half or whole bandit, ugly, black-browed, one of them villainously pock-marked, the others with unhealthy erupted skins, they rolled cigarettes while urging the excited women to greater frenzy with evil jokes.

“Drive back those women!” Jake called the moment Gordon appeared. “Then bring the captain, or colonel, or general, whichever is what, over here.”

Nodding in reply to Gordon’s gesture, the leader followed him across the compound. Of medium height, well formed, features aquiline and cleanly cut, he was a perfect specimen of that tailor-made, detestably handsome Mexican middle-class type. Conceit, insufferable vanity,

bristled at the ends of his curved mustache. How it could be associated with such reckless hardihood as he now displayed must remain one of Nature's mysteries, for, entering the patio, he took a seat under the portales and addressed Jake with an authoritative air:

"Now, señor, will you please explain why you have attacked a command of General Valles?"

"Yes, if you will explain, on your part, why a command of General Valles attacked my people!"

It was Lee that answered. She was wearing her man's riding-clothes, and the man's surprise when she spoke told that he had taken her for a boy. Now, with exaggerated courtesy that was far more offensive than his first hardy insolence, he sprang up and offered her his chair.

"I did not know"—his bold glance wandered over her costume—"you will pardon me, señorita?"

Though she flushed, Lee returned the stare. It was not the first time that revolutionists had come with "requisitions" to Los Arboles. She answered from experience.

"You have a commission from General Valles?"

He had. It ran in the usual form, setting forth in grandiose language that the necessities of the revolution demanded all good citizens to contribute their uttermost to the cause, authorizing the bearer, *el capitán* Santos, to seize and expropriate such goods, cattle, horses, or other chattels according to his judgment, and to settle therefor with his note of hand, payable after the revolution; signed in Valles's own illiterate, crabbed hand and attested with a prodigious seal.

Lee handed it back. "This seems to be in legal form. That being the case"—she returned to the attack with a directness that drew from Jake an appreciative nod "perhaps you will now answer why you attacked my people!"

"I know of no attack except"—the straight brows knit over a black flash at Gordon—"when this man killed one of my men."

Already Lee had gained the details from the women. She replied at once: "He shot in self-defense—to save one of my girls."

"Santa Maria!" His mustache drew up in a cynical grin. "What foolishness! As though a good soldier should be shot because he ruffled a dove. You Americanos take these *peonas* too seriously, fill them with ideas above their station. On our haciendas they are proud to gain a soldado for a sweetheart."

Could the thoughts of, say, Gordon, Jake, and Sliver have been examined just then they would have shown, respectively, an intense desire on Gordon's part to break the officer in two across his knee; a cool calculation by Jake as to the possibility of "getting away with it" should they find it necessary to kill the entire command. Sliver, still holding a bead on the file of men, from his gaze, was ardently wondering if he could send one bullet through all four heads.

If the thoughts of the *peonas*—now gathered in a murmuring, gesticulating mob that showed principally as glistening eyeballs rolling like foam in a sea of brown faces along the wall—a composite of their thought would have shown a mad passion to rend and maim, mutilate and torture, bred of their natural savagery aggravated by centuries of mistreatment under Spanish-Mexican rule. Out of which chaos of thought and passion, vibrant and sweet with the strength and truth of a fine nature aroused by base wrong, came Lee's voice:

"You say that? You, a follower of a man who was once himself a *peon*, who boasts that his is the *peones'* cause? You, his representative, sneer because we treat like human beings these poor creatures? If you *do* represent him, then God help us, for we have little but violence to expect from your cause."

It was a fine chord, strongly struck, should have set in vibration the strings of sympathy in any normal human being. Though he caught but little of the Spanish, Gordon felt and glowed responsively. It aroused even Jake, the cold and crafty, born hater of the *peon* in all his ways, to mutter: "You bet! they hain't got nothing coming from him!" But in the nature of the Mexican, warped and blackened forever both by training and by the vicissitudes of bandit war, it aroused only surprise. Though his eye lit up, it was only in secret appreciation of her beauty. It was to ingratiate himself, personally, in her favor that, with a sudden reversal, he ran off with despicable glibness the shibboleths of his "Cause." Surely they were fighting for the *peon*; to obtain his rights and restore the public lands alienated by the *hacendados*.

"If my hombre did as you say," he concluded, "he earned his death. My general would be the first to applaud it." With a gesture that dismissed the killing lightly, as if it were that of a fly, he added: "So let us say no more of that. My wish is to serve *you!*"

Though again he did not understand the words, the grin that accompanied them in its offensive mixture of conceit and admiration sent the angry blood flooding Gordon's face. He was standing behind Lee, and, hearing his quick breath, she put back her hand in a restraining

gesture.

"Leave him to me," she whispered. Then, looking the other straight in the eye, she gave him his answer. "You wish to serve me? Very well, señor, you may do so very easily—by removing yourself and your men off my place."

For a moment he looked at her, the offensive grin wiped out by surprise. In turn, surprise gave way to sudden viciousness. "Si, señorita—after you have produced two hundred horses, which is your share of the new levy for equipment and supplies. Also"—another black flash went to Gordon—"it will be my duty to take this man to my general."

"Perhaps I had better go," Gordon whispered. "It may save you—"

Lee cut him off without looking around. "And shoot him the moment you get him outside the gates?" She quoted the Mexican law of "The escape." "No, señor, I will be responsible for his safe-keeping and deliver him with my own hands at your general's call." She added, after a significant pause, "Along with the evidence of your own neglect in permitting your men to attack my people."

For a moment he looked nonplussed. Now and then, for the sake of effect—especially upon meddlesome consuls—it was the fashion in the revolutionary armies to shoot a few men for just such offenses; and one could never be certain where the next lightning might strike. He blinked, tried to pass it with a shrug; but suppressed fury showed through his vicious look.

"Very well, señorita, the matter shall be left to my general. But the horses. These I must have at once."

"Well, think you've got 'em, an' let it go at that!"

While Jake muttered behind her, Lee stood thinking. Then out of her meditation flashed a sharp question: "Were you at the hacienda of the señor Benson last week?"

The man's dark brows rose. "No, señorita. If there was a requisition served there it must have been by el coronel Lopez."

"When did you leave the cuartel general?"

"Ten days ago. We have been working among the haciendas on the other side of the railroad. But what difference does it make—"

"A great deal." She gave a little nod. "Since you left headquarters the señor Benson, with my manager, the señor Perrin, has gone with an offer of all our horses on favorable terms to General Valles. So that matter may also be left with him."

"Which lets you out!" Jake, who had been fuming all this time in the background, now burst out. "Now git! That's what I said—an' take your dead hombre along."

From his cold, bleak face, so dangerous in its vitriolic quiet, the man's glance passed to Gordon, whose hand was on his gun, then to the peonas who were now crowding the *patio* gates. Everywhere his glance fell amid a small sea of hot, brown faces flecked with a scum of glittering, dangerous eyes. Accustomed to be met always with fawning fear, defiance was a new experience, not easily assimilated. As his glance returned to Jake and he felt the danger that loomed imminent behind his cold truculence, the instinct of defiance wilted. With a shrug he passed out into the compound through the lane the *peonas* opened.

While he was assembling his command Jake leaned casually across the *patio* wall, his rifle in the hollow of his arm, beside him Lee and Gordon, the latter now with a rifle. At the back gate Sliver and his *ancianos* still stood, wary and watchful. Wherefore, in spite of secret mutterings, the intruders made quick business of it.

As, with the dead man tied in his saddle and leading the horse, they passed out under the *patio* arch, the leader paused, bowed ironically, then followed his men.

"Saddle a fresh horse an' go after them," Jake ordered, when Sliver came up. "Don't let 'em see you, but keep them in sight. After this we'll have to keep one man circling the hills while the *ancianos* keep watch an' watch at the gates."

With Lee, Gordon had moved out to the stage and stood watching the men ride away. "I am sorry to have brought this on you," he said, in low tones. In his ignorance of Mexican habits and treachery, he added, "Perhaps it would have been better if I had gone with him."

A hasty glance through the arch showed Sliver on his way to the stables. Jake was shooing the *peonas* back to their quarters with much language and little ceremony. There was no one to see when, with a quick movement, she threw one arm around his neck, pulled down his head, and planted a swift kiss on his cheek.

"I don't want to be widowed—before I'm married."

At midnight Sliver brought in his report. "They've gone on to El Sol. After dark I drew up so close that I almost ran into 'em when they stopped suddenly at the other side of a ridge. Luckily

my horse stood quiet an' the air was so still I heard every word of their wrangling. The captain he was fer coming back, but the others wouldn't hear of it.

"The damned gringos shoot straight,' I heard one of 'em say. 'Already have they killed one of us, an' now they be ready. Also the horses are tired an' we hungry. Let us go forward to Hacienda El Sol.' Then, after some jawing, they moved on."

"An' they won't come back," Jake commented on the report. "Not so long as they kin find something that looks easier."

Which was only half of the truth!

XXIX: TEMPTATION

Bull's eyes opened at dawn on a cloudless sky that lay like an inverted pink bowl over desert so level and vast that the customary bordering mountains showed only blue tips up above the horizon. He had been half conscious of the cessation of movement during the night. Now silence, the cool quiet of dawn, lay over the hot and drowsy earth.

Sitting up, he saw on each side the brown adobe skirts of a desert town enwrapping in their squalid embrace miles of troop-trains which stood in the yards twelve deep and blocked the main line. Twenty thousand *revueltosos*, at least, heaped the roofs. As yet the men lay huddled in their bright serapes. But already the women were astir, lighting the scene with a flash of brilliant skirts. From rude hearths built of earth within a circle of stones a myriad thin, violet columns uprose and hung straight as strings in the crystal air.

"Morning, Diogenes!" The correspondent's cheerful face poked up from under the edge of the car. "Some picturesque, heigh? Who'd think, to look at them sleeping so peacefully, that they were bent on the destruction of another outfit like this less than ten miles away? But that's your Mexican. With us war is a stern necessity to be shoved to a quick conclusion. With him it is a pleasure. Day is to fight in, night for sleep, noon for siesta, and he arranges his warfare accordingly. A night attack would be considered discourteous; not at all according to the Mexican Hoyle. At noon they quit, on the advanced posts, even visit each other and exchange gossip and cigarettes. Whereafter, with a cheerful, 'Adios, señor, it is time to begin fighting!' they return to their respective lines and go to it again. A cheerful people in the midst of their dirt and disorder." He added, thoughtfully, "I never see them like this without thinking of them as a band of careless children shrieking with laughter over the destruction they are wreaking with the powerful weapons we placed in their hands."

"Picturesque? Yes," he went on, from a pause. "But it's mighty hard on the common people. Look at that!"

He was pointing at a shriveled old woman who, with bony fingers, was clawing the horse manure that had been pitched out of a car.

"She's picking out the undigested corn to grind for her tortillas. Man!" Eyes flashing to the inspiration, he ran on in a flush: "If our wise men in Washington could only see that! Do you know what these armies are doing? Riding the brood mares, eating the seed corn! *The seed corn and the brood mares!* You know what that means—famine! If I were a poet I'd take her, that old hag scratching her living from the offal of Valles's war horses—I'd take her for the symbol of Mexico—Mexico bleeding and bludgeoned, ravished, outraged, oppressed.

"It was hard to swallow, what your friend said last night, but it's true. While the Washingtonians prate of principles, this country is fast returning to its original condition of nomadic tribes warring perpetually upon one another. Already—oh!" He descended to a homely but vital conclusion. "They make me sick. God send us a *man!* A man with sympathy and insight; understanding of this people's failings and necessities. God send us another Lincoln!"

"You bet it's hell!" In spite of the profanity Bull's laconic comment was reverent in its essence as the most profound "Amen!"

With a shrug Naylor threw off his earnestness; became again his cheerful self. "I hear the Chinaman stirring. Come on down to breakfast."

Stepping from the ladder, Bull's glance went, in spite of himself, to the table. It was still there, just as he had pictured it, a squat stone jug with glasses; and though, seating himself on a locker, he turned his back, he was still acutely conscious of its presence. He did not look when the Chinaman carried it back into the kitchen. But he knew, and his sigh expressed more than relief. Moreover, both while he was eating and when, later, he walked with Benson and the correspondents into the town, it went with him, occupied always a corner of his mind.

From the adobe outskirts the soldiers and their women were moving in dirty streams of khaki and *peon mantas* splashed with the flash of brass, vivid reds, violets, and blues of soiled calico skirts, the loot of a hundred towns. From a hundred painted streets the streams poured into the plaza, the heart of the town, there to move and mass and melt and mass again, a sweating, sweltering jam of brown humanity topped with a scum of evil eyes, dark, unhealthy faces. In dribbles and trickles its evil tide had flowed in from all over the land, and Benson's remark as they came from a side street into the plaza was fully justified:

"If you could just sink it for half a day a mile under the sea, this would be a safer, cleaner land."

Overpowering the stench natural to a desert town, the sickening sweet odor of carrion hung thick in the air.

"More Mexican efficiency," the dean shrugged. "After the last scrap out here in the hills they made a stab at burning the bodies. They'd pile twenty or thirty in a heap, pour a bottle of kerosene over it, light the soaked clothing, then walk off swelling with the consciousness of hygienic duty well performed. Now when the wind blows this way—it's hard on a white man, though the Mexicans don't seem to mind. Appeals to the natural vulture in them, I suppose."

While they stood watching before crossing to the shaded promenade, the crowd opened behind them to permit the passage of a dozen men under guard. All Spaniards, they ranged in age from the threescore and ten years of a hawk-nosed old man to the twelve of his grandson. But one thing they had in common, the dull, blue hue of mortal fear. In the extremity of his terror the boy repeatedly stumbled and fell—to be picked up and prodded on by a rifle-barrel. Heads hanging, fearful, and hopeless, they shuffled through the crowd.

"Ole, Enrico!" As they came opposite, Bull's friend hailed the officer in command.

After walking a few feet with him, he came back. "They're Spanish storekeepers on the way to 'the place designated,' which is a revolutionary euphemism for being shot. 'The place' is the cemetery where they will be stood up against the wall. A nice little Mexican refinement, eh, making a man's legs carry him to his own funeral? Their crime? Respectability, most likely. They have either dallied in contributing to the 'Cause,' been caught hiding their goods, or perhaps have unreasonably refused some officer access to their daughters' beds. Even in this country"—he spoke with bitter irony—"there are still men to be found who draw the line at that. Or it may be simply that they are Spanish. God knows, it's enough. Valles never forgets that he is a *peon*. After the lapse of centuries he is visiting on their children's children the violences offered by the Spanish conquerors to his Aztec forebears. It may be poetic justice. A philosopher might find some justification for it—if it were only a cause and effect. But"—his pitying glance followed the stumbling boy—"it is rotten hard to watch."

It was only the beginning of a series of sights and events that, while running the gamut from acute tragedy to grim humor, revealed in flashing glimpses the bandit tyrannies that were masquerading as government. As the Spaniards disappeared, there came marching in their wake a group of Carranzista prisoners, mostly women, captured and brought in from an interior town. As they filed through the jeering crowd, a *revuelto* would reach and snatch away a woman that pleased him without a protest from the guards. Always she raised an outcry. But always she ceased at the flash of a knife or as a heavy fist closed her mouth. Whereafter, quietly sobbing, she would be dragged away by the hair or hand.

"That isn't quite so bad." The correspondent nodded at one struggling desperately with her captor. "She'll soon give in and dry her tears. In one battle we took over five hundred women prisoners, and within twenty-four hours they had all settled down to housekeeping with Valles's soldiers. Four years of war whose fluctuations are recorded by a change of husbands is bound to breed philosophy. For their kind it doesn't matter so much. They have ceased to care. But the others—daughters of the upper classes, reared in luxury, refined, many of them educated in Europe—well, during the sack of Durango forty girls of the upper classes committed suicide."

After crossing the plaza, Benson and Bull left the correspondents and turned down a side street where stood the British consulate. An old Spanish mansion, with a great *patio* and interior garden, its high walls shut out even the murmur of the swarming humanity without. The glass

doors of the office opened upon a wide, tiled veranda beyond which flowery paths ran under great trees that let down the brilliant sun blaze in a greenish rain of light. Its peace and beauty accentuated by contrast the drama of human misery that was in course in its quiet demesne.

As they sat waiting for the consul, they saw in the garden two nuns in earnest conversation with an old, black-robed priest.

"More victims of the 'Cause.'" After he had greeted them, the consul, a bluff Englishman, nodded toward the group. "Valles has robbed churches, seized their lands, shot the priests. He crowns it with—this. Last spring he quartered one of his regiments in the nunnery of the order to which these poor women belong. Now they are about to become mothers, and came here to-day to ask the priest—who is himself a refugee whom I saved from a mob that was stoning him to death outside—to ask permission for themselves and others to end their desecration by suicide. One would think that such experiences would kill in any human being the belief in a righteous God. But the old fellow is made of good stuff. Sticks right to his guns."

Through the open doorway, in confirmation, the voice of the priest came just then out of the quiet garden. Old and quavery it was with the burden of his sorrow and years, yet firm in the faith: "The life He gave none but He may take away. Why this terrible thing has befallen it is not for us to say. His purposes are closed in mystery, beyond our sight. It may be that we had grown proud; were swollen with self-righteousness; puffed up with the vanity of good works. Or it may be your sacrifice was necessary to scandalize the world of good people and bring these wicked ones to their proper end? It may be"—he paused, shaking his old head, tears coursing down his furrowed cheeks—"but it is not for us to attempt answer when He chooses to put our faith to the test. I have wished that He had seen fit to take me as I lay there under the stones of the mob. But that was impious, a wicked thought. We can only wait till His brightness pierces the veil of our mortal vision."

Poor brides of Christ! condemned to bear into that wicked world the children of furious lust! Yet, under their bitter sorrow, the leaven of mother love had been at work. The younger, a sweet-faced girl of twenty four or five, raised her pale, olive face. "And may we love them, our babes, when they come?"

The humanity set its reflection in the smile that overflowed the wrinkled face with sympathy and understanding. "God is love, Sisters. He would not wish otherwise."

In their hope and consolation their quick looks at one another were wonderfully revealing. Bending, they took his blessing, and walked slowly away down the garden while he went back in the house.

Bull had looked and listened with sympathy so acute as to be almost pain. And yet—even while his gaze followed the nuns slowly down the garden, he was conscious of a tray of liquors and glasses that stood on a small side-table. On their way they had passed *cantina* after *cantina*, all thronged with half-drunken *revueltosos*, all exhaling a thick reek of spirits that filled his thirsty nostrils, inflamed the drink desire. Now, after refusing the consul's invitation, he walked out on the veranda, and not till the bottles were recorked did he return in time to hear the consul's conclusion on Benson's business.

"As you say, he needs the horses, never more badly, but, again, he was never in worse humor than he has been since his defeat. It wouldn't help any for me to go with you, for I've been fighting him on other accounts all this week. You know him, and I will provide you with a letter that will secure your admittance."

On the way back Bull ran again the gantlet of the *cantinas*. With invisible hands they reached out to throttle his resolution. So powerful was the temptation, he walked like a man in a dream, blind to externals; seeing, hearing nothing till they brought up on the edge of the crowd that blocked always the gates of Valles's headquarters—simple *peones* who waited patiently through the long, hot hours on the chance of obtaining a glimpse of their hero, a *peon* like themselves who had abased the great *hacendados*, their taskmasters, confiscated their lands, beaten their generals, trampled their pride in the dust. Though he shouldered a path through for himself and Benson, he scarcely saw them; had only a dim vision of a guard in the patio, of officers coming and going up a wide stone stairway. Not till they were met by a secretary, seated in an anteroom, and Benson spoke, did he awaken to what was going on.

"That's 'Matador' Fero, Valles's killer." Benson nudged him as a man looked in through the open double doors of the next room and gave them a suspicious stare. "He shot two hundred Federal prisoners, one afternoon, in files of five, one bullet to a file, trying out a new high-power rifle. Looks it, doesn't he?"

He did. The hulking figure, gross jaw and mouth, small eyes, black, piercing, cold as ice, all

bespoke cruelty that was accentuated by his colorless olive skin. Strolling back to his post behind Valles, whom they could see sitting at a desk in the next room, he stood there closely watching, both the American correspondents who were ranged before the desk, and also the *revuelto* officers who lounged on the window balconies. Not a hand stirred, foot moved, without his notice.

Fierce beast that the "Matador" was, Bull's keen knowledge of men, developed by years of hazard to an instinct, still set him down as less dangerous than his master. In the latter a towering forehead, massive upper head, indicated genius of the highest constructive order. But his thick lips, repulsive mouth, great amber eyes that were never at rest, sent always their sharp, suspicious glances darting hither and thither, told why it had been perverted to destructive ends; proclaimed the bandit *peon*, military dictator. He had stopped speaking when they entered. Now he began again, and as he talked the heel of his hand nervously tapped the table. Now and then, with a gush of savage feeling, it would rise and fall with a bang.

"You may tell your papers, señores, the reverse of the other day was sustained by one of my generals. But to-morrow—you have seen my reinforcements, twenty thousand brought down from Chihuahua?—to-morrow I shall command. We shall drive the Carranzistas like dust before a hot wind. And you can tell them"—he observed a sinister pause—"you may tell them that I am not pleased with the countenance your government is now giving the Carranzistas. So far I have been careful of American lives and property in the country I control, but if your government allies itself with my enemies—" His big fist struck the table with force that emphasized the threatening flash of the darting eyes.

Yet, pulsing with vindictive anger, the exhibition paled by contrast with his furious attack on one of his own officers who came in as the correspondents filed out. The fact that he had been wounded and had gone on, alone, when his command refused to face a galling fire, made no difference. Beast mouth stretched to a gorilla grin, every line of his face writhing in an awful smile, Valles scored him with coarse insult and seething invective while his hand toyed thirstily with the hilt of his knife.

Flushing and paling, the man stood with hanging head till an order issued from the last furious burst. "Go, now, and shoot every tenth man in your command. I will teach them that I am more to be feared than the damned Carranzistas!"

In the midst of it Bull nudged Benson. "Don't you allow we better leave him cool for a while?"

But the Englishman's obstinate jaw set hard. "I'm not afraid of him. Besides"—the secretary stood again in the doorway—"it is too late."

A curt nod marked Valles's recognition of Benson as they followed in. Then, as his tigerish eyes took in Bull, they lit with quick appreciation of his bulk, then went off again on their suspicious questing. While Benson talked, he beat again a soft tattoo with the heel of his hand; then, rising, he walked off into another room.

The secretary followed, and through the closed door they caught the harsh, throaty monotone. When it ceased the secretary came out.

"My general says that all of your property is subject to requisition to be paid for in legal currency issued by him as the chief of the republican armies."

"And he thinks we'll stand for that?" His eyes flashing under bent brows, harsh face burning with anger, Benson stepped toward the door. "I'll—"

But as he moved the "Matador" stepped in between. Half a dozen lounging officers, too, came hurrying from the balconies.

"It would do no good, señor." The secretary's shoulders rose in a shrug. "Wait a more favorable time."

Benson stared down upon him, big fists clenched, face purple with furious passion. Thinking he was about to strike, Bull put out his hand. But, turning suddenly, Benson strode out of the room, throwing his defiance back over his shoulder.

"He can't bluff a British subject that way! He'll give me his answer *himself*—and he'll give it *to-day*."

As Bull followed out a hand touched his shoulder. Thinking it was the secretary, he turned—then stood staring at the sentry on guard at the door, who returned a sheepish grin. Though the face seemed familiar, he did not recognize the man for one of the raiders Lee had saved from hanging till he spoke.

"Ah, señor, 'tis fine to see an old face. The señorita, she that saved us from your just anger, she is well? Tell her that fine mercy was defeated by the *revueltos* who took us from her servants. Ask if she will in her great kindness have the general set us free that we may return to our wives and babes in Las Bocas."

In spite of his own stress, Bull could not but grin. "Was the jefe of Las Bocas a better master than Valles?"

"A master is always a master." The man shrugged. "But one's pais is one's pais and the niñas, the flesh of one's body, blood of his blood, cannot be forgotten. Thou wilt speak to her, señor?"

The tear that trickled down his villainous face earned him a civil answer. Though he knew the futility of it, Bull nodded. "Si, I will speak."

Below he found Benson shoving like an angry bull through the *peon* crowd. On its outskirts he turned and shook his fist at the building.

"I'm going back to the consul—to tell him something that he'll take better alone. Where shall I meet you?"

"Here?"

"No, I can't tell how long I may be. Make it after lunch at the car."

Bull nodded. Then remembering the correspondent's warning, he called after him, "I'd like to be there when you tackle him again."

Nodding, Benson walked on. Left alone, Bull sat down on a bench in the plaza. Already the drink desire was returned upon him. And as he sat there, in the grip of his mortal weakness, three soldiers seated themselves on the same bench and proceeded to pass a bottle of *tequila*.

Before he even saw it Bull's mutinous nostrils snuffed the odor. Looking away, he tried to think, to recall the vision that strengthened and cooled him in his hour of torture last night. But now, the stronger for his long abstinence, that enormous desire inflamed his brain; enveloped it in heated mists through which the pretty, wholesome faces loomed dim and indefinite. And then

—
After a curious glance up at the huge figure, the nearest soldier tapped his arm. "You will drink with us, señor?"

What it cost him to refuse and walk away! Men have gone down in history as martyrs by the exercise of no more effort. But just as pressure enough will snap a bone, as persistent fatigue will paralyze a muscle, so the effort weakened his will, broke his resolution. Feeling curiously weak, utterly exhausted, he stopped at the plaza corner and gazed at a *cantina* across the road.

Even then he did not give in. Hands writhing behind his back, face one purple suffusion, he circled and recircled the plaza half a dozen times before he stopped at the same spot again. In that time desire has no height he did not reach; passion no heat, hell no torture, he did not endure. And while he stood watching the *cantina's* roaring trade, reluctant but conscious in his soul that the end was come, a hand dropped with a hearty slap on his back.

"Come on, Diogenes, you're just in time. We've discovered some beer, good cold beer, down at the German Club. Counting the consul, there's only two Dutchmen left in the town, but trust them to have their beer. Don't waste time in astonishment. Come right along."

In his mortal weakness Bull snatched at the straw. He could drink a barrel of the thin Mexican stuff without knowing it—at least he felt he could! But while, for an hour thereafter, they sat in a cool *patio* talking and sipping, the despised brew was still potent enough to loose the mad rustler spirit that hearkened only to the voice of desire.

When the correspondents left to file their despatches, he remained.

"I'm waiting for Benson," he told them. "If you see him, tell him I'm here."

While they walked down the *patio* and out through the bar into the street, he sat nervously making rings with his beer-glass. Then, trembling with eagerness, he called the waiter.

"This stuff hasn't a kick in it. Bring me a bottle of whisky!"

XXX: THE OTHER HALF OF THE TRUTH

As they sat at breakfast Gordon's glance went repeatedly to Lee. Her smile, soft and mischievous, told that she knew very well what was in his mind, but she did not answer till the end of the meal.

"I'm going to ride with Mr. Nevil to-day," she told Jake.

Sliver's nod and grin outside expressed his opinion of the arrangement. "It's a cinch," he

chuckled. "Cepting Lee Haskins and his Sal, I never seen two folks more sot on each other."

Jake evidenced a dry curiosity. "An' who in hell might they be?"

"Folks I knew up in the Palo Verde country. They was stuck on each other like two stamps at the end of a day's ride in a sweaty pocket; allus that close up walkin', standin' or settin', you had to walk around 'em twice to find the jine."

"An' after they was married?" Jake questioned.

Sliver scratched his head. "You-all mightn't believe it, but you c'd have fired a charge of buckshot between 'em at long range without hittin' either."

Jake nodded. "I'd have allowed as much. But these ain't that kind. Did you see how she deviled him all through breakfast? Well, she'll keep him on aidge that-a-way all his life. He'll never get all at once; never quite reach the end. They'll allus be something beyond."

