

Ryan Marah Ellis

**The Treasure Trail: A Romance
of the Land of Gold
and Sunshine**



Marah Ryan

**The Treasure Trail: A Romance
of the Land of Gold and Sunshine**

«Public Domain»

Ryan M.

The Treasure Trail: A Romance of the Land of Gold and Sunshine /
M. Ryan — «Public Domain»,

Содержание

CHAPTER I	5
CHAPTER II	11
CHAPTER III	27
CHAPTER IV	32
CHAPTER V	35
CHAPTER VI	42
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	44

Marah Ellis Ryan

The Treasure Trail: A Romance of the Land of Gold and Sunshine

CHAPTER I

KIT AND THE GIRL OF THE LARK CALL

In the shade of Pedro Vijil's little brown adobe on the Granados rancho, a horseman squatted to repair a broken cinch with strips of rawhide, while his horse—a strong dappled roan with a smutty face—stood near, the rawhide bridle over his head and the quirt trailing the ground.

The horseman's frame of mind was evidently not of the sweetest, for to Vijil he had expressed himself in forcible Mexican—which is supposed to be Spanish and often isn't—condemning the luck by which the cinch had gone bad at the wrong time, and as he tinkered he sang softly an old southern ditty:

Oh—oh! I'm a good old rebel,

Now that's just what I am!
For I won't be reconstructed

And I don't care a damn!

He varied this musical gem occasionally by whistling the air as he punched holes and wove the rawhide thongs in and out through the spliced leather.

Once he halted in the midst of a strain and lifted his head, listening. Something like an echo of his own notes sounded very close, a mere shadow of a whistle.

Directly over his head was a window, unglazed and wooden barred. A fat brown olla, dripping moisture, almost filled the deep window sill, but the interior was all in shadow. Its one door was closed. The Vijil family was scattered around in the open, most of them under the *ramada*, and after a frowning moment of mystification the young fellow resumed his task, but in silence.

Then, after a still minute, more than the whisper of a whistle came to him—the subdued sweet call of a meadow lark. It was so sweet it might have been mate to any he had heard on the range that morning.

Only an instant he hesitated, then with equal care he gave the duplicate call, and held his breath to listen—not a sound came back.

“We've gone loco, Pardner,” he observed to the smutty-faced roan moving near him. “That jolt from the bay outlaw this morning has jingled my brain pans—we don't hear birds call us—we only think we do.”

If he had even looked at Pardner he might have been given a sign, for the roan had lifted its head and was staring into the shadows back of the sweating olla.

“Hi, you caballero!”

The words were too clear to be mistaken, the “caballero” stared across to the only people in sight. There was Pedro Vijil sharpening an axe, while Merced, his wife, turned the creaking grindstone for him. The young olive branches of the Vijil family were having fun with a horned toad under the *ramada* where gourd vines twisted about an ancient grape, and red peppers hung in a gorgeous

splash of color. Between that and the blue haze of the far mountains there was no sign of humanity to account for such cheery youthful Americanism as the tone suggested.

“Hi, yourself!” he retorted, “whose ghost are you?”

There was a giggle from the barred window of the adobe.

“I don’t dare say because I am not respectable just now,” replied the voice. “I fell in the ditch and have nothing on but the Sunday shirt of Pedro. I am the funniest looking thing! wish I dared ride home in it to shock them all silly.”

“Why not?” he asked, and again the girlish laugh gave him an odd thrill of comradeship.

“A good enough reason; they’d take Pat from me, and say he wasn’t safe to ride—but he is! My tumble was my own fault for letting them put on that fool English saddle. Never again for me!”

“They are all right for old folks and a pacing pony,” he observed, and again he heard the bubbling laugh.

“Well, Pat is not a pacing pony, not by a long shot; and I’m not old folks—yet!” Then after a little silence, “Haven’t you any curiosity?”

“I reckon there’s none allowed me on this count,” he replied without lifting his head, “between the wooden bars and Pedro’s shirt you certainly put the fences up on me.”

“I’m a damsel in distress waiting for a rescuing knight with a white banner and a milk-white steed—” went on the laughing voice in stilted declamation.

“Sorry, friend, but my cayuse is a roan, and I never carried a white flag yet. You pick the wrong colors.”

Whereupon he began the chanting of a war song, with an eye stealthily on the barred window.

Hurrah! Hurrah! For southern rights, hurrah!
Hurrah for the bonnie blue flag
That bears the single star!

“Oh! *I* know that!” the voice was now a hail of recognition. “Cap Pike always sings that when he’s a little ‘how-came-ye-so’—and *you’re* a Johnny Reb!”

“Um! twice removed,” assented the man by the wall, “and you are a raiding Yank who has been landed in one of our fortresses with only one shirt to her back, and that one borrowed.”

He had a momentary vision of two laughing gray eyes beside the olla, and the girl behind the bars laughed until Merced let the grindstone halt while she cast a glance towards the house as if in doubt as to whether three feet of adobe wall and stout bars could serve instead of a dueña to foolish young Americans who chattered according to their foolishness.

There was an interval of silence, and then the girlish voice called again.

“Hi, Johnny Reb!”

“Same to you, Miss Yank.”

“Aren’t you the new Americano from California, for the La Partida rancho?”

“Even so, O wise one of the borrowed garment.” The laugh came to him again.

“Why don’t you ask how I know?” she demanded.

“It is borne in upon me that you are a witch of the desert, or the ghost of a dream, that you see through the adobe wall, and my equally thick skull. Far be it for me to doubt that the gift of second sight is yours, O seventh daughter of a seventh daughter!”

“No such thing! I’m the only one!” came the quick retort, and the young chap in the shade of the adobe shook with silent mirth.

“I see you laughing, Mr. Johnny Reb, you think you caught me that time. But you just halt and listen to me, I’ve a hunch and I’m going to prophesy.”

“I knew you had the gift of second sight!”

“Maybe you won’t believe me, but the hunch is that you—won’t—hold—the job on these ranches!”

“What!” and he turned square around facing the window, then laughed. “That’s the way you mean to get even for the ‘seventh daughter’ guess is it? You think I can’t handle horses?”

“Nix,” was the inelegant reply, “I know you can, for I saw you handle that bay outlaw they ran in on you this morning: seven years old and no wrangler in Pima could ride him. Old Cap Pike said it was a damn shame to put you up against that sun-fisher as an introduction to Granados.”

“Oh! Pike did, did he? Nice and sympathetic of Pike. I reckon he’s the old-time ranger I heard about out at the Junction, reading a red-fire riot to some native sons who were not keen for the cactus trail of the Villistas. That old captain must be a live wire, but he thinks I can’t stick?”

“No-o, that wasn’t Cap Pike, that was my own hunch. Say, are you married?”

“O señorita! this is so sudden!” he spoke in shy reproof, twisting his neckerchief in mock embarrassment, and again Merced looked toward the house because of peals of laughter there.

“You are certainly funny when you do that,” she said after her laughter had quieted down to giggles, “but I wasn’t joking, honest Indian I wasn’t! But how did you come to strike Granados?”

“Me? Well, I ranged over from California to sell a patch of ground I owned in Yuma. Then I hiked over to Nogales on a little *pasear* and offered to pack a gun and wear a uniform for this Mexican squabble, and the powers that be turned me down because one of my eyes could see farther than the other—that’s no joke—it’s a calamity! I spent all the *dinero* I had recovering from the shock, and about the time I was getting my sympathetic friends sobered up, Singleton, of Granados, saw us trying out some raw cavalry stock, and bid for my valuable services and I rode over. Any other little detail you’d like to know?”

“N-no, only needed to know it wasn’t Conrad the manager hired you, and I asked if you were married because married men need the work more than single strays. Adolf Conrad got rid of two good American men lately, and fetches over Mexicans from away down Hermosillo way.”

“Cause why?” asked the man who had ceased pretense of mending the saddle, and was standing with back against the adobe.

“Cause I don’t know,” came petulant response. “I only had the hunch when I saw you tame that outlaw in the corral. If he pulls wires to lose *you*, I’ll stop guessing; I’ll know!”

“Very interesting, señorita,” agreed the stranger reflectively. “But if I have a good job, I can’t see how it will give me aid or comfort to know that you’ve acquired knowledge, and stopped guessing. When’s your time up behind the bars?”

“Whenever my clothes get dry enough to fool the dear home folks.”

“You must be a joy to the bosom of your family,” he observed, “also a blessing.”

He heard again the girlish laughter and concluded she could not be over sixteen. There was silence for a space while only the creak of the grindstone cut the stillness. Whoever she was, she had given him a brief illuminating vision of the tactics of Conrad, the manager for the ranches of Granados and La Partida, the latter being the Sonora end of the old Spanish land grant. Even a girl had noted that the rough work had been turned over to a new American from the first circle of the *rodeo*. He stood there staring out across the sage green to the far purple hills of the Green Springs range.

“You’ve fixed that cinch, what you waiting for?” asked the voice at last, and the young fellow straightened up and lifted the saddle.

“That’s so,” he acknowledged. “But as you whistled to me and the call seemed friendly, it was up to me to halt for orders—from the lady in distress.”

Again he heard the soft laughter and the voice.

“Glad you liked the friendly call, Johnny Reb,” she confessed. “That’s my call. If ever you hear it where there are no larks, you’ll know who it is.”

“Sure,” he agreed, yanking at the cinch, “and I’ll come a lopin’ with the bonnie blue flag, to give aid and succor to the enemy.”

“You will not!” she retorted. “You’ll just whistle back friendly, and be chums. I think my clothes are dry now, and you’d better travel. If you meet anyone looking for a stray maverick, you haven’t seen me.”

“Just as you say. *Adios!*”

After he had mounted and passed along the corral to the road, he turned in the saddle and looked back. He could see no one in the window of the bars, but there came to him clear and sweet the field bugle of the meadow lark.

He answered it, lifted his sombrero and rode soberly towards the Granados corrals, three miles across the valley. Queer little trick she must be. American girls did not usually ride abroad alone along the border, and certainly did not chum with the Mexicans to the extent of borrowing shirts. Then as he lifted the bridle and Pardner broke into a lope, he noted an elderly horseman jogging along across trail on a little mule. Each eyed the other appraisingly.

“Hello, Bub!” hailed the older man. “My name’s Pike, and you’re the new man from California, hey? Glad to meet you. Hear your name’s Rhodes.”

“I reckon you heard right,” agreed the young chap. “K. Rhodes at your service, sir.”

“Hello! K? K? Does that K stand for Kit?”

“Center shot for you,” assented the other.

“From Tennessee?”

“Now you’re a sort of family historian, I reckon, Mr. Pike,” suggested K. Rhodes. “What’s the excitement?”

“Why you young plantation stray!” and the older man reached for his hand and made use of it pump-handle fashion with a sort of sputtering glee. “Great guns, boy! there was just one K. Rhodes a-top of God’s green earth and we were pardners here in Crook’s day. Hurrah for us! Are you cousin, son, or nephew?”

“My grandfather was with Crook.”

“Sure! I knew it soon as I laid eyes on you and heard your name; that was in the corral with the outlaw Conrad had driven in for you to work, it wa’n’t a square deal to a white man. I was cussin’ mad.”

“So I heard,” and the blue eyes of the other smiled at the memory of the girl’s glib repetition of his discourse. “What’s the great idea? Aside from the fact that he belongs to the white dove, anti-military bunch of sisters, Singleton seems quite white, a nice chap.”

“Yeh, but he’s nowadays wise at that. He sort of married into the horse game here, wasn’t bred to it. Just knows enough to not try to run it solo. Now this Dolf Conrad does know horses and the horse market, and Granados rancho. He’s shipped more cavalry stock to France than any other outfit in this region. Yes, Conrad knows the business end of the game, but even at that he might not assay as high grade ore. He is mixed up with them too-proud-to-fight clique organized by old maids of both sexes, and to show that he is above all prejudice, political or otherwise, he sure is corralling an extra lot of Mex help this year. I’ve *companeros* I’d go through hell for, but Conrad’s breed—well, enough said, Bub, but they’re different!” Mr. Pike bit off a chew of black plug, and shook his head ruminatively.

Rhodes looked the old man over as they rode along side by side. He was lean, wiry and probably sixty-five. His hair, worn long, gave him the look of the old-time ranger. He carried no *reata* and did not look like a ranchman. He had the southern intonation, and his eyes were wonderfully young for the almost snowy hair.

“Belong in the valley, Captain?”

“Belong? Me belong anywhere? Not yet, son,” and he smiled at his own fancy. “Not but what it’s a good enough corner when a man reaches the settlin’ down age. I drift back every so often. This ranch was Fred Bernard’s, and him and me flocked together for quite a spell. Singleton married Bernard’s widow—she’s dead now these seven years. I just drift back every so often to keep track of Bernard’s kid, Billie.”

“I see. Glad to have met you, Captain. Hope we can ride together often enough for me to hear about the old Apache days. This land has fetched out three generations of us, so it surely has some pull! My father came at the end of his race, but I’ve come in time to grow up with the country.”

Captain Pike looked at him and chuckled. K. Rhodes was about twenty-three, tall, almost boyish in figure, but his shoulders and hands suggested strength, and his mouth had little dents of humor at the corners to mitigate the squareness of jaw and the heavy dark brows. His black lashes made the deep blue of his eyes look purple. Young he was, but with a stature and self-reliant manner as witness of the fact that he was fairly grown up already.

“Where’d you learn horses, Bub?”

“Tennessee stock farm, and southern California ranges. Then this neck of the woods seemed calling me, and I trailed over to look after a bit of land in Yuma. I wasted some time trying to break into the army, but they found some eye defect that I don’t know anything about—and don’t more than half believe! I had some dandy prospecting plans after that, but there was no jingling in my pockets—no outfit money, so I hailed Singleton as an angel monoplaned down with the ducats. Yes sir, I had all the dream survey made for a try at some gold trails down here, going to take it up where the rest of the family quit.”

“You mean that, boy?” The old man halted his mule, and spat out the tobacco, staring at Rhodes in eager anticipation.

“I sure do. Reckon I’ve inherited the fever, and can’t settle down to any other thing until I’ve had one try at it. Did do a little placer working in the San Jacinto.”

“And you’re broke?” Mr. Pike’s voice betrayed a keen joy in the prospect.

“Flat,” stated K. Rhodes, eyeing the old gentleman suspiciously, “my horse, saddle, field glass, and gun are the only belongings in sight.”

