

EMERSON WILLIS GEORGE

A VENDETTA OF THE
HILLS

Willis Emerson
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Willis George Emerson

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TO MY WIFE

BONNIE O'NEAL EMERSON

Our enchanting years of pleasure, dear, are speeding all too fast,
As our ever-fleeting joys become blest mem'ries of the past.
Heaven's blessings, glad and golden, strew with bliss the paths of life
When a sweetheart, fond and cheery,
Has her "hubby" for her dearie,
And her "hubby" has a sweetheart for his wife.

– The Author.
January 18, 1917.

CHAPTER I – Guadalupe

IT was a June morning in mid-California. The sun was just rising over the rim of the horizon, dissipating the purple haze of dawn and bathing in golden sunshine a great valley spread out like a parchment scroll. It was a rural scene of magnificent grandeur – encircling mountains, rolling foothills, and then the vast expanse of plain dotted here and there with clumps of trees and clothed with luxuriant grasses.

Thousands of cattle were bestirring themselves from their slumbers – some sniffing the air and bellowing lowly, others paving the earth in an indifferent way, and all moving slowly toward one or other of the mountain streams that wound serpent-like through the valley, as if they deemed it proper to begin the day with a morning libation.

To the south, commanding a narrow pass that pierced the Tehachapi mountain range, stood old Fort Tejon, dismantled now and partly in ruins, picturesque if no longer formidable – a romantic relic of old frontier fighting days. In the foreground of the crumbling adobe walls, sheltered under giant oaks, was a trading store and postoffice combined.

Within this building half a dozen men were in earnest conversation, swapping yarns even at that early hour. Perhaps they, too, like the cattle, had felt the call for their “morning’s morning.”

A young army officer, Lieutenant Chester Munson, was telling of a rough experience he had had a few days before with a mountain lion in one of the near-by rugged canyons.

The story was interrupted by a sound of galloping hoofs.

“Here’s Dick Willoughby,” someone announced.

The rider brought his mustang to a panting stop, threw the bridle rein over its head, and, leaping lightly from his saddle, entered the store.

Dick Willoughby was a tall, athletic, square-jawed, grey-eyed young fellow who looked determinedly purposeful. He was originally an architect from New York City, but during the last five years had become an adopted son of the West – had made the sacrifice, or rather gone through the improving metamorphosis, of assimilation.

“Good morning, Ches, old boy,” he shouted to the lieutenant.

The latter returned the salutation with a friendly nod.

“The camp was lonely without you last night, Dick,” he said. “Who is the fair senorita that keeps you away?”

“That’s all right,” replied Willoughby, smiling. “I will tell you later.” Then after a genial allround greeting for the others present, he eagerly exclaimed: “Boys, she is coming.”

“What! Guadalupe?” shouted everyone in chorus of surprise.

“Yes, Guadalupe is headed this way. I spied her on the mountain trail an hour ago, and thanks to my field glasses, was able to determine the moving speck was none other than the old squaw herself. She is just beyond yon clump of trees and will be here shortly.”

“I am wonderin’ if she’s got her apron filled again with them there gold nuggets,” remarked Tom Baker inquiringly, while a smile flitted over his grey-bearded countenance. “That squaw is a regular free-gold placer proposition.”

“She would have been held up before now in the old days, eh, sheriff?” laughed one of the cowboys. Tom Baker had been sheriff for a long term of years in early times, and, although no longer in office, the title had still clung to him.

“By gad!” exclaimed Jack Rover, another cowboy, and a gentlemanly young fellow in manner and appearance. “She’s not going to get back to her hiding-place this time, nor to that will-o’-the-wisp placer gold mine of hers unless she shows me.”

“That will do for you,” said Dick Willoughby with an admonishing look. “Don’t you forget that Guadalupe, although an old Indian squaw, is also a human being. There is going to be no violence if I can prevent it.”

“Well,” laughed Jack, pushing his hat back as if to acknowledge that he had been checkmated, “you’re my boss on the cattle ranch, and I’ll have to take your tip, I guess.”

“I say, Dick,” asked the other cowboy, “did you see anything of the white wolf?”

“Do you mean the real wolf?” interjected Jack Rover, “or the bandit, Don Manuel?”

Willoughby was looking along the road and took no notice.

“I guess both are real,” mused Tom Baker, grimly smiling, and a general laugh followed.

“Well, I for one will subscribe to that,” exclaimed Buck Ashley, storekeeper, postmaster, bartender, and all-round *generalissimo* of the trading establishment. “If Don Manuel is not a wolf in human form, and a bigger outlaw than Joaquin Murietta ever thought of being, why you may take my head for a football.”

“But he’s dead, ain’t he?” asked the cowboy who had introduced the subject of the white wolf.

“Just one thing that I want to emphasize good and plenty to you fellers,” said Tom Baker, “and that is – ”

“Here she comes!” interrupted Dick Willoughby.

A hush fell over the group as the bent, aged figure of an Indian woman was seen approaching the store. Her features were hidden by a shawl that closely muffled her head and shoulders.

Buck Ashley saluted Guadalupe with a “How?” The squaw answered with the same abrupt salutation, shuffled up to the counter and said brokenly, “Coffee – sugar – tea – rice.” With her left hand she had gathered up the lower portion of her calico apron and held it pouch fashion. She thrust her right hand into the pocket so formed, and bringing forth a handful of gold nuggets, laid them on the counter. Some were the size of peas, and others as large as hulled hickory nuts. Not a word was spoken by the onlookers, who were wild-eyed in their astonishment. Soon interest rose to high tension.

Buck Ashley tied up a large package of sugar and pushed it toward the bent form of his customer; then resting his hand on the counter, he looked fixedly at the squaw and said, “More gold.”

Again she thrust her hand into the apron pocket and brought out another handful of nuggets, whereupon Ashley proceeded to tie up a large package of coffee. This done, he repeated the request for more gold. Old Guadalupe added another handful of nuggets to those already on the counter, and Ashley tied up a package of rice.

The squaw looked up at the storekeeper for a moment and then said, “Tea.”

Buck Ashley’s laconic response was “More gold,” and immediately another handful of nuggets was brought forth, whereupon a fourth package was deposited on the counter.

Old Guadalupe stowed the parcels in her apron on top of any remaining gold nuggets she might have brought. Then she turned and walked limpingly away, through the low brushwood toward a little grove of gnarled and twisted sycamores close to the ruined fort.

When she had gone Buck Ashley observed, “No use following her – not a damn bit of use in the world! She’ll make camp out there under the trees until some time tonight, and then vanish like a shadow into the dark.”

While speaking, Ashley had been gathering up the gold.

“I say, Buck,” observed Dick Willoughby, winking at his friend Lieutenant Munson, “it is my private opinion that that bandit, the White Wolf, has nothing on you.”

Tom Baker laughingly chimed in: “If I am any judge, and I allow as how I am, Buck here would make that pound-of-flesh Shylock feller look like thirty cents Mex.”

Ashley smiled greedily, but in a satisfied way, as he said with unruffled calm: “Guess I’d better weigh them nuggets and see how much the old squaw’s groceries cost her.”

“The treacherous Indian and the honest paleface,” laughed Dick Willoughby in a half-rebuking tone.

Buck Ashley bridled up. His voice rang with deep feeling.

“Boys,” he said, “you think I’m a Shylock, a robber, a devil I expect, and everything that’s bad. I don’t talk much about myself, but just so you’ll not think too blamed hard of me, I’ll ask you a question. Supposen when you was only about fifteen years old, you stood by, tied hand and foot, and saw a lot of redskins scalp and kill your father and mother and two little sisters, and then rob your dead father of over ten thousand dollars in gold, run off the family stock, and take you to their camp to burn at the stake as a sort of incidental diversion at one of their pow-wow dances; and supposen you performed a miracle and got away and took an oath to kill and rob every derved Indian you might see throughout the remaining days of your life – what, then, if I reformed and gave up the kilin’ and stuck to robbin’, would you blame me?”

During this tragic recital of his wrongs the old storekeeper had become noticeably excited.

Dick Willoughby got up from the cracker-box where he had been resting, and advancing with hand extended, said: “Buck, what you have told us presents the whole matter in a new light. Shake!”

“Thanks,” replied the storekeeper as he turned away to wipe a mist from his eyes.

Then quickly facing about, he called out in his usual gruff, hale and hearty manner: “Say, boys, what’ll you all have? This round is on the house.” They drank in silence. A fragment of Buck Ashley’s history had cleared away a good deal of previous misunderstanding.

CHAPTER II – Charmed Lives

THE spell of restraint that resulted from Buck Ashley's story was at last broken by the cowboy, Jack Rover.

"Look here, Dick," he exclaimed, "I'll give a month's salary if you will let me take a chance and follow old Guadalupe. I've simply got to find out and locate that sand-bar in some mountain stream from which she brings in all this gold. This is the third time I've seen our friend Buck Ashley collect a grocery bill from the old squaw, and the whole business, gold nuggets and all, is getting on my nerves. Why, I dreamed about it for a week last time I saw her forking out whole handfuls of gold."

"Very well," replied Willoughby, "if you want to take the chance, Jack, go ahead. But it is a mad project which will end in my expressing your remains back East or else planting you in the cemetery on the hill. It's up to you to make your choice before you tackle the job. You certainly know what happened to four or five others who attempted to follow the old squaw. Each mother's son of them was buried the next day."

"Oh, that's ancient history," Jack retorted.

"Not such very ancient hist'ry," remarked Tom Baker. "I myself saw young Bill McNab drilled through the heart with a bullet that seemed to come from nowhere. After that I'll allow I wasn't filled up with too much curiosity as to where Guadalupe hiked over the mountains."

"There was a regular sharp-shootin' outfit," concurred Buck Ashley.

"And there wasn't a sheriff in the country would have led a posse into that damned ambush," Tom went on. "There wasn't a sportin' chance along that narrow ledge round which Guadalupe always disappeared. And with all them outlaws in the mountains!"

"But the outlaws have been wiped out years ago," persisted Jack Rover.

"Mebbe," said Tom Baker, sententiously.

"You forget the White Wolf," added Buck Ashley.

"Which white wolf?" asked Jack. "I put that question before but got no answer."

"Both," replied Tom. "To begin with I don't believe that Don Manuel is dead at all. That was only a newspaper story. You may take it from me that the bandit won't pass in his checks till he gets old Ben Thurston. I'm allowin' as how Ben Thurston would quick enough give a thousand head of his fattest beeves just to rest easy in his mind on that score. He'll find out, sure enough, some day."

"Yes, when the White Wolf finds him," interjected the storekeeper with a terse emphasis.

"What's that old feud anyway?" queried Lieutenant Munson. "Tell me, Tom."