"Say!" Sliver looked at him in dumb wonder. "Fer an old bachelor you know a heap. Where'd you learn it?"

"Where any man learns it—from a woman." A shadow swept, for a moment, the reckless face. "On'y—I didn't have sense enough to stay be my teacher."

Just then Gordon overtook them, but while helping them to saddle up—for it was his day on guard—Sliver curiously watched Jake. When, moreover, he mounted to the watch-tower above the gates and saw Lee and Gordon ride away, the sight accentuated a new feeling, one of a vacancy in his being which, so far, a long succession of fluffy, blondined ladies had somehow failed to fill.

Their strongly perfumed memory set his head wagging over that problem in morals which has puzzled wiser heads. "Ain't Natur' the fickle jade, a-setting a man to fall dead in love with one girl while he's still terrible fond of two dozen? Why kedn't she a' b'en more single-minded?"

His brooding over these inconsistencies was suddenly disrupted by a flash of doubt, so pronounced as to be almost alarm. Lee and Gordon were now silhouetted against the sky-line. They were, however, no longer at correct riding distance. Eyes less keen than Sliver's could easily have perceived they were holding hands. He drew the phenomenon to the attention of Jake, who just then came riding from under the arch.

"Say," he called down, "d'you allow it's all right for them two to go off that-a-way by themselves?"

Jake snorted. "Didn't she ride with you yesterday an' me the day afore?"

"Yes, but she's our boss an'—well, they love each other a whole lot."

"So that's what's biting you?" In one sentence Jake countered heavily on the common view of things. "She kin ride with tough guys like you an' me an' it's all right; but she mustn't go out with the man that loves her more 'n anything on earth. Where's your sense?"

Sliver feebly scratched his head in a vain effort to find it. Failing, he made weak answer, "I was jest sorter thinking they orter, have a chapperonny." Vanquished by Jake's disgusted snort, he withdrew and went down to close the gates.

Meanwhile Lee and Gordon held on their way. At the crest of the rise, from where she and her father had overlooked the *hacienda* on that last fatal day, they reined in and looked back upon it lying like a huge painted cup in the great gold saucer of the sun-scorched plains. As then, the sweep of her hand took in the house, adobes, compound, giant cottonwoods sweeping with the dry arroyo across the view, the range rolling in bright billows to the far hills.

Her cry was the same: "Oh, isn't it beautiful? Soon the rains will come and turn everything green, but I like it best this way. Greens are to be had anywhere, but these golds—that is Mexico."

Stimulated by his responsive smile, just as she used to do with her father, she began to dive into the past, relate the battles and sieges, scandal and intrigue, recreate the vivid pageants of the old dons and their savage brown retainers. If she had chosen the differential calculus for her subject, he would have listened with pleasure to the soft, eager voice. The lithe, graceful figure that gained so in ease and grace of its flexures from her man's riding-clothes, the mobile face, molten under the touch of emotion, would have illumined the heaviest subject. But he was equally interested, plied her with questions when she showed signs of stopping.

"Oh, I'm so glad that you love it!" she sighed, happily. "It would have been such a disappointment if you— But that is so silly, because it wouldn't have been you. Soon the rains will come, and in the long, dark evenings after"—she went on with a little flourish—"I shall read you stacks and stacks of the old letters and documents we found in an old leather trunk. It will be lots of fun."

Naturally they dipped into the future, building their own castles. Where she left off, he

began. "Wait till we get my old dad down here! A big streak of romance crosscuts his business sense, and when he sees this—well, he promised me a hundred thousand when I finally settled down. After Uncle Sam steps in and puts an end to all this revolutionary nonsense, we'll—"

The reconstructed and beautiful Los Arboles that emerged from his imaginings was inhabited by a contented peasantry, better paid, healthier, and happier than the country had ever seen. What he forgot she filled in till, from sheer lack of material, they came to a happy pause.

Business concluded and the Mexican millennium achieved, they turned to their own pleasure. A certain Java forest was, of course, again lugged in by the ears. She, however, did not appear to notice it was getting a trifle shopworn, but enthused as brightly as though it were new goods freshly displayed. And while they ran on, rebuilding their earthly scheme of things according to their hearts' desire, the gods in resentment of their presumption were forging the thunderbolts that were to shatter it to bits. Unconscious of sharp eyes that were watching from the heart of the chaparral thicket half a mile away, they presently joined hands and rode on.

At first the direction seemed to suit the watcher's purpose. After they passed, he rode his horse out in the open and followed, keeping always out of their sight. Even when, an hour later, Gordon circled toward the mountains on his regular beat, the watcher followed. But when their course began to bend to the south he laid on quirt and spurs and went after them at a gallop.

Turning at a call, Lee and Gordon saw him coming down a long slope, and, as he drew nearer, she recognized the *mozo* who had brought Ramon's message from El Sol.

"Que? Filomena?"

As he answered, in rapid Spanish, sudden distress wiped out her happiness. "Oh, Betty is ill!" she translated for Gordon. "Mary Mills sent word to El Sol and asked them to send for me. Filomena can act as my escort, so it won't be necessary for you—" She paused, anticipating rebellion.

It came. "Bull told me that you were not to ride alone. I wouldn't let you, anyway."

If she made a little face, she was still secretly pleased. "That's what one gets for being a girl, but I suppose I'll have to put up with it." Turning to the *mozo*, she gave him his orders in Spanish: "The señor will go with me. You may ride on to Los Arboles and tell Don Sliver, the gringo señor, where we have gone."

Disconcertion showed through the man's *peon* immobility. But with an obsequious "Si, señorita!" he rode on, but stopped over the next rise, dismounted, and crawled back to the crest on his belly.

Lying there, he watched them riding in a direction that showed them to be taking the short cut through the hills. Till they passed out of sight he lay quietly. Then, after carefully clearing a patch of ground, he built a small fire of the dry grass and twigs and covered it with the succulent green leaves of a Spanish bayonet.

Instantly there rose on the still air a dense smoke column. Till it soared to its full height he waited. Then, alternately covering and lifting his scrape from the fire, he sent a succession of great smoke puffs rolling on high. Whereafter he stamped out the fire and, grinning, mounted and rode away.

About that time Lee and Gordon were entering the ravine. A slight embarrassment rose between them as they drew near the *fonda*. But in place of Felicia's smooth, dark face the wrinkled, purblind visage of old Antonio appeared at the bar window, where he was serving an *arriero* whose loaded mules cropped the lush grass along the stream.

As they passed Lee looked quickly at Gordon. But meeting and reading her glance, he laughed and raised his right hand in attestation. Disarmed, she shook her finger, and the next minute their horses had scrambled around the bend, past the spot whence she had looked down and seen the kiss, into neutral territory.

Half an hour put them at the head of the staircase from where, as on the night they had brought home the raiders, they looked over spur and ridge to the distant plains. Then it had all been washed in the crimson and violet and gold of sunset. Now, beyond the black chaparral, that undulated like a woman's mantle over the shoulders and breasts of the hills, the plains lay to the eye, a sea of undulating gold flecked with green isles, trees, and far fields of growing corn. Mountains and plains, cañon and ravine, it was just as wild, infinitely beautiful in one mood as the other.

"A wonderful land!" Gordon breathed it.

Could his eyes have gone with the curving meridians over its length and its breadth, have followed the dim, blue ranges in their course across brazen deserts, to the deep forests, eternal

snows of the Sierra Madres; then ranged south across the great central plateau rich in cotton, corn, and cane; have slid with lacy streams down the cañons, streets of the mountains that led into the tangled jungles where coffee and cocoa, rubber and tobacco, palms and bananas, sage, rice, spices, flourish in the languid tropics; could he have taken the land in its entirety, richer in its beauty, variety of crops, fruits, plants, than the fabled Garden of Eden—could he have done all this, even then imagination would have fallen far below the reality. Yet he saw enough to stimulate him to prophecy.

“Some day, when all this petty revolutionary business is squelched, this is going to be part of the greatest nation on earth.”

That set them planning again, and while they talked the largest army yet brought forth by successive revolutions was in process of disintegration but an eagle’s flight away. Following battle and retreat across sun-struck desert where thirst slew more than lead or steel, it was scattering fiery chaff blown by cannon’s blast over the face of the land to set it aflame with minor disorders. Beyond the farthest blue range columns of smoke marked the sites of a hundred burning *haciendas*. With them, under the pitiless sky, rose the groans and cries of the wounded and tortured, wailing of ravished women.

In present ignorance of this, unconscious, again, of the keen eyes that had spied the *mozo’s* signal and were now watching them from the chaparral half a mile ahead, they rode on.

“Why waste good rope? One shoots him out of the saddle with ease.”

If the voices had not been pitched low, Lee and Gordon, now only a few hundred yards away, might have heard the argument.

She would easily have recognized Ramon’s voice. “True, amigo, and I love him less than thou; would kill him the quicker but for my promise to his *compañero*. While he held me under his rifle, I gave it—to make no attempt on their lives.”

“A promise?” A low, hard laugh issued from the covert. “What is it but a deadfall for one’s enemy? If all those I have broken, to men killed, women deceived, rise against me on the last day, Satan will be put to it to find a hot enough corner in hell. But *I* gave no promise—and he killed Tomas, my man. If your stomach turns at the job, leave him to me.”

“No, no!” Ramon’s voice rose in quick protest. “His killing would still be at my hands. Also”—the addition came in lower tones—“I would rather he lived—to suffer the furies I have suffered when he thinks of her in my arms. No, señor, we will rope him from behind.”

“Bueno! Have it thy—” A sharp hiss cut them off.

Very cunningly they had taken up their positions at the head and foot of a slippery steep where loose rubble bank and a narrow passage through thick chaparral would allow only one horse to go down at a time. Ramon, with two of the revolutionists, crouched above, while the leader, with the others, hid at the foot. He had no more than gained back to his men before Lee and Gordon appeared silhouetted against the sky above.

She was in the lead, so close that Ramon could almost have touched her stirrup as she looked back at Gordon. “I’ll go down first. If I break my neck you can pick up the remains.”

Really anxious, he watched her go slipping and sliding, most of the way on her beast’s haunches, but at every stumble she picked it up with skilful use of the bridle.

“Come on!” she called back, laughing.

But before he could move, before she could even turn to look back, the noose of a *riata* writhed like a smoke ring out over the chaparral and was drawn with a swift, hard pull around her arms. At the same moment a man leaped and seized her bridle while the leader cinched her feet under her horse’s belly.

“Run!” From above Gordon saw her white, desperate face turned over her shoulder. “Run! Oh, *run!*”

He could not—had he wished it. It happened so quickly that he had barely time to use the spur, and if Ramon’s cast had been made a second sooner he would have been roped before his beast moved. As it was, the loop settled diagonally across his left arm and right shoulder. The next second he went flying backward out of the saddle and landed heavily. While he was still in the air, however, his hand had gone to his gun. Now he turned it loose downhill.

That it would shoot nine shots in eight seconds was its maker’s boast, and the weapon proved it. Aware that he might kill Lee, but conscious through his blind confusion that it might be worse, he emptied the clip, shooting close to the ground.

His aim, erratic enough, was rendered more so by the desperate tugging of the revolutionists on the rope. Like spray from a swinging nozzle, the bullets flew right and left, all but one, which

went through the leader's head. Then, a couple of whips of the rope caught the free arm in against his body.

At the foot of the hill the men were examining their fallen leader. "He has killed him, el capitan! Cut his throat, the gringo swine!"

Eyes glittering in his villainous, pock-marked face, one of them snatched out his knife and came rushing uphill.

Gordon knew it for the end, felt the chill of death. If he could only have risen and fought them! But to lie there, bound and impotent, while the knife was drawn across his throat! To pass out into the blackness and leave Lee to face her fate! He struggled fiercely, striving to break his bonds. As he relapsed in cold despair, Lee's voice, shrill in its mortal terror, rang out:

"If he is hurt, Ramon, I shall hate you forever!"

To give him due, Ramon was already stepping forward. A sudden writhing, like the first quiver of boiling water, passed over his face. He looked, but without answer raised a warning hand. "The gringo is not to be harmed, hombre."

"But he has killed el capitan. Also he shot Tomas, our compa \tilde{n} ero."

"The fortune of war, amigo. I passed my word to one that held my own life in the hollow of his hand."

Gun in hand, he faced the revolutionist who stood fumbling his knife. Out of the situation it appeared that only tragedy could issue. But in all the world there is nothing more mercurial than the moods of a *peon*. Behind them rose a coarse laugh.

"Santisima Trinidad! why quarrel over a dead man, Ilarian? Hast thou forgotten the ten strokes with the flat of his saber el capitan gave thee for wasting rifle cartridges on rabbits before the fight of El Ojo? As for Tomas—I owed him ten pesos. Also, there are now but four of us to divide this se \tilde{n} or's money."

The argument reached down to their bandit instincts. "Bueno, Rafael, bueno!" Another called: "Trust thee to see a peso through a dead man's shirt. Put up thy knife, Ilarian. It was Tomas's throat it flashed at last when he took Catalina, the pretty mestiza, away from thee."

The fellow still stood, undecided. He had drawn the knife. Dislike to back down kept him muttering and bristling like an angry dog till Ramon pulled a roll of notes from his breast.

"Here, hombre."

The man's huge mouth split in a grin. In his eagerness to secure his share, the fourth man came running uphill, dragging Lee's horse by the bridle, and while they argued over the division and gambled for the last odd note, she spoke in English.

"I would never have thought to find you in alliance with bandits against me. Why did you do it? It can only bring disaster." From which she ran on, touching with all her strength and skill on the chords of memory—their childhood, budding youth, incident, fond reminiscence, her own faith in his goodness, pride in his honor. "And now would you destroy it all? The respect and affection I have always had for you? And what have you to gain by it? Surely not my love."

She thought he was shaken. Looking into his face, she had been shocked and astonished at the change wrought in a few days. Like mountain slopes stripped of their verdure, burned down to the hard slag by volcanic fires, so its softness and youth were gone, leaving in bold relief the hard lines of passion and hate. For one moment a quiver shook its grimness. But there was no softening of the burning eyes, for it took out of bitter anger.

"What have I to gain?" He threw up his head in defiance. "You! with love or without it!"

By its very unnaturalness his quiet was more ominous than his violent outpourings of the other day. She took her breath in sudden fear.

"Ramon, what are you going to do?"

Danger inhered in a light shrug, with its defiance of consequences. "Take you to San Angel—to be married, hard and tight, by jefe and priest."

"Oh, but they will not do it! They were friends of my father; have known me from childhood —"

"They are Mexican—would love to see you mate with me, a Mexican like themselves. They will do as I say. If not"—his nod carried a sinister significance—"so much the worse for you."

Unable to believe, she stared down at him; as she looked into the brilliant, hard eyes there was borne in upon her understanding of his insane egotism. The veneer of softness, courtesy, lip service, burned away; there was left only the animal fighting for the possession of its mate.

She bent her head in sudden shame. "Ramon, please take me home."

"Yes, to *ours*." He snatched her bridle. "Come! already we have wasted too much time."

As they had spoken in English, Gordon heard all. Now he spoke. "You stopped them killing

me, but that would have been less wicked. Remember she is no *peona*, but an American subject. For any mistreatment you will be called to account by our government."

"Your government?" Turning his head, Ramon spat aside in the dust. "Your government? The Germans harried us for three years till we ran down and hanged the murderers of their countrymen at Covodonga. In Guerrero a villageful of people were shot for the murder of one Englishman. For the massacre of its citizens at Torreon even the Chinese demanded and obtained an indemnity of five million dollars. But your government—for the murder of hundreds of its men, dishonor of scores of its women, it has lodged—complaints. One more or less will not embarrass us—nor help *you*. Come on, hombre!"

As he moved off, leading Lee's beast, Gordon writhed in a last effort to break his bonds. For the moment he was blinded by the rush of blood to his straining eyeballs, but as his sight cleared he saw Lee looking back. That womanly pity which transcends fear had lifted her for the moment above her own terrors. Like a light filtering through a storm, her smile gleamed wanly through the pale window of her distress. Then the chaparral swallowed her, and he settled back in black despair.

Though it was only a few seconds, it seemed an hour passed before a foot swinging into his line of vision caused him to look up. The revolutionists had finished dividing the money and were looking down at him.

"Going to cut my throat, now he's gone," Gordon read it—and did not care.

But he had failed to count on the streak of good humor that crosscuts even a bandit nature. "We are the richer by a hundred pesos by him." Ilarian, the fellow who had tried to cut his throat, grinned at the others. "Let us lift him over there in the shade."

"'Tis hard on thee, amigo," the fellow went on, after they moved him. "'Tis hard to have thy girl snatched thus away. But have no fear"—though he caught only an occasional word of Spanish, the gestures, helped out by a gross leer, threw light brilliant as lightning on his meaning—"we will avenge thee. These days the pretty ones go to the strong. He has not got her yet. Adios—and better luck!"

As, laughing loudly, they left him, all the romance that had colored, for him, the Mexican revolutions, drained away, leaving him with clear, cold vision to face its dread facts—the tragic realities even then in course where the smoke columns rose, far away, under brazen skies. In agony of fear for Lee that transcended physical torture he watched them go.

XXXI: "BRAINS WIN"

Two days later Bull awoke from a wild nightmare through which drunken faces, infuriated faces, maudlin women faces, had whirled in a mad phantasmagoria, devil's dance of singing, drinking, swearing, fighting. As though it were another, he dimly saw himself hurling men through a window while glass crashed and furniture crumbled around him. More clearly, a second picture stood out—of a big black rustler—to wit, himself—set up against a wall before a firing-squad. He even saw the rifles aimed, and yet—his brain cool and that enormous desire gone, he lay in a little cell-like adobe room. Light streamed over the sheet across the doorway, and as, rising, he looked out into the *patio* of the German Club he heard far off the boom of cannon punctuating the staccato pulsations of rifle-fire.

"The battle's on!"

As the thought passed through his mind it was killed by sudden agony, poignant, though mental, as physical pain. His great hands went up and covered his face, but could not shut out despair. "My God! I've fallen down!"

Outside people were moving and talking. But he paid no heed; just stood, face buried in his hands, till he recognized the "dean's" voice.

"Well, come on, fellows! They're going to it again. Let's get out where we can see."

"I'll take a look at Diogenes first," came the voice of his friend. "You chaps go on. I'll catch up."

Bull dropped his hands, revealing bleared eyes and swollen face to the correspondent's gaze. "Well! well! Up and bright as a cricket! You went it some in El Paso, Diogenes; but—last night!" He shook his head in mock reproof.

"What did you do? What didn't you do? Drank up all the whisky here, then went out and tried to dry up the cantinas. A few are still in business—those you didn't break up. It took a troop to round you up. They had you stuck against a wall when Enrico, my amigo, happened along. Remembering that he had seen you with me, he brought you over here."

"Well, I'm sorry! damned sorry that he did!" Bull shrugged. "On'y to be shot, like a soldier, would be too good a death for me. My kind smother in the gutter."

His bitterness touched the other. "Look here, old man, don't take it so hard. We all of us have our slips. The only thing to do is to get up and go on again."

Underneath his first lightness and present sympathy a heavier feeling had made itself felt. Bull had stretched out again on the cot, and now, as he stood looking down upon him, the correspondent's face grew grave. Once he opened his lips; then, unconsciously, Bull opened the way.

"Where's Benson?" He looked up. "Did he go again to Valles?"

"Unfortunately, yes. His consul warned him against it—without avail. What happened we can only guess. You know his temper; remember what he said on the train. Perhaps he threatened Valles. He could not have done much more, for he left his guns in the car with the Chinaman. 'So if the son of a gun kills me,' he told him, 'the boys will know it for murder.' He must have had a hunch, for he never came back."

"Dead?" Bull broke a shocked silence.

The other nodded. "They acknowledge it—say he tried to kill Valles, which is, of course, all rot."

Bull had leaped up. "Dead! And I did it! Drunken swine that I am! It's no use." He waved away expostulations. "You yourself warned me not to let him go alone!" He started out the door.

"Here!" the correspondent seized him. "Where are you going?"

"Out—to get drunk—get killed if I kin!"

Though he waved like a blown leaf at the end of the club-like arm, the correspondent stuck. "All right! all right! But what's your hurry? You'll be a long time dead, old man. If you must get killed, come with me."

Through Bull's black despair flashed a sardonic gleam. "Humph! Stand on a hill with a pair of glasses five miles off?"

"Not on your life, hombre! When we interviewed him yesterday that's exactly the crack Valles made about 'gringo correspondents' and 'long-distance reporting.' I'm going to show the beggar. It's me for the outposts where folks get killed."

Now, in his turn, Bull showed no concern. "Don't be a fool! You're paid to get the news, not to do Valles's fighting."

The change of positions was so swift, the correspondent could not repress a grin. "What's sauce for Diogenes is sauce for me. If you have a right to get yourself killed, so have I."

The black shadow again wrapped Bull. "I've good reason. If I kin git myself shot, like a man, I'm just that much ahead. But you—"

"Aw, shut up! Do you think I am going to let that greasy bandit get away with a crack like that? We're doing too much talking. Come on!"

"I'd—" Bull hesitated. "I'd like to see—*his* consul first. His wife—she'd naterally like to know. She's in El Paso, just now, an' I know her address."

"We go past there. Then I want a minute with our consul. In case I don't turn up, I wouldn't want my San Francisco girl to be wearing weeds too long."

Going out, Bull stopped at the bar. "You needn't to be scairt." He answered the other's look. "My thirst's over—for a while. But I need a bracer." Yet the half-glass of raw brandy he swallowed had a deadlier significance. It marked the utter abandonment of hope, sealed his return to the old life.

Shortly thereafter the two entered the British consulate. With the quiet of despair he listened while the consul talked.

"I did my best to prevent Mr. Benson from going back, and thought I'd succeeded. If it hadn't been that he was seen going in, he would simply have disappeared. As it is, the cuartel general has given out several stories. First, that he tried to shoot Valles; which is absurd, for he carried no gun. Then that he was shot while trying to escape after being placed under arrest. Lastly—to satisfy me and give his murder the semblance of a military execution—that he was tried by

drumhead court-martial and fusiladoed for his attempt on the life of the general. But of one thing I can assure you, Mr. Perrin"—he went on from a heavy pause—"this does not end it. Already the particulars are entered upon my records, and the British government never forgets. It may be one year—it may be ten. But when peace is restored this business will come up again. No matter how high the murderer may have risen, how low he may have fallen, the case will never be dropped till there appears opposite the name of William Benson in our archives, "The murderer was brought to justice."

The quiet surety of his speech, based on a record of centuries among wild peoples, made it impressive. Outside, the correspondent commented thereon in his breezy fashion.

"That's Johnny Bull for you, dignified, slow in speech, but surer than hell! One of his subjects is killed in a far corner of Afghanistan. Up goes a regiment and decimates the tribe—or a brigade, or an army, if necessary; in which case, to offset the expense, the country becomes a British province. Hombre! how long do you suppose it would take that fat old fellow to settle this Mexican affray? Humph! He'd make shorter work of these mushroom generals and sawdust presidents than he did of the Hindu rajahs."

In another way the scene at the American consulate was equally impressive. When they entered the single little stuffy room, twelve feet square and entered from an alley, that conserved the dignity of the United States the consul looked up, then handed the correspondent a letter.

"Hum! Last call for Americans to get out of Mexico!" He coughed ironically. "Know ye, all gringos, by these presents: Owing to the fact that four hundred of you have been murdered, ravished, or tortured, and in order to remove further temptation from the path of the gentle Mexican, you are hereby ordered, without regard to your financial ability, consideration for the lives you endanger in transit, or property left behind, to return to your own country and thereby save this department from further annoyance by your kicks and complaints! Oyez! Oyez! Frankly," he turned to the consul, "what do you think of it?"

The consul shrugged his shoulders. "You wish to register?"

His pen scratched in the silence for a while, setting down the correspondent's name and commission. "Anybody else you wish to notify?"

The pen scratched on in silence the name of the San Francisco girl. Then he reached for the letter the correspondent handed.

"To be sent, in case of your death. Now, Mr. Perrin?"

The pen scratched Lee's name and address.

"Anything to send?"

"Nothing!"

"Very well, gentlemen!" His superficial cheerfulness was denied by his handshake—the sympathetic pressure of comrades under stress. "I shall observe your wishes—if possible. Well—" His shoulders rose again. "Hasta luego! Till we meet again."

"A brave man in a weak place!" The correspondent rightfully placed him, outside. "Now, Diogenes, for the front."

An hour later, after a heart-bursting run on foot for the last quarter-mile through small fountains of dust raised by shrapnel and rifle-bullets, the pair gained the uttermost outpost, a low wall of stones on the crest of a small hill that lay like a halved orange on the flat of the desert. A mile eastward, from the crest of the other half, a battery of French "threes" was spitting shrapnel with the feverish energy of an angry cat.

Between the hills ran a trench lined with thousands of revolutionists, whose incessant fire shrouded the front in bluish haze that was shot through and through with darting puffs. To the west and a quarter-mile in the rear, a second battery occupied a smaller elevation, protecting that flank.

Of the enemy, thirty thousand Carranzistas, out there on the plain were to be seen only lines of smoke that hung low over sand and chaparral in a great half-moon, the tips of which extended beyond the Vallista positions. But they could hear, too plainly, the twit! twit! of the ceaseless leaden rain passing overhead. Now and then a bullet would strike the wall with the sharp ring of a hammer on stone. Slipping through an embrasure, one pierced the brain of a revolutionist.

Seizing the dead man's rifle, Bull stepped into his place.

It was not that he particularly desired to kill Carranzistas. He would have shot Vallistas with equal will. But besides wringing a moment's surcease from his black despair, the instant his eye fell to the sights and he felt the familiar pressure of the butt, the old daredevil rustler spirit revived. As on the night he fought off Livingstone and his *vaqueros* on the Little Stony, as on a hundred other occasions, every other feeling was drowned in a heady lust for fight. Just as

carefully as though his life depended on it, he drew his beads on the lighter puffs that peppered the distant smoke. Watching him load and fire, grimly earnest, the sweat trickling in pale runlets down through the dust on his face, the correspondent nodded his satisfaction.

"Poor old Diogenes! But if he keeps busy he'll soon get over it."

Drawing his own weapons, a pencil and pad, he sat down on a boulder and began to take notes. And surely there was no lack of material. The spitting guns, trenches crammed with brown, ant-like men, the crackling rifle-fire, the desert shining like brass under the intolerable glare of the sun beyond the smoke haze, formed the background for a queer mixture of dirty comedy and squalid tragedy.

A few yards away, behind a second short wall, a brown girl sat on her heels patting out *tortillas* while she gossiped with another girl, in complete indifference to the bullets flying overhead. At least she was indifferent until, glancing from the top stones, one upset her coffee-pot and quenched her little cooking-fire. Then, pretty face convulsed with rage, she shook her fist at the distant smoke-line while screaming frightful curses.

"Damned dogs of Carranzistas!" she finished with her last, spent breath. "Wait! Wait for the Valles riders! Then there will be a scampering with tails between the legs!"

Her mishap had drawn a roar of laughter from the revolutionists. The fellow that stood next to Bull now turned his grinning, sweaty face. "Ole, Amalia! Bring me a drink and thou shalt have the knifing of my first prisoner."

Her coarse answer drew a second roaring laugh. Nevertheless, while making it, she picked up her water-bottle. Less than a score of yards separated the two walls, yet it afforded stage room for the tragedy that burst in the middle of the comedy. For as she ran with a swift, shuffling step across it, the bullet of an invisible enemy found its mark; she collapsed in a heap.

Bull, also, had looked around. Now, heedless of the correspondent's yell: "Come back, you fool! She's dead! shot through the head!" he ran out, picked up the poor creature and brought her behind the wall.