“Ki-yi!” chirruped his new acquaintance gleefully, “I knew when I got out of the blankets this morning I was to have good luck of some sort, had a ‘hunch.’ You can bet on me, Bub; you’ve struck the right rail, and I’m your friend, your desert *companero!*”

“Yes, you sound real nice and friendly,” agreed K. Rhodes. “So glad I’m flat broke that you’re having hysterics over it. Typical southern hospitality. Hearty welcome to our city, and so forth, and so forth!”

The old man grinned at him appreciatively. “Lord boy!—I reckon I’ve been waiting around for you about ten year, though I didn’t know what your name would be when you come, and it couldn’t be a better one! We’ll outfit first for the Three Hills of Gold in the desert, and if luck is against us there we’ll strike down into Sonora to have a try after the red gold of El Alisal. I’ve covered some of that ground, but never had a pardner who would stick. They’d beat it because of either the Mexicans or the Indians, but *you*—say boy! It’s the greatest game in the world and we’ll go to it!”

His young eyes sparkled in his weathered desert face, and more than ten years were cast aside in his enthusiasm. K. Rhodes looked at him askance.

“If I did not have a key to your sane and calm outlining of prospects for the future, I might suspect loco weed or some other dope,” he observed. “But the fact is you must have known that my grandfather in his day went on the trail of the Three Hills of Gold, and left about a dozen different plans on paper for future trips.”

“Know it? Why boy, I went in with him!” shrilled Captain Pike. “Know it? Why, we crawled out half starved, and dried out as a couple of last year’s gourds. We dug roots and were chewing our own boot tops when the Indians found us. Sure, I know it. He went East to raise money for a bigger outfit, but never got back—died there.”

“Yes, then my father gathered up all the plans and specifications and came out with a friend about fifteen years ago,” added Rhodes. “They never got anywhere, but he sort of worked the fever off, bought some land and hit the trail back home. So I’ve been fairly well fed up on your sort of dope, Captain, and when I’ve mended that gone feeling in my pocketbook I may ‘call’ you on the gold

trail proposition. Even if you're bluffing there'll be no come back; I can listen to a lot of 'lost mine' vagaries. It sounds like home sweet home to me!"

"Bluff nothing! we'll start next week."

"No we won't, I've got a job and made a promise, got to help clean up the work here for the winter. Promised to take the next load of horses East."

"That's a new one," observed his new friend. "Conrad himself has always gone East with the horses, or sent Brehmen, his secretary. But never mind, Bub, the eastern trip won't take long. I'll be devilin' around getting our outfit and when the chance comes—us for the Three Hills of Gold!"

"It listens well," agreed K. Rhodes, "cheeriest little *pasear* I've struck in the county. We'll have some great old powwows, even if we don't make a cent, and some day you'll tell me about the mental kinks in the makeup of our Prussian friend, Conrad. He sounds interesting to me."

Captain Pike uttered a profane and lurid word or two concerning Mr. Conrad, and stated he'd be glad when Billie was of age. Singleton, and therefore Conrad, would only have the management up to that time. Billie would know horses if nothing else, and—Then he interrupted himself and stared back the way he had come.

"I'm a forgetful old fool!" he stated with conviction. "I meandered out to take a look around for her, and I didn't like the looks of that little dab of a saddle Conrad had put on Pat. You didn't see anything of her, did you?"

"What does she look like?"

"A slip of a girl who rides like an Indian, rides a black horse."

"No, I've seen no one," said the young chap truthfully enough. "But who did you say your girl was?"

"You'll find out if you hold your job long enough for her to be of age," said Pike darkly. "She'll be your boss instead of Conrad. It's Billie Bernard, the owner of Granados and La Partida."

"Billie?"

"Miss Wilfreda, if you like it better."

But K. Rhodes said he didn't. Billie seemed to fit the sort of girl who would garb herself in Pedro's shirt and whistle at him through the bars of the little window.

CHAPTER II

THE RED GOLD LEGEND

It took less than a week for Kit Rhodes to conclude that the girl behind the bars had a true inspiration regarding his own position on her ranches. There was no open hostility to him, yet it was evident that difficulties were cleverly put in his way.

Not by Philip Singleton, the colorless, kindly disposed gentleman of Pike's description. But by various intangible methods, he was made to feel an outsider by the manager, Conrad, and his more confidential Mexican assistants. They were punctiliously polite, too polite for a horse-ranch outfit. Yet again and again a group of them fell silent when he joined them, and as his work was with the horse herds of La Partida, that part of the great grant which spread over the border into Sonora, he was often camped fifty miles south of the hacienda of Granados, and saw no more of either the old prospector, or the tantalizing girl of the voice and the whistle.

Conrad, however, motored down two or three times concerning horses for eastern shipment, but Rhodes, the new range capitan, puzzled considerably over those flying visits, for, after the long drive through sand and alkali, the attention he gave either herds or outfit was negligible. In fact he scarcely touched at the camp, yet always did some trifling official act coming or going to make record that he had been there.

The Mexicans called him El Aoura, the buzzard, because no man could tell when he would swoop over even the farthest range of La Partida to catch them napping. Yet there was some sort of curious bond between them for there were times when Conrad came north as from a long southern trail, yet the Mexicans were as dumb men if it was referred to.

He was a compactly built, fair man of less than forty, with thin reddish brown hair, brows slanting downward from the base of the nose, and a profile of that curious Teuton type reminiscent of a supercilious hound if one could imagine such an animal with milk-blue eyes and a yellow mustache with spiky turned-up ends.

But Rhodes did not permit any antipathy he might feel towards the man to interfere with his own duties, and he went stolidly about the range work as if in utter forgetfulness of the dark prophecy of the girl.

If he was to lose his new job he did not mean that it should be from inattention, and nothing was too trifling for his notice. He would do the work of a range boss twelve hours out of the day, and then put in extra time on a night ride to the *cantina* at the south wells of La Partida.

But as the work moved north and the consignment of horses for France made practically complete, old Cap Pike rode down to Granados corrals, and after contemplation of the various activities of Rhodes, climbed up on the corral fence beside him, where the latter was checking off the accepted animals.

"You're a cheerful idiot for work, Bub," agreed the old man, "but what the devil do you gain by doing so much of the other fellow's job? Pancho Martinez wasn't sick as he played off on you; you're green to these Mexican tricks."

"Sure, I'm the original Green from Greenburg," assented his new *companero*. "Pancho was only more than usually drunk last night, while I was fresh as a daisy and eager to enlarge my geographic knowledge, also my linguistics, Hi! Pedro! not the sorrel mare! Cut her out!"

"Linguistics?" repeated Pike impatiently.

"Yeh, nice little woman in the cantina at La Partida wells. I am a willing pupil at Spanish love songs, and we get along fine. I am already a howling success at *La Paloma*, *La Golondrina*, and a few other sentimental birds."

“Oh, you are, are you?” queried Pike. “Well, take a warning. You’ll get a knife in your back from her man one of these fine nights, and the song will be *Adios, adios amores* for you!”

“Nothing doing, Cap! We play *malilla* for the drinks, and I work it so that he beats me two out of three. I’m so easy I’m not worth watching. Women don’t fancy fools, so I’m safe.”

“Well, I’ll be ‘strafed’ by the Dutch!” Pike stared at the young fellow, frowning in perplexity. “You sure have me puzzled, Bub. Are you a hopeless dunce by training or nature?”

“Natural product,” grinned K. Rhodes cheerfully. “Beauty unadorned. Say Cap, tell me something. What is the attraction for friend Conrad south of La Partida? I seem to run against a stone wall when I try to feel out the natives on that point. Now just what lies south, and whose territory?”

The old man looked at him with a new keenness.

“For your sort of an idiot you’ve blundered on a big interrogation point,” he observed. “Did you meet him down there?”

“No, only heard his voice in the night. It’s not very easy to mistake that velvety blood-puddin’ voice of his, and a team went down to meet him. He seems to go down by another route, railroad I reckon, and comes in by the south ranch. Now just what is south?”

“The ranches of Soledad grant join La Partida, or aim to. There are no maps, and no one here knows how far down over the border the Partida leagues do reach. Soledad was an old mission site, and a fortified hacienda back in the days of Juarez. Its owner was convicted of treason during Diaz’ reign, executed, and the ranches confiscated. It is now in the hands of a Federal politician who is safer in Hermosillo. The revolutionists are thick even among the pacificos up here, but the Federals have the most ammunition, and the gods of war are with the guns.”

“Sure; and who is the Federal politician? No, not that colt, Marcito!”

“Perez, Don José Perez,” stated Pike, giving no heed to corral interpolations. “He claims more leagues than have ever been reckoned or surveyed, took in several Indian rancherias last year when the natives were rounded up and shipped to Yucatan.”

“What?”

“Oh, he is in that slave trade good and plenty! They say he is sore on the Yaquis because he lost a lot of money on a boat load that committed suicide as they were sailing from Guaymas.”

“A boat load of suicides! Now a couple of dozen would sound reasonable, but a boat load—”

“But it happened to every Indian on the boat, and the boat was full! No one knows how the poor devils decided it, but it was their only escape from slavery, and they went over the side like a school of fish. Men, women, and children from the desert who couldn’t swim a stroke! Talk about nerve—there wasn’t one weakling in that whole outfit, not one! Perez was wild. It lost him sixty dollars a head, American.”

“And that’s the neighbor friend Conrad takes a run down south to see occasionally?”

“Who says so, Bub?”

The two looked at each other, eyes questioning.

“Look here, son,” said Pike, after a little, “I’ll hit any trail with you barring Mexican politics. They all sell each other out as regular as the seasons swing around, and the man north of the line who gets tangled is sure to be victim if he stays in long enough.”

“Oh, I don’t know! We have a statesman or two who flirted with Sonora and came out ahead.”

“I said if he stayed in,” reminded Pike. “Sure we have crooks galore who drift across, play a cut-throat game and skip back to cover. The border is lined with them on both sides. And Conrad—”

“But Conrad isn’t in politics.”

“N-no. There’s no evidence that he is, but his Mexican friends are. There are men on the Granados now who used to be down on Soledad, and they are the men who make the trips with him to the lower ranch.”

“Tomas Herrera and Chico Domingo?”

“I reckon you’ve sized them up, but remember, Kit, I don’t cross over with you for any political game, and I don’t know a thing!”

“All right, Captain, but don’t raise too loud a howl if I fancy a *pasear* occasionally to improve my Spanish.”

The old man grumbled direful and profane prophecies as to things likely to happen to students of Spanish love songs in Sonora, and then sat with his head on one side studying Kit ruminatively as he made his notes of the selected stock.

“Ye know Bub, it mightn’t be so bad at that, if you called a halt in time, for one of the lost mine trails calls for Spanish and plenty of it. I’ve got a working knowledge, but the farther you travel into Sonora the less American you will hear, and that lost mine of the old padres is down there along the ranges of Soledad somewhere.”

“Which one of the fifty-seven varieties have you elected to uncover first?” queried Rhodes. “The last time you were confidential about mines I thought the ‘Three Hills of Gold’ were mentioned by you.”

“Sure it was, but since you are on the Sonora end of the ranch, and since you are picking up your ears to learn Sonoran trails, it might be a good time to follow your luck. Say, I’ll bet that every herder who drifts into the *cantina* at La Partida has heard of the red gold of El Alisal. The Yaquis used to know where it was before so many of them were killed off; reckon it’s lost good and plenty now, but nothing is hid forever and it’s waiting there for some man with the luck.”

“We’re willing,” grinned Kit. “You are a great little old dreamer, Captain. And there is a fair chance I may range down there. I met a chap named Whitely from over toward the Painted Hills north of Altar. Ranch manager, sort of friendly.”

“Sure, Tom Whitely has some stock in a ranch over there—the Mesa Blanca ranch—it joins Soledad on the west. I’ve always aimed to range that way, but the lost mine is closer than the eastern sierras—must be! The trail of the early padres was farther east, and the mine could not well be far from the trail, not more than a day’s journey by mule or burro, and that’s about twenty miles. You see Bub, it was found by a padre who wandered off the trail on the way to a little branch mission, or *visita*, as they call it, and it was where trees grew, for a big alisal tree—sycamore you know—was near the outcrop of that red gold. Well, that *visita* was where the padres only visited the heathen for baptism and such things; no church was built there! That’s what tangles the trail for anyone trying to find traces after a hundred years.”

“I reckon it would,” agreed Rhodes. “Think what a hundred years of cactus, sand, and occasional *temblors* can do to a desert, to say nothing of the playful zephyrs. Why, Cap, the winds could lift a good-sized range of hills and fill the baby rivers with it in that time, for the winds of the desert have a way with them!”

A boy rode out of the whirls of dust, and climbed up on the corral fence where Rhodes was finishing tally of the horses selected for shipment. He was the slender, handsome son of Tomas Herrera of whom they had been speaking.

“It is a letter,” he said, taking a folded paper from his hat. “The Señor Conrad is having the telegraph, and the cars are to be ready for Granados.”

“Right you are, Juanito,” agreed Rhodes. “Tell Señor Conrad I will reach Granados for supper, and that all the stock is in.”

The lad whirled away again, riding joyously north, and Rhodes, after giving final directions to the vaqueros, turned his roan in the same direction.

“Can’t ride back with you, Cap, for I’m taking a little *pasear* around past Herrera’s rancheria. I want to take a look at that bunch of colts and size up the water there. I’ve a hunch they had better be headed up the other valley to the Green Springs tank till rains come.”

Captain Pike jogged off alone after some audible and highly colored remarks concerning range bosses who assumed the power of the Almighty to be everywhere the same day. Yet as he watched

the younger man disappear over the gray-green range he smiled tolerantly for, after all, that sort of a hustler was the right sort of partner for a prospecting trip.

The late afternoon was a golden haze under a metal blue sky; afar to the east, sharp edges of the mountains cut purple zig-zags into the salmon pink of the horizon. The rolling waves of the ranges were bathed in a sea of rest, and now and then a bird on the mesquite along an arroya, or resting on branch of flaring occotilla would give out the foreboding call of the long shadows, for the heart of the day had come and gone, and the cooler air was waking the hidden things from siesta.

Kit Rhodes kept the roan at a steady lope along the cattle trail, drinking in the refreshing sweetness of the lonely ranges after hours of dust and heat and the trampling horse herds of the corrals. Occasionally he broke into songs of the ranges, love songs, death laments, and curious sentimental ditties of love and wars of old England as still crooned in the cabins of southern mountains.