"Oh, it is an old story," the sheriff answered. "I thought everybody knew about it, but of course you're a newcomer. Well, you see," he continued, clearing his throat and expectorating a copious and accurately aimed pit-tew of tobacco juice toward a knot-hole in the floor, "the White Wolf's father, Don Antonio de Valencia, a reg'lar high-toned grandee from Spain, had settled in these here parts away back longer than anyone could remember. He claimed this whole stretch of country from horizon to horizon. Then came the Americans, among them a government surveyor named Thurston. He had a pull at Washington and managed to get a legal grant to the San Antonio property. Of course the old Spaniard had no real title – his was just a sort of squatter's claim. But they do say as how he had lived in this here valley more than half a century, so it was mighty hard luck to lose the land. And the boy Manuel never would admit the Thurstons had any right to call it theirs."

"Don Manuel had a younger sister," interposed Buck Ashley. "Rosetta, a beautiful girl – looked like a morning-glory. Gad! but she sure had a purty face. You remember, Tom, don't you?"

"Oh, yes," replied Tom Baker, "it's not likely I should forget the poor girl. It was 'cause of her the quarrel became a bitter blood feud – the Vendetta of the Hills, as we got to calling it. You see," he went on, resuming the thread of his story, "old man Thurston's son, Ben, the present owner of the rancho, was in his younger days a gay Lothario scamp, and he came from the East to his new home

in California loaded down with a college education and a mighty intimate knowledge of the ways of the world that decent folks don't talk about, much less practice. He had not been here a month until he commenced makin' love to little Senorita Rosetta. Before the second sheep-shearin' time came around, she was – well, in a delicate condition. To save himself and, as he thought, cover up the disgrace – you see he was engaged to a rich Eastern girl of prominent family – why, the young scoundrel conceived the hellish plot of lurin' little Rosetta to Comanche Point one dark night. And when he got her there he threw her over the cliff – at least that's the way the story goes. Guess Don Manuel was about twenty-five years old at that time, and Ben Thurston two or three years his junior. Well, the disgrace killed Rosetta's father and mother. They died of grief and shame soon after the affair, almost on the same day, and Don Manuel buried them together in the old churchyard on the hill by the side of his murdered sister. And it was there and then, they say, that he took an oath to kill Ben Thurston. That was mor'n thirty years ago and the feud has been on ever since, and all us old-timers know hell will be poppin' 'round here one of these days."

"But nobody ever sees the White Wolf, Don Manuel," added Buck Ashley. "That's the extr'ornery part of it."

"Oh, you yourself are likely to see him one of these dark nights, Buck," laughed Jack Rover, as he winked at the other boys. "A storekeeper that'll work night and day stacking up money year in and year out is liable to have a call sooner or later from the bandit and his friends."

"Oh, hell!" was the laconic response of Buck Ashley. "Guess I sure can take care of myself."

"But Don Manuel may not be alive," suggested the young lieutenant.

"He's alive right enough, make no mistake," said Tom Baker, "although I'll allow I don't know a single soul who has actually seen him personally for more'n twenty years. He is a kind o' shadowy cuss. Everybody knows him by his old-time deeds of high-way robbin' and all-round murderin' for golden loot. I heard of a feller last year who claims to have seen the White Wolf when he was makin' that last big stage delivery over by Tulare Lake. He was masked, and had all the passengers out on the roadside with their hands thrown up over their heads while he was takin' their valuables away from them."

"It's a dead cinch," Buck Ashley observed, "that whenever there was a hold-up or a robbery, or a murder in cold blood for money, why everybody knew that the White Wolf was again in the hills and playin' his cut-throat game for pelf and plunder, or mebbe just for revenge against the gringos, whom he hated like hell. Sometimes he was not heard of in these parts for two or three years, and then he showed up more blood-thirsty than ever. His hand was agin every man, and it looked like as every man's hand was agin him."

"I've been told," said Dick Willoughby, "that when the White Wolf was a boy he saved the life of the old highwayman, Joaquin Murietta."

"Yes, them are facts," replied Tom Baker. "Leastways I've heard say so. They claim that he saved Murietta's life from a posse of deputies one night, and altho' the White Wolf was only a boy at that time, yet a heap of people think he's the only livin' soul who knows the whereabouts and location of the secret cavern where Joaquin Murietta planted his loot, amountin', they say, to millions of dollars in gold and jewels and valuables of all kinds. The retreat always proved a safe one for the murderin' gang, and now they're gone no one even to this day can find the place. It's somewhere on San Antonio Rancho, but where? The White Wolf kept his secret well."

"If old Pierre Luzon ever gets out of San Quentin," remarked the storekeeper, "I guess he could tell, but he's up for life. He was nabbed in that same Tulare Lake affair 'bout which Tom had been talkin'."

"Yes," said the sheriff, "two others were shot dead before they got back to the mountains. The White Wolf and Pierre were ridin' alone when the Frenchie's horse stumbled. They picked him up insensible, a broken leg and concussion of the brain, and he was the only one of the gang who ever went to jail."

“God ‘lmighty,” exclaimed Buck, “old Pierre used to sit around in this here store day after day, smokin’ an old foreign-lookin’ pipe, and hardly speakin’ a word. He used to pretend he knew no English. We never once suspected that he was one of Don Manuel’s bunch – always thought of him as an old shepherd, a bit off his nut, who had saved a few dollars and was takin’ things easy. And hell, all the time he was the White Wolf’s look-out man, makin’ note of everything and passin’ the word o’ warnin’ when there was talk of the sheriff gettin’ busy.”

“I’ll allow Pierre Luzon fooled me proper,” concurred Tom Baker. “However, he got what was cornin’ to him all right, a life sentence, though he ought to have been hanged. Well, perhaps it is only the White Wolf and Pierre Luzon who now know the cave where Joaquin Murietta cached his treasure.”

“And Guadalupe perhaps as well,” remarked Buck Ashley.

“Yes, perhaps Guadalupe also,” assented the sheriff. “But the White Wolf keeps guard over her.”

“That’s the real White Wolf this time,” laughed

Dick Willoughby, with a nod toward the young lieutenant, who had been listening intently to the tale of weird romance.

“The real White Wolf?” replied Munson, enquiringly. “You’ve got me all tangled up. What do you mean?”

“Don’t you know how Don Manuel came by his name of the White Wolf?” asked the sheriff.

“No, all this folk lore is new to me.”

“Why, gosh all hemlock! He is named because of a darn big white wolf that has been seen at different times in this here country for a hundred years.”

“Wolves don’t live so long,” protested the lieutenant incredulously.

“Well, this one does,” retorted Tom, curtly. “Leastwise he’s been seen from time to time since ever I can remember. In the old days they named the White Wolf Rancho after this monster animal. It has a charmed life. No one can kill this big fellow, altho’ lots of shots have been fired at him. And the same was true of Don Manuel de Valencia. He escaped so often that folks believed his life a charmed one. And so they called him the White Wolf.”

“I saw the white wolf once myself,” said Buck Ashley, “the real white wolf that even now, as Tom says, guards old Guadalupe and makes it best for young fellows like you, Jack Rover, to leave the squaw alone when she makes back for her hidin’ place in the mountains. I’ll never forget that morning, although it’s more or less twenty years ago. The great shaggy brute was following Guadalupe along the trail like a Newfoundland dog. In those days I was out on the hills roundin’ up some mavericks. One of the calves broke from the herd and scampered along a trail that led directly in front of the old squaw. And say, boys, would you believe it? From less than half a mile away I saw with my own eyes that monster devil of a white wolf – white as the driven snow – make one terrific mad leap and grab that yearlin’ by the neck. Guadalupe spotted me and disappeared, and the white wolf trotted after her round the bend, carryin’ the dead calf in its jaws as a cat carries a mouse.”

“Did you not shoot at the wolf?” excitedly asked Lieutenant Munson.

“Shoot, hell! What would have been the use? Didn’t you hear what Tom Baker said? White wolves have charmed lives whether they go on two legs or four.”

CHAPTER III – Feminine Attractions

TOM BAKER, the sheriff, cleared his throat. “You fellers, I’m assoomin’, are all boys. I have been loafin’ ‘round in this man’s land for forty years. I was here the day Don Manuel had been buryin’ his old father and mother from the little Mission Church, less than a quarter of a mile from where we are settin’. He was standin’ right in front of this store when young Ben Thurston and two of his ranch hands rode up. If ever I saw real bravery it was that mornin’. Don’t take much bravery to do some things heroic when you have your artillery handy, but it requires the real stuff when you’re gunless.

“Young Thurston spoke to his companions and they drew their guns and kept them leveled at Don Manuel as their boss dismounted.

“Don Manuel was one of the handsomest young fellers I ever laid my two eyes on. He walked straight up to Thurston, and notwithstandin’ the two loaded pieces of artillery was pintin’ straight at him said:

“‘Ben Thurston, you are the man who killed my sister.’

“‘You are a damned liar!’ retorted Thurston.

“‘Yes, you killed her,’ went on Don Manuel. I found this button in her dead hand, and right there, by God! is where it came from. Look at your coat. Your life shall pay for this dastardly murder. If I had my gun I would settle the matter now, notwithstandin’ that today I have been burying my beloved father and mother.’

“When young Thurston heard about there bein’ no gun, he snatched the tell-tale button from his accuser’s hand, swung himself into his saddle, laughed mockingly, and with his quirt struck Don Manuel across the face; then he wheeled round his pony and rode away with his bodyguards in a cloud of dust.

“God! I will never forget it. Don Manuel stood there, as white as a piece of paper, and never moved for a whole minute. The quirt had drawn the blood from his face in one long streak. At last he turned away with a resolve in his eyes – one of them there terrible resolves that change the life of a man, and went back to the little church to finish the last sad rites to his people. It’s my opinion Don Manuel, from that very hour, turned bandit in his heart and took oath to murder all the gringos in California.

“As I said before, that was thirty years back, and mebbe a little more, and I have never seen him since. But we all heard of him good and plenty. He certainly left a red trail.”

A silence followed. Presently Buck Ashley in the way of explanation, said:

“That tombstone on his sister’s grave was put up one night. Nobody saw it done, but everyone knows, of course, it was the work of Don Manuel. It has just one word – ‘Hermana’ – chiseled on the cross of white marble. That’s the Mexican for ‘sister,’ guess you all know. So the name Rosetta is only remembered by old-stagers here, like Tom Baker and me. And we ain’t forgotten her pretty face either. Poor little girl!”

“A doggoned shame,” muttered the sheriff, meditatively, his eyes cast down.

“How about the law?” asked Lieutenant Munson. “The law!” exclaimed Baker, raising his eyes and flashing a look of withering contempt. “What kind o’ law was there in those days and in these parts? A gun was usually both judge and jury. Besides, with the only bit of evidence gone, how could Don Manuel prove anything agin a rich young feller like Ben Thurston?”

“But if he was laying for him all the time, how is it that the White Wolf never got his man all through those thirty years?”

“Because Ben Thurston lit out – he was too demed scared to live on the rancho any longer. But that’s another story.”

“Let’s have it, sheriff.”

“Well, it’s a longish yarn, and p’raps you fellers are about tired of hearing me.”

No one protested; there was rather a movement of settling down in pleased expectancy of something worth listening to. So Tom Baker continued:

“Ben Thurston had one warnin’, good and plenty, and he didn’t wait around for a second one. After Don Manuel’s threat, he seldom left his home, and a little later went back East again. It wasn’t till more’n a year that he showed up agin at the rancho. This time he brought with him his Eastern bride, a fine slap-dash young woman who could ride a horse and handle a team in good shape. But we could all see that she wasn’t too happy, for Ben Thurston started in to drink heavily, and she was ashamed of him and showed it.”

