

Raymond Evelyn

Jessica, the Heiress



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CHAPTER I. JESSICA DISAPPEARS

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

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

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

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

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

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

"About what, pray?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Mrs. Benton sighed, but responded nothing loath:

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

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

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

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

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

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

“‘Pooring’ again are you? Another scamp, too.”

“Oh, Aunt Sally! He’s—dead!” remonstrated Jessica, in awestruck tones.

“And a fine job he is. There’s plenty of good-for-noughts still living. A man that’s been wicked all his life ain’t apt to turn saint at the end of it. I like folks that do their duty as they go along. If the robber, Garcia, had got well he’d likely claimed our Luis and reared him to be as bad as himself.”

“Aunt Sally, you’re uncharitable this morning. What’s made you so?”

“The plumb meanness of human natur’.”

“Your own?” asked the girl teasingly.

“No, saucebox. My boy, John’s. His, and all the rest of ’em.”

“Toward whom?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

In spite of her own distress, Jessica laughed.

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

“Suppose I should? Wouldn’t I have a right? Ain’t he my own?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

Both stooped and rose again, astonishment deepening upon their faces as Jessica held out her open palm with the injured trinket lying upon it.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Fiddlesticks!”

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

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

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

“Hi, there, mother! Your money or your life!”

“Money—life!” echoed Luis, clinging to his playmate’s waist and peeping over his shoulder.

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

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

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

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

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

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

“I don’t know.”

“Very well, then I’ll help you to remember.”

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

“Won’t be whipped, old Aunt Sally!” added Luis, clasping his leader; whereupon the customary scuffle ensued; for, no matter what their business in hand, personal contact always insured a slight passage at arms. At present, this diverted their thoughts from what might be in store at the will of their mutual enemy, and it came with appalling suddenness. Each small boy was lifted, bidden to shut his eyes and mouth, then plunged downward into a barrel of some cold slippery stuff. Here he was

soused vigorously up and down, until every portion of his skin was smeared with the stick mess; after which he was placed on his feet and once more commanded:

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

Ned was silent, but Luis “guessed they’s under a tree.”

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER II.

THE HUSH OF ANXIETY

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The other smiled again at the complacency visible upon her friend's face, which so innocently displayed the same feeling that had just been deplored in Ned. However, Aunt Sally was too busy with her own food to notice anything else, and it seemed long to her companion before she had finished and risen, to call, sharply:

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

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

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

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

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

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

“She is quick to understand,” said the mother, proudly.

“Course. Nothin’ strange, is it, seeing who her folks was? Best go take a nap, honey.”

“Oh, no! Thank you for suggesting it, but I’m too wakeful.”

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

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

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

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

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

“Why, Gabriella Trent! Me! Me! Don’t say that, and make me feel meaner’n dirt. It’s you, honey, is that—”

Mrs. Trent laughed as she answered:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Aunt Sally, what has happened to Jessica?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I don't know."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER III. OLD CENTURY TAKES THE TRAIL

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Am I the nina's¹ keeper? But, no," then resumed his weaving.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

¹ Little one.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Hello, neighbors! Ain’t lookin’ over and above cheerful, are you? What’s wrong?”

“Good-day, herder. How’s all?”

“Glum, I should say. Where’s Lady Jess?”

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

“Lost your tongues, mostly, hey? I say—where’s the captain?”

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

“Not here.”

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

“Has she been here to-day?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Jessica Trent is safe. Jessica Trent is coming back.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER IV. DELIVERANCE

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The dwarf began to talk aloud, to himself, apparently; but after a moment of this muttering, grew silent again. He had come to the mouth of a black pit which seemed to descend into great depths. In reality the depth was not so great; yet to anyone within it escape was impossible without

help from above. Into this hole Ferd peered, holding the lantern so that its rays fell straight downward, and calling in a jeering voice:

“Is the ‘captain’ ready yet?”

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

“All right. The money first.”

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

“Down there safe. Is you hungry?”

“No, Ferd. The food you took out of Aunt Sally’s pantry kept me from that.”

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

“Here am I, Sunny Face. Wait. I come.”

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

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

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

“I find a way. Wait.”

“Oh, Pedro! I know your blessed voice! There’s a rope somewhere. Ask him. Quick—quick!”

“Wait.”

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

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

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

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

“Climb!”

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

But he was in no haste. Allowing her to keep between himself and the cavern’s wall, even intrusting to her care the curious staff that now persisted in dancing along the cavern’s floor in an

elfish way which amazed the girl, he made a circuit of the place. At one spot he paused, and a single grunt of satisfaction escaped him. Then he seized a loaf of bread from a shelf-like niche and began to eat it eagerly. He even pointed to another, lying in the same place, but Jessica shook her head.

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

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

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

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

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

"Come, Sunny Face!"

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

"Come."

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

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

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

"Fetch the padre's staff."

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

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

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

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

"Ugh!" said the Indian, arousing from his contemplation, and, stooping began to dig amid the loose stones at his feet, with the only tools at his command—his own lean fingers. For these he sometimes substituted a bit of rock, and to Jessica it seemed as if he would never give over his strange

task. When she had begun to really despair of the liberation which had seemed so near a while ago, he ceased his labor and stood upright, holding something shining toward the lantern's light. To the girl it appeared as only another worthless stone, of a pretty, reddish hue, but wholly unworthy the toil which had been spent to secure it. She was further surprised, if anything could now surprise her, to see the Indian place the fragment carefully within his shirt front and tighten his belt afresh below it. Then he lifted the basket she had filled with the articles they had found and motioned her upwards again.

“Now, we're really going, aren't we, Pedro?”

“Yes, Sunny Face. We go.”

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

CHAPTER V. JESSICA'S STORY

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

"Mother! My mother! Where are you?"

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

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

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

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

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

"In the canyon cave."

"Didn't know there was one."

"Nor I—before."

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

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

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

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

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

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

Nor when Pedro and the subdued dwarf came slowly over the road would they make any further explanation. Indeed, they were both utterly silent; the Indian forcing his captive before him into the

deserted office where he intrenched himself, with his basket and staff, until such time as it should be his mistress' pleasure to receive him.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Go on! Go on! What next?” demanded an impatient listener.

“Then I saw Ferd. Oh, mother! If I tell I’m afraid they’ll hurt him.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Hear me, ‘boys.’ Do you belong to me?”

“Ay, ay! Heart and soul!”

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

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

“Will you do this?”

“Hold on, little one. Let the ‘admiral’ speak. Has she forgiven that human coyote?”

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

CHAPTER VI. BEHIND LOCKED DOORS

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

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

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

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

"My money! My money! My money!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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