I had not long been married,

A happy, happy bride!
When a handsome trooper captain

Stepped up to our bedside,
“Rise up! rise up! young man,” he said,

“And go along with me,
In the low, low lands of Holland

To fight for liberty.”

The ancient song of the sad bride whose lover proved false in the “low, low lands of Holland” trailed lugubriously along the arroya in a totally irrelevant way, for the singer was not at all sad. He was gaily alert, keen-eyed and watchful, keeping time to the long lope with that dubious versification.

“And they’re at it again pretty close to the ‘low, low lands of Holland,’ Pardner,” he confided to the horse. “And when you and I make a stake you’ll go on pasture, I’ll hit the breeze for Canada or some other seaport, and get one whack at the Boche brown rat on my own if official America is too proud to fight, for

Oh-h! oh-h! Oh-h!
In the low, low lands of Holland,
My love was false to me!”

Then, after long stretches of sand dunes, mesquite thickets, occasional wide cañons where *zacatan* meadows rippled like waves of the sea in the desert air, he swung his horse around a low hill and came in sight of the little adobe of Herrera, a place of straggly enclosures of stakes and wattles, with the corral at the back.

Another rider came over the hill beyond the corral, on a black horse skimming the earth. Rhodes stared and whistled softly as the black without swerving planted its feet and slid down the declivity by the water tank, and then, jumping the fence below, sped to the little *ramada* before the adobe where its rider slid to the ground amid a deal of barking of dogs and scattering of children.

And although Kit had never seen the rider before, he had no difficulty as to recognition, and on a sudden impulse he whistled the meadow-lark call loudly enough to reach her ears.

She halted at the door, a bundle in her hand, and surveyed the landscape, but failed to see him because he at that moment was back of a clump of towering prickly pear. And she passed on into the shadows of the adobe.

“That’s the disadvantage of being too perfect, Pardner,” he confided to the roan, “she thinks we are a pair of birds.”

He turned at the corner of the corral and rode around it which took him back of the house and out of range from the door, but the dogs set up a ki-yi-ing, and a flock of youngsters scuttled to the corner of the adobe, and stared as children of the far ranges are prone to stare at the passing of a traveler from the longed-for highways of the world.

The barking of the dogs and scampering of the children evidently got on the nerves of the black horse left standing at the vine-covered *ramada*, for after a puppy had barked joyously at his heels he leaped aside, and once turned around kept on going, trotting around the corral after the roan.

Rhodes saw it but continued on his way, knowing he could pick it up on his return, as the Ojo Verde tank was less than a mile away. A boy under the *ramada* gave one quick look and then fled, a flash of brown and a red flapping end of a sash, up the cañoncita where the home spring was shadowed by a large mesquite tree.

At first Rhodes turned in the saddle with the idea of assisting in the catching of the black if that was the thing desired, but it evidently was not.

“Now what has that *muchacho* on his mind that he makes that sort of get-away after nothing and no pursuer in sight? Pardner, I reckon we’ll squander a valuable minute or two and gather in that black.”

He galloped back, caught the wanderer but kept right on without pause to the trickle of water under the flat wide-spreading tree—it was a solitaire, being king of its own domain and the only shade, except the vine-covered *ramada*, for a mile.

The startled boy made a movement as if to run again as Kit rode up, then halted, fear and fateful resignation changing the childish face to sullenness.

“*Buenas tardes*, Narcisco.”

“*Buenas tardes*, señor,” gulped the boy.

“I turned back to catch the horse of the señorita for you,” observed Rhodes. “It is best you tie him when you lead him back, but first give him water. Thirst is perhaps the cause he is restless.”

“Yes señor,” agreed the lad. “At once I will do that.” But he held the horse and did not move from his tracks, and then Rhodes noticed that on the flat rock behind him was a grain sack thrown over something, a brown bottle had rolled a little below it, and the end of a hammer protruded from under the sacking.

Ordinarily Rhodes would have given no heed to any simple ranch utensils gathered under the shadow where work was more endurable, but the fear in the face of the boy fascinated him.

“Think I’ll give Pardner a drink while I am about it,” he decided, and dismounted carelessly. “Got a cup that I can take my share first?”

Narcisco had no cup, only shook his head and swallowed as if the attempt at words was beyond him.

“Well, there is a bottle if it is clean,” and Rhodes strode awkwardly towards it, but his spur caught in the loose mesh of the sacking, and in loosening it he twisted it off the rock.

Narcisco gasped audibly, and Rhodes laughed. He had uncovered a couple of dozen empty whiskey bottles, and a tin pan with some broken glass.

“What you trying to start up here in the cañon, Buddy?” he asked. “Playing saloon-keeper with only the gophers for customers?”

He selected a corked bottle evidently clean, rinsed and drank from it.

“Yes—señor—I am here playing—that is all,” affirmed Narcisco. “At the house Tia Mariana puts us out because there is a new *niño*— my mother and the new one sleep—and there is no place to make a noise.”

“Oh,” commented Rhodes, “well, let the black have a little water, and lead him out of the way of mine. This gully isn’t wide enough to turn around in.”

Obediently the boy led the black to the sunken barrel catching seepage from the barrel under the drip. Rhodes tossed the sack back to the flat rock and noted an old canvas water bottle beside the heap, it was half full of something—not water, for it was uncorked and the mouth of it a-glitter with shimmering particles like diamond dust, and the same powder was over a white spot on the rock—the lad evidently was playing miller and pounding broken glass into a semblance of meal.

“Funny stunt, that!” he pondered, and, smiling, watched the frightened boy. “Herrera certainly is doing a bit of collecting *vino* to have a stock of bottles that size, and the poor kid’s nothing else to play with.”

He mounted and rode on, leaving Narcisco to lead the black to his mistress. He could not get out of his mind the fright in the eyes of the boy. Was Herrera a brute to his family, and had Narcisco taken to flight to hide his simple playthings under the mistaken idea that the horseman was his father returned early from the ranges?

That was the only solution Rhodes could find to the problem, though he milled it around in his mind quite a bit. Unless the boy was curiously weak-minded and frightened at the face of a stranger it was the only explanation he could find, yet the boys of Herrera had always struck him as rather bright. In fact Conrad had promoted Juanito to the position of special messenger; he could ride like the wind and never forget a word.

The shadows lengthened as he circled the little cañon of the Ojo Verde and noted the water dripping from the full tanks, ideal for the colt range for three months. He took note that Herrera was not neglecting anything, despite that collection of bottles. There was no wastage and the pipes connecting the tanks were in good condition.

He rode back, care free and content, through the fragrant valley. The cool air was following the lowering sun, and a thin mauve veil was drifting along the hills of mystery in the south; he sang as he rode and then checked the song to listen to the flutelike call of a lark. His lips curved in a smile as he heard it, and with it came the thought of the girl and the barred window of Vijil’s adobe.

She permeated the life of Granados just as the soft veil enwrapped the far hills, and she had seemed almost as far away if not so mysterious. Not once had he crossed her trail, and he heard she was no longer permitted to ride south of the line. The vaqueros commented on this variously according to their own point of view. Some of the Mexicans resented it, and in one way or another her name was mentioned whenever problems of the future were discussed. Singleton was regarded as temporary, and Conrad was a salaried business manager. But on a day to come, the señorita, as her mother’s daughter, would be their mistress, and the older men with families showed content at the thought.

Rhodes never could think of her as the chatelaine of those wide ranges. She was to him the “meadow-lark child” of jests and laughter, heard and remembered but not seen. She was the haunting music of youth meeting him at the gateway of a new land which is yet so old!

Some such vagrant thought drifted through his mind as the sweet calls of the drowsy birds cut the warm silence, now from some graceful palo verde along a barranca and again from the slender pedestal of an occotilla.

“Lucky you, for you get an answer!” he thought whimsically. “Amble along, Pardner, or the night witches get us!”

And then he circled a little at the north of the cañon, and the black horse, champing and fidgeting, was held there across the trail by its rider.

“We are seeing things in broad daylight, Pardner, and there ain’t no such animal,” decided Rhodes, but Pardner whinnied, and the girl threw up her hand.

“This time I am a highwayman, the far-famed terror of the ranges!” she called.

“Sure!” he conceded. “I’ve been thinking quite a while that your term must be about up.”

She laughed at that, and came alongside.

“Didn’t you suppose I might have my time shortened for good behavior?” she asked. “You never even ride our way to see.”

“Me? Why, child, I’m so busy absorbing *kultur* from your scientific manager that my spare moments for damsels in distress are none too plenty. You sent out nary a call, and how expect the lowest of your serfs to hang around?”

“Serf? That’s good!” she said skeptically. “And say, you must love Conrad about as much as Cap Pike does.”

“And that?”

“Is like a rattlesnake.”

“Don’t know that rattlesnake would be my first choice of comparison,” remarked Rhodes. “Back in Tennessee we have a variety beside which the rattlesnake is a gentleman; a rattlesnake does his best to give warning of intention, but the copperhead never does.”

“Copperhead! that’s funny, for you know Conrad’s hair is just about the color of copper, dusty copper, faded copper—copper with tin filings sifted through.”

“Don’t strain yourself,” laughed Rhodes. “That beautiful blondness makes him mighty attractive to our Mexican cousins.”

“They can have my share,” decided the girl. “I could worry along without him quite awhile. He manages to get rid of all the likeable range men *muy pronto*.”

Rhodes laughed until she stared at him frowningly, and then the delicious color swept over her face.

“Oh, *you!*” she said, and Rhodes thought of sweet peas, and pink roses in old southern gardens as her lips strove to be straight, yet curved deliciously. No one had mentioned to him how pretty she was; he had thought of her as a browned tom-boy, but instead she was a shell-pink bud on a slender stem, and wonder of wonders—she rode a side-saddle in Arizona!

She noticed him looking at it.

“Are you going to laugh at that, too?” she demanded.

“Why no, it hadn’t occurred to me. It sort of looks like home to me—our southern girls use them.”

She turned to him with a quick birdlike movement, her gray eyes softened and trusting.

“It was my mother’s saddle, a wedding present from the vaqueros of our ranches when she married my father. I am only beginning to use it, and not so sure of myself as with the one I learned on.”

“Oh, I don’t know,” he observed. “You certainly looked sure when you jumped that fence at Herrera’s.”

She glanced at him quickly, curious, and then smiling.

“And it was you, not the meadow lark! You are too clever!”

“And you didn’t answer, just turned your back on the lonely ranger,” he stated dolefully, but she laughed.

“This doesn’t look it, waiting to go home with you,” she retorted. “Cap Pike has been telling me about you until I feel as if I had known you forever. He says you are his family now, so of course that makes Granados different for you.”

“Why, yes. I’ve been in sight of Granados as much as twice since I struck this neck of the woods. Your manager seems to think my valuable services are indispensable at the southern side of this little world.”

“So that’s the reason? I didn’t know,” she said slowly. “One would have to be a seventh son of a seventh son to understand his queer ways. But you are going along home today, for I am a damsel in distress and need to be escorted.”

“You don’t look distressed, and I’ve an idea you could run away from your escort if you took a notion,” he returned. “But it is my lucky day that I had a hunch for this cañon trail and the Green Springs, and I am happy to tag along.”

They had reached Herrera’s corral and Rhodes glanced up the little gulch to the well. The flat rock there was stripped of the odd collection, and Narcisco stood at the corner of the adobe watching them somberly.

“*Buenos tardes!*” called the girl. “Take care of the *niño* as the very treasure of your heart!”

“Sure!” agreed the lad, “*Adios, señorita.*”

“Why the special guard over the treasure?” asked Rhodes as their horses fell into the long easy lope side by side. “The house seems full and running over, and *niñitas* to spare.”

“There are never any to spare,” she reminded him, “and this one is doubly precious for it is named for me—together its saint and its two grandmothers! Benicia promised me long ago that whether it was a boy or a girl it would be Billie Bernard Herrera. I was just taking the extra clothes I had Tia Luz make for him—and he is a little black-eyed darling! Soon as he is weaned I’m going to adopt him; I always did want a piccaninny for my own.”

Rhodes guided his horse carefully around a barranca edge, honeycombed by gophers, and then let his eyes rest again on the lustrous confiding eyes, and the rose-leaf lips.

Afterward he told himself that was the moment he began to be bewitched by Billie Bernard.

But what he really said was—“Shoo, child, you’re only a piccaninny yourself!” and they both laughed.

It was quite wonderful how old Captain Pike had managed to serve as a family foundation for their knowledge of each other. There was not a doubt or a barrier between them, they were “home folks” riding from different ways and meeting in the desert, and silently claiming kindred.

The shadows grew long and long under the sun of the old Mexic land, and the high heavens blazed above in yellows and pinks fading into veiled blues and far misty lavenders in the hollows of the hills.

The girl drew a great breath of sheer delight as she waved her hands towards the fire flame in the west where the desert was a trail of golden glory.

“Oh, I am glad—glad I got away!” she said in a hushed half-awed voice. “It never—never could be like this twice and we are seeing it! Look at the moon!”

The white circle in the east was showing through a net of softest purple and the beauty of it caused them to halt.

“Oh, it makes me want to sing, or to say my prayers, or—to cry!” she said, and she blinked tears from her eyes and smiled at him. “I reckon the colors would look the same from the veranda, but all this makes it seem different,” and her gesture took in the wide ranges.

“Sure it does,” he agreed. “One wants to yell, ‘Hurrah for God!’ when a combination like this is spread before the poor meek and lowly of the earth. It is a great stage setting, and makes us humans seem rather inadequate. Why, we can’t even find the right words for it.”

“It makes me feel that I just want to ride on and on, and on through it, no matter which way I was headed.”

“Well, take it from me, señorita, you are headed the right way,” he observed. “Going north is safe, but the blue ranges of the south are walls of danger. The old border line is a good landmark to tie to.”

“Um!” she agreed, “but all the fascinating things and the witchy things, and the mysterious things are down there over the border. I never get real joy riding north.”

“Perhaps because it is not forbidden, Miss Eve.”

Then they laughed again and lifted the bridles, and the horses broke into a steady lope, neck and neck, as the afterglow made the earth radiant and the young faces reflected the glory of it.

“What was that you said about getting away?” he queried. “Did you break jail?”

“Just about. Papa Singleton hid my cross-saddle thinking I would not go far on this one. They have put a ban on my riding south, but I just had to see my Billie Bernard Herrera.”

“And you ran away?”

“N-no. We sneaked away mighty slow and still till we got a mile or two out, and then we certainly burned the wind. Didn’t we, Pat?”