As he laid her down the other girl came running across the bullet-swept space and threw herself on the body with cries and lamentations. She was not dead! She could not be dead, Amalia! the friend of her soul! For a while she ran on in a passion of grief. Then, springing up, eyes flashing white in her furious, distorted face, she flung her frantic curses at the distant line.

"Kill them, the damned Carranzistas! He who kills the most this day shall be my lover!"

"And here comes he that will do it!" The man on Bull's left touched his shoulder.

Up the hill behind them a battery was coming, stretched on a scrambling gallop. Alongside the guns, urging the drivers on, a man rode a great black stallion at the head of a cavalry detachment. Even at a distance the harsh, monotonous voice rose above the rattle of the limbers, rifle-fire, booming guns.

"It's Valles!"

As the correspondent pointed, looking back at Bull, the great black horse launched out and shot up the hill.

"Make way, hombres, for the guns!"

Amber eyes aflame, brute mouth working, face quivering like shaken vitriol, he was herding the men aside when his glance fell on the correspondent. Then, though his face drew into a grin, comprehension flashed in his hot eyes.

"Ole, compañero!" His wave of the hand took in all. "Hot work! but nothing to that which is to come. Mira!"

Following his pointing finger, they saw to the westward a great cloud of dust, long, thick, and low, rolling in upon their right flank. "Carranzista cavalry! But—look again!"

Looking always to their front, they had seen nothing of the cavalry, brigade after brigade, which was forming under cover of the hill to the west and behind them. Ten thousand wild horsemen were in the mass. Thousands of others were streaming out of the town. Big hands clutching as though he had them already in his grasp, eyes again aflame, Valles shook his fist at the distant dust.

"Wait, my dear amigos los Carranzistas! Wait!"

The guns just then topped the hill, and, sitting the great black horse with reckless hardihood out in the open, indifferent to the whistling bullets, he directed their emplacement. "To the left, hombres! a little more! To the right! easy! not quite so much!" The last one set, he rasped out a last command: "Bueno! Now shoot into the dust!" Then followed by his staff he went galloping down the hill.

"He bears a charmed life!" The man next Bull spoke again. "Out of a hundred battles he has

come with never a hurt." He added, with a wink, "An' it was not always from his front the bullets came."

Bull had looked on, brows bent in a heavy glower. Now the coal eyes lit with a sudden inspiration. The man had turned again to his shooting. The artillerymen were laying their guns. They fired just as Bull threw up his rifle and drew a bead on the black horse and rider. Sweeping back, the smoke blotted all out. As it cleared, and his eye dropped again to the sights, the correspondent struck up the muzzle.

"What are you trying to do?"

"Justice on that grinning devil."

"Good job no one saw you." A quick glance around showed the artillerymen and revolutionists absorbed in their own work "Do you know what they would have done to both of us—skinned us alive, boiled us in oil, or something equally nice. Have a heart! If you don't care yourself, just think what nice reading it would make for my San Francisco girl, 'Having toasted him on one side, they then proceeded to fry the other.'"

"I hadn't thought of that. But if I'd been alone—"

He sent a black flash after the receding figure, then turned again to his loophole.

On his part the correspondent watched till Valles disappeared in the massed cavalry below. Shortly thereafter it began to move, a huge, brown blanket embroidered with the flashing gold and silver of guns and sabers, *machetes*, accoutrements. For a while it was in full view. Then the impalpable desert dust enveloped it in rolling clouds from which, like the roar of distant surf, issued the thunder of pounding hoofs. Like the rolling, twisting funnel of a cyclone, it swept toward that other distant cloud, and when they met and merged the greater cloud rolled backward, slowly at first, then with increasing speed.

"Weekes was wrong!" It came out of the correspondent in an excited yell. "He's smashed 'em to smithereens! Me for a wire at once!" But as the cloud continued to sweep on he added a qualification, "That is, if Valles stops and comes back."

When, later, the cloud drew steadily down the horizon the doubt evolved into criticism. "Whatever is he thinking of? There he's gone with all the cavalry and left his flank exposed!"

At intervals along the far blue haze the flash of cannon now broke with greater frequency. The rifle-fire rivaled the rapid roll of a thousand drums. Answering the "threes," shrapnel shell came on long, shrieking curves and burst around them. In as many minutes one blew up the next wall, killing half its defenders. A second disabled a gun. The man next to Bull collapsed without a groan.

Turning his glasses eastward, the correspondent saw men piling in heaps where shrapnel was bursting on the edge of the trench. On the far hill came the flash of explosions among the Valles guns.

"Brains win! They were only playing with us, using less than a third of their guns! They've drawn Valles off with a false retreat! Now they'll flank us! My God! there they come!"

From the chaparral, on their right, had burst a new, thick line of smoke. Bullets were slipping like hail along their flank, tumbling men. He leaped and caught Bull's arm.

"Come on! Let's get while we can!"

They could already see the Carranzistas, thousands of them, half-wild, maniacal figures, looming through the smoke. Yet Bull shook his head.

"Some chance for shooting now. Light out yourself."

"Man! Valles is defeated!" The other seized and shook him. "Do you know what that means? This army will be scattered throughout northern Mexico. If you won't consider yourself, think of your girl! Are you going to leave her to face this bandit rabble, stung by defeat, mad against Americans?"

Bull had turned on him with suppressed fury. But through the din and smoke, into that hell of cries and groans, whistling, crashing shells, there came to him first the old wistful vision of Mary and Betty Mills; then the feel of Lee's soft, cool arms on his neck. Himself forgotten, the lust of battle suddenly chilled, he shook with fear.

"Come on!"

Turning, he ran down the hill toward the chaparral where they had hidden their horses, half a mile away. Coming in they had faced only the rain of bullets curved over the hill. Now, from the flank, they came fast and low, a heavy cross-fire. Yet while they ran breathlessly through the dust under the merciless blaze of the sun the correspondent cracked his jokes.

"Consolation race! Odds a hundred to one!" he gasped. "Gosh! but that chaparral is going faster the other way!"

A few minutes later he dropped, almost on its edge. Yet even in that dire moment he remained his cheerful self.

"Shot in the leg! I always said that was the only way they'd ever get me. Here's my notes, Diogenes! Give them to Weekes and tell him to chuck 'em on to the wires. Now, *run like hell!*"

And Bull did "run like hell"—with the correspondent across his shoulders, into the chaparral where the rain of bullets slacked; faded out by the time he reached the horses. The bullet had gone through the knee. All that he could do was to stop the bleeding with a handkerchief twisted tight above. Then, with the correspondent lying forward in his saddle, arms around his horse's neck, he headed for the town.

As they rode, in their rear rose a huge, raucous voice, the charging yell of the Carranzistas pouring in a brown flood over the trenches. Followed the terrible roar of a rout—yells, shrieks, curses, victorious shouts, scattering shots, occasional volleys. On the edge of the town it caught and engulfed them, that mad rout. Helpless jetsam, they floated above, a stream of wild, sweating faces, powder-grimed, bloody, flecked with a yeast of glistening, fearful eyes, floated through the painted adobe streets to the railroad yards.

There fugitives were already piling by thousands on top of the trains and increasing the confusion; there came, just then, a flash from the hills they had left. Followed the shriek, rising crescendo of the shell, then—the explosion smoke cleared, showing a splintered mass bespattered with mangled humanity that had been, a moment before, sentient human beings. The Carranzistas were shelling the station with Valles's own guns.

"We're farther up!" the correspondent whispered through white, drawn lips. "We bribed the engineer, last night, to pull us out on the main line to insure our getaway."

He spoke again, with an effort, when they had ridden another half-mile. "That's queer. It stood about here, yet I don't see the placards. Perhaps we have overshot."

But as Bull made to turn a man slipped from the brake-rods under a car ahead. "Here, señores! This way!"

Just then, too, the door rolled back and the "dean" looked out. "Hurry up! Ten minutes more and you would have been too late. The Gonzales Brigada played discretion for the better part of valor and made a quick sneak. We go next! We tore off the signs for fear they might cut us out. We're traveling, for the present, incognito. You're hurt! Here, you fellows, lift him in and shut the door quick!"

After the correspondent had been laid in his bunk the "dean" turned to Bull. "That chap outside has been here ever since yesterday morning, looking for you. He said his business was muy importante, so the Chinaman kept him fed. Perhaps you had better see what he wants."

But when Bull looked out the man was gone. Also, just then, a welcome accompaniment to the roar of the mad rout outside, came the groan, bang, and rattle of cars starting in succession under the engine's tug.

XXXII: TRAVAIL

The instant she passed from Gordon's sight Lee's smile went out, quenched by mortal fear. For years tales that defied by their black horror exaggeration by even the fervid *peon* minds had filtered into Los Arboles, and, more vividly than Gordon, she realized her danger.

It was not so much Ramon. At San Carlos she would have a fighting chance; stood ready to match her woman's wit against his man's strength. Her fear centered on the men.

As, overtaking them, he rode by on the narrow path, Ilarian pressed close against her. "Cheer up, little one! 'Tis the fighting cock that wins his hen. 'Tis the way of the world, and what matter it so long as she be won? 'Tis his turn now, but later 'twill be for thee to keep him itching."

Laughing hoarsely, he rode on, but in passing his rude fingers searched the softness of her arm and she caught the bold look into her eyes of his grinning fellow. Thereafter she felt their glances touching, plucking at her like fumbling fingers. Now glowing with shame, again frozen with terror, she endured it—to her it seemed hours before she spoke to Ramon.

"I'm afraid of those men. Can't you—send them away?"

He shrugged. "You have more reason to be afraid of me."

"You?" In spite of the deadly chill at her heart she managed a little laugh. "That is impossible."

"Why?"

"Fear one's oldest friend?" Already, with intuitive guile, she was laying the foundations of her defense. Though he looked at her with quick suspicion, she returned the innocent eyes nature has given woman for her chief protection. "For you—a man of whom I have known only good? But these men fill me with fear."

Suspicion clouded, for a moment, his eyes. Passing, it left his gloom lighter. Reassurance softened his tone. "Don't be afraid. They will leave us at San Carlos."

"But, Ramon, it is now noon. If we ride hard we cannot get there before dark." She shuddered at the thought.

"You would rather we were alone?"

"A thousand times." She returned to his gaze the same innocent eyes—and once more his gloom lightened a shade.

"They are going to San Carlos anyway, so I can hardly send them away. But I am armed, and there is no necessity for you to be afraid. Also—you said that the jefe and priest at San Carlos would refuse to marry us. If so, these are the men who can help me compel."

"Ramon!" she spoke with dread earnestness, "look quickly behind you!"

He did, and his quick frown told that he was not pleased. Dismounting under a pretext of cinching up his saddle, he motioned for the two men behind to pass ahead.

"You saw!" she said, riding on. "You are armed, but they are four to one; may take you unawares. I ask only one thing. Keep my feet bound, take any other precaution you choose, but unfasten my hands and—lend me your knife."

"To use on *me*, if you get the chance?"

"Not on you nor them!" Her steady look carried her meaning.

His glance went forward to the revolutionists, who broke out, just then, in uproarious laughter.

"If I thought—" His hand went to his gun, then fell again. "No! they are rough and coarse, but they know well that my father is Valles's friend; that if they lifted a hand against me he would flay them alive. Really, there is no danger, yet—if it will make you less fearful. But you promise—to return it, the knife, at San Carlos?"

"I promise."

"I never knew you to lie, and I—" His face lost a little of its hardness. "I would prefer to be gentle."

Leaning over, he unbound her arms, then gave her the case-knife that hung at his hip. "I suppose I'm a fool," he said as she slid it under her belt inside her shirt.

"Indeed you are not!" she began, in a flush of relief. Then, as a picture of Gordon lying bound on the trail rose to her mind, she turned her head in fear that he might read the sudden impulse to slash the lead rope and go galloping back.

The certain knowledge that she would be overtaken checked the impulse. Also, with a woman's self-abnegation, she comforted herself with the thought that every mile she traveled lessened his hazard. She rode on till certain whisperings between the revolutionists ahead brought her again under fear that grew and reached its climax when, later in the afternoon, they swung at right angles on to the San Carlos trail and rode, now along the flank of a mountain, again through a wooded valley, thence up and over a great hill, while the sun slid down behind them. While they traveled dusk quenched the flaming peaks. The long shadows drew together, enwrapping hill and valley in a thick veil through which men and horses loomed as dark, sinister shapes. When they stopped, suddenly, where a stream emerged from a wood, she shook with apprehension.

"The beasts are tired, señor, and this is a good place to camp," a voice came back.

"Oh, don't! Let us keep on!" she pleaded.

"The animals are tired and must be fed," Ramon answered. "After they are rested we will go on."

As, dismounting, he began to untie her feet, she was seized again with a wild impulse to turn and dash away in the dark. But even had it been possible, just then a heap of dried grass and leaves flared up from a match illuminating the woods and stream. Reaching up, Ramon lifted her down and seated her close to the fire.

Sitting there, she watched him unsaddle and hobble their beasts. Her swift, uneasy glances showed the revolutionists doing the same. Yet—all the fears of that long afternoon now concentrated in a cold horror. Intuitively, she knew. When, his hands full of food he had unpacked from his saddle-bags, Ramon came walking past the revolutionists toward her, she broke out with a sudden scream:

“Take care!”

Too late! A pair of sinewy arms locked like brown snakes around him, pinioning his arms to his body. As he went down, fighting madly, Lee leaped up and ran. But already Ilarian and another man had started toward her. Running her swiftest, straining madly with the beat of his pursuing feet, like a drum in her ears, she had gained the edge of the wood, was almost within its safe blackness, when she was seized and pulled back with a wrench that tore the shirt away from one white shoulder and threw her to the ground.

She rose instantly on one knee, then paused at the sight of the brutish face above. One hand clutching the torn shirt at her neck, eyes dark lamps in a face of white horror, she crouched like an animal at bay till, with a sudden snatch, he stooped and lifted her bodily.

“No, no!” The snatch of the second man loosened the other’s grip so that she fell between them to the ground. “No, hombre, fair play between compañeros. We shall gamble for her. The winner, if he choose, can then sell his chance.”

The fighting, writhing mass at the other side of the fire now straightened out, and as they rose, leaving Ramon securely bound on the ground, the other two added their protests. “Si, hombre, we will not stand for that. She goes first to the winner, according to our custom. Bring her back to the fire.”

To avoid their handling, she rose and walked herself. As she came where the light fell on Ramon she saw that he had managed to struggle up on his knees. Now he began to speak, pleading, arguing, threatening his captors with the displeasure of their general.

But he drew only jokes and laughter. “Valles?” Ilarian answered him. “He was defeated by the Carranzistas, and has trouble enough to care for himself. The requisition el capitan showed was made out months before the battle. Had the señor, your father, been fool enough to fill it, we should have taken the horses for ourselves.” With a shove that sent Ramon flat on his back, he added: “Lie down, hombre! For these many years thou and thy fathers laid the whip on our backs. While we starved they fed fat and made free with our women. Now it is for thee to watch us at the eating and loving.”

Laughing, he caught Lee again with a sudden snatch, was forcing her head back, when Rafael again interfered. “Hands off, hombre, till the cards say she is thine!”

“Si, muddle not the waters for our drinking,” the others added. “Let us eat, then get to the cards.”

“The bride? She must not go hungry at the wedding feast.” The fourth man offered her food. “Here, little one.”

Weak and faint, she was backing away, but stopped with a sudden inspiration. “If I may share it with him?”

“Seguro.” Rising, the man dragged Ramon a few feet away and set him up, back propped against a tree. “Only take care he bite not thy pretty fingers.”

Laughing, he went back to the fire, leaving her to sit and watch their feeding of meat and *tortillas*, with gulps of liquor from clay bottles.

Between her and them yawned a gap in time wider than the centuries that intervened between herself and her wode-stained ancestors running wild in the woods of Britain. Their low, sloping foreheads, unbalanced heads with all the weight below; their loose mouths, brute jaws, dark skin, nature’s infallible stigma of inferiority, pronounced them half a million years behind her, the last-bloom of a higher race.

In her a solitary youth had intensified the delicate fancies, sensitiveness, timorous imaginings, shrinkings, and retreats that mark a young girl’s first reachings toward love. And now—her idealizations were suddenly confronted with the caveman’s brutal practice. Sitting there, she endured a thousand tortures. Worse than their coarse jests were their glances. She shrank under them in hot shame; to escape them took the food they offered, moved over and knelt beside Ramon.

He was sitting, head hanging, but as, now, he looked up the firelight showed the sweat in beads on his brow. “*You bring me food?*” His accent carried more than a thousand self-reproaches.

She did not attempt consolation she did not feel. “Pretend to eat.” She spoke in English.

"They are watching, now. But soon they will gamble"—she shuddered, thinking of the stake—"will see only the cards. I still have your knife. When the time serves I will cut you loose. Their rifles are piled behind us with the saddles. They may shoot you down from the fire. But to reach them is our only chance."

He lowered his head to hide a sudden flash of hope. "I will do anything, take any chance. Greater punishment no man could suffer than I am enduring. But it has made me think—realize my blind selfishness. I can only ask your forgiveness."

"Now, *compañeros*, the cards! Cut and shuffle for love!" A hoarse voice came from the fire.

While the first hand of a game she did not understand was being dealt she watched the flying cards with dread interest; was still watching when Ramon whispered:

"I know that game. Five minutes will see it finished. By leaning a little to one side, your body will cover my elbows. One cut will set them free. I will still sit as I am, and when I whisper slash the *riata* at my feet, then run! run into the depths of the woods. From here to San Carlos is but a couple of leagues. Once there—with the jefe, you will be safe."

Ilarian's bellowing laugh rang out, just then, marking the close of the first hand. "One to me, little one! Be not impatient. The luck is with us. Soon we shall take a little *pasear* together."

"If he wins again it will be over in a minute," Ramon whispered, while the cards were fluttering around again. As the men bent over them, thumbing their hands, he gave the word, "Now!"

With two slashes she did it, one at his arms, the other at his feet. But swift as was the movement, Rafael caught it in the tail of his eye. When he turned she had dropped the knife in the grass and, though her heart stood still, she resumed her pretense of feeding Ramon. As he watched her the suspicion died out of the man's stare. He was just about to turn again to the game when, as Ramon leaned forward to take the bite she was offering, the severed *riata* fell from his elbows.

Given two men in a sudden juncture, the one with a definite plan wins the lead. As the man jumped up, pointing, Ramon sprang, reached the rifles, aimed and shot him down. The others looked up, startled, and as he aimed again they pulled and fired.

"Run, *querida*, run!" Ramon had called it, leaping up. As he collapsed on the heap of saddles it issued again on his last dry whisper, "Run!"

It had all happened while she was scrambling up. Naturally she turned when Ramon fell and paused, horror-stricken. Not till the others were almost upon her did she turn and run—too late.

As, heart fluttering like that of a frightened quail, she ran for the wood Ilarian seized her. Wildly beating the brutal, pock-marked face, she writhed helplessly in his arms.

XXXIII: THE DEATH IN THE NIGHT

During the rest of the day, while the train rolled and rattled and jolted its slow way over the heated face of the desert, the correspondents stewed with Bull in their own juices in semi-darkness. At intervals there would come a stop. With the mad, blind selfishness of panic the *brigada* Gonzales had burned the watering-tanks as they passed. So those that followed had to draw for the engine with buckets from wells. Also there were occasional rails to be replaced which, with equal selfishness, they tore up again the moment the train passed over.

When the sun finally set in a fiery conflagration and dusk brought some cress of the heat the conductor came in with tales of wholesale desertions from the *brigada* Gonzales, and shortly thereafter began the dispersion of their own men. As they approached familiar country, or tempted by tales of rich loot to be taken from near-by *haciendas*, they began to drop off in fives, fifties, tens. Of those that had kept the corrugated-iron roof beating like a drum with their stampings and shufflings throughout the afternoon, there remained only a single solitary figure when, after dark, Bull climbed up on top to air his choked lungs.

As he sat down on the running-board the figure looked up, then moved closer. "It is thee, señor?"

Peering, Bull made out the face. It was the sentry who had spoken to him at Valles's door. As his mind associated what the "dean" had said with the recognition he spoke quickly. "The señor Benson? Didst thou see—"

"Si, señor." His head moved in the gloom. In the rambling *peon* fashion he ran on: "'The close mouth admits no flies,' said Matador. 'Keep thine shut and we shall make thee a captain to-morrow.'"

"A captain of what, señor? Of ghosts? For I was not deceived. He that was sentry when they killed the German? He became a captain? Also they that helped to roast the Spaniard till he told where he had hidden his gold? And the three that killed el presidente for Huerta? Captains and majors and colonels were they—of the dead. Si, among the *revueltos* it is become a saying, 'Be not a captain till thou hast grown lieutenant's spurs.' Si, I knew that I should be dead before the eve of another day, so I fled my guard, señor, and came straight to thee."

Though he was on fire to hear, Bull knew better than to bring his crude thought into confusion by interruption. While the train ambled along he let the narrative take its own course.

"'A captain?' said Matador!" His eloquent shoulders quivered in the gloom. "Better to be a live mozo at the tail of Don Miguel's horses in Las Bocas."

From a second pause he ran on: "He came to the cuartel general, the señor Benson, while I was sentry of the second watch at the door of my general. He was in there, Valles, with a girl. I had seen her go in—such a girl! tall and straight, with eyes misty as twin nights, teeth white as bleached bone, hair thick and black as the pine forests that clothe the Sierra Madras! Santísimo, señor! such a girl as one may have when he has combed a country and taken first pick of its women! I could hear her laughing in there when the señor Benson came striding up the stairs.

"I saw, when he drew near, that his face was flushed, but there was no smell of liquor upon him. 'Twas the red of the great anger that burned in his veins, kept his head shaking like that of a tormented bull. When I barred the way he looked at me with eyes that snapped like living sparks, shoved me aside into the corner with one sweep of his arm, before I could stop him had opened the door and walked in—walked in, señor, through the anteroom into the private office where Valles was at play with the girl!

"El Matador himself had warned me, 'Let no man pass!' But when I had picked myself out of the corner and followed in, there he stood in front of Valles, who had dropped the girl and leaped to his feet. Surprise and fear showed on his face—the fear of bullet, knife, and poison that dogs him everywhere. But it changed at once to a grin—the terrible grin his people fear. His glance at me said, 'Stay!' and as I stood, waiting in fear and trembling, he spoke with a voice that cut like a knife.

"'It is my amigo, the señor Benson.'

"Señor, I have seen his generals tremble when he spoke like that. Even el Matador, tiger that he is, would slink before him like a whipped cat. For all the pesos in all the world I would not have taken his place. Yet that great Englishman stood before him solid and square as a stone; answered with a voice of a hacendado in speech with a *peon*.

"'I came to tell you, Valles'—just like that he spoke, señor, without even a 'my general'—'I came to tell you that I do not take my answers from secretaries. The offer I made you this morning was fair and square and good business for both of us. It deserved more than a threat of 'requisitions.' You'll never get my horses that way—if I have to cut their throats. If you want them, say so—yes or no.'

"He got it, the 'no,' quick and hard. Then the great anger that was in him burst forth like a river in flood. Like bear and tiger they quarreled, the señor threatening Valles with the power and vengeance of his government, Valles snarling defiance, their passions feeding each other as brands burn together in a fire.

"One other thing, and you will have a picture of it, señor—the two at their furious talk, the girl against the wall behind Valles, one hand held out, fear in her great eyes, and a fourth; for as they wrangled there came a stir behind me. So quietly that I, whom he touched in passing, did not hear, el Matador came into the room. One second he stood, watching them from narrow eyes, then, slowly and quietly as a snake slipping through grass, he drew up behind the señor. I have shot men in this war. At home in Las Bocas I have drawn the knife in passion. But the cold glittering of his eyes, slow snake crawl, chilled the blood of me.

"He had gained knifing distance when the señor roared in disgust. 'Bah! Why do I waste words on a *peon*? My general, is it? I have had such generals whipped on my place! General? A bandit *peon* who steals horses in place of the chickens with which he began his thieveries!'

"'Bandit *peon*? Stealer of chickens?' This, señor, to Valles that had killed a hundred men with

his own hand before the wars ever began? The yellow eyes of him seemed to leap out of his face. At the sight of him, frothing like a mad tiger in lust to kill, the girl screamed, hiding her face! At his belt hung pearl-jeweled pistols, the best of their kind. But with the instinct of his old trade the hand of the butcher flew to his knife.

"They say that the señor tried to kill him. It is a lie! Even when the knife flashed in his eyes he still stood at his distance, shaking his big fist, growling his threats, angry but unafraid; so big, strong, masterful, that Valles, even in his fury, hesitated. But not el Matador! Looking back as she ran out of the room, the girl saw as I saw; screamed aloud as the knife passed, once! twice! with a hiss and 'heigh! splitting the backbone, piercing the heart."

With that strong sense of the dramatic which makes the *peon* a born story-teller he stopped. For a moment the flash of a match lifted the brown, hard face from the gloom under a tattered *sombrero*, lighting the faded red of his blanket serape. Then they faded again into a dim, huddled figure that swayed with the rack and swing of the cars.

Bull had unconsciously suspended his breath. Now it expired in a sigh. "His disposal. Know you aught of that?"

The shrug quivered again in the darkness. "There is little more that I saw. Across the body el Matador looked at me, and I chilled with the sure knowledge that I should never see my niñas again. He even stepped, then Valles spoke.

"This is a good hombre. He will help thee with—that!' He followed the girl into the next room.

"Between us, el Matador and I, we rolled the señor in serapes, binding them with cords so that the face should not be seen by them that carried him out to the secret place; and it was then that he spoke of my captaincy.

"Go now to thy quarters, señor.' He clapped me on both shoulders. 'And dream of the stars the morning sun will see flashing here.'

"But lest I sleep too well, señor, I came from the cuartel here."

For a full minute, while Bull chewed the bitter cud of remorse, the cars racked on through the night. Then he spoke. "There is one in El Oro, the consul Ingles, that would have given many pesos—not the currency of Valles, but real pesos of silver and gold—for thee to set thy name to this!"

"Si!" His cigarette glowed in the midst of a shrug. "Of what use pesos, even silver and gold, when the sight is darkened and the mouth shut? When one may no longer see the niñas at play, watch the dancing of girls? When the taste of good food is gone from the mouth, the feel of warm liquor from the throat? He that betrays Valles will have no more use of these."

"But in El Paso," Bull urged, "one would be beyond the reach of his hand. There, also, is a consul Ingles."

"One's pais? The rise and set of sun across the desert beyond Las Bocas; the chatter of the women at their washing by the stream; the soft laughter of girls; one's children watching at dusk for the return—these are not to be bought with pesos. One's pais is one's pais. To it one always returns."

"Si," Bull acknowledged the call, the most powerful in the feeling of a Mexican. "But from El Paso one could go by the ferrocarril Americano. In one day he could cross from El Paso to Nogales, thence south to Las Bocas and live in plenty beyond the reach of Valles. And one's woman and niñas—would smile the sweeter at the sight of a bulging pocket."

The cigarette glowed again, this time without the shrug. "There is something in that. Si, señor, I will do it!—go to the consul Ingles in El Paso."

Just then the Chinaman called for Bull to come down to supper. He was not hungry, but he had food handed up for the man, who, after eating it, rolled up in his serape and went to sleep. Then, while he snored and the train racked slowly along the chain of fires, each a station that lay like red beads on the desert's dark breast, Bull lay suffering agonies of shame and remorse that grew more vivid as the miles lessened between him and home.

It was long after midnight before he fell into troubled sleep. When he woke, at gray dawn, the revolutionist was gone.

"Homesick and scared out!" Bull shrugged—and what did it matter? That which was done was done!

Nor was he the only deserter. All through the night the train had dribbled away its evil freight in trickles that would spread through the land till it was inundated with a flood of carnage, robbery, rape. Of the clustering brown swarm on the roof there remained only a few dozens scattered in heavy sleep throughout the train's length.