“Guess it was to drown his conscience and keep from thinkin’ about Rosetta,” interjected Buck Ashley.

“Like as not,” assented Tom. “Well, anyhow, he hadn’t been here very long afore Don Manuel got him – yes, got him fair and square, although he managed to save his neck at the last moment. There was card-playin’ and drinkin’ one night at the rancho – Thurston had got a bunch o’ gay young dogs down from San Francisco. Mrs. Thurston had left the room, and was sittin’ out alone in the moonlight on the verandah. Suddenly she heard a sound that made her sit up and listen – the clatter o’ twenty pairs o’ gallopin’ hoofs a-comin’ straight for the house. She must ha’ known something about the vendetta, for she rushed in terror to her husband and gave him warnin’. He escaped by a back door, and a minute later the place was surrounded. The shootin’ came first from some of the ranch hands, who had tumbled out of the bunk house and were spyin’ around corners. They said later that the hold-up party numbered more’n twenty, some of them masked with handkerchiefs tied around their faces, but others bold as brass and not carin’ a dang who saw ‘em. Among these last was Don Manuel. But Pierre Luzon was a downy duck, for no one spotted him, although later on we came to know that he played the principal part that night, next to the leader of the gang.

“Well, after the shootin’-scrap became general, there was a pretty scare in the ranch house – one of the card-players dropped, and the others were hiding under tables, when Don Manuel appeared and asked for Ben Thurston. His wife, mighty brave, denied that he was there – he had left that afternoon for Visalia to buy some cattle, she boldly declared. Don Manuel, always the true gentleman, mark ye, was for believin’ her when Pierre, his face masked, came in from the verandah and in a low voice passed some words to his chief. Mrs. Thurston knew in a moment that her bluff was goin’ to be called, and, while the outlaws were confabbin’, darted from the room.

“But Pierre was just as quick out by the verandah, and before she got to the door o’ the woolshed beyond the horse corral, he was there to block her passage. It was Pierre who had caught a glimpse of the fugitive sneakin’ into this outbuilding, and now he knew for certain that Thurston was hiding among the bags o’ wool inside. But a cornered man is a dangerous animal, and it might mean a good few lives if the door was opened and any attempt made to rush the place.

“The gang was soon buzzin’ all around; the woman, now almost in hysterics, was hustled aside, and a few bundles of loose hay was being dumped into the shed through an open window. A match did the rest. Within three minutes the door opened and Thurston came staggerin’ out through thick clouds of smoke. Pierre grabbed him and had a noose around his neck in doublequick time.

“The shootin’ was over before this, and some of the ranch hands were lookin’ on from a little distance, for now everyone knew that it was only the boss that the night-riders were after. So more’n one was able afterwards to tell the story – how the young wife threw herself at Don Manuel’s feet, and with sobs and tears pleaded for mercy. And by the living God she won out even after the rope, with her husband at the end of it, had been swung over the limb of a near-by sycamore.

“The White Wolf stood stock-still for perhaps a minute, weighin’ things like, his arms folded across his breast. Then he raised the weepin’ woman, and, turnin’ to Thurston, now half-dead with fear, laid hold of him by the shoulder and shook him as a terrier shakes a rat. Then with his other hand he flung the noose from around his neck. ‘Take your miserable life, then, this time’ – that’s what Don Manuel said. ‘Take it, but the day will come when we shall meet again, man to man, with no

woman's tears to save you.' And he pushed Thurston away contemptuously, topplin' him over like a ninepin, and a minute later rode off at the head of his men."

The narrator paused, and there was a general murmur of repressed excitement.

"My word, that's a peach of a story," exclaimed Jack Rover.

"He certainly was a chivalrous fellow, this oldtime Don Manuel," remarked the lieutenant.

"And don't you see," said the sheriff, "that, when a man acted like that and spoke like that, his words must come true? Don't tell me that Don Manuel today is dead while Ben Thurston is still alive. But he has taken mighty good care of himself ever since that day. He an' his wife skipped East the very next morning, and I'm told they never stopped till they got to Europe. Nobody knows where exactly they lived during the time that followed, but news came through years later that the wife had died, somewhere in the south of England, leaving a son behind. That's young Marshall who has come West with his dad now – the young man's first visit and his father's last one, I reckon, if he sells the ranch, as I'm told he's trying to do."

"But I say, boys," observed Jack Rover, "what do you suppose the White Wolf did with all the gold he took away from the people? It's said that in one stage robbery he got over fifty thousand dollars of the yellow stuff."

"Hid it," replied Buck Ashley, "with Joaquin Murietta's hoarded gold. For it's sure as sure can be that Don Manuel came to know the secret o' the bandits' cave where Murietta used to store his loot. The only thing anybody else knows is that it is around here somewheres."

"But they do say," observed one of the cowboys, "whatever Sheriff Baker may think, and you, too, Buck, that Don Manuel is sure 'nuff dead. Most folks herabouts believe that the White Wolf has gone to his long restin' place, sort a j'ined forces with old Joaquin Murietta. The Tulare Lake affair was, I guess, his last raid."

"He ain't dead," muttered Tom, determinedly, while Buck Ashley also shook his head in repudiation of the cowboy's theory.

"Well, I happen to know," observed Dick Willoughby, "that Mr. Thurston has run down the story of the White Wolf's death in that Seattle saloon brawl pretty thoroughly, and he is of the opinion that the big-featured articles in the San Francisco and Los Angeles papers were correct – that the dead man's identity was absolutely established."

"That's how he'd wish it to be, at all events," said Buck Ashley. "But even now, when Ben Thurston ventures to come home to the rancho, he brings with him a great big hulking bodyguard – Leach Sharkey, I'm told is the fellow's name. That don't look much like believin' the White Wolf to be dead and the vendetta played out, does it? You can see it in his hang-dog face that it isn't any real pleasure for him to be around in these parts. He ain't once paid me a visit at the store. Guess he thinks his hide'll last longer by stickin' close to home. You owe your job o' runnin' his cattle, Dick Willoughby, to the fact that he's still plumb scared."

"Oh, well, I am in his employ," said Dick loyally, "and I'm inclined to give him the benefit of the doubt as regards these ugly rumors and idle stories. He has always been on the square with me. But perhaps he'll stick to the rancho, now he believes the White Wolf to be dead."

"He may believe it, but, as Buck says, why then the bodyguard?" commented the sheriff as he relighted his pipe.

"Yes." replied Dick Willoughby, "but I believe he is thinking of letting Leach Sharkey go. Personally I would be willing to wager that Don Manuel, whom no one has seen since that last raid on the stage coach, is dead and sleeping with his sires."

"Well, dead or alive," exclaimed Jack Rover, "I don't care a hang for the White Wolf and his-buried treasure. But what I would like to know is the exact location of that rippling mountain stream, the identical sandbar where the old squaw Guadalupe gathers up her pocket change with which to buy groceries. That would be a heap better than any blooming cave. Them's my sentiments."

As he said this he threw some silver on the bar and invited everybody to lubricate.

“Just nominate your poison, boys, and let’s drink to my finding old Guadalupe’s gold mine.”

They all laughed good-naturedly, and Lieutenant Munson declared that he thought he would put in the balance of his furlough days prospecting. “You know,” he explained in an aside to the storekeeper while the latter was preparing the drinks, “I am only here to visit my old college pal, Dick Willoughby, and incidentally see the place where my father was a soldier in the early California days. He was stationed several years in Fort Tejon.”

“That was before my time,” said Buck Ashley.

“The soldiers had abandoned the old fort when I came first into these parts.”

Meanwhile Dick Willoughby was clinking glasses with Jack Hover.

“There are some mighty pretty little *senoritas* hereabouts,” said Dick, “good American blood mixed with Spanish blood, you know, and all that. If a fellow could only find the right one – understand, I say the right one, Jack – he wouldn’t be losing any time in chasing after the old squaw’s secret gold mine or the White Wolf’s buried millions.”

Jack Rover laughed outright.

“I say, Dick, what are you reddening up about? Gee, if I had as fine a lead as you have staked out, I’d feel the same way. Ain’t that right, Buck?” Buck Ashley winked at Jack Rover and said: “If you mean who I think you mean, you sure are righter than right. I speak wide open and unrestrained when I give it as my opinion that Miss Merle Farnsworth is the finest specimen of young womanhood that I ever set eyes on, and I have seen some girls East as well as West. Take it from me, she is a jewel, she is a regular beauty rose. Yes,” he went on, “and too damned good for that young Thurston whelp, who hangs around tryin’ to act smart whenever she and that old *duenna* chaperon of hers comes here to trade. I’ll simply boot him out of the store one of these days.”

Dick Willoughby smiled in a satisfied way as he moved toward the door.

“Well, hold on, Dick,” called out Jack Rover, “don’t be in such a dangnation hurry. I’ll ride with you in a minute. I’ve just got this to say to you, Buck Ashley, that I like you better than ever for what you’ve said about Marshall Thurston. Even though I’m working for the Thurston outfit, I’m free to express my opinion that that young feller is about the meanest specimen of low-down humanity I’ve ever struck.”

“It’s a case of the second decadency, I suppose,” remarked Munson. “The worthless profligate, spawn of the rich old *roué*, Ben Thurston.”

“Such a drunken pup,” continued Rover, “ain’t good enough for a half-breed Indian, much less for the likes of the young ladies of La Siesta. Gee, if I thought there was one chance in a thousand for me with either of them, why goodbye to that placer gold mine ambition that’s eating my vitals, or to the planted millions of the White Wolf.”

As he spoke the last words, he followed Dick Willoughby into the open. Dick was standing by his pony.

“You’re superlatively in earnest, aren’t you?” he said as he laughed good-naturedly at the cowboy.

“You bet your life I’m in earnest,” replied Jack. “And if you don’t get busy with that love affair of yours, well, take it from me, you had better look out, for somebody will be picking the peach right from under your very nose. Well, so long, Dick; I’ve changed my mind; I’ll not ride with you. I’ll see to that bit of fence repairing up on the range. And who knows but I may find a sand-bar and a riffle sparkling with yellow gold?” He laughed like a big overgrown boy as he touched the rowel to his pony and galloped away across the valley.

CHAPTER IV – Back to the Soil

JACK ROVER is a great boy,” said Dick Willoughby to Lieutenant Munson as the two rode off at a leisurely pace toward the group of ranch buildings peeping through a clump of trees at the edge of the foothills.

“A type of Western character,” replied Munson, “that in a way is quite new to me. And yet, do you know, I rather like this Western atmosphere.”

“Like it!” exclaimed Dick. “Why, man, it is *the* atmosphere in which to live, move and have one’s being.”

They both laughed at his enthusiasm.

“Really,” continued Dick, soberly, “I would not live another year in New York City for all the property fronting on the Circle, the coming centre of old Gotham. Out here a man is a man for what he is worth. You grow bigger, you think broader thoughts, you are not confined to following precedents or taking orders from the man higher up.”