“Well, as range boss of this end of the ranch I reckon I have to herd you home, and tell them to put up the fences,” said Rhodes.

“Yes, you will!” she retorted in derision of this highly improbable suggestion.

“Surest thing you know! Singleton has good reasons for restricting your little pleasure rides to Granados. Just suppose El Gavilan, the Hawk, should cross your trail in Sonora, take a fancy to Pat—for Pat is some *caballo!*—and gather you in as camp cook?”

“Camp cook?”

“Why, yes; you can cook, can’t you? All girls should know how to cook.”

“What if I do? I have cooked on the camp trips with Cap Pike, but that doesn’t say I’ll ever cook for that wild rebel, Ramon Rotil. Are you trying to frighten me off the ranges?”

“No, only stating the case,” replied Rhodes lighting a cigarette and observing her while appearing not to. “Quite a few of the girls in the revolution camps are as young as you, and many of them are not doing camp work by their own choice.”

“But I—” she began indignantly.

“Oh yes, in time you would be ransomed, and for a few minutes you might think it romantic—the ‘Bandit Bride,’ the ‘Rebel Queen,’ the ‘Girl Guerrilla,’ and all that sort of dope,—but believe me, child, by the time the ransom was paid you would be sure that north of the line was the garden spot of the earth and heaven enough for you, if you could only see it again!”

She gave him one sulky resentful look and dug her heel into Pat. He leaped a length ahead of the roan and started running.

“You can pretend you are El Gavilan after a lark, and see how near you will get!” she called derisively and leaned forward urging the black to his best.

“You glorified gray-eyed lark!” he cried. “Gather her in, Pardner!”

But he rode wide to the side instead of at the heels of Pat and thus they rode neck and neck joyously while he laughed at her intent to leave him behind.

The corrals and long hay ricks of Granados were now in sight, backed by the avenue of palms and streaks of green where the irrigation ditches led water to the outlying fields and orchards.

“El Gavilan!” she called laughingly. “Beat him, Pat,—beat him to the home gate!”

Then out of a fork of the road to the left, an automobile swept to them from a little valley, one man was driving like the wind and another waved and shouted. Rhodes’ eyes assured him that the shouting man was Philip Singleton, and he rode closer to the girl, grasped her bridle, and slowed down his own horse as well as hers.

“You’ll hate me some more for this,” he stated as she tried to jerk loose and failed, “but that yelping windmill is your fond guardian, and he probably thinks I am trying to kidnap you.”

She halted at that, laughing and breathless, and waved her hand to the occupants of the car.

“I can be good as an angel now that I have had my day!” she said. “Hello folks! What’s the excitement?”

The slender man whom Rhodes had termed the yelping windmill, removed his goggles, and glared, hopelessly distressed at the flushed, half-laughing girl.

“Billie—Wilfreda!”

“Now, now, Papa Singleton! Don’t swear, and don’t ever get frightened because I am out of sight.” Then she cast one withering glance at Rhodes, adding,—“and if you engage range bosses like this one no one on Granados will ever get out of sight!”

“The entire house force has been searching for you over two hours. Where have you been?”

“Oh, come along home to supper, and don’t fuss,” she suggested. “Just because you hid my other saddle I went on a little *pasear* of my own, and I met up with this roan on my way home.”

Rhodes grinned at the way she eliminated the rider of the roan horse, but the driver of the machine was not deceived by the apparent slight. He had seen that half defiant smile of comradeship, and his tone was not nice.

“It is not good business to waste time and men in this way,” he stated flatly. “It would be better that word is left with the right ones when you go over the border to amuse yourself in Sonora.”

The smile went out of the eyes of the girl, and she held her head very erect.

“You and Mr. Rhodes appear to agree perfectly, Mr. Conrad,” she remarked. “He was trying to show me how little chance I would stand against El Gavilan or even the Yaqui slave traders if they ranged up towards the border.”

“Slave traders?” repeated Conrad. “You are making your jokes about that, of course, but the camp followers of the revolution is a different thing;—everywhere they are ranging.”

The girl did not answer, and the car sped on to the ranch house while the two horses cantered along after them, but the joyous freedom of the ride had vanished, lost back there on the ranges when the other minds met them in a clash.

“Say,” observed Rhodes, “I said nothing about Yaqui slave traders. Where did you get that?”

“I heard Conrad and his man Brehman talking of the profits,—sixty pesos a head I think it was. I wonder how they knew?”

Singleton was waiting for them at the entrance to the ranch house, great adobe with a patio eighty feet square in the center. In the old old days it had housed all the vaqueros, but now the ranchmen were divided up on different outlying rancherias and the many rooms of Granados were mostly empty. Conrad, his secretary Brehman, and their cook occupied one corner, while Singleton and Billie and Tia Luz with her brood of helpers occupied the other.

Singleton was not equal to the large hospitality of the old days when the owner of a hacienda was a sort of king, dispensing favors and duties to a small army of retainers. A companionable individual he was glad to meet and chat or smoke with, but if the property had been his own he would have sold every acre and spent the proceeds in some city of the East where a gentleman could get something for his money.

Conrad had halted a moment after Singleton climbed out of the car.

“I sent word to Rhodes to come up from La Partida because of the horse shipment,” he said looking across the level where the two riders were just entering the palm avenue. “Because of that it would seem he is to be my guest, and I have room.”

“Oh, we all have room, more room than anything else,” answered Singleton drearily, “but it will be as Billie says. I see Pike’s nag here, and she always wants Pike.”

The milky blue eyes of Conrad slanted towards Singleton in discreet contempt of the man who allowed a wayward girl to decide the guests or the housing of them. But he turned away.

“The telephone will reach me if there is anything I can do,” he said.

Singleton did not reply. He knew Conrad absolutely disapproved of the range boss being accepted as a family guest. Between Billie and Captain Pike, who was a privileged character, he did not quite see how he could prevent it in the case of Rhodes, although he was honestly so glad to see the girl ride home safe that he would have accepted any guest of the range she suggested.

“Papa Phil,” she said smiling up into his face teasingly, “I’m on my native heath again, so don’t be sulky. And I have a darling new namesake I’ve been making clothes for for a month, and I’ll tell

you all about him if you'll give Mr. Rhodes and me a good supper. He is Cap Pike's family, and will have the south corner room; please tell Tia Luz."

And when Billie was like that, and called him "Papa Phil," and looked up at him with limpid childish eyes, there was never much else to be said.

"I'll show Rhodes his quarters myself, and you make haste and get your habit off. Luz has been waiting supper an hour. Today's paper reports a band of bandits running off stock on the Alton ranch, and it is on the Arizona side of the border. That should show you it is no time to ride out of sight of the corrals."

"Now, now! you know the paper raids aren't real raids. They'll have a new one to get excited over tomorrow."

She ran away to be petted and scolded and prayed for by Tia Luz, who had been her nurse, and was now housekeeper and the privileged one to whom Billie turned for help and sympathy.

"You laugh! but the heart was melting in me with the fear," she grumbled as she fastened the yellow sash over the white lawn into which Billie had dashed hurriedly. "It is not a joke to be caught in the raiding of Ramon Rotil, or any of the other accursed! Who could think it was south you were riding? I was the one to send them north in the search, every man of them, and Señor Conrad looks knives at me. That man thinks I am a liar, sure he does! and the saints know I was honest and knew nothing."

"Sure you know nothing, never could and never did, you dear old bag of cotton," and Billie pinched affectionately the fat arm of Tia Luz and tickled her under her fat chin. "Quick Luzita, and fasten me up. Supper waits, and men are always raving wolves."

She caught up a string of amber beads and clasped it about her throat as she ran across the patio, and Kit Rhodes halted a moment in the corridor to watch her.

"White and gold and heavenly lovely," he thought as he rumbled his crisp brown curls meditatively, all forgetful of the earnest attempts he had just made to smooth them decorously with the aid of a damp towel and a pocket comb. "White and gold and a silver spoon, and a back seat for you, Kittie boy!"

Captain Pike emerged from a door at the corner of the patio. He also had damp hair, a shiny face, and a brand-new neckerchief with indigo circles on a white ground.

"Look at this, will you?" he piped gleefully. "Billie's the greatest child ever! Always something stuck under the pillow like you'd hide candy for a kid, and say,—if any of the outfit would chuck another hombre in my bunk the little lady would raise hell from here to Pinecate, and worse than that there ain't any this side of the European centers of civilization. Come on in, supper's ready."

Rhodes hesitated at the door of the dining room, suddenly conscious of a dusty blouse and a much faded shirt. His spurs clink-clanked as he strode along the tiling of the patio, and in the semi-twilight he felt at home in the ranch house, but one look at the soft glow of the shaded lamps, and the foot deep of Mexican needlework on the table cover, gave him a picture of home such as he had not seen on the ranges.

Singleton was in spotless white linen, the ideal southern ranchman's home garb, while the mistress of all the enticing picture was in white and gold, and flushing pink as she met the grave appreciative gaze of Rhodes.

"H'lo little Santa Claus," chirruped Pike. "It's just the proper caper to set off my manly beauty, so I'm one ahead of Kit who has no one to garnish him for the feast—and it sure smells like some feast!"

"Venison perhaps a trifle overdone, but we hope it won't disappoint you," remarked Singleton. "Have this seat, Mr. Rhodes. Captain Pike and Miss Bernard always chum together, and have their own side."

"Rather," decided Pike, "and that arrangement reaches back beyond the memory of mere man in this outfit."

“I should say,” agreed the girl. “Why, he used to have to toss me over his head a certain number of times before I would agree to be strapped in my high chair.”

“Yep, and I carpentered the first one, and it wasn’t so bad at that! Now child, if you will pass the lemons, and Kit will pass the decanter of amber, and someone else will rustle some water, I’ll manufacture a tonic to take the dust out of your throats.”

“Everybody works but father,” laughed Billie as the Chinaman sliced and served the venison, and Tia Luz helped supply all plates, and then took her place quietly at the lower end of the table and poured the strong fragrant coffee.

Rhodes spoke to her in Spanish, and her eyes lit up with kindly appreciation.

“Ah, very good!” she commented amicably. “You are not then too much Americano?”

“Well, yes, I’m about as American as you find them aside from the Apache and Pima and the rest of the tribes.”

“Maybe so, but not gringo,” she persisted. “I am scared of the Apache the same as of El Gavilan, and today my heart was near to stop going at all when we lose señorita and that black horse—and I say a prayer for you to San Antonio when I see you come fetch her home again.”

“Yes, the black horse is valuable,” remarked Billie. “Huh! I might as well be in a convent for all I get to see of the ranges these late days. If anyone would grubstake me, I’d break loose with Cap here and go prospecting for adventures into some of the unnamed ranges.”

“You see!” said Tia Luz. “Is it a wonder I am cold with the fear when she is away from my eyes? I have lived to see the people who go into the desert for adventure, and whose bare bones are all any man looks on again! Beside the mountain wells of Carrizal my own cousin’s husband died; he could not climb to the tank in the hill. There they found him in the moon of Kumaki, which is gray and nothing growing yet.”

“Yes, many’s the salt outfit in the West played out before they reached Tinajas Altas,” said Pike. “I’ve heard curious tales about that place, and the Carrizals as well. Billie’s father nearly cashed in down in the Carrizals, and one of his men did.”

“But that is what I am saying. It was Dario Ruiz,” stated Tia Luz. “Yes, señor, that was the time, and it was for the nameless ranges they went seeking, and for adventures, treasure too; but—his soul to God! it was death Dario was finding on that trail. Your father never would speak one word again of the treasure of that old fable, for Dario found death instead of the red gold, and Dario was *compadre* to him.”

“The red gold?” and Cap Pike’s eyes were alight with interest. “Why, I was telling Kit about that today, the red gold of El Alisal.”

“Yes, Señor Capitan, once so rich and so red it was a wonder in Spain when the padres are sending it there from the mission of Soledad, and then witches craft, like a cloud, come down and cover that mountain. So is the vein lost again, and it is nearly one hundred years. So how could Dario think to find it when the padres, with all their prayer, never once found the trail?”

“I never heard it was near a mission,” remarked Pike. “Why, if it had a landmark like that there should be no trouble.”

“Yet it is so, and much trouble, also deaths,” stated Tia Luz. “That is how the saying is that the red gold of El Alisal is gold bewitched, for of Soledad not one adobe is now above ground unless it be in the old walls of the hacienda. All is melted into earth again or covered by the ranch house, and it is said the ranch house is also neglected now, and many of its old walls are going.”

“There are still enough left to serve as a very fair fortress,” remarked Singleton. “I was down there two years ago when we bought some herds from Perez, and lost quite a number from lack of water before the vaqueros got them to La Partida wells. It is a long way between water holes over in Altar.”

“Sure,” agreed Pike, “but if the old mine was near a mission, and the mission was near the ranch of Soledad it should not be a great stunt to find it, and there must be water and plenty of it if they do much in cattle.”

“They don’t these days,” said Singleton. “Perez sold a lot rather than risk confiscation, and I heard they did have some raids down there. I thought I had heard most of the lost mine legends of western Sonora, but I never heard of that one, and I never heard that Fred Bernard went looking for it.”

The old woman lifted her brows and shrugged her shoulders with the suggestion that Sonora might hold many secrets from the amicable gentleman. But a little later, in an inquiry from Rhodes she explained.

“See you, señor, Dario Ruiz was *compadre* of Señor Alfredo Bernard, Americanos not understanding all in that word, and the grandfather of Dario was major-domo of the rancho of Soledad at that time the Apaches are going down and killing the people there. That is when the mine was lost. On the skin of a sheep it was told in writing all about it, and Dario had that skin. Sure he had! It was old and had been buried in the sand, and holes were eaten in it by wild things, but Don Alfredo did read it, and I was hearing the reading of it to Dario Ruiz, but of what use the reading when that mine bewitched itself into hiding?”

“But the writing? Did that bewitch itself away also?” demanded Billie.

“How could I be asking of that when Dario was dead down there in the desert, and his wife, that was my cousin Anita, was crazy wild against Don Alfredo the father of you! Ai, that was a bad time, and Don Alfredo with black silence on him for very sorrow. And never again in his life did he take the Sonora trail for adventures or old treasure. And it is best that you keep to a mind like his mind, señorita. He grew wise, but Dario died for that wisdom, and in Sonora someone always dies before wisdom is found. First it was two priests went to death for that gold, and since that old day many have been going. It is a witchcraft, and no blessing on it!”