Across the brightening east the mountains now laid a familiar pattern. Beyond—the *patio* and compound of Los Arboles were lying still and gray under the dawn. Bull saw, with the distinctness of vision, the sheet across Lee's doorway quiver under the breath of dawn. Then it faded, gave place to the Mills *rancho*, equally still, equally silent; its warm gold walls pale gray, the clustering bougainvilleas dark as clotted blood.

That feeling analogous to the chill of death which envelops a sleeping house held him in thrall. While he gazed, there appeared on the veranda the familiar vision. But he shut it out, tightly closing the eyes of his mind. He turned his face to a dark dot, walls of the burned station, that appeared to be moving toward him across the desert's grays. Climbing down over the end, he passed through the Chinaman's kitchen into the car.

It was still dusk in there, but he could hear the deep breathing of correspondents, sleeping heavily after the exhaustion of the hot night. Quietly he gathered his belongings, had shoved open the door sufficiently to pass out, when a whisper came from behind:

"Adios, Diogenes!"

Turning, he saw the correspondent leaning out of his bunk.

"Don't take that little slip too seriously, old man," he whispered as they shook hands. "Try again. If it wasn't for this"—he tapped his knee—"I'd have helped you to get out your girl. But you'll make it all right. Only don't dally. There's going to be hell to pay."

The engine was whistling for the station. Though it did not stop, Bull jumped and, if a bit shaken, landed unhurt. He was watching the train recede, his hand still tingling, heart warmed by the strong pressure of his friend's hand, when his name was called.

"It is you, señor Perrin?"

Drowsy and heavy-eyed from lost sleep, the Mexican agent stood in the doorway of his box-car station. Anxiety and fear shadowed his face.

"Wicked times, señor. Up and down the line they are robbing and murdering, Valles's defeated soldados. Many gringos have been slain. Early in the night a company of fifty dropped off here and are gone, mad with hate, to loot the gringo haciendas."

Appalled, Bull stared at the distant mountains.

XXXIV: -----?

Left alone on the trail, Gordon suffered his own agonies—the poignant anguishes of youth unmitigated by the fatalism or philosophy of experience. Time and again his spirit rose in furious rebellion against the frightful injustice of fate. Eyes starting with the strain, sweat pouring from his brow, he rolled in successive paroxysms, vainly striving to burst his bonds—only to subside each time into a coma of utter despair. Then, as the very violence of his exertions cleared the blood from his brain, he did that which an older head would have done at first—lay still and began to think.

How to get loose! There must be some way! He had once seen a prisoner in a "movie" burn off his bonds with a fire of hay started by the coals from his pipe. But if it were possible—outside of a "movie"—where were the hay and pipe? An attempt to cut the *riata* by abrasion on a stone behind him produced only a sore on his wrists. Yet there must be some way! If he could only loosen them by flexing and reflexing his muscles! He stopped thinking, at this point, and lay staring downhill.

His struggles had carried him to within a few feet of the dead revolutionist. Before leaving, his followers had looted the body of its guns, bandolier of cartridges, but had left the belt. Under the body Gordon now caught a glimpse of his knife.

To roll downhill was simple. With his butting shoulders, it was no trick to move the body till the knife came up into position where he could draw it with his teeth. But thereafter—a knife in the teeth could not be used to free hands bound behind one's back!

He looked about him. The problem was simple. If the knife could be held firmly so that he could turn and rub the wrist-cords against the edge. Presently his eye lit on the stump of a *palo*

verde that had been bruised and split off by the slip of some passing beast. Working his way over to it, he bent and carefully placed the horn handle in the split, edge up, point resting at an angle of forty-five on the ground. Then, shuffling around, he felt delicately till the razor edge came squarely between his wrists. Very lightly, in mortal dread of a miscarriage, he sawed, sawed, sawed until his hands suddenly split apart. One slash at his ankles and he was upon his feet.

His first thought was to run, wildly, madly, after Lee. Then his usual good judgment resumed command. The revolutionists were mounted and had an hour's start! He must have a horse! And with the thought there rose a mental picture of the *arriero* they had seen at the *fonda*.

A general freighter, the fellow often brought cordwood and charcoal from the mountains into Los Arboles, and in seasons of sickness and want Lee had helped him and his family out. Undoubtedly he would be willing to help.

He started running up the steep and backward along the trail, and now the fates relented and threw a piece of big luck in his way. For as he came swinging along the flank of the mountain, a tinkle of bells rose out of the cañon; a black head shoved up from below; urged on by the *arriero's* sharp hisses and driving curses, three mules came scrambling up out on the level.

The sight of a man, breathless, dusty, and disheveled, running at top speed with a naked knife in his hand, meant to the *arriero* only one thing. The celerity with which, slipping from the saddle, he trained his rifle across the animal's back showed how he came to be still riding the trails when mule-trains had been swept away by raids and "requisitions." As he had seen Lee pass the *fonda* with Gordon, one word, "revolutionists," fully explained the situation, and though Gordon got only about a third of his voluble Spanish, it was easy to understand his clucks of commiseration.

"Carried off! Tut! tut! tut! She that was so kind to the poor! supplied remedies to my own niñas when they fell ill of a fever! Josefina will cry her eyes out over this!"

Neither did he stop with idle sympathy. While talking he pulled the hitches and with one shove sent a cargo of pottery on his likeliest mule crashing to the ground. Then, while hastily rigging a saddle out of serapes and cord, he filled the air with crackling Spanish, larding his questions with frightful oaths.

"How many were they, señor? Six? And you shot one. Bueno! bueno! That leaves us but two and a half apiece. Would that I might gut them all with one flick of my knife! Take thou this."

It was an old Colt with a barrel a foot long. Motioning to his own riding-mule, he ran on:

"You shall ride her, señor, for she is easier in her gait than the boats of the sea. Some there are that will tip the nose at a mule for riding. But in the mountains they will travel three miles to a horse's two. An hour's start have they? Then by shoving hard we should come on them in five, or less if they camp at dark."

He had now finished his saddling. A stream of hisses plus a few pistol cracks of his long mule-whip sent the remaining animals scampering back down the ravine to the lush grass by the *fonda*, where old Antonio would care for them. Then, springing up on the mule, he sat, rifle across his arm, saddle *machete* and knife close to his hand, black eyes glittering under his *sombrero*, a wild, dangerous, bandit figure, ready for the start.

Thus, mounted on a mule instead of the gallant steed of fiction, did Gordon go in pursuit. But that which the animal lacked in looks it made up in utility. Justifying its owner's boast, it navigated steps, slid down into cañons sure-footed as a goat, crawled like a fly up the opposite walls, moved forward on the levels at a swift, easy, rocking pace. To the eye of the great, scarlet-crested vulture, sailing on free wing half a mile above, pursued and pursuers appeared as dust clouds, now rising from the deep trough between two great earth waves, again hovering like smoke on the crest of a hill. But by the bird it would easily have been seen that as the hours slid by the second gained steadily upon the first.

Fast as the little beasts traveled, however, their pace appeared like an insect's crawl when measured by Gordon's fears. Action, at first, brought relief. Later he fell again a prey to anguish. The threat of the revolutionists filled him with horror through which, as in a dreadful nightmare, he saw Lee struggling frantically. Of Ramon he never even thought. It was always the men. Yet he managed to hold himself in hand; refrained from lashing the mule into the furious pace that would, while killing it, have still lagged far behind his fears.

And he had always at his side the *arriero*, with his repeated, "Do not trouble, señor; they will keep traveling till dark!" to cheer him.

The latter's sharp glance it was that picked out the sign where the revolutionists had swung on to the San Carlos trail. His hawk eyes found, just before sundown, dust rising like yellow smoke on the opposite hills. When darkness covered the tossing earth with its solemn veil it was

he, again, that saw the first flare when the revolutionists' fire blossomed like a red rose in the black heart of a valley. Lastly, it was his knowledge of the country that made it possible for them, after tying the mules at a safe distance, to crawl up until, gently shoving the bushes aside, Gordon looked out and saw under the red light of the fire the revolutionists at their gambling and Lee seated beside Ramon.

"One to me, little one," Ilarian's bellow just then rang out. "Be not impatient. Soon we shall take a little pasear together."

At the sight of Ramon, the *arriero's* brows had gone up under the roots of his hair, for, had he wished it, Gordon's Spanish would not have permitted a full explanation. Now he touched Gordon, pointing. Nodding, he nipped off a few leaves, then leveled the long Colt, aiming at the nearest man. A glance to his right showed him the *arriero* slowly shoving his rifle-barrel through the leaves. Then, turning again to his aim, he was just in time to see Lee slash Ramon's bonds.

The next instant the latter sprang for the rifles. Lee was up and standing almost in line with the man he had covered. He dared not shoot, and in the next five seconds, before they could readjust themselves to the rapid change, the situation had flashed into its final stage—Ramon had fallen with one revolutionist; the others were rushing at Lee across the firelit space.

By that time Gordon had risen. As, standing, he fired from the edge of the wood a second man fell forward upon his face. The *arriero's* rifle cracked sharply, and there remained only Ilarian. Swinging with Lee, still in his arms, he faced Gordon charging across the firelit space.

Usually Gordon could be depended upon to keep his head. But Lee's bitter cry, the sight of her helplessness, combined with the awful strain of the afternoon, produced in him a berserker rage. Teeth bared in a snarl, his gun completely forgotten, he seized Ilarian with his naked hands just as he dropped Lee; threw him with such violence that his feet rose in the air and he struck shoulders first on the ground. Then, without even a second glance, he lifted and gathered Lee in his arms.

Fortunately, the *arriero* not only kept his wits, but was working them overtime. As, rolling over, Ilarian pulled and pointed his gun the *arriero's* second bullet plumped between his shoulders.

It is doubtful whether Gordon heard the shot. His face in Lee's hair, hers hidden in his breast, they remained without looking around even when the *arriero* spoke.

"Warm work, señor!"

Receiving no answer, he grinned and gently tapped the side of his nose. "They are all that way—at first," he confided in the stars. "But wait till the priest ties them so that neither can wriggle without the other. Wait!"

A cough also passing unnoticed, he walked over and knelt beside Ramon. With a heavy shake of the head, he passed to the revolutionists. Three were dead, but, though unconscious, Ilarian still breathed stertorously.

"The worse for thee, amigo," the *arriero* addressed him. "The old señor Icarza will pay well to do thy killing with his own hands. By sunrise, mañana, I should have thee to him, and then"—he gave a little sinister nod at the dead—"and then thou wilt be envying these."

A glance at the lovers having shown them to be, to all intents and purposes, still alone under the stars, he went off, shaking his head, to bring up the mules. "Santa Maria Marisima! to think that I, also, was once so foolish!"

On his return he gathered up the arms, belts, knives, bandoliers of cartridges, guns—it has to be written, also stripping the khaki coats and riding-boots from the dead. "They will serve thee no more after the old señor finishes," he addressed the unconscious Ilarian, as he tore off his.

While he was packing his loot in an orderly and methodical manner on the mules a murmur of talk rose behind him. But as it was couched in English he was saved from further reflections.

"Oh—*dear!*" Lee's exclamations, partially smothered in a rough and dirty shirt, still conveyed a curious mixture of confidence and fear, regret, relief, sorrow, and happiness, hope and doubt. "Oh—*dear!* I used to be so independent and fearless. Now—I feel so weak."

"Time you did." A hug mitigated the severity of the comment. "After this perhaps you will let me do a little of your thinking?"

"For a while." The shirt choked a little, perverse laugh. "Till I get over it."

"Very well, we are going on, right now, to be married in San Carlos."

"Oh, but—"

"No 'buts.' We'll take no more chances."

She hesitated and—gave in. "Oh, isn't it nice to have some one decide for you?"

Had the *arriero* been consulted he could have told a tale. But Gordon quite believed it. He

was raising her face to his when her eyes distended with a sudden sorrow.

"Oh, poor Ramon! Whatever are we thinking of?"

Shocked at her own thoughtlessness, she turned. But the *arriero* had finished his packing, now stood beside Ramon. His shake of the head sent her back into Gordon's arms, and as she sobbed on his shoulder the *arriero* took affairs into his own capable hands.

"I shall take him home to the old señor, with this wicked one, and tell him that he died in defense of thee."

With the most careful planning, it could not have been managed better. "They will never—know," she sobbed, more quietly. "And—at the end—he was sorry."

XXXV: WHY?

While Bull stood on gaze at the distant mountains he shook with the chill of a great fear. His question issued in a whisper so low and husky that the agent took the meaning from his gesture toward the hills.

"The bandits moved toward the señor Lovell's." He answered. "Praise the saints! the señoritas are both in El Paso."

"Then they'll go straight on to Mary's!" The last vestige of color drained from Bull's face.

Leaping the intervening mountains, imagination showed him that trickle of foul humanity dribbling down upon the *rancho*. He saw Mary Mills on the veranda, Betty pressed to her side. But in place of the hope and trust of his previous visions pale horror sat on her face. Obliterating the sweet wholesomeness that surrounded her like an aura, the dirty dribble swept around her and the child.

He turned to the agent. "My horse? Did they get him?"

"No, señor, I had my mozo drive all the beasts into the chaparral." He pointed eastward. "Come!"

Half an hour later the *mozo* shoved a shock head out of the chaparral in answer to the agent's whistle, and five minutes thereafter Bull was on trail, riding hard through a dread nightmare, insensible to the glare of the sun, suffocating heat, conscious only of the terrors that coursed through his mind.

In these dread visions Lee had no part. She had Gordon and Sliver and Jake! His fear centered on Mary Mills and her child. Often, in sudden agony, he would dig in the spurs and rowel his beast into a mad gallop. But always his better judgment checked the mad impulse. Reining in, he would proceed at a gait that would keep the animal running to the end. At least, he so rode until, passing into the grass country that afternoon, he saw a tall smoke column rising on the shoulder of a mountain ahead.

He recognized it at once for one of the smoke signals arranged by Benson to spread the news of a raid, and as he saw that it rose in direct line with the widow's *rancho* his fears crystallized around its slender column. Beyond peradventure, the place had been attacked. Jaws clenched till the bones stood out white through the flesh, black brows bent in bitter desperation, he urged on his frothing beast.

Whether he came in from Los Arboles or the railroad, distance always timed Bull's arrival at the *rancho* with the lowering of the sun. As he urged his jaded beast at a shambling trot over the last rise his shadow lay long and black on the rich apricot glow of the slope. Long ago the ominous cloud had died on the mountain's high shoulder; but, more ominous still, a lighter column had risen in the foreground. Though prepared, a hoarse sob unlocked his set jaws as he came in sight of the place.

The externals were the same—crimson and gold mountains encircling tawny pastures. At this hour the widow's cattle were usually to be seen forging slowly homeward across the sun-fired slopes. But now—in all the wide prospect occurred no sign of man or beast. Swept of all life,

lonely and desolate, it ran off and away to the hills.

The house? Instinctively Bull swept his hand across his eyes. But the evil vision remained. In place of the bougainvillea draping all with purple clusters, a shriveled black lace hung around the windows that stared with fiery eyes from blackened walls. In agony of spirit that shook him with tremblings more severe than those on the tired horse, Bull rode on down the slope. Approaching, he caught first the crackle and murmur of the flames that still leaped within the seared walls, then a low wailing mixed with a feverish mutter of prayer.

A wild rush of hope swept his being—to die the next moment when, rounding the corner, he saw Terrubio's woman. On her knees, hands raised in supplication, she was so absorbed in her prayers that she did not see or heed him till he laid his hand on her shoulder.

She did not start. Slowly, with the deliberation of a being shocked beyond emotion, she turned her head and looked up in Bull's face. Though she was still under thirty, hers had been the quick withering that follows the early ripening of tropical countries. There was left only the lingering beauty of great Spanish eyes; and in their depths, half vacant, half wild, Bull saw, as in some brown pool, flitting reflections of the horrors in his own mind. Lips moving without sound, she stared at him for some seconds, then, suddenly clasping his knees, burst into a passion of tears.

At any other time Bull's dominant racial contempt would have caused him to spurn her. Stooping now, he gently patted her head. Wise in his sorrow, he waited for the passing of the first convulsion.

"Aie!... Aie!" Soon she began to speak. "Aie! the poor señora ... and the niña ... where were they? The mercy of God? Pity of the Virgin? Aie! Aie! where were they?"

A second convulsion choked her utterance, and once again Bull waited with the patience of absolute despair; left her, as he had left the man on the train, to tell the tale in her own way.

"They came in from all sides, señor." Her hands swept the round of the hills. "Only the old man, my father, that was out with the herds, escaped. He it was who sent up the smoke from the mountains. The señora was at breakfast with the niña in the patio when Terrubio, my man, came running from the stables with the brown wolves hard on his heels. White as the petals of the flower at her throat she was with her great fear. But she shook it off, señor, went forward to meet them with smiles and greetings. They must be hungry and tired! If they would rest for a while she would serve them with her own hands! And she had the child speak to them, trusting that her white youth might move in them some stir of pity. Aie! Pity! The pity of the tiger for the lamb it holds between its paws! Si, a white ewe in the midst of a ravening pack, she stood beating them off with her smiles.

"Enter, señores, and be seated. Food shall be brought you at once.' Thus she spoke them.

"Because it served their wickedness, they swarmed in, that scum of beasts, into the sala, the kitchen, swarmed through the house, till it reeked with their evil presence.

"At first they held some order. Not at once, even by their kind, are the sanctities to be destroyed. In the days that Don Porfirio held them in place a white woman was as high above them as the angels of light, so their tradition held them for a little while. Their first awe, however, soon became as a whet to their evil appetites. From rough jokes, bad talk, they proceeded to worse—entered her bedroom and the child's, broke open the locked drawers, looted and handled their clothing.

"For that she did not care—not for anything, could she but keep the child from their hands. To have her out of their sight, she left her with me in my kitchen when she herself carried the food and waited upon them.

"Get Betty away!' she had whispered to me. But the bandits had seen to that. Two of them sat at my kitchen door eating while they kept guard.

"Still she had hope—that, being fed and flattered and pleased with their plunder, they would ride on their way. Even when, as she came and went among them, they began to pluck at her with little pats and pinches, she still clung to the hope; held them off as she could with smiling reproof. But, beasts as they were, they took their bread from her hand, and then—and then—how shall one tell it?

"They demanded that the señorita Betty be brought in to wait on them. At first they took the food she brought, patted her on the back, called her 'Linda' and other pet names. But soon they began to torment her also. At last one beast pulled her on to his knee.

"To me, in the kitchen, came the child's scream and the señora's bitter cry. 'For the sake of your mothers, señores!' followed by the crash of furniture, smash of crockery swept to the floor.

"At the cry I ran to the doorway and saw Terrubio, my man, rush in at the opposite door. The

face of him was torn with the fury of hell! One! Two! Three! He split their hearts with his knife, before he also went down under a saber stroke and was hacked to bits as he lay on the ground. From the meat-block I had snatched my fleshing knife. But as I gained the doorway the guards took me from behind and threw me backward upon the floor. As I lay there, fighting with both of them, the screams of the child, desperate moaning of the mother, rang in my ears! Mercy of God! Pity of the Virgin! Where were they? Where were they?"

Covering her ears, as though to shut out the dreadful echoes, she cowered at Bull's feet while shudder after shudder shook her frame.

"Go on!" He stooped and shook her violently. "Go on!"

She looked up, the tears streaming from her eyes. "I was wrong, señor. One mercy was granted—death! They murdered them ... murdered them! Angered by the death of their own men, they murdered them—the innocent woman, sweet child!"

"Yet you—escaped?"

"Si. The two had left me for dead in the kitchen, and the fire was almost upon me when I gained strength to rise and stagger out. Then, they were gone—gone like the wolves that sneak into the forest after they have slain the white heifer of the plains."

Turning, Bull walked blindly to his horse and dropped his face on his arms, propped upon the saddle. While he stood, trembling in every limb, blind struggle filled his mind.

The Mercy of God? Pity of the Virgin? Indeed, where were they? Where, in a universe ruled by a just God, could one find justification for this horror? "The sins of the fathers shall be visited upon the children to the fourth generation," says the old Law; but where in Mary Mills's blameless ancestry, where in their long line of honest merchants and farmers, could one find the fault that demanded this terrible atonement? And she—who had given forth only kindness, charity, mercy, throughout her life? And Betty, spotless in her innocence as her new-born soul? Where could one find the fault which called for their desecration?

Not in these clear terms did Bull's thought run. Blind anguish kept him straining as in the throes of a violent nausea. He did not think, he felt—felt the frightful injustice beyond the explanation of any doctrine; and, feeling, his whole being rose in revolt against it.

While he stood, face buried in his arms, there forced upon his consciousness a sound that rose above the woman's sobbing—the dry murmur of the flames. Strange to say, it brought him a certain comfort. They were gone, that pleasant, wholesome woman, sweet child, gone forever beyond the blank wall that rises between the quick and the dead! Surely they were gone! Yet—the corruption of the tomb, mold of the grave, would never touch their flesh. Through the clean, white flames they had passed into the original elements; and, wild man of the plains that he was, born of free spaces, wide deserts, clean winds, he took comfort in the thought.

Next, intensifying, yet soothing his poignant anguish, there floated in upon him a vision of the soft beauty of that last night. Again he saw through the gloaming the infinite loneliness reflected in Mary Mills's face. Again its dim whiteness turned toward him in the dusk. Like a timid dove he saw her hand come fluttering into his. Then—with deep thankfulness he realized it—now she would never know! never know how far he had fallen below his resolves.

Not for her, now, the pain of listening to his confession. His own did enter into his thoughts. All that he had suffered, was now suffering, was as naught. No anguish, physical or mental, could atone in his own sight for his fall. If he could have restored her and the child as they were yesterday, to go forward with a worthier man to happier destinies, he would have done it, then turned and gone on his own dark and solitary way. But that was impossible, and, being impossible, he hugged to his breast the thought—now she would never know!

From this his mind turned again in a dull way to the question, "Why?" He had no skill in the philosophy of words. The doctrine that evil is merely good out of place, that the ferocity which had brought this terrible thing to pass had origin under the power that set the stars in their courses, the suns on their ways, would never have appealed to him. His mind turned to a nearer cause, and found it in what clearer minds than his denounced as the slack policies of a government that had utterly failed in its duties to its own—the government that, with the purblindness of the mole, had intrigued with bandits, played fast and loose with the fates, crowned its follies by permitting a barbaric people to attempt the impossible task of guiding its own destinies.

Raising his head, he turned his face of dark despair to the northward. Then, with the truth of a simple vision that is not to be blinded by diplomatic sophistries, with power beyond the wildest raving, his stern nod placed the responsibility where he believed it belonged—across the Rio Grande.

"You done it!" His homely phraseology increased rather than lessened the force of his indictment. "Yes, *you* done it!"

The woman had fallen again to her praying. Her mutter drew his attention. Even in that moment of dire distress racial feeling was still forceful enough to halt an impulse to kneel at her side. Instead he knelt in mind. Head bowed, he stood beside her, a silent partner to supplications which his keen sense of unworth prevented him from sharing.

When she broke into a second wild frenzy of cursing, arms raised to the sky, he turned and walked away, his face set toward the mountains—and revenge.

XXXVI: "IN THE MIDST OF LIFE—"

Out of the midst of these terrors and alarms, through the tragic night that was sweeping over the land, broke a solitary beam of light, gleam of romance that was destined to burn brightly for two love-illuminated days before obscured by gathering dangers.

Just about the time that Bull, with the wounded correspondent in his arms, was swept along the mad battle rout, Gordon and Lee reined in their beasts and looked back and down on the little town of San Carlos nestling in a valley below. Sequestered in the hills, far from the railroad along which the red tides of revolution ebbed and flowed, it had so far escaped the prevailing destruction. Its painted adobes glowed like a great opal within the setting of warm-brown hills, as happy a picture as bride and groom ever gazed upon, for, helped out by the wise counsel of Lee's good friends, the *jefe* and priest, Gordon had prevailed.

"These wicked days a young girl may not expect to hold her own," the priest had advised. "Los Arboles needs a man's hardness."

To which the *jefe* had added his little joke, "Managing thee, *niña*, will not be his lightest work."

No doubt, because Cupid rides like a mad racer through the sunny lands, taking bolts and bars, duennas and like obstacles in his stride, Mexican law gives him pause at the last; places the bars so high that the wildest of lovers must needs take breath. Ordinarily two weeks would have been required to fulfil the forms; but where both law and church are on Cupid's side—well, there is no country on earth where his business receives greater despatch. Accordingly, from the church that shoved its square gold tower out of the rainbow mass of the town Lee and Gordon had ridden away, man and wife, an hour ago, to honeymoon, according to her plan, in the great bowl of the mountain pastures.

Now, as she looked back, a certain wistfulness crept into the girl's expression; a shadow slight yet sufficient to attract Gordon's notice. Working his beast alongside, he laid his arm across her shoulder.

"I was thinking of the girl I left down there." She expressed the feeling common to new-made wives in looking back on the place where they have left their girlhood. "She meant well, but—was *so* foolish. I was just wondering if—if—"

"Lee Nevil will be different from Lee Carleton." He helped her out. "If she isn't the same contrary little tyrant that gave me my first taste of heaven"—he paused, grinning—"and hell—"

"You didn't make *me* suffer, of course!" She flashed up in quite the old manner. "The way you carried on with that *dreadful* girl. But there goes Lee Carleton again! and after the lecture I gave her this morning. Yes, sir, I awoke her at dawn and gave her a real good talking to. Henceforth she is to be kind and quiet and sympathetic, and never lose her temper and—What are you laughing at? Don't you *want* me to reform?"

"There! there!" Her distress was genuine, and he repressed a second laugh. "If I thought there was the slightest chance of it, I'd—I'd march you straight down the hill again and have the padre say the service backward." Quite illogically he went on: "I, too, had a serious hour with myself. I made up my mind—"

He got no further, because of the small hand that closed his mouth. "Not to change? Don't dare to say it!"

Perhaps her alarm rooted in the age-long experience of woman that change is the law for man. At any rate, she fought the very suggestion.

"You won't, will you?"

He assured her, of course, that he wouldn't—and believed it, no doubt. So, this mighty business settled, each being duly bound to the other to remain as they were and attempt no reforms, however well intended, they turned their bright faces to the future; rode on, planning as they went with the brilliant optimism of youth. While the dusty miles slid underneath and the trail heaved them up and down over the mountains and valleys, they built up and tore down and reconstructed. By the time, midway of the afternoon, they looked down from the plateau into the mountain pastures they had settled the revolution, placed the country on a basis of peace from which it should never be moved thereafter.

In this, the dry season, the giant bowl of jade was transmuted by sun-scorched grasses into living amber bisected by a thin, green veining along the stream. From its rim the trail dropped like a yellow snake in many convolutions as it fell down, down, down into the chaparral. It looked, and was, dangerous. A stone dislodged by Gordon's beast dropped hundreds of feet sheer, then rebounded and plunged forward on a still longer leap. Following its staircase windings, they had under their eyes Pedro's *jacal* in its little garden, splashed now with the vermilion of ripening peppers. A white patch presently resolved into the *camisa* and *calzones* of Pedro himself, and as they reined in at his door the old fellow came out of the garden, his wrinkles and pouches drawn into a welcoming grin.

"He's really part of the scenery"—Lee communed aloud with herself—"almost as much as that old dead tree. We might let him stay. But, no!" She shook her head. "I don't want any human being here but ourselves. Oh, I know! We'll send him in to Los Arboles with a note to Sliver and Jake."

Neither would she—after Pedro had saddled up and departed, have any commerce with the *jacal*. "It isn't that it's dirty. Old Pedro is as clean in his habits as any white man, and quite fussy over his housekeeping. But it has been lived in. We'll camp by the stream at the far end of the valley."

She did borrow a few clay drinking and cooking bowls; also appropriated a savory stew of *frijoles* which Pedro had ready for supper, adding it to the supplies they had brought from San Carlos. On his part Gordon commandeered an old shot-gun.