“Oh, I know,” replied Munson, “or at least I am beginning to understand something of what you mean. I have only been here ten days and I am already feeling loath to return to my post.”

“Ches,” exclaimed Dick, turning abruptly and facing his companion, “give it all up, old fellow, and come and live in this glorious country – California! There’s music in the very name. It is the land of sunshine, of fruits and flowers, and of pretty girls into the bargain.”

“You keep telling me of the pretty girls, but when am I to see them?” questioned Munson. “If you have any real *senoritas* who will cause a fellow to forsake his Eastern home and send in his resignation to army headquarters, let me get a peep at them.”

Again they both laughed, this time at the challenge in Munson’s words.

“All right,” said Dick, “you shall see them. And, by the way, don’t you remember that this is the very day we have arranged to call on Mrs. Darlington at the Rancho La Siesta? It is a beautiful place, this little rancho, and Mrs. Darlington you will find to be a most admirable woman. But just wait until you see Grace Darlington.”

“How about Miss Farnsworth?”

“Not for you, old man,” replied the other quickly, reddening at the temples. “Not as long as my name is Dick Willoughby – providing, you understand, always providing that I shall prove successful in my wooing.”

“Is it as bad as that, Dick?”

“Well,” – his laughing tone was only a mask to deeper feelings – “I cannot deny that I am pretty hard hit.”

“My, but you do whet my impatience,” said the lieutenant. “And I am about as anxious to be paying that afternoon call as I am to have my breakfast. I don’t know how you feel, Dick, but I’m as hungry as a lean coyote.” He paused a moment, then asked in a musing tone: “How far away is this wonderful La Siesta Rancho?”

“Oh, only about twenty miles.”

“Twenty miles! You speak of miles out here in the same way as we speak of city blocks back in New York. Surely it must be quite a farm.”

“Quite a farm? I should say! You musn’t confound our Californian ranchos with Eastern farms, old man. Why, this rancho of San Antonio covers over four hundred square miles of territory.”

“You astonish me.”

“La Siesta Rancho adjoins the great San Antonio possession and contains comparatively few acres, just under three thousand. But it surely is a beautiful little place, fixed up like a nobleman’s park in the old world. And then the ladies – ”

“Aha, the ladies,” repeated Munson, doffing his hat in courtly fashion and smiling audaciously.

Dick touched the flank of his pony with his spur, and for a few miles they rode on at a quicker pace and in silence. Soon they were approaching the ranch buildings. On the outer edge was a little cottage, covered with vines and surrounded by fruit trees, the place which Dick Willoughby, the cattle foreman, had called “home” for the past five years.

After turning their horses into a corral, they passed by way of a broad verandah into a big room, roughly but comfortably furnished. Some logs were smouldering in the fireplace, and quickly started into a bright blaze when Dick kicked them together. The warmth was grateful, for while out of doors everything was now bathed in genial sunshine, here the morning air was still keen.

A Chinaman appeared from the back quarters, and smiled expectantly.

“Breakfast, Sing Ling,” called out Dick, “and just as quick as you can serve it.”

Sing Ling departed as noiselessly as he had come.

“These are certainly great quarters,” observed Munson, settling himself in a big Old Mission rocker and glancing around.

The walls, curiously enough, were pretty well covered with pen-and-ink sketches and designs of buildings that might have adorned an architect’s office, while there was a partly completed landscape painting in oils standing on a rudely fashioned easel.

“And you’ve certainly stuck to the old line of work, Dick,” the lieutenant went on.

“Of course one must have something to think about when he is all alone in a new country,” replied Willoughby. “But most of that stuff I did in my first year here,” he added, following the other’s survey of the walls.

“You still paint, however,” remarked Munson, his eyes resting on the unfinished canvas.

“Or try to,” was the laughing response.

“Oh, that’s a modest way of putting it. Do you know, old man,” Munson went on, “since I came here I have often thought what a marvelous change has been wrought in you – what a transplanting has taken place? You were a chronic New Yorker, except for that one year you spent in the Latin Quarter of gay Paree. You thought then you were going to make a great painter. And, by gad, I almost believe so myself,” he added, bending forward to make a more critical scrutiny of the work on the easel. “By jove, that’s really fine, Dick.”

“I’m afraid that’s flattery, Chester, my boy,” responded Willoughby. “However, it sounds good to hear you say so. A word of appreciation is what all hearts hunger for. Personally I even believe in a moderate amount of flattery. Its psychic influence is more potent in arousing and causing the heart to throb with ambition than all the stimulants, drugs or reasoning in the world. Indeed, without a certain amount of flattery one becomes ambitionless, languid, and perishes; whereas the unexpected caress or kindly words of praise from loved ones, just or unjust, adds more strength to the good right arm of the breadwinner than all the beef in Christendom, and makes the sunshine seem brighter and earth’s every breeze a south wind blowing across beds of violets.”

“A bit of a poet, too, I see,” smiled Munson.

Willoughby made no reply. He had crossed over to the open door and was looking out on the valley that stretched away for miles – great oak trees in the foreground, with cattle-dotted pasture lands beyond. Waving his hand toward the vast expanse, he said:

“Just look at that for a picture, and see how tame a man-made gallery is as compared with this great art gallery of Nature. Do you know, Ches, I despise New York? There was a time, when I first came here, that I felt I should die of ennui, yearning for the Great White Way once again. But I have outgrown all that. I know now, thank God, there’s nothing to it. Here a man can fill his lungs with pure air, and at the same time feast his soul all day long with beautiful things.”

There followed a brief interval of silence. Munson had risen and joined his comrade at the door. Both were gazing over the glorious sunlit sweep of territory rimmed by the distant, pine-clad hills. In the heart of Dick Willoughby was supreme contentment, in that of Chester Munson a vague

longing to get away from red-tape army routine and breathe the exhilarating and inspiring freedom of life in the open.

“Blakeflast,” bleated a soft voice behind them, and turning round they found the suave, smiling Chinaman with hand outstretched toward the smoking viands upon the table. Sentiment was instantly forgotten in favor of lamb chops grilled to a turn, a great fluffed omelette with fine herbs that would have done credit to a Parisian chef, and coffee that was veritable nectar.

At last appetite was satisfied. The lieutenant had produced his cigar case, Dick was filling his briar-root pipe with tobacco from the humidior. The latter spoke:

“Say, Ches, we were talking about New York. Do you want me to give you a toast on that modern Babylon?”

“Sure, old man, go ahead! You know I haven’t lost my interest in old Gotham, by any manner of means. It may be a modern Babylon. But to me it is none the less the greatest of American cities.”

“That’s just the trouble,” said Dick, seriously. “It is too great. There identities are swallowed up. Individualism cannot survive. It is all one great composite.”

“Well, let us hear the toast.”

Dick raised his cup of coffee and said: “Very well, here it is; here is my opinion of New York:

‘Vulgar in manners; overfed,
Over-dressed and under-bred;
Heartless, godless, hell’s delight,
Rude by day and lewd by night.
Bedwarfed the man, enlarged the brute;
Ruled by boss and prostitute.
Purple robed and pauper clad;
Raving, rotten, money mad;
A squirming herd in Mammon’s mesh;
A wilderness of human flesh;
Crazed by avarice, lust and rum —
New York! thy name’s delirium.’rdquo;

“Great Heavens, old man,” exclaimed Munson, when Dick had finished, “you are severe, to say the least.”

Willoughby laughed good-naturedly as he passed the match box to his friend.

“Not severe, only truthful,” he said. “You see, in New York no man dares think for himself. Everything is controlled by a machine-appointed chairman, secretary and committee, and you must hear the resolutions read before you know the doctrine you are perforce to advocate.”

Then he lit his pipe and rose from the table.

“Now, I have a lot of things to attend to, old fellow,” he resumed. “Make yourself comfortable. Here’s a bunch of Eastern newspapers – oh, I read them regularly, haven’t got rid of that bad habit yet. I’ll tell Sing Ling to have lunch ready on the stroke of noon. Then we’ll be in good time to start out for the Rancho La Siesta. So long!”

CHAPTER V – At La Siesta

SOON after one o'clock Dick Willoughby and Chester Munson were again in the saddle. They galloped along the foothills for some time in silence. But coming to the boulder-strewn wash of a mountain stream, they had perforce to rein their horses to a walk. Conversation was now possible.

"Dick, will you give me a job as a cowboy if I quit the army?" asked Munson abruptly.

"Surest thing you know," replied Dick. "But why try to kid me like that?"

"Oh," laughed the other, "I am not jesting."

"Well, by gad, if you feel that way already, the chances are you will write out your resignation when you get back to the shack tonight."

"You mean by that –"

"I mean," said Dick, smiling benignly at his friend, "that when you have once seen Grace Darlington you will feel like browsing on the California range until you have learned to throw a riata."

"Oh, it is not the thought of any mere girl that will influence my decision. I feel like getting back to Nature – back to the soil – back to a life of untrammelled freedom."

"Back to unspoiled womanhood," added Dick sententiously.

"Well, you've certainly got my curiosity aroused over these young ladies at La Siesta. How much farther do we have to go?"

"Within an hour, sir, within the hour, my lord, shall you see the lady fair. But remember," Dick went on banteringly, "that you are not to practise any riata-throwing on Miss Merle Farnsworth."

"I understand. But we won't fall out over her. You may have your beautiful brunette. I have always been partial to blondes."

"In the plural number," grinned Dick. "But Grace Darlington will dim the light of all your previous flames. She is the most perfect blonde you have ever yet encountered."

"You are certainly enthusiastic – for a disinterested party."

"Well, you'll say the same thing, Ches, my boy, when you see her."

It was not yet four o'clock when they approached the Rancho La Siesta. The house was of a style quite unusual in California – a miniature castle that might have been planned by some European architect of renown. It stood amid noble oak trees, old and gnarled and of gigantic size, but not too numerous to hide the architectural features of the building. To the rear the trees grew more thickly till they finally merged into one great forest that covered the lower ridge of the mountain beyond. Far up, just within the timber line, could be seen the red-tiled roof of a house which Dick told his friend was the home of a Mr. Ricardo Robles. Beneath the forest, the gently undulating lands sloped away to a considerable stream that dashed down from one of the mountain canyons and debouched into the great valley.

"Whew!" exclaimed Munson admiringly, as they rode up and turned their horses over to an attendant. "Some swell architecture around here! Is this your work, Dick?"

"Oh, no!" replied Willoughby. "I had nothing to do with it. But I do like the architectural lines of Mrs. Darlington's home. She's English and has English tastes, and transplanted ideas are not always successful in a new country. But in this case the building just seems to fit the scenery. It has always delighted me."

"It is certainly beautiful," concurred Munson as they walked along a winding graveled pathway that climbed the gentle slope and led to the portico of the mansion.

Around them were gay beds of flowers dotting the greensward. Almost hiding the columns of the portico were climbing roses, one bush of the purest white, the other of deep crimson.