“Well, I reckon I’d be willing to cross my fingers, and take the trail if I could get started right,” decided Rhodes. “It certainly sounds alluring.”

“I did go in once,” confessed Pike, “but we had no luck, struck a *temporale* where a Papago had smallpox, and two dry wells where there should have been water. My working pardner weakened at Paradones and we made tracks for the good old border. That is no trail for a lone white man.”

“But the writing, the writing!” persisted Billie. “Tia Luz, you are a gold mine yourself of stories, but this one you never told, and I am crazy about it! You never forget anything, and the writing you *could* not,—so we know you have the very words of that writing!”

“Yes, that is true too, for the words were not so many, and where some words had been the wild things had eaten holes. The words said that from the mine of El Alisal the mission of Soledad could be seen. And from the door of Soledad it was one look, one only, to the blue cañoncita where the alisal tree was growing, and water from the gold of the rose washed the roots of that tree.”

“Good God!” muttered Rhodes staring at the old lady who sat nodding her head in emphasis until her jet and gold earrings were all a-twinkle. “It was as easy as *that*,—yet no one found it?”

“But señor,”—and it was plain to be seen that Doña Luz was enjoying herself hugely as the center of all attention, “the two padres who made that writing met their death at that place—and it was said the *barbaros* at last killed also the grandfather of Dario, anyway he did die, and the women were afraid to tell even a new padre of that buried writing for the cause that it must have been accursed when it killed all people. That is how it was, and that mission was forsaken after that time. A Spaniard came up from Sinaloa and hunted gold and built Soledad hacienda where that mission had been in that old time, but no one ever found any more of gold than the chickens always are picking, a little here, a little there with a gravel in the craw. No señor, only once the red gold—red as flame—went out of Altar on a mule to the viceroy in Mexico, and the padres never lived to send any more, or see their brothers again. The men who dug that gold dug also their grave. Death goes with it.”

“Ugh!” and Billie shivered slightly, and looked at Rhodes, “don’t you go digging it!”

His eyes met hers across the table. It was only for an instant, and then Billie got very busy with her coffee which she had forgotten.

“Oh, I’d travel with a mascot to ward off evil,” he said. “Would you give me a bead from your string?”

She nodded her head, but did not speak. No one noticed them, for Cap Pike was telling of the old native superstition that the man who first found an ore bed found no good luck for himself, though the next man might make a fortune from it.

“Why,” he continued in evidence, “an Indian who finds even a vein of special clay for pottery doesn’t blaze a trail to it for anyone else. He uses it if he wants it, because his own special guardian god uncovered it for him, but if it is meant for any other man, that other man’s god will lead him to it when the time comes. That is how they reason it out for all the things covered by old Mother Earth. And I reckon the redder the gold the more secret the old *barbaros* would be about it, for gold is their sun-god medicine, or symbol, or something.”

“With white priests scattered through Sonora for two centuries one would suppose those old superstitions would be pretty well eradicated,” remarked Singleton.

Doña Luz glanced at him as at a child who must be let have his own ideas so long as they were harmless, but Pike laughed.

“Lord love you, Singleton, nothing eradicates superstition from the Indian mind, or any other mind! All the creeds of the earth are built on it, and a lot of the white ones are still alive and going strong! And as for priests, why man, the Indian priests are bred of those tribes, and were here before the white men came from Spain. It’s just about like this: If ‘Me und Gott’ and the U-boats took a notion to come over and put a ball and chain on all of so-called free America, there might be some pacifist mongrels pretend to like it, and just dote on putting gilt on the chain, and kow-towing to that blood-puddin’ gang who are raising hell in Belgium. But would the thoroughbreds like it? Not on your life! Well, don’t you forget there were a lot of thoroughbreds in the Indian clans even if some of their slaves did breed mongrels! And don’t forget that the ships from overseas are dumping more scrub stock on the eastern shores right now than you’ll find in any Indian rancheria either here in Pima or over in Sonora. The American isn’t to blame for all the seventeen dozen creeds they bring over,—whether political or religious, and I reckon that’s about the way the heads of the red clans feel. They are more polite than we are about it, but don’t you think for a moment that the European invasion ever changed religion for the Indian thoroughbred. No sir! He is still close to the earth and the stars, and if he thinks they talk to him—well, they just *talk to him*, and what they tell him isn’t for you or me to hear,—or to sit in judgment on either, if it comes to that! We are the outsiders.”

“Now, Cap,” said Billie, “I’m going to take it away. It’s too near your elbow, and you have had a double dose for every single one you’ve been handing out! You can take a rest until the others catch up. Tia Luz, give him a cup of coffee good and strong to help get his politics and religion straightened out.”

Pike laughed heartily with the rest of them, and took the coffee.

“All right, dear little Buttercup. Any medicine you hand out is good to me. But say, that dope about hidden ores may not be all Indian at that, for I recollect that mountaineers of Tennessee had the same hunch about coal veins, and an old lead vein where one family went for their ammunition. They could use it and they did, but were mighty sure they’d all be hoodooed if they uncovered it for anyone else, so I reckon that primitive dope does go pretty far back. I’ll bet it was old when Tubal Cain first began scratching around the outcroppings by his lonesomes.”

Conrad sauntered along the corridor and seated himself, flicking idly some leather thongs he had cut out from a green hide with a curved sheath knife rather fine and foreign looking. Singleton called him to come in and have coffee, but he would not enter, pleading his evil-smelling pipe as a reason.

“It can’t beat mine for a downright bachelor equipment,” affirmed Pike, “but I’ve scandalized this outfit enough, or thereabout, and that venison has killed all our appetites until breakfast, so why hang around where ungrateful children swat a man’s dearest hobbies?”

“If you think you’ll get rid of me that way you had better think again,” said Billie. “I don’t mind your old smokes, or any other of your evil ways, so long as you and Tia Luz tell us more bewitched mine stories. Say, Cap, wouldn’t it be great if that old sheepskin was found again, and we’d all outfit for a Sonora *pasear*, and—”

“We would not!” decided the old man patting her hair. “You, my lady, will take a *pasear* to some highbrow finishing school beyond the ranges, and I’ll hit the trail for Yuma in a day or two, but at the present moment you can wind up the music box and start it warbling. That supper sure was so perfect nothing but music will do for a finish!”

The men drifted out in the corridor and settled into the built-in seats of the plazita, though Rhodes remained standing in the portal facing inward to the patio where the girl’s shimmering white dress fluttered in the moonlight beside the shadowy bulk of Tia Luz.

He lit a cigarette and listened for the music box Pike had suggested, but instead he heard guitar strings, and the little ripple of introduction to the old Spanish serenade *Vengo a tu ventana*, “I come to your window.”

He turned and glanced towards the men who were discussing horse shipments, and possibilities of the Prussian sea raiders sinking transports on the way to France, but decided his part of that discussion could wait until morning.

Tia Luz had lit the lamp in the *sala*, and the light streamed across the patio where the night moths fluttered about the white oleanders. He smiled in comical self-derision as he noticed the moths, but tossed away the cigarette and followed the light.

When Captain Pike indulged the following morning in sarcastic comment over Kit’s defection, the latter only laughed at him.

“Shirk business? Nothing doing. I was strictly on the job listening to local items on treasure trails instead of powwowing with you all over the latest news reports from the Balkans. Soon as my pocket has a jingle again, I am to get to the French front if little old U. S. won’t give me a home uniform, but in the meantime Doña Luz Moreno is some reporter if she is humored, and I mean to camp alongside every chance I get. She has the woman at the *cantina* backed off the map, and my future Spanish lessons will be under the wing of Doña Luz. Me for her!”

“Avaricious young scalawag!” grunted Pike. “You’d study African whistles and clicks and clacks if it blazed trail to that lost gold deposit! Say, I sort of held the others out there in front thinking I would let you get acquainted with little Billie, and you waste the time chinning about death in the desert, and dry camps to that black-and-tan talking machine.”

Kit only laughed at him.

“A record breaker of a moon too!” grumbled the old man. “Lord!—lord! at your age I’d crawled over hell on a rotten rail to just sit alongside a girl like Billie—and you pass her up for an old hen with a mustache, and a gold trail!”

Kit Rhodes laughed some more as he got into the saddle and headed for the Granados corral, singing:

Oh—I’ll cut off my long yellow hair

To dress in men’s array,
And go along with you, my dear

Your waiting man to be!

He droned out the doleful and incongruous love ballad of old lands, and old days, for the absurd reason that the youth of the world in his own land beat in his blood, and because in the night time one of the twinkling stars of heaven had dropped down the sky and become a girl of earth who touched a guitar and taught him the words of a Spanish serenade,—in case he should find a Mexican sweetheart along the border!

For to neither of the young, care-free things, had come a glimmer of fore-vision of the long tragic days, treasure trails and desert deaths, primitive devotions and ungodly vengeance, in which the threads of their own lives would be entangled before those two ever heard the music of the patio again—together.

If in Holland fields I met a maid

All handsome fond and gay,
And I should chance to love her

What would my Mary say?

What would I say, dear Willie?

That I would love her too,
And I would step to the one side

That she might speak with you!

“Yes, you would—not!” he stated in practical prose to no one in particular. “Not if you were our girl, would she, Pardner?”

Pardner tossed up his head in recognition of the comradeship in the tone, and Kit Rhodes became silent, and rode on to the corrals, happily smiling at some new thoughts.

CHAPTER III

A VERIFIED PROPHECY OF SEÑORITA BILLIE

That smile was yet with him when he saw the herd and the vaqueros coming up from the water tanks, and noted Conrad and Tomas Herrera talking together beside Conrad's automobile.

The beat of the many hoofs prevented the two men from noting one horse near them, and words of Conrad came to him clearly.

"It has to be that way. You to go instead of Miguel. You have enough English, you can do it."

Tomas Herrera muttered something, evidently reluctance, for again Conrad's words were heard.

"But think of the *dinero*, much of money to you! And that fool swine will not see what is under his nose. You can do it, sure you can! There is no danger. The blame will be to him if it is found; my agent will see to that. Not you but the gringo will be the one to answer the law. You will know nothing."

He spoke in Spanish rapidly, while both men watched the approaching vaqueros.

The smile had gone from Kit's face, and he was puzzled to follow the words, or even trust his own ears.

"*Bueno*," said Herrera with a nod of consent. "Since Miguel is hurt—"

"Whoa, Pardner," sang out Rhodes, back of them as he slid out of the saddle. "Good morning, gentlemen. Do you say Miguel is hurt, Herrera? How comes that?"

The face of Herrera went a curious gray, and his lips blue and apparently stiff for he only murmured, "*Buenas dias*, señor," and gulped and stared at Conrad. But the surprise of Conrad, while apparent, was easily accounted for, and he was too well poised to be startled unduly by any emergency.

"Hah! Is it you, Rhodes, so early? Yes, Miguel is reported hurt over Poso Verde way. Not serious, but for the fact that he was the one to go with you on the horse shipment, and now another must go. Perhaps his brother here."

"Oh—ah—yes," assented Rhodes thoughtfully. He was not so old as Conrad, and quite aware he was not so clever, and he didn't know their game, so he strove as he could to hold the meaning of what he had heard, and ended rather lamely: "Well, too bad about Miguel, but if you, Tomas, are going instead, you had better get your war togs ready. We start tonight from the Junction, and have three hours to get ready."

"Three hours only!" again Herrera seemed to weaken. To start in three hours a journey into the unknown far East of the Americano was beyond his imaginings. He shrugged his shoulders, tossed his hands outwards in despair, and turned toward the barns.

Conrad looked after him in irritation, and then smiled at Rhodes. He had a rather ingratiating smile, and it the first time he had betrayed it to Kit.

"These explosive Latins," he said derisively. "I think I can make him reasonable, and you go forward with your own preparations."

He followed Herrera, leaving Kit staring after them wondering. His glance then rested on the automobile, and he noted that it had not merely come out of the garage for the usual work of the day. It had been traveling somewhere, for the wheels were crusted with mud—mud not there at sunset yesterday. And in that section of Pima there was no water to make mud nearer than Poso Verde, and it was over there Miguel Herrera had been hurt!

He had only three hours, and no time to investigate. There were rumors of smuggling all along the line over there, and strange conferences between Mexican statesmen and sellers of Connecticut hardware of an explosive nature. He recalled having heard that Singleton was from Connecticut, or was it Massachusetts? Anyway, it was over there at the eastern edge of the country somewhere, and it was also where plots and counter plots were pretty thick concerning ammunition; also they were

more complicated on the Mexican border. He wondered if Singleton was as simple as he looked, for he certainly was paying wages to a mixed lot. Also it was a cinch to run any desirable contraband from Granados across to La Partida and from there hellwards.

He wondered if Singleton knew? But Singleton had a capable business manager, while he, Rhodes, was only a range boss with the understanding that he adjust himself to any work a white man might qualify for.

The mere fact that once he had sat at the family table might not, in Singleton's eyes, warrant him in criticizing an approved manager, or directing suspicion towards him. He might speak to Pike, but he realized that Pike was not taken very seriously; only welcomed because Billie liked him, and because an American ranch usually had the open door for the old timers of his caliber.

Also Pike had told him plainly that he must not be expected to mix up in the Mexican game for any reason whatsoever.

"I reckon it's up to us, Pardner," he decided, as he called directions to the different men loading the wagons with oats and barley for the stock on the trail. There were three mule teams ready for the railroad junction where the cars were waiting on the siding, or would be by night.

Some of the men were getting the mules straightened out in the harness while others were roping horses in the corral. It would take most of the home outfit to lead and drive them to the railroad, which meant one lonely and brief period of hilarity at the only joint where "bootleg" whiskey could be secured by the knowing, and a "movie" theater could add to other simple entertainments for the gentle Juans of the ranges. Neither Conrad nor Herrera were visible, and he presumed the latter was making arrangements for the sudden and unexpected departure from his family, but he knew he had not attempted to ride home for a farewell greeting, because his horse still stood near Conrad's automobile where he had first overheard that curious conversation between the two men.

After a leisurely breakfast Pike was meandering towards the stock yard on his mule with the intent to trail along to the Junction with the boys. Rhodes, catching sight of him, looked hopefully but unsuccessfully for Singleton. The minutes were slipping by, and no definite instructions had been given him concerning the three car loads of horses. Did Conrad mean to leave every detail until the last moment and make difficulties for the new man? Was that the way he got rid of the Americans he didn't want? He recalled the prophecy of Billie that he would not hold his job. Well, he would show her!

