

Kelly Florence Finch

# The Delafield Affair



Florence Kelly

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### CHAPTER I

### VENGEANCE AVOWED

Curtis Conrad turned from superintending repairs on the adobe wall, and walked across the corral to the gate at the opposite side. As he filled his pipe he looked across the wide, greenish-gray New Mexican plateau stretching far to east and south and west. It was dotted here and there with little groups of grazing cattle, and he noted a straggling procession of the creatures, their figures wavering and distorted in the heat haze, coming down from the distant foot-hills. They were following a trail that cut across the plain in a straight line to the pond across the road from the house, beyond a grove of cottonwood trees.

“Poor devils!” he thought. “They’re tramping miles for a drink of water, and to-morrow they’ll tramp back again for their breakfast. The Castletons are going to lose big money in dead cattle this Summer, unless there’s more rain than there was last. It’s awful to see the poor brutes dropping in their tracks. I’ll begin looking for a job in a wetter country if this Summer doesn’t bring more rain.” He turned his attention to his pipe, sheltering bowl and match in his hollowed hand. “No use, in this wind,” he muttered. “What a blast it’s blowing to-day! Well, there’s no sand in it.”

The plain stretched away from the ranch-house in low, rolling hills, so evenly sized that it gave the impression of a level surface. Up from one of the little valleys rose a horseman, as if he had sprung suddenly from the depths of the earth. Through the heat that wavered over the plain his horse’s legs drew out into long, knobby sticks, and both man and steed became an absurd caricature of the sinewy pony and cowboy rider that presently cantered up to the gate with the mail for which Conrad had been waiting.

“Three cow-brutes are down on the pond trail, just where it crosses the road. One of ’em’s got a calf.”

“Are they dead?”

“Mighty nigh – will be by night.”

“You and Red Jack go and skin them in the morning.” Conrad turned toward the house, looking at his letters. His mind still lingered over the calf. “Poor little devil, it ought to have a chance,” he was thinking, when his eye caught the name on one of the envelopes. He turned upon the cowboy a gaze suddenly grown preoccupied.

“No, Peters,” he said; “the calf won’t go with the other cattle while its mother is alive, and I saw that gray wolf skulking along the draw this afternoon. You and Red Jack’d better go down now and put the cows out of their misery. Skin them and bring the calf into the corral till night, and then put it down by the pond with the other cow-brutes.”

His eyes quickly returned to the letter that had attracted his attention. “Tremper & Townsend!” he exclaimed with eager surprise. “Why, they were Delafield’s attorneys!” He tore open the envelope with an impatient jerk and the rushing wind almost blew from his fingers the check it contained. As his eye ran quickly down the half-dozen lines of the letter his face lighted with satisfaction and amusement.

The sound of a carriage distracted his attention. It turned in at his house-gate and he hastened forward, a lean, long-legged figure of a man, hat doffed and hand outstretched.

“How are you, Bancroft? Glad to see you! And Miss Bancroft, too! Of course you’re coming in. Thirsty? I’ll bet you are! And you know we’ve got the best water in Silverside County here. How

much better your daughter's looking, Aleck! If you keep on like this, Miss Bancroft, you'll soon forget you were ever ill."

"Oh, I've forgotten that already, there's such magic in the winds you have here," the girl replied laughingly as he lifted her to the ground. "They're strong enough to blow the past out of your memory and make you forget even your own name!" Her father suddenly turned away and began to hitch the horses. He sent back a covert glance at her as she stood at Conrad's side, a slender figure, her face still thin from recent illness but aglow with the pink of returning health, the breeze fluttering the short brown curls that clustered over her bare head.

"Oh, my hat, please!" she exclaimed, with sudden remembrance of the head-covering she had left hanging in the carriage top. Curtis took it down for her and looked on with undisguised admiration while she tied it with a big bow of ribbon under her chin. Bancroft came back, explaining that they had driven since mid-forenoon from the base of Mangan's Peak, and asking if Conrad did not think they had made pretty good time with their new team of horses. Curtis looked them over critically, praising their good points, and approving heartily when Bancroft told him they had been bought for both riding and driving, for he wanted Lucy, now that she was growing strong again, to become an expert horsewoman.

A big cottonwood tree grew beside the gate, and a little plot of grass, enclosed on three sides by whitewashed adobe walls, made a square of welcome green. Lucy Bancroft exclaimed with delight as they entered the tiny yard, stepping mincingly across the grass with lifted gown, and smiling back at the two men, while fleeting dimples played hide-and-seek in her cheeks.

"I'm so glad, Mr. Conrad," she laughed, "that you haven't any signs up to 'keep off the grass,' for I simply must walk on it. I never saw anything so lovely as this little lawn and this beautiful big green tree, after our long ride across the plain. It makes me think of that line in the Bible about 'the shadow of a great rock in a weary land.'"