As they passed under the porch roof, a handsome and well-preserved lady of middle age appeared at the top of the steps with a welcoming smile. She descended to give them gracious greeting.

"How glad I am to see you, Mr. Willoughby. No one could be more welcome at La Siesta."

“Thank you,” said Dick with marked chivalry.

“Mrs. Darlington, permit me to present my friend, Lieutenant Munson.”

The introduction over, they ascended the steps together, and passed into a spacious courtyard, with broad verandahs running all around and a fountain playing in the centre. The hostess conducted her visitors to a cosy corner, screened by glass panels from the open air and furnished with rich Persian rugs, divans, cushions, tapestries, carved ebony tabarets, all in oriental fashion. When they were comfortably settled, she opened the conversation.

“Lieutenant, the young ladies of La Siesta are most impatient to meet you. Mr. Willoughby has told us so much about you and yet has been so very dilatory – yes, really you have, Mr. Willoughby – in bringing you over, that we have put down several black marks against his name.”

“Oh, thank you,” stammered the young officer, reddening. “I quite agree with you about Willoughby, for I have been pleading with him to present me from the very first day of my arrival.” Turning to Mrs. Darlington, Dick laughingly protested: “My dear Mrs. Darlington, that is the first whopper you have heard from my esteemed friend. You have yet to learn that he always speaks in the superlative degree.”

At this moment Grace Darlington stepped through one of the French windows. As she stood hesitating for a moment, Chester Munson there and then agreed with all the preliminary praise Dick Willoughby had bestowed. She was certainly a vision of loveliness, with a wealth of golden hair and eyes of sapphire blue; petite, her figure plump but beautifully molded, her cheeks aglow with the red roses of health and youth and happiness.

“My daughter Grace,” announced Mrs. Darlington, rising and formally introducing the lieutenant to her as she joined the group.

Again Munson blushed and stammered. Dick was chuckling; he saw that the gallant son of battle, with a penchant for blonde beauties, had succumbed to the first glance from Grace Darlington’s eyes.

“Delighted to meet you, Lieutenant Munson,” she declared with frank friendliness as they shook hands.

“Where’s Merle?” asked Dick almost before Grace had time to turn to him.

“There now, Mr. Impatience,” she replied, shaking her finger teasingly at him, “Merle will be here in her own good time. She’s busy with Bob just now.”

“Who the dickens is Bob?” asked Dick, visibly disconcerted.

“Oh, her new Irish terrier,” laughed Grace, her voice ringing with mischievous merriment. “And such a beauty!”

Dick breathed again. The lieutenant had recovered his composure; it was his turn now to bestow a sardonic smile upon his comrade.

“We’ll have afternoon tea,” suggested Mrs. Darlington. “And of course you two young men will stay for dinner.”

Both uttered a simultaneous protest – they were only in riding clothes. But Mrs. Darlington made short work of the argument, and touched a pushbutton by her side. A maid responded, the extra covers for dinner were ordered, and meanwhile tea was to be sent on to the verandah. Pleasant small talk succeeded, the lieutenant being called upon for his first impressions of California.

Of a sudden Grace exclaimed in a voice, half of joy, half of surprise:

“Why, here comes Mr. Robles!”

Advancing along the verandah, hat in hand, was a man of striking presence and dignity, perhaps fifty years of age. His jet black hair was streaked with gray, the full beard almost verging on whiteness. Olive complexion and brown eyes, together with the courtly manner of his salutation, indicated the thoroughbred Castilian.

He bowed and raised to his lips the hand of his hostess. To Grace he paid the same deference. Next he turned to Dick Willoughby and extended his hand.

“I have met Mr. Willoughby. I am pleased, sir, to see you again.”

Then his eyes rested on Lieutenant Munson, and Mrs. Darlington presented the young army officer.

“And where, I pray, is Miss Merle?” Mr. Robles finally asked, glancing around.

“That’s what I want to know,” blurted out Dick. Then he reddened just a little.

The older man looked kindly at Dick, and smilingly said: “The audacity of youth.”

“Yes,” put in Grace, “the audacity and the impatience as well.”

But just at that moment there floated from the recesses of the home the fragment of a song: “I dreamt I dwelt in marble halls, with vassals and serfs at my side.”

“Ah, here comes the recreant now,” exclaimed Mrs. Darlington.

The song stopped abruptly, and a moment later Merle Farnsworth appeared. She went first of all to Mr. Robles and greeted him warmly, giving him both her hands, which he kissed in his princely fashion. For Willoughby she had a pleasant smile, and for his friend, the lieutenant, a kindly welcome to California.

The tea tray had meanwhile arrived, and soon both the young ladies were busy attending to their guests. While he sipped his tea, Munson completed his inspection of Merle Farnsworth – dispassionately, for the brunette type of beauty had never yet made his pulses beat faster. But he could none the less admire. She was a stately girl, taller than Grace Darlington, with fine, regular features and brown eyes that matched the dark heavy braids of her hair. Her manner was alert and vivacious, yet there was the quiet dignity of gentle breeding even in her smile.

After half an hour of general conversation, Mr. Robles arose to take his leave, notwithstanding Mrs. Darlington’s pressing invitation that he should remain and join the dinner party.

“My home is not far away,” he said when shaking hands with Munson, “up in the woods yonder. Perhaps you may have seen it as you came along the road.”

“Yes,” observed Dick, “I pointed it out to the lieutenant.”

“Well, both you gentlemen are cordially invited to pay me a visit any time you are riding through this part of the country. Although I live far away from the busy world, and am a recluse by choice, I have some things that may interest you – pictures, old manuscripts and books of the Spanish days.”

“Pictures?” interposed Dick, inquiringly.

“Yes, a few that I picked up during several visits to Europe.”

“If people only knew it,” remarked Mrs. Darlington, “Mr. Robles has perhaps one of the finest private picture galleries in America.”

“Then I’m certainly coming to see you,” said Dick, eagerly.

“Me or my pictures?” asked Mr. Robles with a quizzical smile.

“Both,” and the young fellow showed he meant it by a cordial hand grip.

“You will pass our door, Mr. Willoughby?” exclaimed Merle in half-laughing reproachfulness. “You will dare to give the go-by to La Siesta?”

“Well, art is art,” replied Dick sturdily, although he did not trust himself to look at Merle while he answered.

“But perhaps the young ladies will show you the way through the oak forest,” suggested Mr. Robles.

“That would be great,” said Lieutenant Munson, with his eyes fixed on Grace Darlington.

“Delightful,” she blushing assented.

“Well, arrange it among yourselves. For the present, *adios*.” And with a sweeping bow the senior took his departure.

A stroll through the gardens and orchards, dinner and sprightly conversation, an hour of piano-playing and singing to follow – altogether a delightful evening was spent. The nearly full moon had risen before the young men found themselves on the homeward trail.

As side by side they rode down into the valley, Munson said:

“Dick, boy, there’s no use talking. You have introduced me to some perfectly charming people today – they’re wonderful.”

“What did I tell you?” asked Dick.

“You surely did not tell me the half,” replied the other. “I think Grace Darlington is the prettiest girl I have ever seen.”

“Guess you’ll be writing out your resignation and sending it to army headquarters,” laughed Dick. “*Quien sabe?*”

The lieutenant made no reply, and quickening their pace, they pushed on in silence.

At last they were nearing home – passing round the last spur of the mountain. The moon was now riding high overhead, bathing the whole landscape in bright effulgence. Willoughby brought his pony to a walk, and Munson, coming up behind, soon joined him.

“How do you like riding by the light of the California moon?” asked Willoughby.

“Really, Dick, you call even the moon a California moon, as if the same moon didn’t shine in New York City or in Paris.”

“Not in the same way,” said Dick soberly. “The truth is, the moon really looks larger and brighter here, and the stars, too, are more brilliant. Haven’t you noticed it?”

“I have noticed that the atmosphere is exceedingly clear,” replied Munson, and, as if to verify his observation, he cast a glance up to the rock-ribbed flank of the mountain above the belt of timber.

“Good God, what’s that?” he added breathlessly grasping the arm of his friend.

Instinctively both halted their horses as they continued to gaze.

The bent form of the old Indian squaw Guadalupe was unmistakable as she toiled slowly along a narrow ledge on the face of the precipice. But following close behind her was a vague, shadowy figure – the figure of some four-footed beast, bigger than a big dog.

“The white wolf!” gasped Dick.

“Is it real, or is it a spectre?” whispered Munson.

Just then a scudding cloud momentarily obscured the moon, and when the full light again shone forth, both woman and wolf had vanished.

The young men looked into each other’s eyes in awe and wonderment.

CHAPTER VI – The Quarrel

THE following days were busy ones on San Antonio Rancho. Dick Willoughby was constantly in the saddle, looking after his subordinates, watching the line fences, and generally keeping track of the vast herds. Lieutenant Munson was becoming acclimated. He not only accompanied Willoughby on many of his rides, but had also paid several visits to La Siesta, and one afternoon in particular had enjoyed immensely a successful trout fishing expedition with the young ladies along the mountain stream that flowed through the property.

One morning there was great excitement at San Antonio headquarters. Ben Thurston returned from a visit he had been paying to Los Angeles, and with him floated in a circumstantial story that the rancho had been really sold. As usual, he was attended by the plain-clothes detective whom he retained as bodyguard. Leach Sharkey was a big, hulking fellow, more than six feet in height, with a tousled shock of reddish hair, a stubby red mustache, and teeth that showed even when his face was in repose. Bulging hip pockets indicated the brace of heavy revolvers which he invariably carried.

Within an hour of Mr. Thurston's coming, Dick Willoughby, as foreman, was summoned to an interview at the ranch house. The owner received him alone in his office.

Ben Thurston was a squat, solidly built man, and despite his life of idle luxury, carried his fifty odd years well. He was sullen and taciturn in manner, but brusque and imperious when he did choose to speak. Two features were markedly characteristic – the chin was weak and the eyes had the restless, alert look of one who constantly lived in an atmosphere of fear and suspicion.

Thurston opened the conversation without any preliminaries.

"Willoughby, I want an accurate count of all the cattle and horses on the ranch; and especially I require a fair idea as to the number of fatted beeves – those ready for the market, you understand."

"Very well," replied Dick, "your orders shall be carried out as expeditiously as possible, but it will require a few days to complete the work."

"How many days?"

"If I make use of all the force it may take a week – perhaps a little longer."

"All right, use all the help you can get. I must have these figures promptly. There is a Los Angeles syndicate who are after an option on the rancho. They are counting on buying me out – lock, stock and barrel." Ben Thurston smiled, squinted his shifty eyes and blew his nose vigorously.

"It always makes me laugh," he added pompously, "to have these fellows come around this great principality of mine and try to buy me out."

Just then someone outside flitted past the window, and, quick as lightning, Thurston turned and exclaimed in a startled tone: "Who was that?"

"That was Jack Rover," replied Dick, "one of our cowboys."

"Oh," and the frightened look in the eyes subsided.

"Tomorrow then," Dick went on, returning to their former topic of conversation, "we'll begin a round-up of the stock at this end of the range. I'll put the boys on the job right now."