With memories of the white and gold vision of the previous night, and the guitar in the *sala*, and the moonlight touching all to enchantment, he had fully decided that he would not only hold the job, but on some future day he would be business manager. And he'd find that lost mine or know the reason why, and he would—

For after all Kit Rhodes was only twenty-three and all of life ahead of him for dreams! He was wondering what he could fetch back from the East that would be acceptable to a witchy elf of a butterfly girl who already had, to his simple estimate, all the requisites of a princess royal.

Juanito came loping past, and Rhodes asked for his father.

"I am myself looking for him," said the boy. "He has there on his horse all the things for Tio Miguel, but Miguel not coming, and I wonder who goes? Maybe it will be me. What you think?" he asked hopefully.

Kit did not answer, for Juanito's mention of the articles for Miguel brought from home by Tomas, and still fastened to the back of the saddle, drew his attention to the articles tied there—some clothing badly wrapped, a pair of black shoes tied together with brown strings, and under them, yet plainly visible, a canvas water bag.

There was nothing unusual in a water bag or a canteen tied back of any saddle in the dry lands, it was the sensible thing to do, but Kit found himself staring at this particular water bag stupidly, remembering where he had seen it last. It had been only partly full then, but now it was plump and

round as if water-filled; yet one glance told him it was not wet, and moreover, he had noted the day before a hole in the side tied up in a hard knot by twine, and there was the knot!

Yet it might be a stock of *pinole*, parched corn, as evidence of Miguel's forethought against privation on the long eastern trail. He could think of several reasonable things to account for an old water bag tied to a Mexican's saddle, but reason did not prevent his glance turning to it again and again.

The fear in Narcisco's eyes came back to him, and his attempt to cover his harmless playthings at the coming of the unexpected American. He wondered—

"Say, Bub, I've got ten dollars to invest in some little trinket for Billie boy, and I want you to put it down in your jeans and invest it in whatever it will cover," said Captain Pike at his elbow, clinking the silver coin meditatively. "You'll have time to see plenty attractive things for the money there in the streets of New York, or Baltimore, or whichever of the dock towns you'll be heading for."

Rhodes accepted the coin, absently frowning.

"That's one of the dark secrets not yet divulged by this curious management," he growled. "I'm to go, or so I was told, but have been given no instructions. Where's Singleton?"

"Just rounded up for breakfast."

"Is he coming down here to the corrals?"

"Not that I could notice. Pedro got in from the Junction with last Sunday's papers, and he and Billie have the picture sheets spread around, having a weekly feast."

Kit strode over to his mount, and then halted, glancing towards the house a half mile away, and then at the telephone poles along the wide lane.

"Say, there's a telephone somewhere down here at the works, connecting with the hacienda, isn't there?"

"Sure, in that hallway between the two adobes where the bunk house ends and offices begin."

Kit started briskly towards the long bunk house, and then turned to Pike.

"Do me a favor, Captain. Stay right there till I get back, and don't let anyone take that Herrera horse away, or his load!"

"All right, but load!—why, the spotted rat hasn't got a load for a jack rabbit, load!" and Pike sniffed disdain at the little knobs of baggage dangling from the rawhide strings. He didn't think the subdued animal needed watching—still, if Kit said so—

At the same time Kit was calling the house, and hearing in reply a soft whistle of the meadow lark, and then a girl's laugh.

"Your music is good to listen to, Lark-child," he called back, "and your ears are perfectly good at telling who's who, but this is a strictly business day, and it is Mr. Singleton I need to speak with."

"Still holding your job, or asking for your time?" came the mocking voice.

"You bet I'm holding my job, also I am on it, and want the boss."

"Well, sometimes you know the boys call me the boss. What can we do for you, Mr. Kit Rhodes?"

"I'll use all three of my Spanish cuss words in a minute, if you don't be reasonable," he thundered.

"Is that a bribe?" came sweetly over the wire, and when he muttered something impatiently, she laughed and told him it was not fair to use another language when he had promised Spanish.

"Listen to me, young lady, if I can't get Singleton on the wire I'll get on a horse and go up there!"

"And you listen to me, young man, it wouldn't do you a bit of good, for just now he is nearly having a fit, and writing telegrams about something more important than the horse corrals."

"There is nothing more important this day and date," insisted Kit.

"Well, if you were as strictly a white dove advocate as Papa Singleton is, and as neutral, and then saw a full page Sunday supplement of your pet picture fraulein, working for your pet charity

and sifting poison into hospital bandages and powdered glass in jellies for the soldiers of the Allies, I reckon you would change your mind.”

“Powdered glass!—in *feed!*” repeated Kit, stunned at the words and the sudden thought they suggested. “Great God, girl, you don’t have to go to the eastern papers for *that!* You’ve got the same trick right here in Granados this minute! Why—damn you!”

The receiver fell from his hand as a crushing blow was dealt him from the door at his back. He heard a girl’s scream in the distance as he grappled with Conrad and saved himself a second blow from the automobile wrench in the manager’s hands. It fell to the tiles between them, and Rhodes kicked it to one side as he struck and struck again the white, furious face of Conrad.

“The wrench! Tomas, the wrench! Give it to him! The Americano would murder me!” shouted Conrad.

Tomas had other things to think of. He had heard as much as Conrad of the telephone discourse, and was aware of his pinto standing placidly not fifty feet away, with all the damning evidence in the case tied to the back of the saddle!

Juanito, however, ran like a cat at his master’s call and caught up the wrench, but halted when Pike closed on his shoulder and pressed a cold little circle of blue steel against his ribs.

“Not this time, *muchacho!*” he shrilled, “drop it! This is a man’s game, and you’re out.”

The men came running, and others attempted to interfere, but the little old man waved the gun at them and ordered them to keep their distance.

“No crowding the mourners!” he admonished them gleefully. “I’ve a hunch your man started it, and my man will finish it. I don’t know what it’s about, Kit, but give him hell on suspicion! Go to it, boy,—do it again! Who-ee!—that was a sock-dolager! Keep him off you, Kit, he’s a gouger, and has the weight. Give it to him standing, and give it to him good! That’s it! Ki-yi! Hell’s bells and them a-chiming!”

For the finale of that whirl of the two striking, staggering, cursing men, was unexpectedly dramatic. They had surged out into the open, but Conrad, little by little and step by step, or rather stagger by stagger, had given way before the mallet-like precision of the younger man’s fists until Kit’s final blow seemed actually to lift him off his feet and land him—standing—against the adobe wall. An instant he quivered there, and then fell forward, glassy eyed and limp.

Singleton’s car came whirling down the lane. Billie leaped from it before it stopped, and ran in horror to the prone figure. One of the older Mexicans tried to ward her off from the sight.

“No good, señorita, it is the death of him,” he said gently. “One stroke like that on the heart and it is—*adios!*”

“What in the name of God—” began Singleton, and Kit wiped the blood from his eyes and faced him, staggering and breathless.

“Get him water! Get busy!” he ordered. “I don’t think he’s done for, not unless he has some mighty weak spot he should have had labelled before he waded into this.”

The blood was still trickling from the cut in his head made by the wrench, and he presented an unholy appearance as they stared at him.

“I’ll explain, Singleton, for I reckon you are white. I’ll—after while—”

“You’ll explain nothing to me!” retorted Singleton “If the man dies you’ll explain to a jury and a judge; otherwise you’d better take yourself out of this country.”

Kit blinked at those who were lifting Conrad and listening to his heart, which evidently had not stopped permanently.

“But give me a chance, man!” persisted Rhodes. “I need some mending done on this head of mine,—then I’ll clear it up. Why, the evidence is right here—powdered glass for the stock at the far end of the trail—Herrera knows—Conrad’s game—and—”

He did not know why words were difficult and the faces moved in circles about him. The blood soaking his shirt and blouse, and dripping off his sleeve was cause enough, but he did not even know that.

“Take him away, Captain Pike,” said Singleton coldly. “He is not wanted any longer on either of the ranches. It’s the last man I hire, Conrad can do it in future.”

“Conrad, eh?” grunted Kit weakly, “you’re a nice easy mark for the frankfurter game,—you and your pacifist bunch of near-traitors! Why man—”

But Singleton waved him away, and followed the men who were carrying Conrad to the bunk house.

“All right, *all* right! But take care you don’t meet with a nastier accident than that before you are done with this game!” he said shaking his fist warningly after Singleton, and then he staggered to his horse where Pike was waiting for him.

He got in the saddle, and reeled there a moment, conscious of hostile, watchful eyes,—and one girl’s face all alone in the blur.

“Say,” he said, “I heard you scream. You thought it was you I swore at. You’re wrong there. But you are some little prophetess,—*you* are! The job’s gone, and Herrera’s got away with the evidence, and the jig’s up! But it wasn’t you I cussed at—not—at—all! Come on, Pike. This new ventilator in my head is playing hell its own way. Come on—let’s go by-bye!”

CHAPTER IV IN THE ADOBE OF PEDRO VIJIL

“There ain’t no such animal,” decided Kit Rhodes seated on the edge of the bed in Pedro Vigil’s adobe. His head was bandaged, his face a trifle pale and the odor of medicaments in the shadowy room of the one deep-barred window. “No, Captain, no man, free, white and twenty-one *could* be such a fool. Can’t Singleton see that if Conrad’s story was true he’d have the constable after me for assault with intent to kill? He’s that sort!”

“Well, Singleton thinks Conrad would be justified in having you prosecuted, and jailed, and fined, and a few other things, but for the reputation of Granados they let you down easy. You know it’s *the* dovery for the Pass-up-the-fists of this section, and what the Arizona papers would do would be comic if they ever got hold of the fact that Singleton picked a new bird for the dove cage, and the dratted thing changed before their eyes to a fractious game rooster swinging a right like the hind leg of a mule! No, Bub, we’re orderly, peaceable folks around here, so for the sake of our reputation Singleton has prevailed on his manager to be merciful to you, and Conrad has in true pacifist spirit let himself be prevailed upon.”

“Which means,” grinned Kit, “that I’m to be put off my guard, and done for nicely and quietly some moonless night when I take the trail! And he reports me either drunk or temporarily insane, does he? Well, when the next time comes I’ll change that gentleman’s mind.”

“Shucks, Bub! Thank a fool’s luck that your skull was only scratched, and don’t go planning future wars. I tell you we are peace doves around here, and you are a stray broncho kicking up an undesirable dust in our front yard. Here is your coin. Singleton turned it over to me and I receipted for it, and we have enough between us to hit the Sonora trail, and there’s not a bit of use in your hanging around here. You have no evidence. You are a stranger who ambled in, heard a sensational newspaper report of anti-ally criminal intent, and on the spot accused the highly respectable Granados rancho of indulging in that same variety of hellishness! Now there is your case in a nutshell, Bub, and you wouldn’t get the authorities to believe you in a thousand years!”

“What about you?”

“Oh, I have just little enough sense to believe your hunch is right, but that won’t get you anywhere. They think I’m loco too! I’ve an idea there is a lot more and rottener activities down south of the line with which our Teutonic peace arbitrator is mixed up. But he’s been on this job five years, all the trails are his, and an outsider can’t get a look-in! Now Miguel Herrera has been doing gun-running across the border for someone, and Miguel was not only arrested by the customs officer, but Miguel was killed two nights ago—shot with his own gun so that it looks like suicide. Suicide nothing! His chief, whoever he is, was afraid Miguel would blunder or weaken under government persuasion, so Miguel was let out of the game. That case is closed, and no evidence against anyone. I reckon everyone knows that the guns and ammunition sneaked over is headed for Rancho Soledad. The owner of Soledad, José Perez, is the valued friend of our nice little Conrad, and it happens that Conrad left Granados this morning for that direction, ostensibly to negotiate with the political powers of Sonora concerning a military guard for La Partida in case revolutionary stragglers should ride north for fresh saddle-horses. All appeals to the neutral chair warmers at Washington wins us no protection from that source;—they only have guns and men enough to guard some cherished spots in Texas.”

“Well, if the Teuton is able for a trail I reckon he got nothing worse in the scrap than I, even if he did look like a job for the undertaker. That fellow travels on the strength of his belly and not the strength of his heart.”

“So you say,” observed Pike, grinning, “but then again there are others of us who travel on nerve and gall and never get any further! Just put this in your pipe, Bub, and don’t forget it: Conrad

is *organised* for whatever deviltry he is up to! There is no 'happen so' in his schemes. He is a cog in some political wheel, and it's a fifty-fifty gamble as to whether the wheel is German or Mexican, but it is no little thing, and is not to be despised."

"But I can't see how Singleton, if Singleton is square even—"

"Singleton is a narrow gauge disciple of Universal Peace by decree—which, translated, means plain damn fool. Lord, boy, if a pack of prairie wolves had a man surrounded, would he fold his hands with the hope that his peaceful attitude would appeal to their better instincts or would he reach for a gun and give them protective pills? The man of sense never goes without his gun in wolf land, but Singleton—well, in peace times he could have lived a long lifetime, and no one ever guessed what a weak sister he was, but he's sure out of place on the border."

"I'm tired wearing this halo," observed Rhodes, referring to the white handkerchief around his head. "Also some of the dope you gave me seems to be evaporating from my system, and I feel like hitting the Piman breeze. Can we strike trail tomorrow?"

"We cannot. Doña Luz has been dosing out the dope for you—Mexican women are natural doctors with their own sort of herbs—and she says three days before you go in the sun. I've a notion she sort of let the Mexicans think that you were likely to cash in, and you bled so like a stuck pig that it was easy enough to believe the worst."

"Perhaps that's why Conrad felt safe in leaving me outside of jail. With Doña Luz as doctor, and a non-professional like you as assistant, I reckon he thought my chance of surviving that monkey wrench assault was slim, mighty slim!"

"Y—yes," agreed Pike, "under ordinary conditions he might have been justified in such surmise, but that would be figuring on the normal thickness of the normal civilized skull, but yours—why, Bub, all I'm puzzling over now is how it happens that the monkey wrench was only twisted a mite, not broke at all!"

"You scandalous old varmint!" grinned Kit. "Go on with your weak-minded amusements, taking advantage of a poor lone cripple,—refused by the army, and a victim of the latest German atrocity! I suppose—I suppose,"—he continued darkly, "everyone on and around Granados agrees that I was the villain in the assault?"

"I couldn't say as to that," returned Pike judicially. "Doña Luz would dose you, and plaster you, just the same if you had killed a half dozen instead of knocking the wind out of one. She's pretty fine and all woman, but naturally since they regard you as my *companero* they are shy about expressing themselves when I'm around—all except Singleton—and you heard him."