"Yes," replied Curtis as he threw open the door. "I never knew until I came to New Mexico how much comfort and pleasure there can be in a few blades of grass. When I come in from a long ride and look at this little checker-board square of turf I feel as if I uncurled a whole yard of wrinkles and squints from around my eyes."

The Socorro Springs ranch-house was a rambling sequence of adobe rooms, so joined one to another that they formed the eastern and part of the northern side of the big square corral. It was low and flat-roofed, and struggling tufts of weeds and grass grew along the top and trailed over the edge, adding their chapter to Nature's endless tale of the unwearied determination of Life to evade and overcome Death. The rooms opened out of one another in a long row, all with outside doors looking toward the east and some with additional doors into the corral. A bare adobe yard sloping eastward was bordered by a trickling stream of water along which grew some willows and cottonwoods. Beyond it spread a golden-green field of young alfalfa, and beyond that the greenish-gray plain stretched to the far horizon. Across the front of the house was a narrow wooden porch, and house and porch, walls and sheds, were all a dazzling white that in the vivid sunshine smote the sight like a blow across the eyeballs. In the low, large room in front gayly colored Navajo rugs were spread on the floor, white muslin curtains hung at the windows, and rose-bedecked paper covered the walls and ceiling. Unpainted shelves of pine above a battered, flat-topped desk were filled with books, and the round table in the middle of the room was littered with newspapers, magazines, tobacco pouches, and pipes.

The housekeeper, Mrs. Peters, brought a pitcher of water, and Conrad explained to Lucy that the springs from which the ranch took its appellation, *Los Ojos del Socorro*, "The Springs of Succor," had been so named nearly three hundred years before by a party of Spanish explorers, because they had come unexpectedly upon the pure waters when they were almost dead from thirst. At the housekeeper's suggestion Lucy went into the next room to lie down for a half-hour's rest before they should start for their home in Golden, twenty miles farther westward. The door, accidentally left ajar,

swung part way open and she could hear plainly the voices of her father and Conrad as she lay with eyes closed and thoughts wandering, scarcely heeding what they said.

The two men were absorbed in a discussion of local politics. “Dan Tillinghurst is all right,” said Conrad. “He’s made a good sheriff and he ought to have the office again. I shall do all I can to have him renominated and to help elect him afterwards. But Dellmey Baxter for Congress again! That’s where I buck, and buck hard, and keep a-buckin’.”

“But he’s the head of the party in the Territory,” objected Bancroft. “He can bring out more votes than any other man we can put up. If we turn him down in the convention they’ll beat us at the polls.”

“We’ll deserve to be beaten if we nominate him, anyway. I can’t stomach him any longer, Aleck, and I don’t see how you can.”

“Oh, you’re prejudiced, Curt,” said the other, good-naturedly. “You know you can never see any good in a man you dislike, and you took a dislike to Baxter the first day you set foot in the Territory.”

“Maybe I am prejudiced; but in Dell Baxter’s case there’s ample reason to be, and I’d be ashamed of myself if I wasn’t. I know he’s a friend of yours, but that doesn’t prevent him from being the worst scoundrel in the whole Territory. I tell you, Aleck, there’s nothing that man wouldn’t do, unless it was something square and honest.”

“Come, come, Curt, that’s rank exaggeration. I’ve been associated with Dell Baxter financially ever since I located in this part of the country, and I’ve always found him strictly on the square.”

“Then it was because it was to his interest to be square. He’ll do you up yet, if he gets the chance and thinks it worth while. He’s had his finger in every crooked scheme that’s been put through from Raton to El Paso, and his hands are as bloody as his pockets are dirty.”

“Don’t you think it’s going a little too far,” asked Bancroft, smiling calmly, “to accuse a man in that wholesale way when you haven’t any basis for your assertions but the merest idle gossip?”

Conrad gave an indignant snort. “Oh, I’m not saying he’s done the jobs himself. He thinks too much of that fat paunch of his to put that into any danger. But why does he keep those Mexican thugs hanging around him if it isn’t to use them for things he wouldn’t dare do himself? Why, I heard from Santa Fe only last week that he’s taken into his pay that Mexican cutthroat, Liberato Herrera, whom he saved last Winter from conviction for the Paxton murder.”

“No, Aleck,” he went on. “I buck when it comes to Dell Baxter for Congress again. If he gets the nomination and the other side puts up Johnny Martinez, as it’s likely they will, I’m going to support Johnny.”

“But he’s a Mexican.”

“I don’t care what he is as long as he’s a decent man. He won’t be a disgrace to the Territory in Washington, and that’s more than you can say of Baxter.”

Bancroft’s impassive face lighted with a bantering smile. “There’s no limit to your bad opinion of a man, is there, Curt, if he once gets into your disfavor? By the way, is it true that the Castletons are behind Johnny Martinez?”

“I don’t know, and I don’t care. I’m their hired man here on the ranch, but my vote’s my own, and so’s what little influence I may have, and I’ll do with both of ’em just what I damn please. And if it came to a show-down, I’d be perfectly willing to lose my job if that would keep Dell Baxter from going back to Congress.”