"I'll join you tomorrow myself."

"All right, Mr. Thurston."

"What time?"

"At any time agreeable to you."

"Well, say eight o'clock in the morning. You see," he continued, "I want to get through with this damned business in a hurry and start back East. I have friends who are waiting for me. Of course I will have to stay here until the representatives of this syndicate come up from Los Angeles, but I will make short work of them, believe me."

This time Ben Thurston laughed outright and rubbed his hands together in a satisfied way. For once he seemed inclined to be communicative, and, turning to Willoughby, resumed:

“Do you know, I have collected over three hundred thousand dollars, first and last, selling options on this San Antonio Rancho? It is quite a joke. They all fall down. They make a first payment of twenty-five or fifty thousand dollars, and then,” throwing up both his hands and shrugging his shoulders, “their payments cease and I am just that much ahead of the game.” Willoughby listened in frigid silence; there was not even the flicker of a responsive smile on his face.

Thurston, eyeing him for a moment, looked disconcerted. He drew himself up stiffly in his chair. His voice assumed its usual gruff tone.

“That’s all; get to work then,” he said curtly as he lifted some papers to show that the interview was at an end.

The first round-up was held some twenty miles southwest of the ranch house, at the base of the foothills across the valley from La Siesta. Ben Thurston, attended closely by his bodyguard, was there, his shifting eyes scanning each new face. Not fewer than ten thousand head of cattle were milling about, pawing the earth and bellowing in low tones of irritation at being herded together and held away from their accustomed haunts of juicy grasses.

From a knoll at a little distance Lieutenant Munson, seated on a fine riding pony, watched the great performance, which to him was more wonderful than any hippodrome show or military parade. He was so engrossed with the spectacle that he did not hear the patter of approaching hoofs.

“Good morning, Senor Lieutenant,” came a lady’s voice in cheery greeting.

Turning quickly in his saddle he saw Grace Darlington and Merle Farnsworth on their ponies, which had been brought to a sudden halt close behind him.

“Really, Mr. Munson,” said Grace Darlington, “one would think you were so completely lost in contemplation of a mob of cattle that you had no eyes for your friends.”

Chester bowed and raised his hat as he replied with a bright smile:

“It is certainly a great scene, isn’t it? But you are none the less welcome. Indeed when one is witnessing something unusual, it always adds to the interest to have the companionship of friends.”

“Very prettily put,” observed Merle Farnsworth. “Fortunately the place selected for the round-up this year isn’t very far from La Siesta, so we rode across the valley.”

“Have you anything in New York,” asked Grace, “to compare with this?”

“Indeed we have not,” replied the lieutenant with conviction. “I am beginning to think that the West is a pretty good place in which to live. By the way,” he went on, taking a newspaper clipping from his pocket, “here is something that our mutual friend, Dick, gave me, and said I should read once a day for a month, and then – well, then, he says I will never go East again, but remain in this great picture country. Shall I read it?”

“Oh, do, by all means,” said the girls in unison. “Well, here goes! ‘Every idea we have in the East is run with a convention. We cannot think without a chairman. Our whims have secretaries; our fads have by-laws. Literature is a club. Philosophy is a society. Our reforms are mass meetings. We cannot mourn our mighty dead without some great chairman and a half hundred vice-presidents. We remember our novelists and poets with trustees, while the immortality of a dead genius is looked after by a standing committee. Charity is an association, and theology at best only a set of resolutions.’”

“What do you think of that?” he asked, laughing. “Isn’t that an awful slam on the East?”

“It is rather severe,” smiled Merle. “But you know, Mr. Willoughby has become a thorough Westerner. The lure of the hills and the valleys has taken complete possession of him.”

“And yet he remains unspoiled.” exclaimed the lieutenant. “But are you aware he is trying to tamper with my old allegiance to the East?”

“Indeed,” asked Grace, “in what way?”

“He wants me to resign my commission and take pot luck with him, as he terms it.”

“You couldn’t do better,” exclaimed Grace enthusiastically.

While this conversation was going on, an exciting incident was taking place only a short distance away. Young Marshall Thurston had come with his father to the round-up, and was riding about watching the operations. Chancing to pass near, Dick Willoughby overheard him use an insulting epithet in regard to Miss Farnsworth – the young man was evidently peeved that the ladies had not sought him out instead of Munson, and it was obvious, too, that he had been drinking even at that early hour in the morning.

Swiftly wheeling, Dick rode up to him with a look of anger so intense that even the cowboys who knew him were taken aback.

“You foul-mouthed beast!” he hissed, as he pushed his quirt into the slanderer’s face. “Just let me overhear you make a rude remark again about Miss Farnsworth and I will hammer the life out of you. You are nothing better than a drunken hobo, not fit to associate with ladies.”

The outburst was so sudden that young Thurston was cowed and attempted no reply. But as Willoughby rode off he sent after him a look of sullen and resentful hatred. Two or three of the cowboys, who really were good friends of Dick Willoughby, but were nevertheless not above fawning for the favor of the heir to the great rancho, indicated that they were on Marshall’s side.

“Guess two can play at the hammering game,” remarked one.

“He don’t come any of his rough-house business over you, Marshall, while I’m around,” affirmed another, pugnaciously.

But the young man, still without uttering a word, turned gloomily away and started his pony in the direction of home.

“Guess he feels like another drink,” grinned an irreverent youth.

“Hell,” exclaimed an elderly man, the blacksmith at the rancho, “if the Thurston family don’t beat the band for quarrels and bloody feuds!”

But just then a bunch of cattle broke from the main herd and the group of cowboys dispersed in a galloping scamper.

Munson and the young ladies, engrossed in their light conversation, knew nothing of this unpleasant episode. They were now discussing the date of the projected visit to the home of Mr. Ricardo Robles among the oaks above La Siesta. It was decided to fix it for the first Sunday after the cattle muster was completed, when Dick Willoughby would be free to make one of the party.

“But hold a moment,” exclaimed the lieutenant suddenly, “unless I’m to be court-martialled for absence without leave, I must take the train East next Saturday, or – or – ”

His eyes fixed on Grace, he hesitated to complete the alternative.

“Or what?” she inquired.

“Follow Dick’s advice and send in my resignation.” As he spoke he thrust a hand into his breast pocket and drew forth a letter, sealed, addressed and stamped, all ready for the mail. “I really can’t quite make up my mind,” he added, dubiously.

“Let me help you,” said Grace with a gay smile as she extended her hand for the letter.

“How?” he asked.

“I’ll mail your resignation for you. We shall be riding home by La Siesta postoffice.”

“Oh, Grace!” murmured Merle in timid protest. “Think of the responsibility you are taking.”

“A woman’s mission in life is to encourage men to do the proper thing,” replied Grace with roguish defiance. “Our friend here is enamored of the West, and the West is the very best place for him. I’ll post your letter, lieutenant.”

He placed it between her fingers, doffed his hat, and bowed gallantly.

“Be it so. Let the gods – or should I say, a fair goddess? – decide.”

“Thanks for the compliment,” cried Grace, with a pretty flush on her face. “Good-bye, then, for the present. Get ready for Sunday’s picnic among the oaks. Come along, Merle, my dear.”

And with a touch of the quirt she started her pony into a canter.

“Great guns, but she’s worth while,” exclaimed Munson as he gazed after the retreating figures.

CHAPTER VII – Old Bandit Days

ON the evening of the day that followed the big round-up of cattle, Dick Willoughby and Chester Munson rode over to the store. As they cantered along, both men were pre-occupied with their thoughts.

Dick was not worrying over his sharp passage of words with his employer's son, for he knew that his services at the present time were quite indispensable, more especially if the rancho was to be sold to the best advantage. The owner had spoken lightly of the negotiations, and had chuckled in a sinister way about the money he had frequently made over unexercised options. But this time it was a Los Angeles syndicate that was seeking the property, composed of men whose financial reputation and keen business ability Willoughby knew well. For he had learned their names after his interview with Ben Thurston, and he felt certain that this particular group of capitalists would have entered into no serious negotiations without having both the cash and the intention to put the deal through. Therefore he scented a change of ownership in the rancho, and consequently, perhaps, the necessity for his looking around to find employment elsewhere. He hated to think of leaving a place that he had come to look on as home and parting from all the friends he had made throughout the countryside. Unconsciously to himself, the greatest tie of all was proximity to La Siesta and to Merle Farnsworth. But Dick was not thinking of Merle just then – he was merely turning things over generally in his mind as he rode across the valley.

Munson also was cogitating the change in his own outlook that had been brought about by the mailing of the letter of resignation to army headquarters. He was recalling the many years he had striven to reach the lieutenantancy now voluntarily surrendered – of his youthful zeal and ambition for an army career which had been powerless to withstand the witching call of the West. And although Grace Darlington's act of putting the letter in the post had been only the last feather to tip an evenly balanced scale, he could not but feel that thereby this beautiful girl of the West had entered into his life and into all his future plans, hopes, and aspirations. The thought gave him joy; he was more pleased than ever that the decisive step had at last been taken.

Arriving at the store, they found old Tom Baker seated on a dry goods box, while Buck Ashley leaned against the counter, waiting for the stage coach and the mails. Already two or three others were beginning to congregate under the trees, in readiness for the distribution of letters and newspapers.

"Hello, Dick," called out the sheriff, "I heard of your scrap yesterday morning with that young ne'er-do-well, Marshall Thurston. My God, I'm glad you gave him hell."

"Please don't speak about it," replied Willoughby quietly. "That was my affair and mine alone. I guess we can find some more agreeable topic."

"Wal," drawled Buck Ashley, "Tom here was just a-tellin' me a yarn that'll interest both you boys a heap, or the lieutenant at all events, for he's new to these parts and don't know the local hist'ry yet. Of course I've heard the story before, but not all the pertic'lars the way Tom can tell 'em. And its a dangnation good story. So start from the beginnin' again, Tom."

Thus addressed, the sheriff, after taking a bite from his tobacco plug, began:

"The yarn has to do with the old-time bandit Joaquin Murietta, about whom we were speakin' the other morn in'. Well, the way it all happened was this: On a neighboring ranch, over Ventura way, beyond the Lagunita Rancho, owned at that time by Senor Olivas, a rich cattle dealer comes down from 'Frisco to buy a bunch of beeves. The stock had all been driven up on a mesa near the Olivas ranch house, and for several days the herders had been cuttin' out the cows and the young calves from the steers, 'cause this feller was only goin' to buy the steers.

"The great herd was bellerin' and pawin' in a big cloud of dust, through which the vaqueros – cowboys, you know, lieutenant – could be seen ridin' round and round. Of course roundin' up cattle is always more or less excitin' work, but this rich chap had come down from 'Frisco with his saddle

bags bulgin' out with gold, and this sorta added a mighty sight to the interest of the doin's. Part of the bargain was that the deal was to be for spot cash, all in gold, too, mind you, and it was arranged that the buyer and Senor Olivas were to take their stations at one side of the narrow gate, and every time a steer was driven through that gate a twenty-dollar gold piece was to be tossed into a big bag which Senor Olivas was holdin'.