"What for?" Though he laughed, repeating her question, the glow in his eye proved him at one with her in spirit. "To kill the meat for our first meal, Mrs. Stone-Hatchet. Also protect you against the attack of any saber-toothed tiger or dinosaur that may be roaming at night in this neck of the woods."

"That will be fine!" Her hands being full of clay dishes, she could not clap them; but her shining eyes supplied the applause. "The wood at the end of the valley is alive with wild pigeon. They're just lovely broiled over hot coals."

"Broiled over hot coals?" he teased her. "Wild doves, the symbol of love? What desecration!"

"I don't care," she pouted. "One has to eat—and they're awfully good."

Nevertheless, after they had pitched camp where the stream plunged down a small rapid into a long, still pool, he shouldered the gun and went after wild pigeon without compunction.

After he departed she looked around and took a deep breath.

It was all as it should be. In anticipation of their coming, a great oak had spread a leafy carpet under its wide branches. It required only to gather them and spread their serapes to form the softest of couches. First she brought water and built a fire; then, after a shy glance around, she followed down-stream to a spot where the pool curved into a natural arbor of alders. When Gordon returned, half an hour later, with a half-dozen pigeons he found her all red and rosy from her swim.

"Your turn, Dirty Man," she rallied him. "Go and take your bath."

When he came back she had the pigeons plucked and spitted on willow wands. While he broiled them over hot coals she made the coffee and served the *frijoles* on golden husks of corn from Pedro's garden. Nature supplied the other utensils—fingers for forks, their sharp young teeth for knives, bits of *tortilla* to scoop up the stew. Both in its preparation and when, sitting side by side, they ate this, the first meal of their wedded life, they were very quiet, lived in a dream; a dream too happy for speech, in which the message of eye to eye was all sufficient. There was little clearing away to do, but when he essayed to help she took him by the shoulders and made him sit down.

"Like a good hunter, you provided the meat. This is *my* work. You can watch and smoke."

Fishing his papers and sack out of his shirt pocket, she rolled him a cigarette with dexterity that demanded explanation.

"I used to do it for my father. Not that I haven't tried." The confession was nullified by a little sigh. "But it always makes me sick. You don't know how I envy Maria and Teresa!" Lighting it, she took a couple of small puffs, then passed it on. "I always tried to get Bull and the boys to smoke in the house, but they seemed to prefer their own quarters. I liked it even as a child. I would curl up in my father's den and watch the smoke from his pipe while he read or wrote. Once, when he went away for some weeks on a hard trip without me, I used to go into his room and bury my face in his old smoking-jacket; it smelled so tobaccery and strong and—*manny*. It gave me the oddest sense of comfort and protection."

Unconsciously, she had touched on the most powerful motive of sex, the attraction of opposite qualities; the same that drew his gaze when, rolling her sleeves above dimpled elbows, she began cleansing the few utensils. He watched the fluttering small hands that invested even a squat and grimy coffee-pot with esthetic values; the graceful bend of the fair head as she peered into its depths to make sure it was really clean; the soft flexures of her waist; the ease with which she rose or relaxed like a small girl-child on widespread knees. Lastly, most powerful of all, a certain shy quiet, the more noticeable because so entirely different from her usual confidence. Her smile, catching his eye, had a new grace, was set in flooding color. When, after cleansing her hands at the stream, she came and stood looking down at the fire, he rose with sympathetic understanding, holding out his hands.

She came on a little run and thereafter—it was as she had wished it in her girl's dreams—as far as dawn and dark from the conventional marriage. Here only the ancient law prevailed—the law older than theologies, custom, judicial sanctions, and the blessings of the church. In the bubble and chatter of the stream through its worn brown boulders, in the whisper of the wind among the grasses, in the lazy drift of pink cloud toward the sunset behind the rim, in bird call and the evening song of the insects, its sanctions were recited.

In their absorption in each other, blind belief in the goodness of all things, they were, no doubt, a scoff for the misogynist, spectacle for a cynic. A scoff in their utter ignorance of the fact that all this glory, supreme bliss, was merely an illusion, a rainbow mirage spread by Nature to lure her human creatures on to perpetuate themselves in a world of pain! A spectacle in their unconscious innocence of the *blasé* modern viewpoint that examines Cupid through a microscope, tears away his roseate veils, exposing him for a small licentiate. Surely a pair of young fools! yet happy with that joy which cynic and misogynist may never know; and—your real philosopher will admit it—most divinely in accord with the scheme of things.

Yes, perfectly unconscious of the fact that Nature, the cunning fowler, had caught their feet in her lime, enmeshed them in her webs, they sat, her fair head pillowed on his shoulder, watching while the crimson lights faded through pink to steel gray; watched the first pale stars wax and increase and lay their pattern of fire across the darkening vault above; watched till night closed her doors and locked them in from the rest of the world.

Life and Death, the two great Mysteries, each inscrutable as the other! "In the midst of one we are in the other," and the friendly night that wrapped the lovers in its dark bosom was troubled, far away, by the roar of the fleeing trains. As these dribbled their foul freight in trickles whose course across the land was marked as though by acid blight, incendiary fires blossomed in the darkness. Rising, later, the moon dropped a checker of dew-light down through the oak on the sleepers. It also lit the march of Gonzales's bandits across the desert.

Life and Death! Evil and Good! Inextricably mixed and, above it all, the stars shedding their dear, cold light. Dawn broke with its customary splendors of crimson and gold. Later the sun raised a red, friendly face and peeped over the mountain rim at Lee and Gordon, happy in the preparation of their breakfast.

In ignorance of all the night had shrouded, that the sun now shone on, of the horror even then in course a few miles away, they pursued their second day, fished and swam, walked among the pasturing horses, had the gayest of times concocting a tasty lunch out of their crude supplies. Thereafter Gordon was lying in luxurious content, head pillowed on Lee's knee, when he first spied a slender smoke column rising far away beyond the rim.

"Look!"

Though he sat up, pointing, he did not comprehend till Lee cried out: "It's the Millses' beacon! Oh, they are attacked! Get the horses! Quick!"

XXXVII: THE THREE—AGAIN

Bull walked a few paces, then looked back at his horse. Its quivering knees, long, slow shivers, told that it was beyond further service. He returned to the woman. She had sunk into a second collapse, but she looked up at his touch.

"You heard them talking before—before—"

"Si, señor, from our stables they had stolen three horses. I heard them speaking of Los Arboles; that they would take all of its horses and sell them at the border."

Nodding, Bull went on his way afoot. But as, head bent, he passed the ruined wall from behind which Terrubio had challenged him long ago a voice called out, "Ole, señor!"

Startled, Bull looked up, half expecting to see again the uncanny eyes, weird cold face. But the faithful servitor was gone; gone with his loved mistress—to wait on her, if such things be, beyond the consuming flame. From behind the wall, leading his horse, hobbled old Rafael, the father of the woman.

"I had thought thee one of those wicked ones." The old fellow slapped the butt of an old musket. "Once my finger tightened on the trigger, but by the mercy of God I waited. Si, señor, I saw them go. After I sent up the smoke I came back slowly, crawling along the valleys, keeping always the height of land between us. Thus I gained so close that I counted them when they passed; a full score, señor, and more, on their way by the plains trail to Arboles. But the mistress and the niña, señor? They did not harm—"

He stopped, halted by Bull's look, then cried aloud while the tears coursed down his wrinkled face. "The white ewe and the lamb! Gone! and I, the old dog, am left? But so it was always. Death takes his pick of the best! I would go after them, señor, those wicked ones; but of what use, save to make a noise, is an old dog after the teeth are gone? The biting must be done by stronger jaws; the running by fleeter feet. Take thou my horse."

Thus freshly mounted, Bull made such time that he climbed to the smoldering beacon on the mountain's shoulder before daylight failed. Below lay the valleys in mysterious pools from which long shadows issued to crawl up the flaming hills. Westward the dying sun had left a crimson wake, barred with black across the smoldering sky; a reflection, Bull felt it, of the fiery blossom that glowed in one dark valley. The faint stars weaving a wan embroidery across the trailing skirts of night, the fading light, the first cool breath of the evening, all helped to intensify the loneliness that clothed the obscure prospect. Yet in it that loneliness, the stillness of great solitudes, wide oceans, Bull sensed sympathy and peace; Nirvana, the peace of great worlds, planetary systems swinging through space on their appointed ways. She! They! That pleasant woman, lovely child, had been absorbed into, were part of it, this peace that quieted his troubled spirit.

He did not think this. Such philosophies were beyond him. But he felt and, feeling, a hoarse sob rose in his throat. Bowing his dark face in his hands, the big, black rustler shook in the throes of saving grief. He did not hear the thud of approaching hoofs; saw nothing until with a clatter of displaced stones Sliver and Jake came shooting out of the sage.

Because of its position far out on the plains, the warning smoke had been seen at Los Arboles long before its soaring column rose high enough to be noticed by Gordon above the rim; in fact, Jake and Sliver gained the forks of the Bowl trail while Gordon and Lee lacked still a mile of the summit. As Pedro had delivered Lee's note the preceding evening, Jake knew that the couple were there. After a moment's thought he voted down Sliver's proposal to ride down for Gordon.

"He'd come in handy. Kin shoot some an' his nerve's all right. But you jes' kedn't shut her out. Better to leave them where she's safe."

"That's right," Sliver had added. "An' it 'u'd shore be a shame to break up their honeymoon."

Accordingly, unaware that the pair were riding hard at their heels, Jake and Sliver had held on until, as before said, they came shooting out on Bull. He had whirled, hand on his gun, but it dropped when a cowman's yell issued simultaneously from their throats.

"Why, you dolgorned old son of a—" Sliver stopped as, riding closer, he saw Bull's face. "Why, hombre! What—"

Turning in his saddle, Bull pointed at the crimson blossom in the dark valley below. He did not explain. With that keen intuition natural in those who live alone in the wide spaces, they had read in his face that which is denied to speech—the soul agony of a strong man. Given that

blossom of fire, their knowledge of Mexican raiders supplied the rest.

"Murdered!... Mother and child!... Burned ... with the house!"

To one skilled in the polished phrases which city folks hold in readiness for all occasions, the manner in which the two received the news might have appeared heartless. Jake looked off and away over the darkening world. Sliver bit a chew off his plug, then fell to examining a fray in his *riata*. When the latter finally spoke the aforesaid city person would have been greatly shocked.

"The poor damn kid!"

"Hell, ain't it?" Jake's tone was quite indifferent.

But Bull had seen Sliver gulping in an attempt to swallow the choking lump in his throat; also the sudden moisture that quenched the cold, snake sparkle in Jake's bleak eyes. These were all-sufficient.

"They was heading for Los Arboles by the plains trail." After a long silence he answered Jake's question concerning the raiders. "Must be nearly there. My God! Miss Lee an'—"

"They ain't there." Sliver hastened to relieve his anxiety. "They're—" He was relieved from further explanation by a second clatter of hoofs. Out of the gathering dusk came Lee and Gordon.

Ever since they spied the smoke column, its dread possibilities had weighed down the girl's spirit. But at the sight of Bull she forgot—for the moment. Uttering a glad cry, she dismounted, was running to him, hands outstretched, but suddenly halted, shocked by his look.

"Why—what—" Following his pointing finger, she saw the fire. That, their inaction, told all before he spoke. "Gone!—both!—burned with the house!" Crying bitterly, she turned instinctively, as though to run to Gordon. Then, recognizing a need greater than her own, she faced about again and ran to Bull.

"Oh, you poor, *poor* man!"

Grasping his big, hard hands, she pressed her wet face against his knee while she sobbed out her sorrow and sympathy. Freeing one hand, Bull gently stroked her hair. Nodding for Sliver and Gordon to follow, Jake led them a few yards back up the trail; so there was none but Bull to hear when she began to sob out a broken confession.

"Oh, I feel—so wicked. While all this—was happening—I—I was—getting married!"

"Married?"

"Yes—to Gordon." She ran on brokenly, giving him in bits the tale of all that had happened since his departure—her abduction, Ramon's death, Gordon's ultimatum. "He begged so hard—and the padre and the jefe said—that I ought—and I wanted to, myself—and we were so happy until—we saw the smoke. And now I—I feel like a criminal."

"Then you needn't." He patted her shoulder. "The jefe was right. Never again will you have more need of a man's strength."

"But? At this time? While—"

"How were you to know? An' remember how hard *she* worked and wished to bring this very thing about. 'Twould have filled her with joy to know that it had come to pass. 'Deed, Missy, she does know an' is glad at this very moment." With that mixture of rude faith and humility that made his enormous strength incongruous, he went on: "Sure she knows an' some day she'll tell you so herself. 'Twon't be for me to hear it. My kind don't go where she is. But you will, an', mark me, the first thing she'll tell will be how happy she was in your marriage."

"Oh, if I thought she would!"

"Be certain of it, child." The last lights had now gone out on the highest peaks. Looking off and away into the gathering gloom, he recited many a hope that Mary Mills had expressed.

While he talked Lee's sobs diminished. She looked up when he finished. "That makes me feel better. And *you*? You, too, think I did right?"

She could see, through the gloom, his sadness lighten. "For what d'you s'pose I brought him here?"

"Not to marry *me*?" She gasped. In spite of the gravity of the moment, her own real sorrow, she could not repress feeling natural in a girl who, having made, as she supposes, her own free choice, finds that, from the very beginning, her husband had been wished upon her. "Oh, if I'd only known it!" She added, with loving illogic, "I'm *so* glad that I didn't."

"That's fine." He patted her head. "It will be easier, now, if you have to live for a while in the States."

"*The States?*" she repeated.

In a brief way, omitting mention of Benson's death—she had enough to bear—he described the scattering of Valles's army, concluding, "They're wild against Americans." He nodded at the fire. "The men that did this are on the way to Arboles; must be almost there."

"My poor people!" she broke out, in sudden distress. "Gordon! Come here!" When, with Sliver and Jake, he emerged from the shadows she cried it again: "Our poor, poor people! They are on their way—the raiders! To Arboles! We must go—at once!"

"Too late!" Bull spoke heavily. "Even an aeroplane couldn't get us there in time." After, even more briefly, he had sketched for the others recent events, he went on: "I came back to bring you and Mary and the child out. For them it's too late, but you must go at once—you an' your husband an' Sliver an' Jake."

"And you?" Lee questioned.

"I'm going on." The statement in its simplicity carried more significance than the wildest vow of revenge.

"Alone?" Lee again demanded. "And you think we'd go slinking home to the States and leave you to face that band yourself?"

"It's my quarrel, my work." His answer, steady and heavy, issued on the darkness. "You are young and have your husband. Your future is all ahead. Mine is most behind. You folks head at once for the border. With Sliver an' Jake to guard you—"

But here he ran against a second obstacle. Sliver's voice rose in the darkness. "An' there's nothing I'd like better 'n to look after Lady-girl. But I ain't so much of a fool that I don't know the store she sets by you, Bull, that's been father an' mother to her, now, for nigh on a year. So it don't go that-a-way. It's me for Arboles while you-all hit with them for the States."

"Good enough!" Jake's acid tones trembled through the gloom. "With a small amendment. You're that young an' foolish, Sliver, it 'u'd be a shame to cut you off—worse 'n the green grass that goes to the oven. So it stan's like this—you-all go back; I go on."

"No, you don't." Gordon's quiet voice interrupted. "At any other time I'd feel diffident about putting in my oar. But these are our people. I could never look my wife"—he felt her hand steal up into his—"I could never look her in the face again if I stood for this. She ought to get out at once, and if you fellows will see her to the border—"

"They won't—till we all go," Lee broke in. "It's easy to see that you've all made up your minds to stay—and you'll need me to hold the horses. We'd better be getting on."

"But, Missy—" Bull began.

But already she had mounted. The clatter of her horse's hoofs returned unmistakable answer.

XXXVIII: FIRE

Hitherto Bull had always ridden on Lee's right, but when the trail permitted two to ride abreast he now, with instinctive delicacy, yielded his old place to Gordon. In this order they rode along the flank of the mountain, their hoofs beating a dark tattoo to the lower rhythm of creaking leather, flapping holsters; rode on past the San Carlos trail, the Bowl forks, had almost reached the head of the ravine above Antonio's *fonda* when Lee, who was riding ahead, reined in with an exclamation.

Out of the gloom that wrapped the plains below had burst a sudden glow which gave birth, as they gazed, to a flower of flame that quivered and swung under the breath of the night wind. It was too far away for them to see the buildings; but, clearly as though they were looking down upon it from the first rise, their minds filled in the picture; supplied the flames roaring through the Arboles *patio*, bursting from doors and windows, scaling the guard-house, running a scarlet race along the rows of adobes.

"My poor people!" Lee sat her horse and gazed.

The shock of realization is often less than anticipation; its finality strips away exaggeration. Down there everything Lee valued was going up in flames—her wardrobe, jewelry, girlish treasures; household effects and *hacienda* stores; that which she valued most of all, the trove of old Spanish manuscripts and letters, doubly dear because so intimately connected with her father's memory. Surely a great loss! but if it flashed up in her mind, regret was instantly wiped out by consuming indignation—not at her personal loss; not that her loved home was being

destroyed under her eyes; but at that which it stood for; the malice, ignorance, wantonness, irresponsibility which has lighted a thousand such fires, would light a thousand more, laying waste all Mexico with its cruelties and lusts. When Sliver's voice broke in the darkness behind her his attempt at rude comfort came almost as a shock.

"Never mind, Lady-girl. They kain't burn them yard-thick walls."

"An' we left word for the *ancianos* to drive the stock into the mountains," Jake added. "Must ha' b'en cl'ar away long before they got there."

"It isn't that." She spoke so low that only Gordon caught her whisper. "My poor girls! I would give all, place and stock, to make sure they escaped." As that bitter indignation resurged within her she added: "There's only one thing left. We must—"

Bull's heavy voice completed it for her,—“catch 'em before daylight.”

While the horses slid and slipped down the steep trail his voice rose above the scrape of hoofs, laying out his plan. After their long march the raiders would undoubtedly camp at Arboles! The fire proved one thing—they had broken open the store and drunk up the stock of *aguardiente*! At dawn they would be found stretched in swinish sleep. And then—

His surmise was reasonable, founded on probabilities, but subject to the change of circumstance. As they rode on down a red glow in the black bowels of the ravine grew into a fire that dyed a deeper chrome the yellow walls of the *fonda*. It also restored a little color into the bronze faces of a score of refugees from Arboles, women and children, herded together like sheep around its blaze.

When Lee rode into the firelight they gave tongue in a chorus of joy, apprehension, every shade of feeling from fear to relief. From their babble she gathered, first, that they had been warned by a *peon* who had run in from Lovell's *rancho*; second, that the *ancianos* had driven the horses into the mountain pasture and scattered the cattle among the ravines. Finally, from out of their midst a lad was thrust forward to tell his tale.

He had been sent to hunt stragglers from the herds. Feeling tired, with that *peon* indolence which is not to be disturbed by mere rumors of raiders, he had curled up in a bunch of chaparral and gone to sleep. Awakened by voices, he had seen the raiders coming. Men of gigantic stature and evil visage his excited fancy painted them, and among them he recognized a *peon* who had run away to the wars after being whipped for some grossness by the señor Benson. So close did they pass, he heard them quarreling among themselves. They appeared to be tired and downcast over their poor luck in obtaining horses; and he, the boy, heard the renegade's expressions of reassurance.

"Si, señores. A few miles more and you will rest with the women at Los Arboles. There we shall find the finest horses, bred by blooded stallions, fit for a general to ride. Or if they have run them away for safe-keeping, 'twill not serve, for I, Pedro Gonzales, know the secret pasture in the great Bowl."

Flaming up under fresh fuel while the lad talked, the firelight showed the Three deep in reflection. The same thought was in their minds: a vivid mental picture of the raiders from Las Bocas ascending the precarious zigzags of the Bowl staircase. If these others could be caught in the same way? Jake's remark expressed their joint conclusion.

"It 'u'd be a *cinch*!"

"Horses all tired out now, too," Sliver added. "If anythin' went wrong, we'd have no getaway. Not that I'd care, but we kain't take no chances with Lady-girl."

Bull's word decided. He made his dispositions, sent the youth to sleep out on the plains and bring early warning of the raiders' movements; posted other sentries at intervals. Finally, he saw first to the horses, that they were watered and fed and groomed; then to the serving of a meal.

He ate, but even his steady, methodical munching bespoke purpose, the conserving of strength for his ends. As he sat, after the meal, gazing into the fire, even Lee failed to discern much difference from his usual self. But after the others, refugees and all, lay wrapped in their serapes, dim, muffled figures under the red light of half a dozen fires, he still sat, a somber figure in black outline against the glow.

After Lee had cried herself to sleep he sat on. At midnight her awakening eyes showed him still there. When she awoke again he was gone—on the round of sentries. He returned before she fell asleep again and sat on, staring into the fire, an ominous figure fraught with danger.

XXXIX: "VENGEANCE IS MINE"

From the "hog's back" where Sliver had accidentally discovered Felicia and the *fonda*, Lee, Gordon, and the Three watched a yellow dust cloud rolling slowly across the plains. The occasional silver flash that stabbed it through as the sun struck a saber or bayonet told that it enveloped the raiders. Three hours ago Sliver had come galloping in from a reconnaissance with the news of their advance. Instantly the refugees had fled like frightened quail into the secret places of the hills. After burying various bottles that contained the liquid abominations wherewith he burned out the stomachs of his customers, Antonio had followed. So for two hours the ravine had been untenanted.

Even after the watchers sighted the dust, an hour passed before it disappeared in the mouth of the ravine; for, as their few horses were loaded down with loot, the raiders moved slowly. Another half-hour dragged by before they appeared, filing like ragged ants up the path along the silver stream. Sighting the *fonda*, they stopped, hastily took cover behind some bushes, and held a hurried consultation. When the file split and began to work its way through the chaparral on each side of the ravine Jake interpreted the manœuver.

"Nobody home, amigos. Fooled this time."

A hoarse yell presently confirmed his diagnosis. Its note changed almost immediately to rage and disappointment, and presently a thin coil of smoke issued from the doorway, followed by a bright flash of flame as the fire licked up the dry thatch of the *ramada*. Like infuriated ants the raiders ran next to fire the stables. They were within easy rifle-shot and Sliver was drawing an experimental bead when Jake knocked up his rifle.

"One shot," he replied, to Sliver's grumble, "an' they'll go like a flock of quail into the chaparral."

Happening to glance at Bull just then, he nudged Sliver to look.

On his knees, peering through a bush, the man looked for all the world like some great animal, bear or black tiger, crouching for its prey. Under dark brows, his coal eyes burned. Like some huge dog held in leash, slow shivers coursed through his frame. Always the two had recognized in him depths of feeling beyond them. The slow shake of the head that passed between them expressed consciousness of a hurt beyond their plumbing. They looked quickly away as Bull turned toward them.

"Time to be moving. They'll be coming presently."

An hour later saw them all placed—Gordon in the chaparral at the top of the trail; Bull, Sliver, and Jake at intervals of quarter of a mile down the zigzag trail.

"No shooting as they go down," Bull cautioned them. "Coming back, they'll be among the horses without a chance to turn."

The arrangement, while wise, was not altogether to Sliver's taste; he grumbled to Jake as they moved on down to their places: "Fat chance for us. He'll pick half of 'em off going up between him and Gordon, then turn and plug the others. Any maverick that gets by to us will be that riddled a bullet 'ull slip through him without t'eching."

"Ain't it coming to him?" Jake scornfully questioned. "He's welcome to my share—if it's any comfort. But listen, hombre—let me tell you that the killing of every *revuelto* in Mexico ain't a-going to cure his hurt."

Leaving Sliver at his post, Jake moved on down, and after he also disappeared in the chaparral silence spread a warm spell over valley and mountain; golden, sunlit silence that was emphasized rather than broken by the wild screech of a hawk.

From above Gordon looked right down into the amber heart of the Bowl. Almost beneath him, the *jacal* rose like a doll's house out of the vermilion splash of Pedro's ripe peppers. From it the green veining of the stream ran through the tawny pastures that were spotted with black dots, the feeding horses. Far down, just where the stream slipped out of the Bowl, he could see the giant oak that marked their camp; and though even his strong young eyes were unequal to the distance, imagination supplied the ashes of their fire, the bed of leaves under the spreading branches.

Instantly he began reliving, tenderly reliving that happy day so absorbed that he forgot for the moment the tragedy that had brought it to a close. He did not notice a slight rustle in the chaparral nor catch the gleam of peering eyes. Were it a raider, he had proved an easy prey. But

the eyes were soft; the hand that presently stole out of a bush and shook his foot was small and white. Whirling, he came face to face with Lee.

"What are you doing here?"

She placed her finger to her lip. "Hush! they are coming! I just couldn't stand it, up there in the chaparral all alone. So I tied the horses and—here I am."

There was nothing that could be done—except to look stern. Reaching, he pulled her down beside him, shook her a little, then spoiled the effect by a kiss. Then, lying flat on their stomachs, they kept a joint watch till the scrape of a hoof, rumble of voices, broke on the trail.

Peeping cautiously, they saw a motley procession file on to the plateau. Like the soldiers of Las Bocas, their clothing ran the gamut of the service uniforms of Porfirio Diaz's army; the silver and gray of *rurales*, red and blue of the infantry, variations from these of cavalry and artillery, fatigue linen mixed in varying quantities with *charro* and *peon* costumes. Accentuating this motley, their loose gross mouths, blunt animal noses, lewd eyes in the midst of faces swollen by last night's debauch, fully justified Gordon's judgment:

"Gosh! what a gallows crew!"

Weary and footsore after two days of heavy marching, neither their appearance nor their spirits were improved by the fact that half of them limped. Their voices had been raised in strident altercation. One fellow's angry complaint carried across to Gordon and Lee.

"The two gringo señoritas at the Lovell *rancho*, where were they?—fled to El Paso. At the second we got what?—one woman, a child, and three horses—and lost three men. At Los Arboles there were to be women, a score at least, young and pretty; also a gringo girl with golden hair and a skin of milk? And horses by the hundred, blooded beasts of fine breeding? What got we?—an empty house! Thou art a pretty leader, Filomena."

"Si!" came a second growl. "And the *fonda*? 'Courage, señores,' he says but two hours ago. 'In the barranca we shall find a *fonda* with liquors and a girl, none prettier in all Chihuahua.' And —"

"Again an empty house!"

By one and another it was kept up. "We limp like lame cats," the first man spoke again. "If this business go like the first and there be no horses—I know of one throat that will be cut."

"And I of another!" The guide, an ugly, squat *peon*, turned on him with a snarl. "Was it I that sent up the warning smoke? No? Then fasten your tongue with your teeth. If you want women, they are to be had at San Carlos, a few hours away, a fine town untouched by war."

"Si, more marching," the first grumbler was beginning, when the other cut him off. He had advanced to the edge of the plateau and stood pointing down into the Bowl.

"And horses, say you? There they are—scores! Si, hundreds! enough to make us all rich when sold at the border."

Success! the shibboleth of the modern world! Even among these scoundrels it wrought the customary effect; turned malcontents into enthusiastic friends. "Bueno!" He who had issued the sinister hint of cut throats was the first to clap the guide on the back. "Bueno, amigo! thou art a leader indeed. 'Twas no fault of thine that the white-skinned girl escaped. I will slit the gizzard of the next that says it."

On his part the guide swelled and ruffled in the flattering sunlight. "I told ye. 'Leave it to Filomena,' said I. 'Leave it to him to show ye fat booty.' Behold!"

Also he assumed the airs and authority of real leadership. "The horses we shall need to rope fresh mounts. Hide the stuff in the bushes till we return. 'Twill be only for a couple of hours."