Bancroft laughed again. Conrad’s eye, as he turned to his desk for more cigars, fell upon the little pile of letters and papers he had just received. On the top lay the Tremper & Townsend envelope. “By the way, Aleck, you’re from Boston, ain’t you?” he exclaimed impulsively.

In the next room, Lucy, listening sleepily to the two voices, had been noting the difference in their quality. Conrad’s was high and clear, his speech rapid and incisive. Her father’s, lower and more deliberate, had in it a subtle, persuasive quality. “Dear daddy!” she whispered softly, her heart warm with affection. Then the new, sharp edge in Conrad’s tone gripped her attention and sent her eyes

flying open. Wide awake on the instant, she listened for the sound of her father's voice again. Had she been on the scene, she might have noted that he turned an instant's keen gaze upon his companion before he answered, carelessly enough:

"Yes; originally. But I've come from so many other places since then that I almost forget it, unless somebody reminds me. I haven't been back there, or known much about the old place, for years."

Conrad's boyish smile illuminated his face and twinkled in his blue eyes. "Yes," he said; "'most everybody out here is so everlastingly on the lope that it's no wonder some of 'em lose their names every once in a while and have to pick up 'most anything that comes handy. I'm no exception, though I've not yet forgotten 'what was my name back in the States.' But did you know anything about the Delafield affair in Boston, fifteen or sixteen years ago?"

"I heard of it at the time, but it was after I left the city. It was so long ago that I forget the details. Skipped, didn't he, with a lot of funds? Or was he the one who defaulted and jumped into the Charles River?"

Conrad had an eagerness of speech and manner that in a man of less vigor would have been accounted nervousness. Voice, face, and gesture were alive with it as he responded: "Jump nothing! except to get out of reach of his creditors! He's alive yet and making money somewhere, and I mean to find him! I've got a particular interest in that man, and when I come up with him he'll have a particular interest in me. For I'm going to give him such a song-and-dance as he's never had before."

Bancroft listened calmly, his face and manner as impassive as usual, but his eyes narrowed as they met his companion's excited gaze. Smiling slightly, he replied, "What has he done to stir you up so? You must have been too young to be interested in financial investments then."

"So I was, directly. Nevertheless, it happens, Aleck, that the Delafield affair has influenced me and my life more than any other one thing. My father lost everything he had in Sumner L. Delafield's smash-up. I was fifteen years old then, and getting ready to go to Michigan University – afterward I was to study law and be a prominent citizen. My father met Delafield first during a business trip to Boston – we lived in central Illinois, and father was well-to-do – and, just like everybody else, he gave the man his entire confidence. You remember, of course, how Delafield came to the top as a regular young Napoleon of business, and soon made a reputation as one of the big financiers. When he turned up missing one fine morning, and it was found that the bottom had dropped out of everything, most people believed he had killed himself. But he hadn't, I happen to know, and he's still alive. Well, my father had been so influenced by Delafield – the fellow must have been a persuasive cuss – that he had put everything he could raise into the man's schemes, and had even mortgaged our home. He had a weak heart, and when he read the news of Delafield's default and disappearance he fell out of his chair dead. The sudden shock of it all prostrated my mother, and she died in giving premature birth to a child. So there was I, a fifteen-year-old boy, suddenly dropped to the bottom of poverty, with two younger sisters and a little brother to take care of.

"I tell you, I swore vengeance on that man. I promised myself I'd hunt him down if it took a lifetime. I'm on his trail now, and I'm not going to leave it until I run him into his hole. Then I'm going to stand him up and call him to his face all he deserves; and give him a gun, so he can have a fair chance for his worthless life, and take one myself; and then I'll put a bullet through his scoundrel brain if I have to hang for it afterward!"

In the adjoining room Lucy Bancroft, with wide eyes and heightened color, was listening to Conrad's story. The thrill of keen-edged purpose in his tense and eager tones had set her nerves to vibrating until her body was a-tremble. At his last sentence Curtis brought his fist down on the table with a crash that almost startled her into outcry. A moment of silence followed, and then she heard her father's cool and even voice, "But suppose he should put one through yours first?"

"Oh, he's welcome to do that if he can draw quicker or shoot straighter than I can. He'll get one through his head before the *baile* is over, and that's all I care about. The round-up's coming, and

I reckon he knows it. For to-day I got a letter from Tremper & Townsend of Boston, who settled up his affairs after his disappearance, enclosing a check for five hundred dollars, saying he wished it sent to me as the first instalment of the amount he owed my father, which he hopes, before long, to be able to pay in full.”

Bancroft flicked the ash from his cigar with unusual care, looked at it with contemplative interest, and drew a whiff or two before he spoke. Turning to Conrad with a quizzical smile, he said: “Well, Curt, doesn’t that rather take the edge off your purpose? Why are you still shaking your gory locks and roaring like a wounded bull at him when he’s evidently doing the square thing by you? Why don’t you let up on your chase and give him a chance?”