"They do say as how the work continued all day, from early mornin' until dark, afore the last blamed steer passed that 'ere gate, and they claim that there was eighty thousand dollars in the Senor's bag as pay for the day's drive. They say, too, that Joaquin Murietta, disguised, was one of the vaqueros doin' the drivin'. Anyway that very night old Olivas was waked up mighty abruptly by feelin' the cold nose of a revolver shoved against his own nose.

"Well, the long and short of it all was that Senor Olivas and his wife were both gagged and bound hand and foot, while Murietta ransacked the house, found the strong box and carried away every blamed gold coin that Olivas had received for the sale of his steers. The outlaw succeeded in makin' his escape into the Tehachapi mountains with his cut-throat gang, and they found a hidin' place in the robbers' cave that is somewhere hereabouts on the San Antonio Rancho. It sure was as slick a piece of rascality as was ever pulled off in the old lawless days."

"Well," observed Buck Ashley, as he shook his head reflectively, "I'm assoomin' some of the cowboy fellers around here will find that cave one of these days. I've put in a good many Sundays huntin' for it myself."

Just then there was the sound of horses' hoofs outside, and a moment later Jack Rover strolled into the store. Over his shoulder was slung the big leather bag for the rancho mails.

"Hallo, everybody," was his greeting. "I'm ahead of time Buck, but the stage will be here in five minutes. I saw its dust above the ridge. I hear, lieutenant," he went on, "you're going to stick to the West and be one of us."

"Quit the army?" exclaimed Tom Baker in surprise.

"That is so," replied Munson. "California has fairly got hold of me, and I intend to make my home in the West."

"Then you just stick here, young man," said the sheriff, rising to his feet and extending his hand. "California is the pick of the States, and our valley the pick of California. Don't you forget it. We're proud to welcome you as a new resident."

"That's what I say, too," concurred Buck Ashley, cordially.

Munson smiled. "Well, I don't know if you can put me in the resident class all at once," he observed, diffidently. "Guess I've got to join the cowboy brigade first, if Dick and Jack here will break me in."

"Sure thing," assented Jack Hover. "You're a good rider now – for an army man."

"An ex-army man," corrected Willoughby, laughing.

"It strikes me we should put you in as postmaster, Munson," suggested the sheriff, a sly gleam of mischief in his eye. "Buck Ashley here is growin' old."

"Yes, but not too old to hold down his job till your tombstone's in the cemetery, Tom Baker," retorted the storekeeper, with a grin. "No man takes the Tejon postmastership while I'm alive," he added defiantly.

"I'm forewarned and won't apply for your job, Buck," laughed Munson. "But here comes the stage, so show your spryness, old fellow, by getting us our mail."

CHAPTER VIII – A Letter from San Quentin

BUCK ASHLEY had retired into the partitioned-off section of the store that formed the postoffice, and was busy stamping and sorting out the mail. The scattered loiterers outside crowded into the building expectantly, and the local parliament was in session. Amid the buzz of conversation Willoughby could not but hear his own name mentioned, coupled with that of Marshall Thurston. He understood quite well that all manner of gossip was flying around in regard to the quarrel at the round-up. But he remained stoically indifferent, shut his ears, and leaning against the counter busied himself with an old *Saturday Evening Post* that had been lying there.

At last the wicket was shoved up with a bang, and those present began to move toward the little aperture through which Buck Ashley proceeded to hand out correspondence and newspapers. One by one the throng melted away. Jack Rover was examining the big bunch of mail for San Antonio Rancho as he stowed it into the letter bag. Munson was opening and gleaning the contents of two or three letters that had come to him from New York. Dick Willoughby continued his reading, unconcerned; Jack would pass over any correspondence for him. Old Tom Baker had not risen from his accustomed seat on an empty box; he had few correspondents, and the mail did not worry him, although he invariably assisted with his presence at its distribution.

These four were now the only ones in the store besides Buck Ashley, who still remained behind the partition. At last the postmaster appeared, holding in his hand an open letter. His face showed great agitation as he glanced around to take stock of those who might be present.

“Say, boys,” he whispered in a mysterious manner, as he held up the letter, “this is the most dangnation extr’ornery thing that has ever happened to me. You’re just the bunch of fellers I’d like to consult. Close the door, Tom.”

“What’s up, Buck?” asked the sheriff as he rose to comply. “You look as if you had the ague shakes.”

“No ague in this here land of California,” laughed Jack Rover. “Is it a proposal of marriage you’ve been getting, Buck?”

“A derned heap better’n that. God ‘lmighty, boys, this may mean millions for all of us. Shoot the bolt, Tom; I’ll hand out no more groceries tonight. Come close together, all of you. You read the letter aloud, Dick. My hand’s a-tremb-lin’, and I can’t get the Frenchie’s lingo just right.”

“The Frenchie?” echoed Tom Baker in puzzled surprise.

“It’s a letter from Pierre Luzon,” explained Buck.

“Good God!” The sheriff was now as deeply stirred as his old crony.

“The bandit scout you were telling us about the other morning?” exclaimed Jack Rover, also fired with excitement.

“I thought that fellow was in San Quentin for life.” remarked Munson, composedly.

“Wal, and ain’t this letter from San Quentin?” retorted Buck. “See the headin’. But Dick’ll read it aloud. I feel clean knocked out.” And the old man sank back on his chair behind the counter.

The four others were now clustered around Dick Willoughby. The latter, deputized to do the reading, had nonchalantly taken the epistle from Buck Ashley’s trembling hand. While the others were speaking he had bestowed a preliminary glance, and from his lips there escaped a murmur of surprise.

“Great Caesar!” As he uttered the ejaculation Dick sat up, keenly alert.

“Well, what’s it all about?” inquired Munson, by this time the only cool man in the bunch.

“Read, read!” cried the storekeeper hoarsely.

Dick Willoughby began:

“Mr. Buck Ashley, Storekeeper, Tejon, California.

“If God in His goodness permits this letter to come to your hands, remember it is from old Pierre, the Frenchman, who used to be about your store sometimes a half a day at a time, smoking his pipe. You never knew much about me or where I lived. But I will tell you.

“I am an old man now – very old. I was born in the South of France, came to this country in the ‘40’. and entered into the service of Joaquin Murietta, who was one great man, but a big bandit. Peace to his soul! Well, he was good to me, and I was faithful to him, taking care of the cave, the big grotto, the cavern among the Tehachapi mountains where he many times hid from the sheriff’s posse, and also, where he brought all his gold to stack up and keep from everybody.

“You also know Don Manuel, him whom the people call White Wolf. Well, once when a boy, Don Manuel he save Marietta’s life from the sheriff by helping him to escape from one close place. Murietta was very grateful, and one day he bring the boy to the grotto cave, and there I see him and like him very much. That was while Murietta still lived.

“Afterward when the little boy grow up and was one man, and turned bitter against the gringos because they wrong his sister, Seniorita Rosetta, and his old father and mother die of grief, he say to me, ‘I will become a bandit like Joaquin Murietta.’ He came to the cavern one night and tell me and say, ‘You be my servant.’ So I say, ‘All right,’ because Don Manuel one brave man.

“So that night of the great stage robbery over near Lake of Tulare, I hold horses. That’s all I do, but all the same they put me in this horrid prison, and here I am. The other two men, Felix Vasquez and Fox Cassidy, were shot by the posse and I have been told by a Portugee in the jail here about the White Wolf being killed away north in Seattle, and he is no more.

“Don Manuel de Valencia, he was one great man. Peace to his soul!

“I am alone. I want to get away from this terrible prison. I have promised one of my guards – a good Frenchman who comes from my town in France – \$5,000 in gold if he can secretly get this letter into postoffice to you and get me away from this living hell. You do this and I show you the cavern. Nobody knows where it is but me.

“Come and get me, please, my good Mr. Ashley, come, and may the spirit of the Virgin Mary reward you. All I say here is truth. You come get me and I show you the secret grotto. I show you the great stacks of gold hidden by Joaquin Murietta and Don Manuel. Also the sand-bar in the hidden stream where Guadalupe gathered up much gold.

“I beg and pray you to keep what I say in this letter secret. I am old and weak and sick. Come and get me.

“Obedient servant,

“Pierre Luzon.”

“Ain’t that just one hell of a letter, boys?” exclaimed Buck Ashley.

“Gospel truth, every word,” cried Tom Baker, emphatically.

“It certainly reads like the truth,” concurred Munson.

“Then what are we going to do about it?” asked Jack Rover.

Dick Willoughby spoke now with the quiet and quick decision that marks the leader of men:

“What we will do is this. We five are partners in this secret, and, if Buck is willing, we’ll play the game together for all it is worth. To begin with, we’ll put up one hundred dollars apiece to send Tom Baker to Sacramento. He will try to get a pardon or a parole for Pierre Luzon.”

“That can be managed,” assented the sheriff. “I’ve got a political pull, you know, boys.”

“Well,” continued Dick, “we’ll bring old Pierre here and we’ll get from him the information he promises about the secret grotto.”

“Not forgetting Guadalupe’s placer mine,” interjected Jack Rover.

“Everything will be attended to in its turn,” replied Dick. “One thing at a time, and the first thing to be done is to get the Frenchman out of San Quentin. When can you start, Tom?”

“The day after tomorrow.”

“Well, we’ll have the cash ready for you by tomorrow night. You must bring Pierre Luzon here without anyone else besides ourselves knowing his name or getting next to him.”

“I’ll fix up a cot for him in my own room behind the store,” suggested Buck Ashley.

“That’s a good plan,” assented Dick. “When the Frenchman’s here, it will be time then to discuss our next move. Meanwhile, it’s an honorable promise of secrecy all round, and to begin with I give my word.”

While speaking the last words, Dick solemnly raised his hand, and each man in turn followed his example as he gave the pledge required.

CHAPTER IX – Tia Teresa

TEN days had passed and the count of the stock on San Antonio Rancho had been completed, every canyon searched, the last wandering maverick roped and branded, the number of fat beeves accurately estimated. Three members of the Los Angeles syndicate had arrived in a big automobile and remained over night at the ranch house. Most of the time they had been closeted with Ben Thurston in his office, and had finally taken their departure without exchanging a word with anyone else on the rancho. Nobody knew whether the deal had gone through or not, but rumor said that, after some disagreement on the first day, terms had been arranged next morning.

Dick Willoughby, although he discussed the question with no one, made his own inferences. The very fact that the visitors had not made any inspection of the property proved that they already knew it thoroughly well. The counting of the cattle and horses had been the final factor in the negotiations, and the figures had enabled the deal to advance a further stage toward completion. Ben Thurston might fool himself about easy option money put up only to be forfeited, but Dick Willoughby was not fooled. The days of closer settlement in California had come, and these Los Angeles men were the most enterprising and skilful subdividers in the West. They dealt only in big propositions, and after mopping up all the available tracts in the southern end of the State, were extending their operations northward. This vast so-called “Spanish grant,” an empire in itself, had no doubt for several years been in their eye, and now they were prepared to handle the San Antonio Rancho with the lavish expenditure it deserved and required to transform the great sweep of cattle range – rich agricultural land, as the luxuriant native grasses showed – into smiling orchards and alfalfa farms, each provided with the irrigation water which intelligent conservation would ensure in abundance.