"Good and plenty," agreed Kit. "Say, I'm going to catch up on sleep while I've a chance, and you rustle along and get any tag ends of things needed for the trail. I'm going to strike for Mesa Blanca, as that will take us up into the country of that Alisal mine. If we go broke there is Mesa Blanca ranch work to fall back on for a grub stake, but from what I hear we can dry wash enough to buy corn and flour, and the hills are full of burro meat. We'll browse around until we either strike it rich, or get fed up with trying. Anyway, *Companero*, we will be in a quiet, peaceful pastoral land, close to nature, and out of reach of Teuton guile and monkey wrenches. *Buenas noches*, señor. I'm asleep!"

Pike closed the door, and went from the semi-dark of the adobe out into the brilliant sunshine where Billie, with a basket, was waiting under the *ramada* with Merced, and Merced looked gloomy lest Pedro should be blamed by Señor Singleton for practically turning his family out of the adobe that it might be given over to the loco Americano.

"Tomorrow, can he go?" she asked hopefully. "Me, I have a fear. Not before is the adobe here watched by hidden men at night, and that is very bad! Because that he is friend to you I say to everybody that I think the Americano is dying in our house, but today he talks, also he is laughing. No more sick?"

“No more sick, sure not, but it will be one more day. A man does not bleed like a gored bull and ride the next day under a sky hot enough to fry eggs. The tea of Doña Luz drove off the fever, and he only sleeps and talks, and sleeps again, but sick? Not a bit!”

“Nor—nor sorry, I reckon?” ventured Billie.

“Why, no child, not that I could notice. That scalawag doesn’t seem to have much conscience concerning his behavior.”

“Or his language!” she added.

“Sure, that was some invocation he offered up! But just between pals, Billie, you ought to have been in hearing.”

“I—I don’t suppose he even remembers that I was,” she remarked, and then after a silence, “or— or even mentioned—us?”

“Why, no, Billie. You made the right guess when you sized him up and thought he couldn’t hold the job. He certainly doesn’t belong, Billie, for this ranch is the homing nest of the peace doves, and he’s just an ungainly young game rooster starting out with a dare against the world, and only himself for a backer. Honest,—if that misguided youth had been landed in jail, I don’t reckon there’s anyone in Arizona with little enough sense to bail him out.”

“Likely not,” said Billie. “Well, there’s the basket from Tia Luz, and I might as well go home.”

CHAPTER V AN “ADIOS”–AND AFTER

Two days later in the blue clear air of the Arizona morning a sage hen slipped with her young through the coarse grass by the irrigation ditch, and a flock of quail raised and fluttered before the quick rhythmic beat of a loping horse along the trail in the mesquite thicket.

The slender gallant figure of his rider leaned forward looking, listening at every turn, and at the forks of the trail where a clump of squat mesquite and giant sahuarros made a screen, she checked the horse, and held her breath.

“Good Pat, good horse!” she whispered. “They’ve got nothing that can run away from us. We’ll show them!”

Then a man’s quavering old voice came to her through the winding trail of the arroyo. It was lifted tunefully insistent in an old-time song of the mining camps:

Oh, Mexico! we’re coming, Mexico!
Our six mule team,
Will soon be seen,
On the trail to Mexico!

“We made it, Pat!” confided the girl grimly. “We made it. Quiet now—quiet!”

She peered out through the green mesquite as Captain Pike emerged from the west arroyo on a gray burro, herding two other pack animals ahead of him into the south trail.

He rode jauntily, his old sombrero at a rakish angle, his eyes bright with enthusiasm supplied by that which he designated as a morning “bracer,” and his long gray locks bobbed in the breeze as he swayed in the saddle and droned his cheerful epic of the trail:

A—and when we’ve been there long enough,
And back we wish to go,
We’ll fill our pockets with the shining dust
And then leave Mexico!
Oh—Mexico!
Good-bye my Mexico!
Our six mule team will then be seen
On the trail from Mexico.

“Hi there! you Balaam—get into the road and keep a-going, you ornery little rat-tailed son-of-a-gun! Pick up your feet and travel, or I’ll yank out your back bone and make a quirt out of it! For—”

My name was Captain Kidd as I sailed

As I sailed,
My name was Captain Kidd,

As I sailed!
My name was Captain Kidd
And most wickedly I di-i-id
All holy laws forbid

As I sailed!

The confessor of superlative wickedness droned his avowal in diminishing volume as the burros pattered along the white dust of the valley road, then the curve to the west hid them, and all was silence but for the rustle of the wind in the mesquite and the far bay of Singleton's hounds circling a coyote.

But Pat pricked up his ears, and lifted his head as if feeling rather than hearing the growing thud of coming hoofs. The girl waited until they were within fifty feet, when she pursed up her lips and whistled the call of the meadow lark. It sounded like a fairy bugle call across the morning, and the roan was halted quickly at the forks of the road.

"Howdy, señorita?" he called softly. "I can't see you, but your song beats the birds. Got a flag of truce? Willing to parley with the enemy?"

Then she emerged, eyeing him sulkily.

"You were going without seeing me!" she stated with directness, and without notice of the quizzical smile of comradeship.

"Certainly was," he agreed. "When I got through the scrap with your disciple of *kultur*, my mug didn't strike me as the right decoration for a maiden's bower. I rode out of the scrap with my scratches, taking joy and comfort in the fact that he had to be carried."

"There was no reason for your being so—so brutal!" she decided austere.

"Lord love you, child, I didn't need a reason—I only wanted an excuse. Give me credit! I got away for fear I'd go loco and smash Singleton for interfering."

"Papa Phil only did his duty, standing for peace."

"Huh, let the Neutral League do it! The trouble with Singleton is he hasn't brains enough to lubricate a balance wheel,—he can't savvy a situation unless he has it printed in a large-type tract. Conrad was scared for fear I'd stumbled on a crooked trail of his and would tell the boss, so he beat me to it with the lurid report that I made an assault on him! This looks like it—not!" and he showed the slashes in his sombrero to make room for the blue banda around his head. "Suppose you tell that Hun of yours to carry a gun like a real hombre instead of the tools of a second-story man. The neighbors could hear a gun, and run to my rescue."

The girl regarded his flippancy with disapproval.

"He isn't my Hun," she retorted. "I could worry along without him on our map,—but after all, I don't know a single definite thing against him. Anyway, it's decided I've got to go away somewhere to school and be out of the ranch squabbles. Papa Phil thinks I get in bad company out here."

"Meaning me?"

"Well, he *said* Captain Pike was demoralizing to the youthful mind. He didn't mention you. And Cap certainly did go the limit yesterday!"

"How so?"

"Well, he went to the Junction for his outfit stuff—"

"Yes, and never showed up at the adobe until the morning star was in the sky!"

"I know," she confessed. "I went with him. We stayed to see a Hart picture at the theater, and had the time of our young lives. At supper I announced that I was going to adopt Cap as a grandfather,—and then of course he had to go and queer me by filling up on some rank whiskey he had smuggled in with the other food! My stars!—he was put to bed singing that he'd 'Hang his harp on a willow tree, and be off to the wars again'—You needn't laugh!"

But he did laugh, his blue eyes twinkling at her recital.

"You poor kid! You have a hard time with the disreputables you pick up. Sure they didn't warn you against speaking to this reprobate?"

“Sure nothing!” was the boyish reply. “I was to be docked a month’s spending money if I dared go near Pedro Vijil’s adobe again while you were there, which was very foolish of Papa Phil!” she added judicially. “I reckon he forgot they tried that before.”

“And what happened?”

“I went down and borrowed double the amount from old Estevan, the trader at the Junction, and gave him an order against the ranch. Then Cap and I sneaked out a couple of three-year-olds and raced them down in the cottonwood flats against some colts brought down by an old Sierra Blanca Apache. We backed our nags with every peso, and that old brown murderer won! But Cap and I had a wonderful day while our coin lasted, and—and you were going away without saying good-bye!”

Kit Rhodes, who had blankly stated that he owned his horse and saddle and little beyond, looked at the spoiled plucky heiress of Granados ranches, and the laughter went out of his eyes.

She was beyond reason loveable even in her boyish disdain of restriction, and some day she would come back from the schools a very finished product, and thank the powers that be for having sent her out of knowledge of happy-go-lucky chums of the ranges.

Granados ranches had been originally an old Spanish grant reaching from a branch of the intermittent Rio Altar north into what is now Arizona, and originally was about double the size of Rhode Island. It was roughly divided into the home or hacienda ranch in Arizona, and La Partida, the cattle range portion, reaching far south into Sonora. Even the remnant of the grant, if intelligently managed, would earn an income satisfactory for a most extravagant princess royal such as its present chatelaine seemed to Rhodes.

But he had noted dubiously that the management was neither intelligent nor, he feared, square. The little rancherías scattered over it in the fertile valleys, were worked on the scratch gravel, ineffective Mexic method by the Juans and Pedros whose family could always count on mesquite beans, and *camotes* if the fields failed. There was seed to buy each year instead of raising it. There was money invested in farming machinery, and a bolt taken at will from a thresher to mend a plow or a buggy as temporarily required. The flocks of sheep on the Arizona hills were low grade. The cattle and horse outfits were south in La Partida, and the leakage was beyond reason, even in a danger zone of the border land.

All this Kit had milled around and around many times in the brief while he had ranged La Partida. A new deal was needed and needed badly, else Wilfreda Bernard would have debts instead of revenue if Singleton let things drift much longer. Her impish jest that she was a damsel in distress in need of a valiant knight was nearer to truth than she suspected. He had an idiotic hungry desire to be that knight, but his equipment of one horse, one saddle, and one sore head appeared inadequate for the office.

Thus Kit Rhodes sat his horse and looked at her, and saw things other than the red lips of the girl, and the chiding gray eyes, and the frank regret at his going.

It was more profitable not to see that regret, or let it thrill a man in that sweet warm way, especially not if the man chanced to be a drifting ranger. She was only a gallant little girl with a genius for friendships, and her loyalty to Pike extended to Pike’s chum—that was what Rhodes told himself!

“Yes,” he agreed, “I was going without any tooting of horns. No use in Cap Pike and me hanging around, and getting you in bad with your outfit.”

“As if I care!” she retorted.

“You might some day,” he said quietly. “School may make a lot of difference; that, and changed surroundings for a year or two. But some day you will be your own manager, and if I’m still on the footstool and can be of service—just whistle, señorita.”

“Sure!” she agreed cheerfully. “I’ll whistle the lark call, and you’ll know I need you, so that’s settled, and we’ll always be—be friends, Trail-hunter.”

“We’ll always be friends, Lark-child.”

“I wanted Cap Pike to let me in on this prospecting trip, wanted to put in money,” she said rather hesitant, “and he turned me down cold, except for a measly ten dollars, ‘smoke money’ he called it. I reckon he only took that to get rid of me, which I don’t call friendly, do you? And if things should go crooked with him, and he—well—sort of needs help to get out, you’ll let me know, won’t you?”

“Yes, if it seems best,” he agreed, “but you won’t be here; you’ll be shipped to a school, *pronto!*”

“I won’t be so far off the map that a letter can’t reach me. Cap Pike won’t ever write, but I thought maybe you—”

“Sure,” agreed Rhodes easily. “We’ll send out a long yell for help whenever we get stuck.”

She eyed him darkly and without faith.

“Wish I knew how to make that certain,” she confessed. “You’re only dodging me with any kind of a promise to keep me quiet, just as Cap did. I know! I’m jealous, too, because you’re taking a trail I’ve always wanted to take with Cap, and they won’t let me because I’m a girl.”

“Cheer up! When you are boss of the range you can outfit any little *pasear* you want to take, but you and I won’t be in the same class then, Lark-child.”

“Are you really going it blind, trailing with Cap into the Painted Hills after that fascinating gold legend?” she demanded. “Or have you some inside trail blazed for yourself? Daddy Pike is the best ever, but he always goes broke, and if he isn’t broke, he has a jug at his saddle horn, so—”

“Oh it’s only a little jug this time, and he’s had a fare-you-well drink out of it with everyone in sight, so there’s only one hilarious evening left in the jug now. Just enough for a gladsome memory of civilization.”

“Are you in deep on this prospect plan?” she persisted.

“Well, not that you could notice. That is, I’ve got a three months’ job offered me down at Whitely’s; that will serve the captain as headquarters to range from until we add to our stake. Whitely is rounding up stock for the Allies down Mesa Blanca way, and Pike will feel at home there. Don’t you worry, I’ll keep an eye on Pike. He is hilariously happy to get into that region with a partner.”

“I don’t like it,” she grumbled at him with sulky gray eyes. “Pedro Vijil just came back from the south, and brought his sister’s family from San Rafael. They’re refugees from the Federals because their men joined Ramon Rotil, the rebel leader, and Merced is crying herself crazy over the tales of war they tell. One of their girls was stolen, and the mother and Tia Luz are both crying over that. So Papa Phil says he’s going to send me away where I won’t hear such horrors. I wish I was a man, and I’d join the army and get a chance to go over and fight.”

“Huh!” grunted Rhodes skeptically, “some more of us had hopes! Our army officers are both praying and cursing to get a chance to do the same thing, but they are not getting it! So you and I, little girl, will wait till some one pitches a bomb into that dovery on the Potomac. Then we’ll join the volunteers and swarm over after our people.”

“Oh, yes, *you* can! Men can do anything they like. I told you I was jealous.”

“Never mind, Lark-child,” he returned soothingly. “If I get over with a gun, you can come along and toot a horn. There now, that’s a bargain, and you can practice tooting the lark’s call until the time comes.”

“I reckon I’ll have plenty of time to toot myself black in the face before you show up again at Granados,” she prophesied ruefully, and he laughed.

“Whistle an’ I’ll come to you, Lassie,” he said with sudden recklessness, “and that’s for *adios*, Billie.”

He held out his hand.

“That’s enough, Rhodes,” said a voice back of them, and Singleton walked forward. “When you got your time, you were supposed to leave Granados. Is this what you’ve been hanging around for during the past week?”

Rhodes flamed red to his hair as he stared down at the elder man.