“Not on your life,” was Conrad’s emphatic rejoinder. “It’s too late in the game for me to take repentance and an honest purpose on the hoof! He’s found out that I’m getting hot on the scent and he wants to buy me off – that’s all that check means. It’s not the loss of the money that sticks in my craw; it’s the deviltry he worked years ago. Whenever I find that he’s discharging his debts to all his other creditors, who aren’t after him hot-foot, then I’ll consent to wait for my parley until he has settled the whole score.”

Lucy arose from the bed depressed with a vague sense of trouble. The longing seized her to be out-of-doors again, alone with her father on the wide plain, with the wind smiting her face and filling her lungs and making her forget everything but her own joy in being alive. She rubbed her eyes, smoothed her face, and forced herself to smile at the reflection in the mirror until her agitation was subdued. And presently, smiling and self-possessed, she opened the door into the front room, just as her father was finishing some friendly advice to Conrad.

“Well, Curt, it’s your affair,” he had said, “and if you are so dead-set on getting that kind of revenge I suppose you’ll go ahead and get it. But you’d better be careful; if this man is desperate he might try to head you off by the same means. And you couldn’t exactly blame him for objecting to being shot in his tracks, or for taking measures to keep you from doing it. For my part, I never thought revenge was a paying investment, and I still believe you’re foolish to waste your time, energy, and money in that sort of business.

“Ah, Lucy, is that you?” he went on, as she opened the door. “Come in, dear. Have you had a nap, and do you feel better?”

“Yes, thank you, I’ve rested beautifully, and I’m ready to start whenever you wish,” she replied.

As they stepped out of the house Lucy looked toward the west, whence the wind came, and as it struck her full in the face she gasped for breath and her slender body swayed in its rushing current. She grasped her wide hat brim with both hands and held it down so that it made a frame for her face. Laughing with joy she turned to Curtis.

“Oh, I love these winds, Mr. Conrad! I know they blow sand into your eyes and pelt your face with gravel, but they make you feel so good! I always want to dance when I’ve been out in a wind like this for a minute or two.” She took half a dozen dancing steps across the little lawn. “And they are so pure and sweet,” she went on more seriously, “and make you feel so – so right that it seems as if they ought to blow all the wickedness out of one’s mind.”

“Jiminy! I wonder if she heard what I said in there!” thought Conrad with inward panic. But he smiled down at her glowing young face and his eyes shone with admiration as he replied: “That is a beautiful theory, Miss Bancroft, but I’m afraid it doesn’t pan out much in practice. It rather seems to me that most people who come to New Mexico have that sort of thing blown into them instead of out of them. As for myself,” and he grinned broadly, “I can’t say that I feel any increase in righteousness, no matter how much I waltz around in these zephyrs.”

“And you must have given them a fair trial, too!” she laughed back. “But you may make all the fun you like of my little pet theory, Mr. Conrad. I shall believe in it just the same, and like the country just as much.”

“No; she didn’t hear, and, besides, she said she’d been asleep, so it’s all right,” thought Curtis with much relief, as he went on eagerly: “I’m glad you’re pleased with us and our winds, so that you’ll want to stay. I assure you, Miss Bancroft, you can’t find such a superior quality of wind anywhere else in the United States.”

“Oh, I’m going to stay, not on account of the wind, but on account of my father, who, I assure you, Mr. Conrad, is the most superior quality of father to be found anywhere in the United States! I’ve been away from him so much that now I’m perfectly happy to be with him all the time. You see, when my dear mother died five years ago, father put me in a boarding-school, and afterward sent me to Chicago for a year to study music, and there I had that attack of typhoid fever that came so near to killing me. But I’m here with him at last, and I mean to stay. And I’m learning to ride now, Mr. Conrad, and father thinks I’m getting on very well; don’t you, daddy?” She turned to her father, as he came beside them at the carriage wheel, with a fond smile and a touch of her hand upon his arm.

“Oh, yes,” he answered, returning her smile and patting her shoulder; “you are doing bravely, Lucy. You’ll soon be scouring the plain like the heroine of a dime novel.”

“No New Mexican girl,” said Conrad as he helped her into the carriage, “thinks she can really ride until she can rope a steer. If you’re going to be such an enthusiastic New Mexican you’ll have to learn tricks of that sort. Get your father to bring you out here some day, and I’ll give you lessons in cowboy riding.”

“Agreed! that would be great fun!” she exclaimed, smiling down at him, her eyes twinkling and the dimples dancing in and out of her cheeks. “We’ll come out, won’t we, daddy, after Miss Dent comes. I shall remember your promise, Mr. Conrad.”

Curtis waved a last good-bye as they turned the corner of his corral, and went back to his desk and his interrupted mail. “A mighty good fellow Aleck Bancroft is,” he said in a half-aloud tone. “He doesn’t palaver a lot, but he makes you feel he’s your friend. I wonder if I said too much about Delafield. That check had wound me up and I sure talked more than I meant to.” Long hours of solitude out-of-doors with only a silent plain around him and a silent sky above are likely to make a man so yearn for the sound of a human voice, though it be only his own, that he falls into the habit of thinking aloud. Conrad had the social temperament and it had not taken the wide and silent spaces of earth and air long to engender in him the habit of making companionship out of his own speech.