Fired by the sight of the horses, the raiders fell feverishly to work unloading their loot, which—Gordon noted it with satisfaction—was largely provisions. Then, lameness and blisters forgotten, unaware of the cold, fierce eyes watching from the bushes, they followed the horsemen downhill, yelling and hooting, raising the echoes with snatches of ribald song.

A thin wisp of smoke above the *jacal* followed by an explosive flash as the dry thatch took fire announced their arrival at the bottom. From above Gordon and Lee saw them move down the valley in a long line that presently came sweeping back in a half-circle with the horses in its belly.

There followed half an hour of confusion at the corrals while mounts were being roped. Yells, wild laughter, vile oaths, rose like a fetid vapor out of the Bowl, fouling the clear sunlight, sweet warm air. Then the massed animals began to move from the corrals and thin out to single file at the foot of the trail. Just as Bull had foreseen, a raider sandwiched in at intervals to keep them moving. As before, the watchers looked down upon the thin file wriggling like a slow, black snake up and around the trail's yellow convolutions.

After an interminable time, it seemed to them, the head of the file rose to Jake's post. Lying

there, his long, thin body stretched at length in the sage, narrowed eyes fixed on the first raider, Jake had never looked more like "The Python" he appeared in *peon* eyes. And he had the serpent's patience. Though his finger played impatiently with his rifle trigger, he watched man after man go by, waiting, waiting, for Bull's shot above. Always cool, he did not give vent, like Sliver, to inward grumblings as the file rose to him.

"If 'twasn't for orders," he mentally harangued the first raider that passed, "your black soul 'u'd be a-busting now on its way to hell!"

High above, Gordon waited with equal impatience, his hazel eyes transmuted once more into blue steel flecked with hot, brown lights. But his imagination revealed to him much that was hidden from the prosaic vision of the cowman. The clear, clean air that flowed like tawny wine across the Bowl; dry whisper of the wind in the sage at his side; drift of white cloud across the blue above; the hum of busy insects; slow winding upward of the herd; it was all pastoral; stirred in his mind a vagrant recollection of the peace and quiet of Gray's "Elegy." In place of the thunders and lightnings, murky night, black rains with which man's imaginings clothed, tragedy, nature had set the stage in sunlight and flowers; invested it with Sabbath calm. Yet, the more powerfully for that peaceful contrast, he felt—felt with savage joy—Death, the grim angel, hovering above.

With her girl's strong intuition, Lee shared his feeling. Just as the wriggling black line rose up to Bull's station she leaned forward and broke off a twig that might have interfered with Gordon's sighting. Yet, in spite of a deep desire for vengeance, the retribution earned by a black deed, she shuddered. As, propping himself on his elbow, Gordon drew a bead on the leading raider she covered her eyes with her hands.

And Bull? As the raiders had passed him on the way down every brute line of their evil visages had seared itself on his brain—the beast mouths, blunt noses, conical ears, gross cheekbones; the sloping foreheads, in the center of which his imagination placed a small, round, purplish spot. Now, as they returned, his dark face in its implacable hate was the face of Death itself—the Death Gordon and Lee felt hovering near.

In the most tense moments, while the being is under shock of a tragic emotion, the brain will sometimes play strange tricks, register trifles too light for notice in normal times. As the first horse rounded the bend below Bull recognized it for a mare that Lee sometimes rode; a flighty, brainless creature, that would shy at its own shadow when nothing better offered.

About fifteen passed him before the head of the first raider showed below. Instantly Bull's rifle flew up; the rifle that never missed, its sights lined true on the spot, the purple spot of his imagination. But the trigger did not fall. Passing on down, his glance had shown him that the last two raiders were still below Jake's station.

He lowered the rifle again, intending, as Sliver had divined, to let three or four of the raiders go on up toward Gordon; and, with the action, vengeance passed out of his hands. If there was anything in the world the flighty mare preferred to shy at, it was a snake. Perhaps a haunting memory of a bitten fetlock in her colthood was responsible for the preference. Be that as it may, when with a dry staccato warning a fat rattler raised its deadly head from bunched, glistening coils on the edge of the path the mare whirled and darted madly downhill, leader in a mad stampede.

A hoarse yell marked the first raider's realization of his danger. With spur and quirt, he tried to force his mount against the bank. But a hatchet head intervened, the wedging body forced in between sent man and beast sideways over the cliff.

Springing up as the mare whirled, Gordon saw laid out directly beneath the course of the stampede down and around the stony staircases. At first it stood out clearly as in those cinema pictures of galloping men taken from a height. Following the first man's cry came the wild yells of the second and third. One! two! three! he saw them squeezed out over the cliff; saw them strike the next level and bound off and over on a longer leap; saw them turn, slowly in midair till the horses showed like fat slugs above the men; saw the final crash and disappearance in the chaparral below. But when his glance came back the crystal clearness was gone, obscured by yellow dust cloud from the bowels of which men and horses were ejected sideways as the stampede whirled on down.

Of the thirty raiders, but one had a chance—he who brought up the rear. But as he turned to run he came face to face with Jake, who had sprung up to see. Instantly Jake raised his gun, but there came a roar and rattle of stones and hoofs. Before he could fire the dust cloud swallowed the man. Three minutes later it rolled down the last night to the pastures.

Over the Bowl silence fell again, golden, sunlit silence broken only by the screech of the

hovering hawk. As before, the wind whispered in the sage, the clouds marched slowly across the blue fields above, the bees went busily upon their ways; but in the mean time—when the dust settled there remained, of the two hundred horses and thirty men, only the few animals that spread out fanwise as they galloped across the level bottoms.

With the swiftness, sureness of a lightning stroke in the night it had come, the doom—so swiftly that Lee and Gordon above, Jake and Sliver below, could only stand and stare, doubting their eyes. And Bull—

The instant the mare turned his mind leaped to the inevitable conclusion. With a roar, bellow of rage, inchoate, wild as the snarl of a balked tiger, he threw his hands on high, rifle waving like a reed in one great fist. Crash! lock, stock, and barrel, it flew in a thousand pieces as he brought it down on a rock! From the bank he leaped down to the trail, in his hot mind some mad idea of stopping the rush. But already the stampede had passed. He ran a few yards, as though to overtake and pull it back. But it swept on and down beyond his speed. Stopping, then, arms raised skyward, fists clenched, teeth bared, eyes glaring in the midst of his swollen, purple face, he stood, a towering figure of furious despair.

Into those few minutes were compressed all the agonies he had endured in the last few weeks—his trial, temptations, failure, bitter disappointment, tragic grief, crowned by this, the robbing of his just revenge. Swelling with a sense of vast injustice, the injustice that created the world on a scheme of struggle and pain, he turned maniacal eyes to the sky; stood shaking his bunched fists while a terrible blasphemy rose to his lips. But it never issued. For in the moment that it seemed his reason must crack there came slipping into his hot mind, like a cooling breath, the old vision—of Mary and Betty as on that last night.

In the sunlight that wrapped the valley, just as in the vast world loneliness under the quiet stars, he sensed her presence. His arms dropped, the mad light died. Bowing his dark face in his hands, he shook again with the throes of silent grief—but only for a short space. Presently he looked up, the old humility restored, its expression on his lips.

“‘Twasn’t for me. I wasn’t fit. ‘Twas taken out of my hands.”

Quiet now, he watched the horses careering over the bottoms. When at last Sliver joined him he gave quiet orders: “Go down, you an’ Jake, an’ collect up their guns—an’ ammunition. Bring up fresh horses for all of us an’ a couple for the packs. We’ll have to light out for the border at once.”

XL: SLIVER “MAKES GOOD”

By the time Sliver and Jake returned the sun hung like a red-hot ball in the smoke of the horizon. Even if the horses had not been tired, it was too late to start that night. Accordingly, after loading the raiders’ provisions, they rode on down into the ravine and used the glowing embers of the *fonda* for their camp-fire.

To them, sitting there, by ones and twos and threes the refugees came straggling in to gather for the night around their own fires. Going from one to another, Lee and Gordon dealt comfort and advice. They were to reap the standing corn and sow again for their own use in the secret places of the mountains. The *hacienda* cattle they could herd in the cañons of the lower hills. Thus, with plenty of milk for butter and cheese, corn, and beans, their own chickens, goats, and pigs, they would be able to live in rude comfort till the coming of peace permitted Lee’s return.

“The knowledge that they will not suffer makes it easier to bear.”

Lee spoke, looking back at the brown faces enlivened by the ruddy glare of the fires. But when, next morning, they crowded around her, old men, women, young girls, and little children, mixing prayers, blessings, and lamentations with their good-bys, she was less philosophical. She was still weeping when she looked back at those that had followed her as far as the mouth of the ravine.

“Oh, if our government could only see them! Surely they would help.”

Gordon looked for another outburst when, later, they sighted ruined Arboles from the very

spot he and Mary Mills had overlooked it. How well he remembered it! The walls and courts, *patio*, rainbow adobes, a small city of gold magnificently blazoned by the red brush of the sinking sun; the cottonwoods flaming a deep apricot under a sky that spread a canopy of saffron and cinnabar, purple and umber and gold, down to the far horizon; the soft smoke pennons trailing violet plumes off and away into the smoldering dusk of the east; the cooing of woman voices broken by laughter, low, sweet, infinitely wild. Now, roofless, windowless, its blackened walls upreared in the midst of a wide, blurred smudge. Yet though the contrast brought stinging tears to her eyes, Lee took it calmly.

“What does it matter? It can be rebuilt. But there are other things”—her voice lowered and trailed away—“that can never be replaced.”

They were both sad and sick at heart. Yet youth may not permanently be cast down. When, riding on, they left the smoke-blackened ruin behind them and passed from the dreary waste of burned pasture into golden plains she began restoration. A native carpenter could replace every loved beam; rebuild the massive old furniture just as it was. The *peones* would lime-wash the exterior in its usual rainbow color! Also, restoration would give opportunity for remodeling and improvement.

As she ran on Gordon sensed another motive; perceived that she was striving to draw Bull out of his sorrow. Not a plan that did not include him! A great fireplace, for use during the rains, was to have a comfortable settle at one side, on which the Three could lounge and smoke while basking in the blaze. Each was to have his own room. Thus and so! Nor was her prattle without effect. Always sensitive where she was concerned, Bull divined her motive, and, albeit with an effort great as a physical strain, he responded, listened, and nodded acquiescence, occasionally forced a smile.

Only Sliver was fooled. “Say,” he remarked to Jake, who rode with him in the rear, “did you allow she’d have taken it so light?”

But Jake, the keen, discerning critic, quickly opened his eyes. “Take it light, you —! —! —! —!” The epithets, if printed, would scorch a hole in the page. “Kain’t you see she’s grieving her little heart out? She’s doing it all for Bull.”

At any other time one of those epithets would probably have produced a retort that would have tumbled Jake out of his saddle. But, conscience-stricken, Sliver accepted all. With humility that was almost pathetic, he actually put into words feeling that was, for him, quite subtle. “Tain’t that I’d set in judgment on Lady-girl, on’y—I reckon it’s so with all of us—I jes’ kain’t bear to see her say or do anything that don’t jes’ fit.”

After a pause he went on: “About these plans o’ her’n? If there warn’t no revolution, an’ we ked stay along here without a break, an’ they’d destroy all the lickin’ in the world an’ forgit the art of making it, I don’t know but that we might live up to ’em. But I’m telling you, hombre, it’s been awful wearing an’ I jes’ know what a spell in El Paso ’ull do for me—I’ll be that swinish I’ll never dare to come near her ag’in.”

When Jake had admitted like feelings Sliver continued: “Sure, under them conditions, lickin’ an’ its makers being, so to say, put on the hog-train an’ run off the aidge of the earth, I’d hev’ one chanst to make good. But as ’tis, an’ seeing that she’s now settled with a fine young husband an’ kin get along very nicely, I’m sorter allowing that El Paso ’ull let me out.” While his eyes blinked guiltily and his lips quivered with anticipatory thirst, he concluded, “Sure I’m that dry ’twon’t take much temptation for me to tell my troubles to a barkeep an’ have him drown ’em in drink.”

“Nor me,” Jake seconded. “Besides, my fingers is jes’ itching to get into a game.”

“Drink, cards, flat broke—back to rustling.” Sliver laid down the law of their being. “With me it runs like, the A-B-C.”

“I drink, you drink, he drinks, we drink,” Jake chanted it *sotto voce*. “If folks wasn’t so onreasonable a feller might make an honest living. But the best tinhorn that ever turned a card from the bottom is bound to make a slip, an’ when he does—whoosh! if he’s lucky enough to make his getaway, rustling’s all that’s left.”

“Bull?” Sliver nodded at the broad back ahead. “D’you allow he’s a-going to stay put?”

Jake’s shake of the head mixed doubt with concern. “If we meet up with any Mex—we’ll never get him away. He’ll run amuck among ’em.”

Sliver’s reckless eye lit with a fighting gleam. “An’ the country’s jes’ lousy with *revueltosos*? Hombre, it’s a cinch! Not that I’d want it,” he hypocritically added, “Lady-girl being along. But if we do chance on a few—hum! what’s the exchange, jes’ now, in Valles’s money? Seven to one, heigh? Well, we’ve three rifles apiece, counting the extras on the pack-horses. One man with three rifles is as good as two men. Twice four of us makes eight. At current exchange, one gringo

for seven Mex, we orter account for fifty-six.”

“There or thereabouts,” Jake agreed. “But, as you say, Missy being along, it’s up to us to dodge ‘em.”

“Five days?” Sliver hopefully repeated. “We’d jes’ as well look out for trouble.”

Not till the morning of the third day did the “trouble” loom up over the horizon.

To avoid raiders along the railroad, Bull laid a course that would strike the American border a hundred miles or so east of El Paso. Confirming his judgment, they had seen during the first two days only a few *peon* herders, who scampered like rabbits at their approach. But while it made for safety, the course he had laid out also carried them away from water, the first necessity of desert travel.

From the Los Arboles pastures they had passed, first, into a sparse grass country dotted with *sahuaros*; thereafter into sage desert sprinkled with limestone boulders and bounded by arid hills of the same; a dry, inhospitable land, lifeless, without sign of human habitation, its heated silence unbroken by the cry of animal or bird, tenanted only by the dreary yucca that threw wild arms about like tortured dwarfs. Toward the middle of the second day they had been forced to head almost due west in search of the water that was to be had only near the railroad.

Dusk was falling when they—more correctly, the horses—found a small *arroyo*. It was so late, and the animals tired, and in order that they might drink their fill Bull took a chance and camped by the water. They did not light a fire. They ate cold food in darkness. Before dawn, too, they were in the saddle, by sunrise had placed nearly ten miles between them and the water which, just there and then, was another name for danger. As a matter of fact, Bull had not expected to get it without fighting. He had not yet ceased marveling at their luck when the “trouble” showed up in form of a line of *sombreros* behind the peak of a limestone ridge—unfortunately, to the eastward.

Jake saw them first. At his sharp hiss Bull looked, and, driving the pack-horses ahead, rode headlong for the next ridge. Looking back as they rode, Gordon saw the line of *sombreros* rise in correspondence as the land fell off. Soon a head showed; then, almost simultaneously, the ridge bristled with mounted men, a hundred at least, in bold relief against the sky-line.

“They’ve seen us!”

As he called it a yell, strident, raucous, pierced the clatter of their galloping hoofs. “Gringos! Mueran los gringos! Kill them!”

A volley followed. But, fired from the saddle in movement, the bullets chipped only a few twigs off the scenery. Scattering shots, too, flew overhead; but, intent on overtaking them, the Mexicans in the main wasted no time in shooting. They were only a couple of hundred yards away when the four men dropped from their horses behind the crest of the ridge.

Differing speed had strung the pursuers out in a scattering column, and Sliver grinned his delight at the arrangement. “Like bowling at the county fair. Miss one, you’ve still a chance at the next behind. Set ‘em up again!” he yelled as, following their volley, two men and a horse plunged forward on the ground.

“A bit lower, Son,” Bull quietly admonished Gordon. “Aim at the jine of man an’ horse. That gives you a seven-foot target.”

“One cigar, one baby down!”

Sliver’s second yell marked the fall of two more horses and another man—shot by Bull out of his saddle. Aiming and firing with the deadly accuracy bred by years of just such fighting against more sagacious foes, they dropped the leaders as fast as they came on; in three minutes had drawn a dead-line of men and horses across their front. And that deadly practice told. Brave enough, after their lights, the raiders were not accustomed to such shooting. In the revolutionary wars their own practice, like that of their opponents, was to spring up out of a trench, yell “*Viva Mexico!*” fire in the enemy’s direction, and drop back again, trusting to the god of war to find a billet for the bullet. Turning, they raced back for the opposite ridge, spurred on by the galling shooting that emptied two more saddles.

Bull’s black glance following them with longing that confirmed Jake’s diagnosis—he would have “run amuck among ‘em” if left to himself. The more steadily, perhaps, for his deadly thirst to kill, he had aimed and fired with automatic precision. Withal, he had found time to note Gordon’s steady shooting.

“You done fine, lad,” he commented. “If there was only ourselves, I’d be in favor of carrying it to ‘em. But”—his glance went to Lee, who was holding the horses—“we’ll have to fall back. They’ve had their lesson an’ ain’t a-going to try any more fool charges. Now they’ll try an’ flank

us. While Sliver an' Jake hold 'em, we'll run back to the next ridge."

But Gordon, flushed with his taste of battle, rebelled. "What's the matter with me staying? You fellows care for me like three hens scratching for an orphan chicken. I'm tired of this sheltered life."

"'Sheltered life'?" Communing with himself, Jake glanced at the grisly dead-line. "'Sheltered life,' an' him with two stretched out down there."

"Comes o' being married," Sliver added. "No married man has a right to run with batchelders."

"That's right," Jake approved. "It's up to you to look after your wife."

"Well?" Gordon protested. "How can I do it better than by staying here?"

"What?" Sliver looked scandalized. "Us take a chanst of her being widowed after all the trouble we had getting her married? No, sir-ree! Git out."

"Come on, Son, you're delaying the game." Bull had already joined Lee. His heavy command came floating up from below. Albeit with a shrug, Gordon obeyed.

The next commanding ridge lay nearly a mile away, and after the others had started back toward it Jake nodded toward the enemy. "Bet you they've split already an' are moving around us. Now if we do the same, keeping well out of sight, we'll mebbe get another crack at 'em."

And so it was. When, after a half-mile détour through limestone and sage chaparral, the halves of the raiders' party showed in the open two rifles opened in concert at points a mile apart; two more riderless horses went scampering away before the others gained back to cover. From the wide base of their triangle Jake and Sliver then came galloping back and joined Bull at its apex; and thus they moved back and back, as the nature of the country permitted, with no more danger than that of an occasional bullet, fired at long range, singing overhead.

While they retreated the sun blazed up in the east, rolled on around its southerly course, superheating the dreary prospect till it glowed like an oven. All that time Bull was looking anxiously for a cross-ridge behind which they might swing their course to the north and east. But with the regularity of the waves of the sea the ridges rolled on back in unbroken succession toward the railroad. With the enemy spread widely upon their flanks a turning movement was impossible. They could only roll back with the limestone waves, trusting that the railroad would bring forth no new enemy.

Unfortunately the desert was growing rougher. Dry watercourses crosscut the sage that now rose tall as a mounted man. The going was rendered more difficult by outcroppings of limestone that sometimes raised an impassable barrier, forcing a détour. Worst of all, the denser growths permitted closer pursuit. At the last stand made by Jake and Sliver, midway of the afternoon, bullets came spitting out of the sage less than two hundred yards away.

"If 'twas on'y black powder they was using," Sliver bitterly complained, "we'd stan' some chance. A feller could bust into the middle of their smoke."

"You're onreasonable," Jake answered. He went on, sarcastically, quoting from an editorial in the last American paper that had come to Los Arboles: "In order that these here bandits kin exercise the 'sacred right of revolution to reg'late their own internal affairs' your Uncle Samuel has kindly supplied 'em with the latest smokeless cartridge. Thanks to his benevolence, some one's going to get hurt pretty soon."

He was right. A scattering volley, fired from that very ridge after they evacuated it, overtook them in the hollow below and brought down Sliver's horse. Hanging on to Jake's stirrup leather, he made the next ridge, but one of the pack-animals had to be given to him and its load abandoned.

"An' this is on'y the beginning." Jake continued his remarks from the next ridge. "The railroad's not far away, an' as I remember the country hereabouts, she runs right out in the open, with nary a snitch of cover for over twenty miles. There'll be nothing to stop 'em from shooting us down by volleys at long range. So it all boils down to this—some one's got to hold 'em at the next good stand while the others make their getaway."

They had been carrying two rifles apiece. Now Sliver quietly appropriated Jake's extra weapon. "With three rifles I orter be good for two hours."

"When I said 'some one'—Jake quietly repossessed himself of the weapon—"I naterally allowed his name was Jake Evers. Git! before I bust you over the head."

"If 'twasn't for them"—Sliver's hard glance went out to the chaparral—"there's nothing I'd like better 'n to take time to rub your long hoss face in the dust."

The threat, however, produced from Jake only his wolf grin. "You damned fool! D'you know what's going to happen to the man that stays behind? He's a-going to be what the society

columns call 'the piece de resistance' at a Mexican barbecue. There ain't a thing in the line of torture that them bandits won't do to you."

"You ked never stan' it." Sliver displayed great solicitude. "You're getting along, Jake, an' your nerve ain't what it used to be."

"You've said it." Jake's cold eye warmed. He placed a friendly hand on Sliver's shoulder. "You're dead right, Son. I'm getting on. What's more, I'm that dyed-in-the-wool with deviltry 'twon't hurt anybody when I pinch out. But you're young yet. You'll—"

"—hit El Paso an' go straight to the devil. You know it darned well. We'll gamble for it." He spat on a pebble and threw it up. "Wet or dry, which? Wet! I win!"

"Jest my luck!" Jake's complaint was sincere as though, instead of death or torture, life and fortune had been the hazard. "I don't have no chance at all except with cards. What did I want'er go an' do that for, anyway, an' me with a deck right here in my pocket?"

"Too late!" Sliver pressed his triumph. "Now git!"

But with his usual sagacity Jake had already picked the spot for the stand. The next ridge rose so precipitously that Bull, Lee, and Gordon were having difficulty in getting up its face. North and south, too, it loomed even more inaccessible.

"'Twill take them hours to go around it with you planted square in the middle."

Sliver's glance had gone to Lee, scrambling up the steep face of the ridge, leading her horse. His hard face softened. "Don't tell Lady-girl—that is, not jes' now. Let her think I'll make my getaway to the northward. But some day, after she's safe in El Paso, you kin tell her—that Sliver was on'y too damn glad to give his life for her'n." He went on, dreamily: "'Course I knew it 'u'd be all off after I'd hit the city. But I'd sorter thought, now an' then, that if the rangers didn't get me too quick, some day I'd come back to Arboles, when her kids was about hip-high, an' teach 'em to ride an' shoot. But that was jes' a dream."

Jake's glance had gone back to the cover that sheltered the *revueltos*, and, judged by the casualty of his nod, Sliver's request might have concerned the purchase of a silk handkerchief or other trifle. But he swallowed hard, spat viciously several times before he could command speech; blushed, even then, at the softness of his tone.

"Funny, ain't it? But that's just what I'd often thought myself. Sure I'll tell her—if them devils don't down me on the next run. They're damn close now, and they'll be up here before we're half-way across. Against that limestone front we'll make some mark, an' with fifty of 'em cracking at us it 'ull be the luck of hell if they don't down one or both."

Again he was right. While, ten minutes later, they struggled among the boulders and brush at the foot of the ridge, the rifles began sputtering behind them. Right and left, above and below, bullets chipped the rocks or plumped in the dust; and just as their beasts rushed on a breathless scramble up the last steep two found their mark—one through Sliver's knee, the other dropped Jake's horse.

Almost fainting from shock and pain, Sliver still clung to the neck of his beast while, with Jake hanging on to a stirrup leather, it carried him to safety. Lee, with the pack-animals, had already moved on, was a full quarter-mile down the slope that fell easily to the great plain traversed by the railroad. Miles away they could see—not the tracks; it was too far away for that—a dark-velvet plume, smoke from an engine. Bull and Gordon still lay answering the *revueltos'* fire. But Sliver and Jake had ascended up a watercourse a hundred yards to the right, in which the dead horse lay out of sight.

"Hey!" Sliver hastily stopped Jake from calling Bull. "Let 'em go! You'll never be able to tear Lady-girl away if she knows I'm hurt. You kin take my horse; on'y lift me down first an' prop me up among the rocks where I kin lie comfortable an' pump a gun."

Having complied, Jake stood looking down upon him. For once in his rough, hard life he was shaken out of his cold, gray self. Sliver, well and hearty, fighting his lone fight was one thing. To leave him, painfully wounded, was quite another. The memory of many a wild ride with the dogs of the law hard on their heels; of desperate stands, shoulder to shoulder, the rifle of each protecting the other; of daring raids in the dark; of midnight diversions shared together; ay, even the memory of many a drunken quarrel in which they had beaten each other beyond identification and awakened next morning just as good friends; all that had gone into the making of the rough loyalty which had bound the "Three Bad Men of Las Bocas" closer than brothers—all this combined in an emotion that revolted at desertion.

"My *God*, hombre!" he broke out in protest. "I kain't leave you here, wounded, to fall in the han's of them wolves!"

"You kain't do nothing else!" Hard eyes flashing, Sliver went on: "Didn't we gamble, jest now,

for who was to stay? An' didn't I win? Now you're trying to renig?" As he noted the sweat standing out on Jake's brow, he went on more quietly: "Look at it sensible. What ked you-all do with a wounded man? You'd on'y sign Lady-girl's death warrant. And don't worry about them wolves. They ain't a-going to light no fires on my belly nor burn my feet. If I don't get done up in the scrap—the last bullet will be for myself."

Also he turned an adamant face to a proposal that Jake should stay too. "No, hombre, it's still over a hundred miles to the border, an' they need you. There's nothing left for you but to take my horse an' git."

It had all been said and done without strain, effort, or self-consciousness; was entirely the expression of his hardy, careless soul that had never known the vice of self-pity. But when Jake still stood, his long, lean face working lugubriously in his attempts to hide his grief, Sliver did that which, for him, was a miracle in divination—entered into and felt the pain of another soul.

"Oh, shore, hombre!" His face lit up with sympathy. "You orter be glad. Ain't it better to die clean, this-a-way, than to choke slowly at the end of some ranger's rope? Go on, now, an' catch up to 'em an' keep 'em moving till night. With the least bit of luck, you'll pull through all right."

As before said, not one iota of self-pity entered into Sliver's consciousness. Apart from a heavy fever and dull ache, the broken knee was behaving itself as well as could be expected and, after Jake's departure, Sliver settled down to the business in hand; *i.e.*, to inflate to the limit the current exchange of one *gringo* for seven *revueltosos*. Reckless, hardened scamp that he was, his remark, addressed to himself, had no reference to water, a canteen of which Jake had left at his elbow.

"Gosh, but I'd like a drink!"

His grin and following chuckle were natural and unaffected. "You're going to be a good boy from now on, Sliver. You've taken your last."

Pulling his Colt's .45 from his belt, he laid it with the water-bottle. "Handy for the funeral." He uttered a second grim chuckle.

The two extra rifles he placed within easy reach on his left. Then he lay quiet, hard blue eyes fixed on the opposite ridge—so quiet that a lone vulture poised above swooped down, alighted, then hopped mournfully away and stood poised on one leg, hopeful if disappointed. In recent history so much firing had invariably brought food.

From the first severe lesson when, from points a mile apart, the deadly rifles picked them off, the *revueltosos* had learned caution, only advancing when they were certain the two had retired. Riding away, Jake had exposed himself along the ridge; but, suspecting a trap, the *revueltosos* remained in hiding. Ten minutes elapsed before a couple of *sombreros* rose cautiously out of a clump of sage.

"Stuck up on sticks." Sliver criticized their wabby motion.