“I reckon I’ll not answer that now, Mr. Singleton,” he said quietly. “You may live to see you made a mistake. I hope you do, but you’re traveling with a rotten bunch, and they are likely to use a knife or a rope on you any time you’ve played the goat long enough for them to get their innings. I’m going without any grudge, but if I was an insurance agent, trying to save money for my company, I’d sure pass you by as an unsafe bet! Keep on this side of the line, Singleton, while the revolution is whirling, and whatever you forget, don’t forget I said it! *Adios*, señorita, and—good luck!”

“Good luck, Kit,” she half whispered, “and *adios*!”

She watched him as he rode away, watched him as he halted at the turn of the trail and waved his hand, and Singleton was quietly observing her the while. She frowned as she turned and caught him at it.

“You thought he waited here, or planned to—to meet me,” she flared. “He was too square to tell you the truth, but it was I rode out here to say good-bye, rode out and held him up! But I did not reckon anyone would try to insult him for it!”

Her stepfather regarded her grimly. She was angry, and very near to tears.

“Time you had your breakfast,” he observed, “and all signs indicate I should have sent you East last year, and kept you out of the promiscuous mixups along the border. It’s the dumping ground for all sorts of stray adventurers, and no place for a girl to ride alone.”

“He seemed to think I am as able to look after myself as you,” she retorted. “You aren’t fair to him because you take the word of Conrad, but Conrad lies, and I’m glad he got thrashed good and plenty! Now I’ve got that off my mind, I’ll go eat a cheerful breakfast.”

Singleton walked silent beside her back to where his horse was grazing by the roadside.

“Huh!” grunted the girl with frank scorn. “So you got out of the saddle to spy? Haven’t you some black-and-tan around the ranch to do your dirty work?”

“It’s just as well to be civil till you know what you are talking about,” he reminded her with a sort of trained patience. “I came out without my breakfast just to keep the ranchmen from thinking what Tia Luz thinks. She told me I’d find that fellow waiting for you. I didn’t believe it, but I see she is not so far wrong.”

He spoke without heat or feeling, and his tone was that of quiet discussion with a man or boy, not at all that of a guardian to a girl. His charge was evidently akin to the horse ranch of Granados as described by the old ranger: Singleton had acquired them, but never understood them.

“Look here,” said his protégée with boyish roughness, “that Dutchman sees everything crooked, especially if there’s an American in range, and he prejudices you. Why don’t you wake up long enough to notice that he’s framing some excuse to run off every decent chap who comes on the place? I knew Rhodes was too white to be let stay. I saw that as soon as he landed, and I told him so! What I can’t understand is that you won’t see it.”

“A manager has to have a free hand, Billie, or else be let go,” explained Singleton. “Conrad knows horses, he knows the market, and is at home with the Mexicans. Also he costs less than we used to pay, and that is an item in a bad year.”

“I’ll bet we lose enough cattle to his friends to make up the difference,” she persisted. “Rhodes was right when he called them a rotten bunch.”

“Let us hope that when you return from school you will have lost the major portion of your unsavory vocabulary,” he suggested. “That will be worth a herd of cattle.”

“It would be worth another herd to see you wake up and show you had one good fight in you!” she retorted. “Conrad has all of the ranch outfit locoed but me; that’s why he passes on this school notion to you. He wants me out of sight.”

“I should have been more decided, and insisted that you go last year. Heaven knows you need it badly enough,” sighed Singleton, ignoring her disparaging comment on his own shortcomings. And then as they rode under the swaying fronds of the palm drive leading to the ranch house he added,

“Those words of your bronco busting friend concerning the life insurance risk sounded like a threat. I wonder what he meant by it?”

The telephone bell on the Granados Junction line was ringing when they entered the patio. Singleton glanced at the clock.

“A night letter probably,” he remarked. “Go get your coffee, child, it’s a late hour for breakfast.”

Billie obeyed, sulkily seating herself opposite Tia Luz—who was bolt upright behind the coffee urn, with a mien expressing dignified disapproval. She inhaled a deep breath for forceful speech, but Billie was ahead of her.

“So it was you! You were the spy, and sent him after me!”

“*Madre de Dios!* and why not?” demanded the competent Luz. “You stealing your own horse at the dawn to go with the old Captain Pike. I ask of you what kind of a girl is that? Also Mercedes was here last night tearing her hair because of the girls, her sister’s daughters, stolen away over there in Sonora. Well! is that not enough? That Señor Kit is also too handsome. I was a fool to send the medicine with you to Pedro’s house. He looked a fine caballero but even a fine caballero will take a girl when she follows after. *I know!* And once in Sonora all trails of a girl are lost. I know that too!”

“You are all crazy, and I never saw him at Pedro’s house, never!” said the girl reaching for her coffee, and then suddenly she began to laugh. “Did you think, did you make Papa Philip think, that I was eloping like this?” and she glanced down at her denim riding dress.

“And why not? Did I myself not steal out in a shift and petticoat the first time I tried to run away with my Andreas? And beyond that not a thing under God had I on but my coral beads, and the red satin slippers of my sister Dorotea! She pulled my hair wickedly for those slippers, and I got a *reata* on my back from my grandmother for that running away. I was thirteen years old then! But when I was nearly sixteen we did get away, Andreas and I, and after that it was as well for the grandmother to pay a priest for us, and let us alone. *Ai-ji!* señorita, I am not forgetting what I know! And while I am here in Granados there must be nothing less than a grand marriage, and may the saints send the right man, for a wrong one makes hell in any house!”

Billie forgot her sulkiness in her joy at the elopements of Tia Luz. No wonder she distrusted an American girl who was allowed to ride alone!

But in the midst of her laughter she was reminded that Singleton was still detained at the telephone in the adjoining room, and that his rather high-pitched tones betrayed irritation.

“Well, why can’t you give the telegram to me? Addressed to Conrad? Of course if it’s a personal message I don’t want it, but you say it is a ranch matter—and important. Horses? What about them?”

Billie, listening, sped from the table to his side, and putting her hand over the telephone, whispered:

“If Brehman, the secretary, was here, they’d give it to him. They always do.”

Singleton nodded to her, and grew decided.

“See here, Webster, one of our men was hurt, and Brehman took his place and went East with that horse shipment. Mr. Conrad had to go down in Sonora on business, and I am the only one here to take his place. Just give me the message as you would give it to the secretary. But you’d better type a copy and send by mail that I can put it on file. All right? Yes, go ahead.”

Billie had quickly secured paper and pencil, but instead of taking them, Singleton motioned for her to write the message.

Adolf Conrad, Granados Ranch, Granados Junction, Arizona. Regret to report
September shipment horses developed ailment aboard vessel, fifty per cent dead,
balance probably of no military use,
Ogden, Burns & Co.

Word by word Singleton took the message and word by word Billie wrote it down, while they stared at each other.

“Developed ailment aboard vessel!” repeated Singleton. “Then there was something wrong on shipboard, for there certainly is not here. We have no sick horses on the ranch, never do have!”

“But these people?” and Billie pointed to the signature.

“Oh, they are the men who buy stock for the Allies, agents for the French. They paid for the horses on delivery. They are safe, substantial people. I can’t understand—”

But Billie caught his arm with a gasp of horror and enlightenment.

“Papa Phil! Think—*think* what Kit Rhodes said! ‘*Ground glass in the feed at the other end of the road! Conrad’s game—Herrera knows!*’ Papa Phil,—Miguel Herrera was killed—killed! And Conrad tried to kill Kit! Oh he did, he did! None of the Mexicans thought he would get well, but Tia Luz cured him. And Cap Pike never went out of sight of that adobe until Conrad had left the ranch, and I know Kit was right. I know it, I know it! Oh, my horses, my beautiful horses!”

“There, there! Why, child you’re hysterical over this, which is—is too preposterous for belief!”

“Nothing is too preposterous for belief. You know that. Everybody knows it in these days! Is Belgium too preposterous? Is that record of poison and powdered glass in hospital supplies too preposterous? In *hospital* supplies! If they do that to wounded men, why not to cavalry horses? Why Papa Phil—”

“Hush—hush—hush!” he said pacing the floor, clasping his head in both hands. “It is too terrible! What can we do? What? Who dare we trust to even help investigate?”

“Well, you might wire those agents for particulars, this is rather skimpy,” suggested Billie. “Come and get some breakfast and think it over.”

“I might wire the office of the Peace Society in New York to—”

“Don’t you do it!” protested Billie. “They may have furnished the poison for all *you* know! Cap Pike says they are a lot of traitors, and Cap is wise in lots of things. You telegraph, and you tell them that if the sickness is proven to have started in Granados, that we will pay for every dead horse, tell them we have no sick horses here, and ask them to answer, *pronto!*”

“That seems rather reckless, child, to pay for all—”

“I *am* reckless! I am crazy mad over those horses, and over Conrad, and over Kit whom he tried to kill!”

“Tut—tut! The language and behavior of Rhodes was too wicked for anyone to believe him innocent. He was a beastly looking object, and I still believe him entirely in the wrong. This loss of the horses is deplorable, but you will find that no one at Granados is to blame.”

“Maybe so, but you just send that telegram and see what we see!”

CHAPTER VI

A DEAD MAN UNDER THE COTTONWOODS

Billie was never out of hearing of the telephone all day, and at two o'clock the reply came.

Philip Singleton, Rancho Granados, Arizona.

Kindly wire in detail the source of your information. No message went to Granados from this office. No publicity has been given to the dead horse situation. Your inquiry very important to the Department of Justice.
Ogden, Burns & Co.

"Very strange, very!" murmured Singleton. "No matter how hard I think, or from what angle, I can't account for it. Billie, this is too intricate for me. The best thing I can do is to go over to Nogales and talk to an attorney."

"Go ahead and talk," agreed Billie, "but I'd answer that telegram first. This is no township matter, Papa Phil, can't you see that?"

"Certainly, certainly, but simply because of that fact I feel I should have local advice. I have a legal friend in Nogales. If I could get him on the wire—"

An hour later when Billie returned from a ride, she realized Singleton had gotten his friend on the wire, for she heard him talking.

"Yes, this is Granados. Is that you, James? Yes, I asked them to have you call me. I need to consult with you concerning a rather serious matter. Yes, so serious I may say it is mysterious, and appalling. It concerns a shipment of horses. Conrad is in Sonora, and this subject can't wait—no, I can't get in touch with Conrad. He is out of communication when over there—No, I can't wait his return. I've had a wire from Ogden and Burns, New York—said Ogden and Burns—All right, get a pencil; I'll hold the wire."

There was a moment of silence, and if a telephonic camera had been installed at Granados, Mr. Singleton might have caught a very interesting picture at the other end of the wire.

A middle-aged man in rusty black of semi-clerical cut held the receiver, and the effect of the names as given over the wire was, to put it mildly, electrical. His jaw dropped and he stared across the table at a man who was seated there. At the repetition of the name, the other arose, and with the stealthily secretive movement of a coyote near its prey he circled the table, and drew a chair close to the telephone. The pencil and paper was in his hand, not in that of "James." That other was Conrad.

Then the telephone conversation was resumed after Mr. Singleton had been requested to speak a little louder—there seemed some flaw in the connection.

In the end Singleton appeared much comforted to get the subject off his own shoulders by discussing it with another. But he had been convinced that the right thing to do was to motor over to the Junction and take the telegrams with him for consultation. He would start about eight in the morning, and would reach the railroad by noon. Yes, by taking the light car which he drove himself it would be an easy matter.

Billie heard part of this discourse in an absent-minded way, for she was not at all interested as to what some strange lawyer in Nogales might think of the curious telegrams.

She would have dropped some of that indifference if she had been able to hear the lurid language of Conrad after the receiver was hung up. James listened to him in silence for a bit, and then said:

"It's your move, brother! There are not supposed to be any mistakes in the game, and you have permitted our people to wire you a victory when you were not there to get the wire, and that was a mistake."

"But Brehman always—"

“You sent Brehman East and for once forgot what might happen with your office empty. No,—it is not Singleton’s fault; he did the natural thing. It is not the operator’s fault; why should he not give a message concerning horses to the proprietor of the horse ranch?”

“But Singleton never before made a move in anything of management, letters never opened, telegrams filed but never answers sent until I am there! And this time! It is that most cursed Rhodes, I know it is that one! They told me he was high in fever and growing worse, and luck with me! So you yourself know the necessity that I go over for the Sonora conference—there was no other way. It is that Rhodes! Yes, I know it, and they told me he was as good as dead—God! if again I get him in these hands!”

He paced the floor nervously, and flung out his clenched hands in fury, and the quiet man watched him.

“That is personal, and is for the future,” he said, “but Singleton is not a personal matter. If he lives he will be influenced to investigation, and that must not be. It would remove you from Granados, and you are too valuable at that place. You must hold that point as you would hold a fort against the enemy. When Mexico joins with Germany against the damned English and French, this fool mushroom republic will protest, and that is the time our friends will sweep over from Mexico and gather in all these border states—which were once hers—and will again be hers through the strong mailed hand of Germany! This is written and will be! When that day comes, we need such points of vantage as Granados and La Partida; we must have them! You have endangered that position, and the mistake won’t be wiped out. The next move is yours, Conrad.”

The quiet man in the habiliments of shabby gentility in that bare little room with the American flag over the door and portraits of two or three notable advocates of World Peace and the American League of Neutrality on the wall, had all the outward suggestion of the small town disciple of Socialism from the orthodox viewpoint. His manner was carefully restrained, and his low voice was very even, but at his last words Conrad who had dropped into a seat, his head in his hands, suddenly looked up, questioning.

“Singleton can probably do no more harm today,” went on the quiet voice. “I warned him it would be a mistake to discuss it until after he had seen me. He starts at eight in the morning, alone, for the railroad but probably will not reach there.” He looked at his watch thoughtfully. “The Tucson train leaves in fifty minutes. You can get that. Stop off at the station where Brehman’s sister is waitress. She will have his car ready, that will avoid the Junction. It will be rough work, Conrad, but it is your move. It is an order.”

And then before that carefully quiet man who had the appearance of a modest country person, Adolf Conrad suddenly came to his feet in military salute.

“Come, we will talk it over,” suggested his superior. “It will be rough, yet necessary, and if it could appear suicide, eh? Well, we will see. We—will—see!”

At seven in the morning the Granados telephone bell brought Singleton into the patio in his dressing gown and slippers. And Doña Luz who was seeing that his breakfast was served, heard him express surprise and then say:

“Why, certainly. If you are coming this way as far on the road as the Jefferson ranch of course we can meet there, and I only need to go half way. That will be excellent. Yes, and if Judge Jefferson is at home he may be able to help with his advice. Fine! Good-bye.”

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «Литрес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на Литрес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.