He pulled thoughtfully at his sunburned moustache for a moment as he considered the matter. “It might have been just as well if I hadn’t said so much,” he went on aloud, “but he’s close-mouthed and a good friend of mine. No, she didn’t hear me – that’s sure. How pretty she is when her eyes twinkle and her dimples come and go! I hope that wine will come in time for me to take her a bottle the next time I go to Golden. Well, I can call on her, anyway, and apologize because it hasn’t. Hello! Here’s a letter from Littleton! Has he got hold of something new about Delafield?”

“I was down in the northern part of your Territory last week on other business,” he read, “and I happened to meet a man who is, I think, on the trail of the very same person we’re after, though he’s been working it from the other end. If I’m right about it, the man we want is now some prominent and respected citizen of New Mexico, and maybe some good friend – or enemy – of yours at this moment. The man I met is Rutherford W. Jenkins, of Las Vegas. You probably know him – ”

“Sure! And know him to be a skunk!” Conrad exclaimed with a contemptuous snort.

“I couldn’t get much out of him,” the letter went on, “although I gave him a tip about the trail we’re on and a little of Delafield’s history as a bait. He snapped at it, and then began to dissemble his satisfaction, so I’m sure it is of value to him. But not even firewater would make him give up anything more. However, I feel pretty sure that he either knows already who Delafield is or expects soon to find out. I think

he's working at it with an eye to the possibilities of blackmail of one sort or another. Perhaps if you see him yourself you can get something out of him."

Conrad's face glowed with satisfaction as he finished the letter. "The birds won't get a chance to make any nests in my hair this trip! I'll sashay up the line this very night and I'll find out who Delafield is from Jenkins, if I have to choke the life out of him to do it. God!" His vengeful desire glowed like a blue flame in his eyes. He jumped to his feet, stretched out his arms, and clenched his fists. "Sumner L. Delafield, it's getting time for you to say your prayers!"

## CHAPTER II

### THE EVIL THAT MEN DO

Lucy Bancroft and her father were unusually silent as they drove toward home. After an effort to chatter gayly she grew quiet – to her father’s surprise, for she was ordinarily a vivacious companion. Speculating uneasily whether or not she had heard Conrad’s story, and reassuring himself that it could mean nothing to her in any event, he made several efforts to draw her into speech. But she answered with her mind so evidently intent elsewhere that he gave up the attempt. The fear grew on him that she had overheard the conversation and that it had left an undue impression on her mind.

A mirage of singularly perfect illusion lay across the plain to their left, and he drew her attention to its silvery surface, the trees bordering its unreal banks, the cattle standing knee-deep in its waters, and the steamboat puffing across its breast. Lucy admired and wondered for a moment, then turned the other way and looked back at the green tree clusters and white buildings of the ranch they had left. Her gaze lingered there until they crossed the hill, and its summit hid the scene from view.

Bancroft sought to reassure himself. Did she not say she had been asleep? And the door was shut. Surely she could not have heard! Even if she had why should she care about it? Nevertheless, her silence made him anxious. It annoyed him to think that her mind was intent upon Conrad’s story. He made another effort to draw her out of her abstraction by asking how soon she expected their friend, Louise Dent, who was coming to spend the Summer with them. Lucy showed interest in this and they discussed plans for her entertainment. But presently she fell silent again, looking straight ahead with a little frown on her brow.

The conviction gripped Bancroft’s mind that she had overheard the cattleman’s recital of his wrongs. Alarm stirred in his heart as he tried to imagine what impression it had made upon her. Would she sympathize with Conrad? For the moment he forgot everything else – business deals and political contests, friendships and enmities, in his desire to know what had been the effect upon the girl beside him of Conrad’s outburst. But much as he wished to know, he feared still more the surety of what her feeling might be, and he could not bring himself to ask the questions that would draw her out.

Presently Lucy’s voice broke suddenly upon their silence. “I wonder what became of his sisters!” Her color rose as she spoke and she gazed with exaggerated interest at a tall, yellow-flowered cactus beside the road.

“Whose sisters, Lucy?” her father asked carelessly, flicking the horses to a faster pace. But his heart sank as he thought, “She did hear it all!”

“Why, Mr. Conrad’s. You know he said he was left when he was only fifteen with two younger sisters and a little brother to take care of.”

“Oh – Conrad – I don’t know. They are probably married by this time. That was a long time ago. I’ve heard him mention his sisters before, I think. Yes; I recall now that he has told me they are both married and prosperous somewhere in Illinois or Iowa.”

“And his younger brother?”

“Oh, he’s just a young fellow, and Curtis is putting him through college. Conrad banks with me, and I’ve noticed his checks sometimes when they come back.”