After a real head appeared under them he waited. When the ridge suddenly broke out in a rush of mounted men he waited. While they rode down into the valley he waited. Not until they were involved in the labyrinth of sage, watercourses, pit-holes, brush, and boulders beneath him, did he draw his first bead. Then, so swiftly that it seemed to the *revueltosos* that they were facing the fire of several men, he emptied the three rifles into the kicking, struggling, plunging line of horses and men. Four saddles he made vacant there and then. He picked off two more as the *revueltosos* raced back over the opposite ridge.

"Six added to three I got makes nine!" Sliver grunted. "A few more an' I kin afford to cash in."

He could see from where he lay for miles along the ridge, and as he noted its front rising more steeply in both directions he chuckled his satisfaction.

"You ain't a-going to try an' pass through me ag'in," he addressed the invisible foe. "An' you ain't going to leave me here. It'll take you an hour to come around. Be that time Lady-girl will be ten miles away, with night fast coming on. Jest to encourage you—"

The shot he threw into the brush opposite was the first of a series designed to keep the *revueltosos'* attention upon himself, and when, half an hour later, he glimpsed men without horses scaling the steep face of the ridge nearly a mile away he knew that he had succeeded.

"They reckon we're all here, trying to stick it out till night," he correctly interpreted the movement. "It 'ull take 'em another half-hour to find out."

A glance in the other direction showed a second party emerging from the brush beyond rifle-shot. While it crossed the valley and scaled the face of the ridge he watched quietly. A little later he began throwing shots in both directions along the ridge.

"Not that I'm expecting to bag any of youse," he addressed the unseen enemy. "But just to slow you up a bit an' let you know I'm here. When you get there"—his glance took in scrub-clothed elevations that commanded his post on both sides—"good-by an' *good* night."

Of all ordeals, there can be none more severe than to be called upon to wait, wait, wait while an unseen enemy is closing in around. Yet Sliver stood the test. If he felt the passage of time, it was because he counted each minute, each second in yards—the hundreds, scores of yards Lee and his friends were gaining on the pursuit. He had fought all day in heat and dust and smoke; the grime of battle added to his grimness. While he waited the sun rolled down the west, transmuting the scorched slopes into a wonderland of cinnabar, sienna, crimson, ocher; a huge oven aglow with the hot slag of creation. But its rich lights showed neither fear nor softening in Sliver's face when, from the spot he had long noted, a rifle spoke.

It was the signal for a leaden rain that began to spatter the rocks about him. It was now only a question of time. He knew it. But till that time came he replied to the fire. He was aiming into the heart of a puff of smoke when the death he had gambled so recklessly with these many years claimed the stakes.

He turned slightly sideways as his head collapsed on his outstretched arm, and through the grime and powder smoke, in the rich evening lights, his face showed with its hard lines all sponged out.

Sliver, the outlaw, gambler, drunkard, horse-thief, turned up to the low sun the quiet, peaceful face his mother had looked down upon as a child.

XLI: JAKE BETTERS THE "EXCHANGE"

By the time Jake caught up with the others that inner humane being, whose occasional appearances caused him so much disconcertion, had withdrawn within his usual cynical shell. His face, when Lee inquired for Sliver, expressed surprise that she should have thought it worth while to inquire.

"*Him?* Oh, he's back there a-holding 'em off while we gain a spell."

Though delivered with masterly unconcern, his explanation did not altogether relieve her anxiety. "But—how will he find us again?"

Jake's shrug was fine in its indifference. "He'll play a lone han', Missy; plug straight for the border. Being alone that-a-way, he'll likely beat us to it."

"You really think so?"

"He'll be there to meet us."

Jake's tone carried conviction even to Gordon. Only Bull was not deceived. After the other two had ridden on he looked at Jake. A lift of the eyebrow, slight shake of the head, touch of the forefinger to the knee—he knew all. Thereafter each burst of rifle-fire, long pause, explained itself. He saw Sliver waiting till the *revueltosos* came out in the open. The slow rhythm of later shots showed him firing along the ridge. A sudden burst of sharpshooting at sundown, following silence, explained themselves. His glance at Jake, the latter's slow shake of the head, signaled then that all was over.

While they were traveling down the long slope toward the railroad the sun had lowered till they could see the telegraph-poles running, a sharp black fence, across the smoldering sky. Southward a toy station rose from the dead-flat plain under a velvet plume of smoke. Bull had laid his course to cross the tracks miles ahead of it. By traveling all night, they could then gain the mountains that bared iron teeth along the western sky-line; but they would be no nearer the border than when they began the fight that morning.

The thought was strong in their minds when Jake leveled his range glasses at the dark smoke plume. "Enjine an' five cars."

He handed the glasses to Bull, and before the latter's keen sight the lenses laid the familiar outlines, of a revolutionary train, a-bristle on top with humanity. Even at the distance, the flash and flare of gay *rebozos* told they were mostly women, and that told all. "Nobody there but

women and wounded. Belongs to the gang that's chasing us."

"A hundred miles to El Paso," Jake spoke. "Three days' horseback? Three hours with that old mogul?"

"Golly!" The idea fastened on Gordon. "Couldn't we?" In place of their present plodding he saw the telegraph-poles, rocks, hills, flying past as they sped northward in the engine.

"On'y women and wounded?" Jake repeated it, musingly.

"Dark in half an hour?" Bull added: "They kedn't tell us from their own. 'Course we should lose the horses." With his accustomed caution he read the reverse of the shield. "If anything went wrong—we'd be left afoot on the desert."

"No worse than we are," Jake argued. "These beasts have been running sence daylight; are clean plugged out. Even if they carry us across to the mountains we're not sure of feed nor water—an' still a hundred miles from the border."

"But Sliver?" Lee protested. "We can't leave him."

She was looking at Bull. He looked at Jake, who looked away, in his mind a picture of Sliver dead among the rocks. Then with that readiness and steadiness that had always filled poor Sliver with envy he lied to a good end. "The last thing he tol' me, Missy, was not to wait. "Twould hinder me an' hinder you-all. I'll make my run alone."

"Very well." Her sigh would have fitted an anxious mother who felt that her boy would be safer under her own eye. "Very well, but I *do* wish he were here."

Again Bull glanced at Jake, who once more looked away; but neither spoke.

While riding slowly forward Bull laid out their plan. "It 'ull be up to you an' Missy," he told Gordon, "to take care of the engineer while Jake an' me stan' off the crowd. She kin hold a gun to his head while you pitch the stuff aboard."

The sun had now set. The dusk thickened as they advanced and through its warm curtain presently broke the distant gleam of cooking-fires. Some were down on the tracks; others on the car-roofs built on rude hearths of earth within stone circles. When Bull called a halt and surveyed the scene through the glasses it presented the familiar spectacle of a *revueltosos'* train-camp: women bending over the fires; some on their knees at the *metates*, others stirring their clay cooking-pots, all gossiping at their work. Here and there a man's face showed in the fire glow; but always an arm in a sling, crutch, or bandage explained his presence there. Unsuspecting, believing that in those wide spaces the railway presented the one avenue of attack, they kept no watch; were stricken dumb when, half an hour thereafter, a stern command to hold up their hands issued from the darkness beyond the firelight. Only one man raised a gun, and as Bull's rifle spat he threw up his hands and plunged headlong from the top of the car to the ground.

Squatted, at supper, with his women by a fire under the lee of the mogul, the Mexican engineer proved easy game. A poke in the side from Gordon's gun emphasized his command to cut the engine off the train. Trembling, the fellow obeyed and stood mute, shaking with fear, with Lee's gun pressed into the nape of his neck, while Gordon pitched their stuff into the cab. When, moreover, after firing a few warning shots along the length of the train, Jake and Bull climbed aboard he opened wide the throttle and sent the mogul spinning northward.

The instant they started Gordon grabbed the fireman's shovel. "Here's where I fulfil one of my kid ambitions."

Looking back from the seat where she had climbed beside Bull to watch the tracks ahead, Lee saw his face focused in brilliant red light as he shoveled and raked the clinker off the bars. Jake, with his usual caution, sat with the engineer; from whom he prodded valuable information with the muzzle of his gun.

His strident repetitions thereof carried above the roar and rattle of the speeding engine across the cab. "He says the half of Valles's army is scattered like pin feathers afore a north wind!... With what's left he's making a las' stan' north of Chihuahua!... He still bosses all the country from here to Juarez!... This outfit was out raiding haciendas to supply the new base!" The next item of news he delivered with a cheer. "Hooray! the line's open clean to the border! He don't know of any trains being run to-night! Thinks we'll have a clear track!"

Just then lights and the ruddy glow of fires flashed out as the engine came spinning out of a cut through low hills. It was merely a section gang, and as they sped past they obtained a glimpse of curious brown faces.

They suggested Bull's question, "Ask him if there's any *revueltosos* on the way."

"At La Mancha!" Jake yelled back. "About thirty miles this side of the border!... Half of the *brigada* Gonzales is holding the town for Valles!"

The *brigada* Gonzales! The command that had furnished the murderers of Mary Mills. A

spasm of hate writhed over Bull's dark face. His big hands clenched. He turned and looked out of the cab window till he regained control of his voice.

"Does he allow we kin run through there?"

Jake nodded. "If we douse the headlight and race by afore they have time to block us."

Looking back, just then, at Gordon, now stripped to his undershirt and growing sootier every minute, Lee heard the answer. She did not, however, give it much thought. The hills and rocks that took on queer shapes in the dim light of a rising moon, giant *sahuaros* that went slipping past like huge ghosts, the occasional fires and lights, glimpses of strange brown faces, the rush and roar of the engine speeding through mysterious night, held her senses. Yet it stuck in her mind, came popping out when, as the engine rounded a sharp curve, the headlight beam struck full on a sheaf of glittering wires.

"Oh!" she called out in sudden alarm. "We ought to have cut the wires!"

It was a vital error. Gordon's whistle expressed their joint dismay; but Jake, with his intense practicability, recovered first. "Well, what's to do—stop an' cut them?"

Bull shook his head. "Too late! We've been running over an hour. Nothing left but to take a chanst."

Jake nodded. But presently he spoke again. "Chanst? If they pull up a rail an' ditch us at La Mancha, I'd hardly call it a chanst with half of the brigada Gonzales shooting us up from all around. We'd be pickled for keeps."

During their "rustler days" it had always been Jake's craft that pulled them out of tight places. Habit held Bull silent till, after he had spoken to the engineer, Jake went on: "He says the track runs two per cent. down into La Mancha. We kin shut off steam an' pussy-foot it the last few miles. So here's the dope. We drop you-all"—his glance took in the others—"a mile this side of the station, give you two hours to go around, then shoot ahead. If we get through, you-all strike a light an' we'll stop and pick you up. If we don't—we don't. But you'll be less 'n thirty miles from the border an' have all night to make your getaway."

"But—"

Gordon's objection, however, was nipped by Bull. "It goes."

Lee, however, was not so easily silenced. Climbing down, she crossed the wobbling cab with unsteady steps and caught Jake's arm. "Oh, don't take the risk. We'll abandon the engine. Come with us!"

Looking down into her face, Jake's bleak eyes were almost soft. He gently patted her hand. "Now don't be jumping at conclusions, Missy. We need the engine to go on, but I ain't a-going to commit suicide. If the tracks are blocked we'll back right off. Then I'll take to the bushes an' follow you round."

With that she had to be content. But, realizing the danger, she climbed up and sat beside him while the mogul rolled and racked and plunged forward through the night. She was still sitting there when, an hour later, a headlight flashed up far away.

"They've wired ahead!" Bull yelled across the cab. "Make him stop, Jake! We'll take to the bushes here."

"Oh! now you come with us!" Lee cried.

But Jake's answer wiped out her happiness. "No, Missy, I'll pull 'em along for a few miles while you-all make your getaway afore I drop off."

Already the throttle was closed. Slowing under the brakes, the mogul glided to a stop. Leaping down, Gordon caught the provisions, ammunition, and rifles as Bull threw them down. Meanwhile Lee stood looking up at Jake with wide, distressed eyes.

"Come on, dear!" Gordon called up from below.

"No time to waste." Bull touched her shoulder.

Still she stood. "Oh, I hate to leave you. *Do* come!"

"Oh, shore!" Jake laughed, patting her cheek. "I'll jine you in a few hours—or at El Paso, if I miss you here."

Because of his cynical outer crust, she had given him, perhaps, the least affection of the Three. But in the last few weeks she had sensed beneath it his loyal human feeling. Now, trembling, she put out her hand, then, reaching suddenly, she pulled down his head and kissed his cheek. The next second she leaped from the cab into Gordon's arms.

Bull had already jumped. Left alone, Jake stood still while the engineer threw the reversing lever and opened the throttle. As the mogul began to glide slowly backward he raised his hand and touched the spot her lips had pressed. Perhaps it revived some memory of his boyhood, some reverent memory of the days when other women than wantons had held him in love and respect.

His face was very soft; so soft and tender it would never have been recognized by his dance-hall flames.

The engine had moved back a hundred yards with increasing speed before he even moved. Then just as ice spreads its frozen mask over pleasant waters so the outer crust that hid the real Jake from the undiscerning spread again over his lantern features. In sudden shame at being caught by himself in such softness, he turned furiously upon the engineer.

"What are you grinning at?"

The man was not. He was far too much afraid. But though he asserted his seriousness with profuse apologies, it made no difference to Jake.

"The trouble with you, Alberto, ain't that you Mexicans are a dirty, lying, thieving, murdering lot so much as you're too plumb ignorant to know your betters when they chanst around. In that brown pudding you call a face there ain't a gleam to show you're sensible of the honor you've just been paid. You don't know it, Alberto, an' you probably never will, but take it from me that if you was president of this rotten country 'twouldn't come near it. If I don't blow the top of your head off during the next hour—which I likely will—you'll be able to tell it to your descendants that a white girl once rode in your cab. If they're smart they won't believe you. But it's the closest to fame you'll ever get, so play it for all it's worth. Now listen, Alberto"—he shook his finger in the engineer's frightened face—"if you ever expect to hand it down to them descendants aforesaid, cut out them grins and get down to business."

Delivered in English, the harangue flew high over the Mexican's head. But it did Jake lots of good. Having, as it were, palliated his shameful emotions, he followed his own advice and turned to the business in hand.

"How far is that engine, Alberto?" He poked the question in with his gun.

"Five miles, señor."

"Jest an engine?"

"No, señor, it rides too steadily. It draws two cars; no more or it could not take the grade at this speed."

"How long afore they catch us?"

"Ten more miles, señor. They travel two to our one."

"All right, slow up a bit."

With hollow clank of drivers the mogul moved on at slackened speed until less than half a mile intervened. It was running, of course, reversed, and across the intervening space the headlights stared. When, obedient to Jake's order, the throttle was thrown wide again the two engines ran like giant insects through the night, one in chase of the other, thundering across bridges, whizzing around curves, shooting through cuts, chimneys spitting smoke and flame, headlights flashing defiance like fiery eyes.

All the while Jake timed the distance. "Cut her off a notch," he ordered when the mogul began to gain. "I wanter draw 'em on as far as I kin."

But out of the dim smoke that trailed behind the pursuing engine broke, just then, a series of red flashes in furious staccato. The drumming reports were drowned in the roar and clank of the racing engines; but the hail of bullets that rattled and glanced from the mogul's side was unmistakable.

"Machine-guns!" Jake exclaimed. "Chuck her into high, Alberto!" As, under a full head of steam, the engine picked up and ran through the night like a frightened girl, he added: "Sheer accident, they hit us, anyway. They kain't do it again."

Proving his words, the next burst of firing went wide. Only one bullet struck the cowcatcher, and, leaping like a horse from the spur, the mogul launched in dizzy flight down grade; had drawn two miles ahead by the time she took the next sharp curve.

"Hold her at that," Jake ordered.

But again he had failed to reckon with the wires, which, after blocking their advance, now cut off retreat. Shortly thereafter came a flash of light as the engine shot from a cut through the first of the series of stations they had passed on their way up.

In accordance with the inscrutable law which governs the location of Mexican stations, it stood a half-mile from the little adobe town that dragged its unclean, brown skirts across the tracks. If the inhabitants thereof had been content to obey telegraphed orders to build an obstacle and let it go at that, the mogul would probably have gone into the ditch without a second's warning. But, desiring to see the smash, they had lighted a huge fire alongside the tracks, and under its glare the pile of ties, earth, and stones stood out plain as by day. Wheels grinding, blue sparks shooting from the sanded rails, the mogul stopped within a hundred yards.

After he had closed the throttle and thrown on the brakes the engineer's eye had gone to the cab door. Then it switched to the ugly, black muzzle of Jake's gun. Releasing the brakes, he reversed and opened the throttle.

A sputter of musketry had followed the first yell of disappointment that went up from the rabble of *peon* watchers. Fired from ancient pieces, however, the bullets fell short or rebounded like peas from the mogul's sides. Picking up her stride, she outran their feeble pursuit in a hundred yards.

It was then that the engineer's voice rose in protest: "But, señor, we shall run into the other train! Mira! Mira! it is now only a mile away!"

Jake's eye measured the distance. Then, in dry soliloquy that, even if it had not been couched in English, would still have gone over the other's head, he spoke. "Do you know what a *maquina loca* is, Alberto? You don't? You s'prise me." Scared out of his small wits, the poor devil had not even answered. "It's the one great invention your pais has produced. 'Twas first used by Mr. Orozco shortly after he graduated from a mule's tail to be commander-in-chief of Madero's army. He designed it for the extirpation of Huertistas that got to tagging after him like these gents is trailing us. 'Twas very simple. He'd load up half a ton of dynamite on an engine cowcatcher an' turn her loose with the throttle wide open jest where she'd catch a troop-train in a blind cut. Mighty effective, it was, too. Some o' them Huertistas was so elevated above their normal they hain't finished raining down yet. Of course we're shy on the dynamite. But a forty-ton mogul careering along at sixty miles an hour ain't to be despised. Anyway, we'll try it. At this gait we orter catch 'em in the cut beyond the station. Hit her up."

While talking he had not been idle. First he laid his rifle by the cab door, ready to jump; then slipped over his head and shoulder the bandoliers of cartridge-clips Gordon had left for him. Meanwhile the Mexican's frightened glance swung between him and the tracks which were slipping faster and faster under the mogul. Beyond the station a faint glow, reflection from its headlight, marked the entrance of the *revueltosos'* train into the cut. In his mind the engineer's horror, burning, mangling, scalding, fought for supremacy with his fear of Jake—and won. Selecting the moment that the latter's two hands were engaged with the bandoliers, the engineer crossed the cab in one leap and plunged down and out.

"You son of a gun!" Grabbing his rifle, Jake jumped after.

But in the few seconds that elapsed between their leaps the mogul carried Jake a hundred yards. A second to a bump and each roll as he struck rebounded and turned over and over lost more time. A few more were required before he picked himself up. Then his glance went after the mogul, now shooting like a comet toward the cut from which the *revueltosos'* train had just emerged. In the glare of the headlights each vividly illuminating the other, like two dragons breathing fire and smoke, they flew at each other's throats.

Came a yell! a crash! Then darkness, hazy with steam, wiped out all but screams and agonized curses.

"God!" It burst from Jake. "If Bull could on'y have been here!"

Both while in the air and rolling over and over he had an impression that he must have jumped almost on top of the engineer. But now, looking around, he became aware—first, that he was standing directly opposite the station; second, of a dark figure in the lighted doorway; third, of a flash, pistol-crack, of a bullet singing by his ear; lastly of a baker's dozen of other dark figures rushing at him from all around.

In a pinch—how well Sliver and Bull had known it!—Jake could always be counted upon to do the unexpected. Behind him stretched an open, moonlit plain where he would be easily shot down or overtaken. Grabbing the bull by the horns, he rushed straight at the figure in the doorway. Into its dark midst went the butt of his rifle. Bang! he slammed the door, a heavy, three-inch affair of oak that fitted against stone jambs and lintels; was secured by iron swing-bars. As he dropped these in place the panels quivered under the impact of many shoulders. Leaving the man he had overthrown writhing and holding his middle, Jake crossed quickly to the window.

In readiness for just such contingencies, its iron grill had been set out six inches to permit a raking fire along the wall, and shooting at ten feet into the convulsive movement at the door Jake's first shot dropped a man. As the others dodged around the corner a yell told of another wounded.

A smaller window commanded that side, and, crossing over, Jake raked the fugitives in their flight with a galling fire till the last dim figure disappeared in the brush. Then, after he had noted with satisfaction that the window rose high above the ground, he turned to his captive, who still lay groaning on the floor.

"Git up!"

Steel eyes and ugly pistol muzzle enforced the order.

The man, a fat Mexican with a yellow, bilious face and small, beady eyes, arose. "If you will only let me live, señor—"

"Shut up!" Jake cut him off. "You're the station agent?"

"Si, señor!"

"What's in those boxes?"

"Powder, señor, giant powder that was brought in by revueltosos from a gringo mine. It is to be shipped on the train to-morrow to Valles, who will have it made into bombs for use in his trenches."

"Thought so." Jake grinned at the pile of boxes. "'Tain't no trick to tell gringo dynamite. The markings fairly scream, 'Made in America!' So Valles is going to make bombs of it? Well, well!"

"Señor, you will—"

"Now, Alberto, cut that out." Having thus transferred the cognomen from the engineer to his present captive, Jake went on. "That precious existence o' yourn depends altogether upon your paisanos outside. The longer I hold 'em off the longer you live. Get it? Bueno! Now trot over to the window. The second you see any one—yelp! If you don't—" He tapped his gun significantly.

The agent thus placed, he looked around the room, The blackened stone of the walls told that it had already been burned in one or other of the revolutions. He grinned again, noting that the original roof had been replaced with laminated iron. "Kain't roast us out, anyway, Alberto."

On the rough table a one-wick lamp shed light over the usual litter of a small freight-office. These days there was little real business. Only a few barrels and bundles stood with the dynamite against the back wall. Crossing the room, Jake pried off the lids, then, while the agent watched him with fearful eyes, he carried and piled the boxes in a solid block close to the table. That done, he returned to the larger window.

Beyond the tracks the plains ran off and away under the moonlight. Northward a cloud of steam hung over the cut, cloaking the salvage of dead and wounded from the wreck. From it issued an occasional cry, command, mutter of voices. Raising his rifle, he sighted into the midst, then dropped it again.

"'Tain't square, shooting wounded." But there was no pity in his eyes. His mouth drew into a hard grin as he muttered: "I'd like to know jest how many I got! Must have been a tidy mess. Well, well! look who's here!"

It was a bullet that had flattened against the stone lintel. His quick eye had picked the flash out of a bunch of chaparral a couple of hundred yards away, and he searched the patch with sweeping muzzle emptying the chamber along its front. Then he waited. But came no answer.

"Afraid I've spoiled another of your colleagues." He turned to the agent. "They ain't very keen, anyway. You Mexes like a sure thing. It's a cinch they're not a-going to try anything till the moon goes down, an' I simply kain't waste any more of my valuable time on them. You kin keep watch, Alberto."

Seating himself at the table, he produced the pack he always carried and laid out the first cards in a game of solitaire. As he played game after game Jake's brow puckered, the corners of his mouth loosened and tightened again in accordance with the fluctuations of his luck. He could not have been more interested, absorbed if, instead of playing with fate on the edge of the grave, he were cleaning out cowboys in a frontier bunk-house.

In the eyes of the Mexican, watching fearfully, the cold, grim face loomed in the yellow lamplight, a mask of terror. Yet his fright held him the more closely to his work. Not a leaf stirred in the brush, puff of dust raised under the night wind, without his notice; and while he watched the darkening plains one second, the grim, hard face under the gold of the lamp the next, Jake played steadily on, played till, having compassed her circle, the moon rolled down to the horizon and hung poised, a huge silver ball, on the tip of a far-off peak.

Rising, then, he walked to the large window, threw the shutters and looked out over the plains, dim and mysterious in the fading light. A stir of movement, buzz of voices, told of the attack that was preparing in the chaparral behind the station. The hard line of his mouth curled in derision, but as his gaze traveled northward to where the black peak now pierced the bright face of the moon its contempt faded.

Lee's face, whitely anxious for him, was in his mind, the thrill of her arms around his neck, when he murmured, "On'y thirty miles to the border, a clean getaway."

Ranging southward again, his glance brought up on the dim, dark range that marked Sliver's last stand. Once more Jake saw him lying, face turned up, among the rocks. But the vision

brought no grief. His small nod expressed merely approbation. Till the moon went out and darkness settled over the plains he stood there, thinking; stood till, with a sharp ping! a bullet whistled past his ear. Then, after closing the shutters, he returned to the table—not any too soon; for as he sat down and picked up the cards came the crash of a volley fired at short range, the splitting and splintering of bullet-pierced shutters.

Through all, as a rat in a corner might watch a cat, the agent had watched him with deadly fascination. From the north window where he stood it was but a step to the door. Apparently Jake did not notice him take it, for he did not look up—even when the agent's hand touched the upper bar.

"If I was you, Alberto, I'd come away from there."

The agent froze. But Jake had spoken in English. The hand went again to the bar, was slowly lifting it when, following a second splintering crash, he fell forward on his face with a hollow cough.

"Through the lungs, I reckon." Jake looked down at the gross body, writhing in its death agony. "I told you to keep away, Alberto."

The man's last convulsive clutch had swung the upper bar clear of its sockets, but Jake did not move. The lower bar still held and, standing up, he watched the oaken panels quiver and split under heavy blows. With rhythmic regularity came the crash of volleys fired point-blank into the shutters. Bullets, too, were spitting through the side window—to strike and flatten on the opposite wall. Over all, above the crash of rifle-fire, thud of the beam they were using on the door, rose the roar and howl of a blood-mad *peon* rabble.

"The hull town has come to the funeral," Jake muttered. "Well, they'll see some wake."

As the door crashed in he stooped and blew out the light. Darkness fell through the room—darkness that pulsed with convulsive movement. Over the body of the agent the leaders tripped and fell. Upon them others piled in a heap, yet under the pressure of the howling crowd outside still others streamed in. Above the oaths, curses, mad howls, rose yells for some one to bring a light.

Presently it came, a piece of engine waste soaked in alcohol at the end of a stick; and when it did, the rolling eyeballs, furious faces, vicious mouths, stood out for a second, writhing in murderous lust, then set in sudden horror.

For the bluish flare fell full on a grim figure, tall, lean, topped with a hard face, steel-point eyes. The muzzle of Jake's gun touched the top layer of powder. Cold, weird, satanic, he must have loomed in their vision as the Evil One in whose existence they all believed. Paralyzed by the impending doom, some stood staring. Others, screaming hoarsely, fought in vain to beat back through the crowd. Till the last moment, yes, till one hardier scoundrel raised a gun, Jake held them in torture, then—

Both shots were wiped out by the tremendous explosion whose thunder and red sky-flash were heard and seen by Bull fifteen miles away.

XLII: BULL DREAMS A DREAM!

After the mogul glided away, Bull, Lee, and Gordon crouched in the sage-brush while the *revuelto* engine approached. With a roar it came at them out of the night, its beam light shooting an angry glance ahead. For a moment they saw it on the high railroad bank in black silhouette against the moonlit sky; an engine and two box-cars that swung and swayed under a heavy top load of soldiers beneath a luminous trail of smoke. On the first car a machine-gun showed in skeleton outline on spider legs. For a second the train loomed in their sight, then roared past, leaving the moon staring down at them through a yellow cloud of dust.

Rising, Bull held a brief council. The eastern hills had swung in while they traveled northward, now lay only a few miles away.

"We'll gain into them a piece, then rest up for a couple of hours," he said. "We kain't afford more. On foot, this-a-way, we'll have to travel at night an' hide up during the day—unless we

chance on a *rancho* where we kin steal horses! Of course, it's terrible on you, Missy. But if you kin stan' it for a little longer—" He stopped as Lee shook, as he thought, with a sob.