Dick knew in his heart that the era of transformation had at last come, that the roaming herds were to be pushed back into regions more remote, that homes and schoolhouses and garden cities would soon be dotting the landscape, that the passing of Ben Thurston, the cattle king, and of his hard-riding, devil-may-care vaqueros was at hand.

Yet Thurston spoke no word – in fact, he seemed to be more grouchy and taciturn than ever. Not even his son Marshall was in his confidence, for the young man was seldom with his father, preferring to spend his time in the drinking saloons and dance halls of Bakersfield, where the activity of oil-developing operations attracted all sorts and conditions of men, among whom the dissipated decadent had readily found friends to his liking.

Ben Thurston who had gone the pace himself in his early days, did not seek to interfere with his son’s pursuit of pleasures, but he had very promptly squelched any interference from Marshall with his own business operations. On the evening of the quarrel with Dick Willoughby at the round-up, Marshall had attempted to tell his father about the affair and suggest Dick’s dismissal. But the old man had at once silenced him by saying: “Why, damn you! I brought you out to this country to enjoy yourself and not to get into trouble. So far as Willoughby is concerned, I can’t afford to quarrel with him. He is my foreman, and I am right in the midst of a big business transaction. So just you mind your own business, my boy, and leave him alone.”

Accordingly, Marshall Thurston, a coward at heart, had not sought to pursue the feud singlehanded, and Dick had seen but little of him during the rest of the mustering work. When they did happen to meet, it was a case of a black scowl of hate from the one and a contemptuous smile of indifference from the other. And so the days had passed until the task was finished.

It was the Sunday morning that had been fixed for the visit to the home of Mr. Ricardo Robles, when the cattle foreman could at last conscientiously take a day of recreation. With the first break of dawn he and Munson were in the saddle, for they had been invited to breakfast at La Siesta before starting with the young ladies on the ride through the oak forest.

The visitors arrived early, but not too early for their hostesses. Grace and Merle were waiting to welcome them in the portico, looking more charming than ever in their neat riding suits of khaki.

“We saw you cross the bridge,” declared Grace, “and mother has gone in to order breakfast to be served. You must be hungry after your early start.”

“Oh, Sing Ling didn’t let us go without a cup of coffee,” laughed Dick. “But I fancy we’ll do full justice, all right, to the bountiful fare of La Siesta.”

It proved to be a delightful meal in every way, the viands seasoned with gay repartee and laughter. A full hour had sped before Dick recalled the real object of the day’s excursion.

“We usually walk to Mr. Robles’ place,” remarked Merle. “It is only a mile or so by the short cuts up the hill, but by the winding road it is very much longer. So we ordered our ponies.”

“I see,” smiled Munson, “to prolong the pleasure of our foursome among the oaks.”

“Not at all, sir,” retorted Grace. “The climb on foot is a stiff one, and we knew that you must be out of condition from the lazy life you are living.”

“I am only waiting for Willoughby to give me a cowboy’s job,” replied the ex-lieutenant.

“I don’t know if there will be any cowboy jobs going,” observed Willoughby. “It’s my belief that San Antonio Rancho is sold and is going to be broken up into small holdings.”

“Oh, what a pity!” exclaimed Merle.

“From one point of view, perhaps,” answered Dick. “But from a hundred other points of view, what a blessing! There will be a dozen happy homes for every steer the range now feeds!”

“But La Siesta will remain just as it is,” cried Grace.

“That will be all right,” replied Dick, gallantly, “It’s already a happy home.”

The ladies smiled pleasantly.

“Then this will mean the elimination of Mr. Ben Thurston,” observed Mrs. Darlington.

“The greatest blessing of all,” declared Merle, clapping her hands. “You see, I am already converted to the change, Mr. Willoughby,” she added merrily.

“But what about my job?” asked Munson in mock dolefulness.

“Consult Mr. Robles,” laughed Grace. “He may take pity on you, and find you a place as handy man on his estate.”

In merry mood they all sallied forth. The saddle horses were waiting, and standing beside them was an elderly Spanish woman.

“Tia Teresa, Mr. Munson,” said Mrs. Darlington by way of introduction.

Munson had often enough heard the name, and in answer to an inquiry, Willoughby had told him that the old dame had been the personal attendant of the two young ladies ever since they could remember. Tia or Aunt Teresa was now more a friend of the family than a servant of the house, and, taking her hand in salutation, Munson treated her with the affable courtesy that was her due.

“I am glad to make your acquaintance,” he said, raising his hat.

Tia Teresa looked pleased. Despite her seventy years, she was a buxom and splendidly preserved woman, and there was still the flash of youthfulness in her big dark eyes.

“You will look after my little girls,” she said, as she gathered together the folds of her black lace mantilla. “By rights I should be coming with you, too,” she added, in the manner of a true Spanish duenna.

“You forget that we are home again – in free America,” laughed Merle as she settled herself in the saddle.

“Too free, I sometimes think,” rejoined Tia Teresa. “But there is safety in four,” she added, turning with a smile to Mrs. Darlington.

And as the young folks rode away she waved them a pleasant *adios*.

CHAPTER X – The Home of the Recluse

AT a gentle pace they wound their way through the forest of magnificent old oaks.

As for Munson, riding by Grace Darlington's side, the miles were the shortest he had ever before traversed. It seemed only a few minutes before the red tiled roof and towers of a house built in the California Mission style were gleaming through the trees only a short distance ahead.

Great oaken doors closed the arched gateway, but at the clatter of hoofs and the sound of voices, a little peep-hole wicket was withdrawn. The inspection by unseen eyes apparently was satisfactory, for a moment later a postern was opened, and two men, Mexicans obviously by their garb and deferential manner, emerged to take and lead away the horses. Within the patio stood Senor Robles, his usually grave face lighted by a smile of cordial welcome.

"Let me tell you, young men," he said while shaking hands, "that while Grace and Merle are quite at home here, you are the very first strangers who have passed through my portals."

"Strangers no longer then," said Dick, good-naturedly.

"Precisely," replied Mr. Robles, "or you would not be here. But I foresee that all of us are going to be very close friends. Isn't that so, Grace, my dear?"

"I'm sure I cannot say," replied Grace, with a smile of demure innocence toward Mr. Munson. Then she turned to Mr. Robles with a roguish twinkle in her eye. "But I've news for you. Mr. Munson has resigned from the army and is looking for a job."

"Both facts are already known to me," answered Robles, smiling.

"Oh," exclaimed Grace, "one can never surprise you, Mr. Robles. Although you live the life of a hermit, you seem to be always the first to learn everything that is going on."

"A hermit, my dear, need not necessarily be out of touch with the world," replied Robles, playfully pinching her ear. "And now, Mr. Willoughby, you came specially to see my pictures. Lead the way, Merle. Gentlemen, I say again – welcome to my mountain home."

They lingered awhile in the patio to admire the marble columns of the cloister that ran all around, the playing fountains at each of the four comers, with groups of symbolical statuary, the wealth of beautiful shrubs and flowers. On the side opposite to the gateway rose a tall tower, fashioned like the campanile of an Old Mission and crowned with bright red tiles.

"We shall ascend there later on," remarked Mr. Robles, following Dick's upward glance.

Then they passed through the wide-opened French window into the living rooms.

The first was a great apartment that occupied one entire side of the building. In the centre was a large globe of the world. Here and there were glass cases displaying manuscripts and illuminated missals. Along the walls were finely-carved bookcases filled with several thousands of volumes.

"When you have the leisure you can come and browse here," said the host, addressing both young men. "Meanwhile you may care to look at the bronzes and statuary" – this with a sweep of the hand that indicated the art treasures distributed about the apartment.

On the side of the house beneath the tower were the dining room and the billiard and smoking room. Passing through these, the visitors came to the picture gallery, a room corresponding in size to the library. Here were hung treasures of the painter's art, masterpieces signed by names that are immortal. These, as their owner again explained, had been acquired by him during several prolonged visits to Europe.

"Count this just as a preliminary survey, Mr. Willoughby," he said finally. "Then come again. There are guest chambers on either side of the gateway, and one of these will always be at your disposal when I am at home. I extend the same invitation to you, Mr. Munson."

"My word, but you may feel honored," exclaimed Grace, in unconcealed amazement.

"When I open my gates, I open my heart as well," said Mr. Robles, with a courtly little bow to his new friends.

Next they ascended the tower. Its first floor, above the living rooms, was a delightful den filled with curios of all kinds. From this sprang a winding iron staircase, up which Mr. Robles led the way.

The upper chamber, extending on all sides some distance beyond the supporting tower, proved larger than might have been expected. Its one conspicuous article of furniture was a great terrestrial telescope. The sliding panels of glass which formed a complete window all around the room showed that the instrument could be used without obstruction in any direction.

Here a Mexican boy was on duty. When the visitors entered, his hand was resting on the telescope. A bright red sash around his waist imparted a touch of picturesqueness to his costume. He was perhaps only twelve or thirteen years of age, but wonderfully keen and alert-looking for his years. At a glance from his master, the youngster took his departure, closing the door behind him.

“Gentlemen,” remarked Mr. Robles, when they were again alone, “perhaps before I brought you here I should have exacted the promise I am now going to ask you to make. Grace and Merle know that I am a recluse and wish to live undisturbed by curiosity-mongers or tittle-tattlers. I want nobody but the friends I deliberately choose to know about my habits of living or the contents of my home. Only in this way can I hope to be left alone. Therefore, please give me your word, Mr. Willoughby and Lieutenant Munson, that you will not speak with any outsider about the things I am showing you today.”

The promise was instantly given and sealed by a hearty hand clasp.

“Now,” resumed the host in lighter tone, “perhaps you would like to view the landscape. I may explain that I had this observatory, as I call it, specially built and equipped so that I could sweep the valley from end to end. For example, I saw you two young men riding along the road this morning,” he went on, with a smile. “I saw one of you alight, about twelve miles from here – it was you, lieutenant – and tighten the girths of your saddle.”

“Great Scott!” murmured Munson, in half-incredulous surprise.

“Test the glass for yourself,” continued Robles, as, placing one eye at the lens, he adjusted the instrument. “Look” – and he stepped back, motioning Munson to approach.

Munson peeped through the long tube and there came from his lips a cry of mingled delight and amazement.

“Dick, Dick, there’s the store as large as life – Buck Ashley standing at the door and lighting a cigar. Geewhizz, and it must be twenty miles away.”

He rose erect and made room for Dick. The latter gazed in silence for a few moments. When he turned to Mr. Robles he said:

“It’s really wonderful – it is the most wonderful glass I ever looked through.”

There was the glimmer of an exultant smile on the face of Ricardo Robles.

“I saw you at the round-up across the valley the other day,” he remarked. “You were much nearer to me than is the store. And while I do not invite any confidence, Mr. Willoughby, you certainly engaged in a very spirited conversation, to say the least, with young Marshall Thurston. Indeed, I half expected to see you come to blows.”

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