“How good he is to them! It must have been very hard on him,” Lucy’s tone was sympathetic, but her father replied briskly:

“Oh, I don’t know! Responsibility is sometimes just the thing to bring out all the good there is in a young fellow and show what sort of stuff he’s made of.”

“I suppose that’s why he’s never married,” Lucy went on, following her own line of thought, her voice still sounding the sympathetic note, “because he had to take care of the others.”

“I don’t suppose that’s a fault in your eyes, my dear.”

“Of course not, daddy!” Lucy flashed back, smiling and dimpling. “Of course a girl likes a young man better because he’s more interesting and can pay her more attention. You would yourself, daddy, if you were a girl.”

“Very likely, my dear. But I like Curtis Conrad well enough, even if I’m not as young as you are and of your sex. I was disappointed in him to-day, though, and surprised as well. You must have heard what he said; how did it strike you to hear a young man boast of his intention to commit murder?”

He spoke so earnestly and the persuasive quality in his voice was so insistent that Lucy turned upon him a quick look of surprise and question. Then her eyes fell as a sudden rush of emotion, coming she knew not whence or why, almost choked her utterance.

“I don’t know,” she began tremulously, “perhaps he wouldn’t really do it – I don’t believe he would – he seems too good and kind to be really wicked or cruel.” She stopped a moment, only to break out abruptly:

“And it was such a wicked thing that man Delafield did! Oh, he must have been a villain! As wicked and cruel – oh, as bad as he could be! I can’t blame Mr. Conrad for feeling as he does. I know it seems an awful thing for me to say, but I really can’t blame him, daddy, when I think what that man made him suffer – and he was only one; there must have been many others. I might even feel the same way if I were in his place and it had been you that was killed!” There was a thrill in her voice that seemed in her father’s ears to be the echo of that which had vibrated through Curtis Conrad’s words when he so passionately declared his purpose. Her words were as knife-thrusts in his heart as she went on, “Oh, how I should hate him! I know I should hate him with all my strength!”

He made no immediate reply, leaning forward to tap the horses with the whip-lash. Lucy choked down a sob or two, turned, threw her arms around his neck, and burst into tears. He put his arm about her with a sudden close pressure, and she, with her eyes hidden against his shoulder, could not see that his face had gone suddenly white and that underneath his brown moustache and pointed beard his lips were pale and tense.

“Well, well, Lucy,” he said presently, his voice calm and caressing, “there’s no need to be tragic over it. Is it any of our affair, even if Conrad is our good friend? Possibly Delafield wasn’t as bad as he says – it’s likely Curt exaggerates about him – he usually does when he dislikes anybody. And perhaps Delafield suffered as much as – the others. Come, dear, brace up and don’t be hysterical.”

Lucy straightened up and gave her father a wavering, wistful smile. “It was silly of me, wasn’t it, daddy, to act like that! I’m ashamed of myself. I don’t know why I cried – I guess it was because I am tired.”

## CHAPTER III

### MISTAKE, OR BLUNDER?

With eager pleasure Conrad gazed from his car window the next morning at the narrow bright ribbon of verdure with which the Rio Grande pranks itself on its southward course through New Mexico. The unkempt fields, the orchards and meadows, and the softened and caressing sunlight were as balm to his eyes, accustomed to the pale, grim southern plain and its fierce white sunshine. As the train rushed northward along the banks of the muddy stream, he looked at the little adobe houses, wondering how long these peaceful Mexican homes could withstand the pressure of the dominant American. He became aware that the men behind him were discussing the same question.

“It will be only a few years,” one of them was saying, “until this rich valley with all this water for irrigation will be in American hands.”

“The greasers are safe enough,” said his companion, “until they begin to borrow on mortgages. Then their fate is settled.”

“I heard the other day,” responded the first, “that Dell Baxter’s been corralling a lot of mortgages on the land hereabouts.”

The other chuckled. “You bet. Dell ain’t the man to let a little chance like this slip by him. These *paisanos* look on him as a sort of ‘little father’ and borrow money of him with utter heedlessness of the day of reckoning. He jollies them along and tells ‘em they’re good fellows and hard workers, and he’s sure they’ll be able to pay when the time comes. Of course they never pay back a blessed *peso*, and Baxter gets the ranch. I’ll bet it won’t be long till he’ll be exploiting a big land improvement company and selling these ‘doby farms for ten times what they cost him.”

The talk of the two men drifted into politics, and presently Conrad heard them discussing Bancroft’s loyal support of Baxter for Congress. “He’s got to do it,” said one of them. “Dell’s been loaning him money and taking mortgages until Bancroft couldn’t do anything else if he wanted to. Dell knows that Bancroft’s support is a mighty important asset on account of the confidence people have in him, and Dell’s been careful to cinch it good and tight.”