It was, however, merely a little laugh strangled at birth by tire and trouble. "It seemed so funny that I, with hundreds of horses of my own, should have to turn rustler." With a little mothering pat that somehow reversed their positions and brought him, the big, dark giant, under her fostering care, she added: "Don't worry about me. If I could only make you some coffee! Do something to justify my existence! Here, give me a rifle. I can at least carry something."

But Gordon took it from her. Bull shouldered the cartridges and provisions. Then, like dim ghosts, they moved over the desert, winding through sage, *palo verde*, stinkbrush, on their way to the obscure hills. Though Lee pleaded, time and again, to carry something, they obstinately refused—and it was well that they did. When Bull called a halt, at last, on the crest of the first hill she stood weaving and swaying until Gordon seated her on a flat rock.

"Don't dare to move," he ordered, "till I get you something to eat."

They had left of their own provisions only coffee, crackers, and salt meat. But after "Alberto" cut off the engine Gordon had "requisitioned" his *tortillas* and chile stew—plenty for three. Once again Lee wished she could make them coffee. Fire being impossible, her dominant instinct still found a vent. While Gordon sat munching leathery *tortillas* his head was suddenly seized; with her wet handkerchief she washed the engine soot off his face.

Neither did Bull escape. "There!" Bestowing a little, loving box on Gordon's ear, she turned on Bull. The cool, damp, soft hands seized and washed and wiped his black visage just as though he had been a child. Whereafter she gave a little sigh of satisfaction.

"Well, you're *half*-clean, anyway."

Like two boys they looked up at her through the dusk. Gordon had taken his punishment with a grin. Now he paid for it with a kiss that drew from Bull a grave smile. "Sleep, now, you kids," he admonished them. "Two hours an' we'll have to be moving again."

"You, too!" Lee insisted.

Exhausted by days of riding and fighting, she and Gordon slid almost at once into the deep, dreamless slumber of tired youth. Till the slower rhythm of their breathing informed him of the fact, Bull lay quiet. Then, rising stealthily, he stood over them, a dim giant figure guarding their sleep while the moon sailed down to the mountains. Fifteen miles to the southward Jake was playing his last lone "hand." He was in Bull's mind when a distant rumble followed a flash that lit the night sky with calcium red.

"Something doing there." Though he could have no accurate knowledge, Bull nevertheless put his intuition into words. "Bet you Jake had a finger in it."

Stooping, he awoke the sleepers, then shouldering the rifles and provisions, led off in the gloom, leaving Gordon to help Lee. And she needed it. The nap had left her sleepier than ever. Like a child aroused in the night, she yawned, stretched; still her eyes would not open.

Yet she made light of it. "My feet seem to belong to some one else. All the time they are trying to go off by themselves. Outch!"

It was the barbed thorn of a *nopal*, which hurt worse coming out than it did going in; the first of a series. Indeed, "cat's claws" and "crucifixion thorns" lay everywhere in prickly ambush. "Spanish bayonet" scratched their shoes, scored their leather puttees. Now the sage would rise high above their heads, then leave them to scramble in the open among limestone boulders. Stripped to its bones by torrential rains of the last season, the ground heaved and tossed in pits and hummocks. In daylight it would have been heavy going. By night it was heart-breaking. When, after an hour of it, Bull called a halt the two laid down at once; in five seconds were fast asleep.

This time he allowed only twenty minutes, then got them up and pressed on again. So, alternately walking and sleeping, they gained ten miles to the north and east before dawn burst, a red explosion, through the first pale lights.

Its weird illumination revealed the same dreary expanse of limestone and scrub desert they had fought over the preceding day. It also showed Lee, pale, tired, limping, but cheerful.

She nodded when Bull proposed that they should keep on till sunrise. "To be sure! We'll have all day to rest."

"I didn't mean, though, for you to walk no more." Stooping suddenly, he rose with her sitting on his shoulder.

"Your weight ain't no more to me than a fly," he replied to her protest; and while the weird red lights faded to amber washes and these brightened into a fierce sunblaze, he carried her on to a *mesa* that raised its limestone face like the walls of an old castle from the boulders and sage.

"'Tain't safe to go on," he said, setting her down. "You'd think, to look around, there wasn't a living thing within a hundred thousand miles. But you never kin tell. The desert has eyes that see without being seen; voices that tell of a stranger without being heard. Sometimes it is a herder in search of strays; sometimes a rustler hiding from the *rurales*; but there's always some one. We'll stop while it's safe."

He was right. Already they had been seen—by a *peon* who had been driven by the good looks of his woman to seek a harborage by a secret spring from *revuelto* lovers. But the tale of their passing did not go forth by him. Already he and his woman were trudging at the heels of their burro deeper into the desert. But only twelve miles away "Alberto," the engineer, was pointing out their footprints to the troop of *revueltos* he had guided up the line.

"Here it was they got off, el capitan. See the marks of their feet? These little ones no larger than a child's are those of the woman."

"A white girl, thou sayest?" the leader asked.

"Si, señor, an Americana white as milk. Dressed she was in man's riding-clothes that showed her very shapely. She will make the fine mate for thee."

"There should be *some* pay." The *capitan* went on, with a vile oath. "Twenty of us, see you, mashed by the engine the gringo loosed upon us; si, mashed to a pulp. As many more cleaned of hair and hide like pigs come out of a scald. Slow roasting would have been the least I had dealt that gringo. But he goes out like"—he blew out the match with which he was lighting his cigarette—"this! and takes a hundred more of us with him. Bueno!" His shrug accepted that which could not be undone. "They are gone, our *compañeros*, but we shall meet again—in hell. But these others, the girl and her men, shall pay."

At his order, his men, about a dozen, strung out on a line the units of which rode a quarter-mile apart. Riding slowly, beating the country to the north and east as they went, they approached Bull's limestone castle just as the shortening shadows proclaimed high noon.

After Lee and Gordon had eaten and lain down, Bull had built over them a rough *ramada* of sage-brush to protect them from the sun. Then, sitting in the shadow, he had held his tireless watch. While the *revuelto* line was still miles away his keen eyes picked up the individual dust clouds that marked its units serpentine across the sage. He knew, yet let them approach almost within rifle-shot before he woke up Gordon, so carefully that Lee slept on.

"There ain't many of 'em," he whispered. "We must make 'em sick at the first shooting. I'm going to slip along the ridge to get that second man. Let yourn come right to the foot of the bluff. Wait till you kin see his eyes; then bust him where he's biggest."

Yesterday's fighting had absorbed most of Gordon's thrills. But now, as he lay looking down at the *revuelto* coming on a little, ambling jog, he sustained a queer revulsion. Yesterday he had lain and loaded and fired as steadily as any of the Three. But, somehow, this seemed different—as different as a duel from a cavalry charge. His Anglo-Saxon instinct for fair play revolted at this ambushing of a single man. When, pausing at the foot of the bluff, the fellow looked up Gordon experienced an absurd impulse to rise and shoot from the shoulder after fair warning.

But while he hesitated Lee turned in her sleep and sighed. It stiffened him, that gentle sigh. A glance along the ridge showed Bull sighting from behind a rock. Drawing his own bead, he fired.

At the crack of the rifle Lee slid from under the *ramada*, startled and wide-eyed, in time to see the man collapse in the saddle, then slide headlong to the ground. Bull's man was also down, and as the riderless horses threw up their heads and galloped away the dust clouds along the sage whirled back and combined half a mile away.

By that time Bull had returned, and as they moved on back he pointed at a gap in a low range that drew its jagged line across the horizon. "That is the Tejon Pass—about ten miles away. The American border is on'y twelve beyond. Mexicans never fight in the dark. If we kin hold 'em till then we'll have all night to climb through the Pass."

They made a good gain while the *revueltos* were recovering from that first sharp lesson. By the time the latter had described a wide circle around the bluff Bull had taken up a second position on a smaller elevation, and held it while Lee and Gordon retired still further.

Thus began a repetition of the previous day's fighting—with this disadvantage, lacking horses in open country devoid of the limestone ridges that afforded natural barriers, and surrounded most of the time with tall sagebrush, they had to keep up a constant fire, searching the brush with their bullets to keep the *revueltos* from crawling up on them. It was hot work, slow work, laborious work, growing all the time more dangerous, for, following up in a wide circle, the *revueltos* brought its ends around until, just before sundown, a shot fired directly from their

rear informed Bull that their investure was complete.

It was not, however, for long. While Gordon threw bullets around the circle, checking its constriction, Bull crept through the sage till he sighted, at last, a light smoke puff issuing from a bush. He aimed into the middle of it and, following the crack of his rifle, a man leaped up, then fell forward.

So began again the retreats which continued while the lowering sun set the Tejon range on fire above a desert of lavender and purple. At dusk a huge, flat moon rose and hung like a polished shield on the horizon's dark wall. Sailing on up, it flooded the desert with quiet radiance, supplying light for their tired feet. As they journeyed the dim mass of the range rose higher and higher till it blotted out the stars. Shortly thereafter they entered the Pass.

From its mouth a mule path wound up between high rocky walls, then fell, hours later, into a narrow valley, where they found a spring and pool, at which they refilled their water-bag. It was hard to leave. But after they had drunk and washed the dust from their faces Bull hoisted Lee on his shoulder again; with tireless strength carried her on up the trail to a plateau almost at the height of land that overlooked the valley. So tired was she Gordon had to keep her awake while she ate the dole of crackers and salt meat, the last of their provisions. Then, gathering her to him, he fell, with her, into dreamless sleep.

Again, to please her, Bull had feigned sleep. Again he returned to his ceaseless watch. Not since he left the train five nights ago had he closed his eyes. Yet his mind functioned as usual. Just as his body was accustomed to move, ride, walk under the heat of a desert sky, so his thoughts flashed and faded in the sultry heat of his brain. If anything, it was stimulated. His vision reached farther; he saw with crystal perception, grasped mental conceptions beyond his normal. As he gazed down on the sleeping pair his mind reached out beyond the danger of the hour.

Unconscious of his kindly scrutiny, the two slept on, Lee gathered in the curve of Gordon's arm, fair head pillowed on his breast, both faces turned up in the moonlight. Exhaustion had drained most of the girl's color, and, the redder for it, the arched bow of her mouth showed under the small nose, fine nostrils. The rounded oval of her cheeks, broad, low brow, smooth throat gained delicacy by contrast with the heavier mold of Gordon's features. His level brows, firm mouth, straight nose, forehead broad and high above wide-spaced eyes, the good, square jaw, supplied the masculine equivalent of her fineness. One face, as the other, indicated quality, breeding. The girlish figure, well rounded in spite of its liteness, complemented the rangy body, flat flanks, long limbs, alongside which it lay so quietly.

In their wholesome, healthy youth they were perfect as a double flower. The man and the woman! given to him for a helpmeet in the Garden of Eden; a helpmeet in joy and sorrow, love and fighting, in play and earnest throughout the generations! The unconscious tenderness of that age-long relation was expressed by his guarding arm, her soft dependence; something of the feeling, mystery, and beauty of all past loves enveloped them sleeping there.

"Jes' naturally made for each other. Not once in a thousand do you get such a pair."

Bull's murmur was founded on truth, for he had seen enough of the world to know of the misfits and mismatings, of the strong with the weak, of health and disease, ugliness and sweetness; the sales of youth to degenerate age; the chance matings of the slums that bring into the world a wretched swarm to fill the hospitals and prisons. Once in a thousand? Not once in a hundred thousand was Nature's intent so completely fulfilled.

To the greatly wise and the greatly simple are vouchsafed visions, and to Bull, looking out over the dim plains, was given a dream. It began at Arboles. Just as he had seen Lee sitting under the *portales* many a time, fair head inclined over a bit of mending for one or other of the Three, he now saw her sewing and making for the small children that tugged at her skirt, tried to climb her knee. Small replicas of herself and Gordon, with the marvelous celerity of visions, they grew under Bull's eyes into strong boys, healthy girls, whose shouts and laughter raised the echoes in the *patio*. Now they were young men and women! He saw the lads go forth and return proudly with young wives. He saw fine young fellows come in to woo and win Lee's girls.

With that the vision expanded till it embraced all the land. Under forced peace, he saw the flood of immigration that had been arrested by the revolutions rise again and pour in wider streams by rail and ship into Mexico, now, in her turn, the melting-pot of the world. Ships thronged her ports; over her rich bosom railroads spread their lace of iron; and here, there, yonder, he saw Lee's children, always strong, always upright, always considerable people among their neighbors. In legislature, church, halls of state, they took place—at first a few white faces among the brown; then, as time moved on and the brown race drowned under the foreign

inundation, whites among white, governors, legislators, presidents of the Mexican United States, worthy peer of its neighbor across the Rio Grande.

It required hours for his slow visioning to arrive at this stately consummation. In course thereof the moon sailed down to its setting in the north, but while its dew-light still fell on the sleepers Bull's gaze came back to them.

Surely they were "fit," the chosen of Nature, ripe fruit of her age-long process. Surely they and their children, the big-boned, cool-brained children of the north, would displace the hotheads who now laid waste the land with their lusts and passions. Not by war would it be brought about so much as that commercial conquest which is more lasting and complete. "Fit," morally and physically, in the fullest sense of the term, yet down there in the valley, in the dark Pass beyond, men more ruthless than the tiger, more cruel than the wolf, the "fit" of ten thousand years ago, were waiting for daylight to renew the attempt on their lives.

It should not succeed! As Sliver had sworn to it—and died; as Jake had sworn to it—and died; so Bull took oath. Also, with slow deliberation, heavy practicability, he began his dispositions. First, he examined the cartridge-belts, and his face darkened as he noted that two days of heavy firing had almost exhausted their ammunition. There was left only enough for one rifle; indeed, to fully charge Gordon's, he had to empty his own.

"Won't need it, anyway."

Muttering it, he sent a satisfied glance around the plateau. All last evening while they were climbing over the first heights into the valley, then on up here, he had searched for just such a place.

"No, I won't need it."

Repeating it, he kneeled beside the sleepers and looked closely into Lee's face, pale from exhaustion, but spirited as ever, and as sweet. He knew it for the last time—just as Sliver had known it; as Jake. Like Sliver, he would have loved to say farewell. But just as Sliver had repressed the desire to save her pain so Bull sealed his self-denial with a heavy shake of the head.

"'Twould on'y break them up an' do me no good."

Very gently he woke up Gordon. "Don't wake her till I'm through telling. It will soon be daylight. With it they'll be on top of us again. The border's over there—on'y a few miles." With heavy steadiness he went on with the last fine lie: "I'm keeping the bulk of the ammunition, an' I'll stay here, for a whiles, to hold them off. But don't you wait for me. She's well rested now; so keep going and going till you've crossed."

Reaching up, Gordon took Bull's hand in a strong grip. "I suppose there's no use asking you to let me stay?"

"No." Bull shook his head. "An' if I would—she wouldn't! Now wake her up."

Sleep had revived her wonderfully. She chatted quite cheerfully while making their last small arrangements. All day yesterday Bull had covered their retreats, and there was nothing unusual in his staying behind. Yet when, looking back as she and Gordon moved off, she saw Bull standing there, perhaps with some presentiment she ran hastily back.

"Oh, won't you come?" she pleaded.

"Sure, come on!" Gordon seconded her plea. "We can fight and run like yesterday."

"Yes, *do*?" Through the dusk her eyes, distended with fear for him, shone big and black in the dim whiteness of her face. In her dread earnestness she seized his arm; tried to pull him along. "Oh, *won't* you come? I'm *so* afraid. First it was Sliver, then Jake, now you. I'm dreadfully afraid that something has happened to them—will happen to you. And if it did—oh, what should I do? What *shall* I do?"

Her pallid face, earnest pleading, shook Bull like a leaf. For almost a year now her slightest wish had been his law. If he had succeeded in holding up his end in Torreon, to use his own phrase, "had walked in an' come out again, sober, like a man," he might have given in; gone on in her service. But, besides the deadly hurt that had slain in him the desire for life, he knew himself; as Sliver had known himself; as Jake.

She was crying now, head bowed on his arm, and small wonder. Through events that had been enough to shatter nerves of iron she had borne herself like a man. Even now she sobbed quietly, doing her best to restrain her tears. "There! there!" Gathering her to him, Bull patted her back gently, as though she had been a grieving child. "There! there! In a few hours we'll be over the border, and 'twon't be long afore we'll be back at Arboles, you an' Gordon an' me an' Sliver an' Jake." He said more; drew a picture of them all in the full swing of the old life. Then, with an assumption of cheerfulness that was remarkable because of the pain it covered, he concluded:

"So don't bother about me. There's less risk here than in any of the stan's we made in the last three days. I've got 'em all down below me an' there's on'y this trail. If they try to come on, it 'ull be like shooting turkeys for a raffle. I'll hold 'em jest for a while, then ketch up afore you reach the border. So run along."

"You're sure?"

"Sure!" He had to swallow his heart to say it.

"Remember," she called back, moving away, "I'll be on pins and needles till you come."

Strongly, with an accent she was afterward to remember, he made answer. "I won't be here long."

Till their dim figures vanished he watched them go. Then, empty rifle in hand, he turned his face to the foe.

XLIII: THE LAST OF THE THREE BAD MEN

As before said, it was not the accidental juncture of distance and fatigue that had caused Bull to stop for the last rest on the plateau. From its edge the trail fell steeply down a watercourse between high walls of shale into a rocky pocket, then climbed the opposite bank to a lesser eminence. Huge boulders occurred all over the level. Launched down the watercourse as through the bore of a giant stone cannon, they could be depended upon to do terrible execution upon a file of mounting men.

After Lee and Gordon disappeared, using his rifle barrel for a lever, Bull pried loose and rolled to the plateau edge over a dozen of the largest. Before them he built an ambush of sage that would look, from below, like ordinary chaparral. Whereafter, he sat down on a boulder and looked out over the Pass, the rugged outlines of which were beginning to form in the pale dawn.

Than this hour, when day stirs in the womb of night, there is none so fraught with a sense of imminence; presage of things to come, calamity or joy, accomplishments and failure, disaster, triumph, defeat. For who shall say what the day may bring forth? In far-off times the first pallid lights had often revealed these very mountains shaken upon their great bases; valleys suddenly buried under the green inundations of rushing seas; cyclonic disturbances that have registered so strongly in the racial consciousness of man that he may never watch without awe the emergence of the new day from the baptism of dawn. As Bull sat, like a man of the stone age in wait for a great cave bear, the feeling was strong upon him.

In such moments a man's whole life is apt to be thrown, like a cinema drama, on the curtains of his mind. But Bull's reflections began with his new birth at Los Arboles. Vividly there rose before him the golden pastures rolling off and away to the mountains; in the foreground, coming at full gallop down the opposite slope, fair hair floating on the wind, he saw Lee following her father in chase of the Colorados.

Next flashed up the sick-room, where she sat for long hours in mute white fear on the opposite side of Carleton's death-bed. He saw her, after the funeral, coming toward him through the *patio* gateway, swaying like a lily in a breeze, the whiter by contrast with Phyllis Lovell's rich, dark beauty.

Followed happier pictures. A slight smile marked a memory of her diligence in his own reconstruction; her delight when her pains yielded some small return in the way of an amended fault, correction remembered. All of it, from the coming of Gordon, the pains and perplexities of match-making, to the triumphal conclusion, moved slowly through his thought; then, from the end, his mind returned and lingered with one scene.

Once again she was giving him her usual critical survey the morning he started for Torreón. While he stood smiling with embarrassed pleasure her eyes rose from the tie she was straightening to his. As she read their sympathy and intelligence, the hands flew up around his neck, her face buried itself in his breast.

Now he was looking down on Arboles from the ridge, her last words still in his ears, the thrill of her soft, cool arms still at his neck. Then, as he turned and rode northward toward the Mills

rancho, memory leaped the gap in time and distance—he was sitting in the widow’s kitchen, Betty curled up on his knee, watching the compounding of Lee’s birthday cake.

From that through the stages of their acquaintance down to the last tender scene the night before he left for Torreon, Memory spread her pictures. Again he was looking down on the house, almost hidden in the bougainvillea whose crimson blossoms splashed the golden walls. Now he was inside, living again that one perfect evening, Betty snuggled warm in his arms, her mother sewing while the flooding sunset faded into dusk. She was speaking, holding out hope for his regeneration. As always in that vision, her hand came fluttering like a small white bird through the dusk. Dark flashed into day. He was listening to the last words that his ears would ever take from her lips; the words that confirmed her ownership.

“I shall expect you soon?”

He heard, too, his own answer, “Sure, ma’am, I’ll come straight to you.”

Again he was looking back at her, smiling over Betty’s shoulder, and—the bougainvillea shriveled into a lace of black around empty windows that stared with fiery eyes from seared walls.

In the intensity of his visioning the horrible *dénouement* came almost with the original shock. He sprang up with a groan of agony.

While he had sat there, musing, the pallid first lights had grown and strengthened, flared up in the crimson fires of sunrise. Beneath, the rugged walls of the Pass flamed in apricot lights pitted with purple shadows. Far down, just where the trail began to climb from a narrow interior valley, came a silver flash as a scabbard took the first gleam of the sun.

It announced the *revueltos* of the *brigada* Gonzales! Her murderers! Answering it, the lines of sorrow, deep-plowed through his face, drew into deeper furrows of hate. His coal-black eyes lit with a maniac glitter. The knuckles of the hand that held his rifle-barrel like a club, gleamed whitely through the skin. When, crouching suddenly, he peered downward from behind a boulder at the file of horsemen now wriggling like a loose-jointed snake along the narrow valley, he was again the animal Sliver and Jake had seen looking down on the *revueltos* in the *fonda* cañon. Big, black, burly, he looked more like a bear than a man.

If he had followed his own desire he would have waited and brought the long fight to a conclusion there and then. But even the deadly hate that sent slow shivers coursing through his huge frame was dominated by his care for Lee. Time was the first consideration; time for the fugitives to make good their escape. Though his rifle was empty, he still had his revolver, a heavy Colt’s .45. Having looked over his boulders and poised them in balance with smaller stones, he passed down the water-course and climbed to the crest of the opposite bank.

Lying there, he looked down on the *revueltos* who had begun to climb up through the chaparral. The mountainside fell off so steeply it was impossible for them to deploy in line, and, knowing it, he sighted high and fired.

The bullet fell short, as he knew it would. But at the crack the *revueltos* tumbled out of their saddles; the next second disappeared with their horses in the sage. To them it was the reopening of the “fight and run” of yesterday’s warfare, and, taught by its lessons, they moved cautiously up through the brush, seeking higher positions from which to return his fire.

Fully aware of their belief, Bull encouraged it by answering, at intervals, the bullets that began to clip the rocks, plump in the dust about him. But he husbanded his shots, firing only when, after a long silence on his part, the foe came creeping on up.

Six shots, fired quarter of an hour apart. To Bull they were mile-posts, each recording a stage in Lee’s advance toward safety. As clearly as though he had been with them he saw her, tired, limping a little, but moving steadily on with Gordon’s help. And his imaginings ran with the facts. Just about the time that he fired his last shot and ran back, down into the gully and up the bore of his huge stone cannon to the plateau above, Gordon sighted, far away on a rise, a speck of white that marked the international boundary line, and moving dots that presently grew into a United States cavalry patrol.

Suspecting an ambush, the *revueltos* came forward slowly. Quarter of an hour passed, indeed, before the first head poked up from behind the opposite bank. Another quarter slid by; then, emboldened by the long silence, three appeared in the open.

“They have gone! Bring up the horses!”

The leader’s call, in Spanish, carried across to Bull. Also, while they waited, he heard their conversation:

“If Prudencia had sent in to La Mancha yesterday morning for more men, we had caught them last night.”

"Si," came the answer. "But he wanted the girl for himself."

"The swine!" The epithet was set in vile oaths. "But he is cured forever of that complaint. Hombre! but they shoot well, these gringos. The bullet took him squarely between the eyes."

There was more of it—their present hope to run the *gringos* down with horses after they gained the levels beyond the Pass; the disposition they would make of them after capture. Unaware of the glittering black eyes only a hundred yards away, they talked on till a scrape of hoofs, hubbub of voices on the other side of the ridge announced the arrival of the horses.

A minute thereafter they came riding in single file, slipping and sliding, most of the time on their beasts' haunches, down into the rock pocket below. At the bottom, the first man looked up a little nervously. Then his voice rose up to Bull, crouching among the sage:

"They are surely gone. Vamos!"

A scraping of hoofs followed. But Bull was in no hurry. There was room for all in the "bore." He waited. Till he caught the labored breathing of the first beast he waited, then—with a sudden pry of the rifle-barrel he launched the first boulder. One after the other, as fast as he could pry them, he sent the others thundering after. Then, clubbed rifle waving like a windblown reed above his head, eyes ablaze, teeth bared, leaping and bounding like some mad gorilla, he shot into the midst of the crushed, struggling mass of horses and men. He was in among them almost before the last boulder struck down a horse in its rebound from the opposite hill.

For a few seconds all was hidden in a cloud of dust, from the bowels of which rose the snorts of wounded horses, groans and yells. Then, as the dust settled, Bull loomed up. Berserk as any Norseman that ever beat time for his death chant with swinging sword, obedient only to the primal instinct to kill, he swung his clubbed rifle, flailing out that evil chaff, dropping them as they came on.

And come they did, those that were able. Accustomed to war and wounds, they ringed him so closely none dare shoot for fear of hitting his fellow. They could only hack and stab with knives and *machetes*. Till only two were left they fought him, and when they gave and ran back up the hill Bull made no effort to follow.

Running blood from a dozen wounds, he stood swaying drunkenly among the dying and the dead, the ferocious, primal passion gone, evaporated with the crimson mists that had veiled his sight. His hot brain had cooled and cleared. He saw with wonderful clarity the golden sheen of the sand and stones; subdued glow of the rock walls; the two *revueltos* staring at him from the hillside above. One of them was raising his rifle, but Bull took no heed. His eyes were lifted to a drift of white cloud overhead.

With such intensity did he stare, the second *revuelto* also looked up, then crossed himself. Did he also see in the diaphanous vapors the faint outlines of a woman and child? Clearly as in life Bull saw; clearly as on that last night he heard Mary Mills's voice:

"I shall expect you soon?"

The *revuelto* was aiming, but Bull did not move. Exultantly his answer rang out, "Sure, ma'am, I'll come straight to you."

The rifle cracked and "Bull" Perrin, the last of the "Three Bad Men of Las Bocas," collapsed in a heap.

THE END.

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This is the record of a trip which the author took with Buffalo Jones, known as the preserver of the American bison, across the Arizona desert and of a hunt in "that wonderful country of deep cañons and giant pines."

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A lovely girl, who has been reared among Mormons, learns to love a young New Englander. The Mormon religion, however, demands that the girl shall become the second wife of one of the Mormons— Well, that's the problem of this great story.

THE SHORT STOP

The young hero, tiring of his factory grind, starts out to win fame and fortune as a professional ball player. His hard knocks at the start are followed by such success as clean sportsmanship, courage and honesty ought to win.

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This story tells of the bravery and heroism of Betty, the beautiful young sister of old Colonel Zane, one of the bravest pioneers.

THE LONE STAR RANGER

After killing a man in self defense, Buck Duane becomes an outlaw along the Texas border. In a camp on the Mexican side of the river, he finds a young

girl held prisoner, and in attempting to rescue her, brings down upon himself the wrath of her captors and henceforth is hunted on one side by honest men, on the other by outlaws.

THE BORDER LEGION

Joan Randle, in a spirit of anger, sent Jim Cleve out to a lawless Western mining camp, to prove his mettle. Then realizing that she loved him—she followed him out. On her way, she is captured by a bandit band, and trouble begins when she shoots Kells, the leader—and nurses him to health again. Here enters another romance—when Joan, disguised as an outlaw, observes Jim, in the throes of dissipation. A gold strike, a thrilling robbery—gambling and gun play carry you along breathlessly.

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