As Curtis bought an Albuquerque morning paper from the train-boy he thought indignantly, “That’s all poppycock! Aleck’s got too much grit to let anybody throttle him with a few dirty *pesos*. Hullo! What’s this about Jenkins?” His eye had caught the name of the man he wished to see in a column of local news. As he read, “Rutherford W. Jenkins came down from Las Vegas yesterday and is stopping at the Metropolitan,” his face shone with satisfaction. “Good luck!” he thought. “We’ll be in Albuquerque in half an hour, and I’ll go for my man like a steer on the prod!”

At the hotel he found Jenkins, with a number of other men, smoking and talking on the porch. He did not expect to be remembered, for they had met only once, months before. But Jenkins came forward with his hand outstretched in greeting. “How do you do, Mr. Conrad! You don’t get up to this part of the Territory very often; but we’re always glad to see you.”

“Thank you, Mr. Jenkins. I’ve come this time especially to see you, and as soon as you have a moment or two to spare I’d like a private conversation.”

“Certainly! With pleasure! Just excuse me for a minute, will you, till I finish up the business I have with these men, and then we’ll go up to my room.”

Conrad waited, tense and expectant, the quite apparent fact that Jenkins was engaged in mere desultory chat and story-telling increasing his irritation at the delay. He had jumped to the conclusion that Jenkins knew who Delafield was, and his breath came short and chokingly at the thought that in a few minutes he, too, would know. To know would be to act. His revolver was in his hip-pocket, and he intended to go straight from the interview to that meeting which for half his years had been the one goal of his thought. He glanced at Jenkins, saying to himself, “He looks like a weasel, and

I reckon he is just enough of one to have wormed around and worked this thing out.” Jenkins was tall, slender, and slightly stooped, his face long and thin, with its salient features crowded too close together. “I reckon he knows, all right,” Conrad’s thought went on, “and he’ll tell me if I make the inducement big enough – he’d do anything for money!”

Under cover of the conversation Jenkins had been doing his share of rapid thinking, prolonging the talk for that very purpose. He was putting together, with the acumen of a man in whom detective processes are a natural endowment, enough facts to convince him of the reason for Conrad’s visit, considering the while just what he should do. He felt sure that he must expect a direct question about Delafield’s identity, but he put off decision upon his response until he should hear the inquiry.

“Now, Mr. Conrad, we’ll go straight up to my room,” he said cordially, laying a familiar hand upon the other’s shoulder. Curtis shrank back a little, falling behind with a promptitude that left no doubt of his intention to keep the interview entirely formal. Jenkins licked his lips with an unwholesome smile, and led the way in silence. As the door closed behind them, Conrad became aware of an increase of repugnance toward this man so great that the necessity of dealing with him was an irritation.

“Well, Mr. Conrad,” said Jenkins, cheerfully, giving the other no time to state his mission, “I hear you are putting in some good licks for Johnny Martinez down in Silverside. What do you think of his chances down there? Pretty good, aren’t they?”

“Yes, I think so,” Curtis replied curtly; and plunged into his own affair. “I have understood, Mr. Jenkins, from my friend Mr. Littleton, of Chicago, whom you met last week, that you are interested in a matter of prime importance to me, and that you have some information I want to get hold of.”

“Oh, yes; I remember meeting Littleton last week,” Jenkins broke in. “A good fellow, too. So he’s a friend of yours, is he? Yes; he and I scraped up quite a friendship and had a good time together. But say, Conrad, the amount of throat varnish that man can stand is something amazing!”

Curtis straightened himself in his chair impatiently. “He wrote me that he had some conversation with you about Sumner L. Delafield, formerly of Boston, but now, I have reason to believe, living here in New Mexico under an assumed name.”

“Yes; I believe we did have a little talk about Delafield,” Jenkins interrupted again. “But I’ll have to confess,” he went on jocularly, “that my mental condition wasn’t perfectly clear and it’s likely my remarks were a little foggy too. But I recall that we did have some conversation about the Delafield affair. Littleton had some personal interest in Delafield’s failure, didn’t he?”

“No; all the work he has done on the case has been for me. I have considerable interest in it.”

“Have you, indeed? Now, this is a coincidence! For some time past I’ve been a good deal interested in that matter myself. I suppose you were roped into some of his schemes?”

For a moment Curtis took counsel with himself upon what and how much he should say, only to thrust back his repulsion against saying anything at all to this man and plunge frankly into his narrative. With the utmost brevity he told of his father’s ruin and of his own trailing of the culprit through so many years. Of his motives he said nothing, and of his work in tracking Delafield no more than was necessary. Few, even of his best friends, knew anything about the secret scheme of vengeance he had nursed from boyhood. Even Littleton, the detective who had aided him in the quest, did not know that he wanted to face Delafield for any reason other than to demand restitution.

Having briefly outlined his story, Conrad went on to say that Littleton had led him to think that Jenkins must be engaged in the same search, and suggested that an exchange of their discoveries might be for their mutual benefit.

Jenkins listened with evident interest, asking questions here and there concerning certain points in the other’s long chase of the fugitive. “Yes; you’ve done very well, Conrad,” he said, admiration in his voice, “very well indeed. That was a damned crooked trail and you’ve done a fine piece of work in following it through.”

Curtis gnawed his moustache and frowned. Jenkins's evasive speeches were increasing his irritation and repugnance almost beyond his control. "The amount of the matter is," he burst out, "I've got the notion that you know who Delafield is, and I'm willing to pay you for the information. I shall undoubtedly be able to find out for myself if I keep at it a little longer, but it happens that I want to know at once. If you know positively who he is, I am willing to pay you three hundred dollars for the knowledge."

Jenkins walked to the window and stood there silently. He was weighing one thing against another, and deciding whether he should tell the whole truth, a part of it, or none at all. Presently he said to himself that a bird in the hand to-day is worth a whole flock that may be in the bush to-morrow.

"Before I decide about your offer, Mr. Conrad," he began cautiously, "there are two or three things I would like to know. You are doing some good work for Martinez for Congress, I understand."

"The best I can," answered Curtis with surprise.

"Well, as you know, I am warmly in his favor myself. I want to get him the support of as many leading men in the Territory as possible. This man Delafield is one of Baxter's influential lieutenants, and I particularly want to win him over to Martinez. You, I happen to know, have some influence with him."

A nervous start betrayed the strain Conrad was under, and an eager look lighted his face. Jenkins saw it, smiled blandly, and inwardly decided to demand another hundred dollars. "It has occurred to me," he went on, "that you might be able to influence him when I couldn't. Combine this leverage with your friendship, and I believe almost anything is possible. If I let you have this information will you agree to use it and your influence in such a way as to induce him to join in with Johnny Martinez?"

The look that blazed in Conrad's eyes, coupled with the same involuntary shrinking movement that he had made in escaping Jenkins's hand at the foot of the stairway, showed the rapid ebbing of his self-control. Jenkins noticed both look and movement, and a gleam of angry resentment flashed into his dark eyes. But it was quickly repressed, as he suavely asked, "Well, what do you say?"

"I don't know that I can promise," said Curtis, stiffly, "that my influence would count as much as that. Possibly it will be enough to keep him from supporting Dellmey Baxter. Yes," he went on with a grim look, "I think I can assure you he will be neutral through the rest of this campaign."

"That might perhaps be satisfactory," said Jenkins meditatively, inwardly deciding to raise the price another hundred dollars in lieu of the aid for Martinez. "But if that is all you're sure of doing I shall have to ask more money for the information. It has cost me a great deal of time and effort, and if I can't bring about this result with it I must repay myself some other way. I will tell you what you want to know, Mr. Conrad, if you will give me five hundred dollars and your promise to do your best to get him to support Martinez."

"That is what I said I could not do; and you are asking more money because I could not promise it."

"Well, then, if you will promise to induce him to remain neutral during this campaign."

"Yes; I will promise that, and I will give you the five hundred dollars."

"Very well; it's a bargain."

Curtis wrote his check for that sum on the First National Bank of Golden. Jenkins examined the bit of paper, folded it away in his pocket-book, rubbed his hands, and smiled at Conrad.

"You will be surprised," he said, "when you hear the man's name. He is well known to you, and he is universally regarded, all over New Mexico, as a model citizen, as square and honest as any man in the Territory – and much more so than most of them."

"Yes?" said Conrad, rising and reaching for his hat.

"Yes, you will be astonished, I promise you," Jenkins went on, rising and facing Curtis, still smiling and rubbing his hands together in satisfaction. "For Sumner L. Delafield, the fugitive from justice," – he began speaking slowly and impressively, – "the absconding defaulter, the man who sank the fortunes of hundreds of people, the man who had to hide in Canada and slink around in out-of-

the-way places for so many years, is now known as” – there was a brief pause to give his revelation its fullest dramatic effect – “is now known in New Mexico as Alexander Bancroft, president of the bank on which your check is drawn.”

Conrad started, and his attitude of eager attention stiffened. For an instant half a dozen Jenkinses seemed to be whirling about the room. Out of the repugnance, contempt, and anger boiling in his veins shot a definite idea, – the desire to choke the man who had said this thing about his best friend. He leaped forward, seized Jenkins by the collar, and shook him as if he had been a ten-year-old boy. Although his arms were flying hither and yon Jenkins grabbed wildly for the pistol in his pocket. Curtis saw the movement, and with his left hand seized the butt. As he pulled it out Jenkins caught its barrel; but with a twist of his right arm and a jerk with his left Conrad wrested the gun from the other’s hand and threw it under the bed.

His face white and his eyes blazing, he grasped Jenkins by the shoulders and jammed him against the wall until the windows rattled. With two quick, backward strides he gained the door. Opening it with a hand stretched behind him, Curtis spoke with deliberate emphasis, pointing his words with a menacing forefinger:

“Rutherford Jenkins, you are the damnedest liar and vilest skunk that ever made tracks in New Mexico, and if you ever tell that lie about Bancroft to another living soul I’ll wring your neck!”

Jenkins sprang toward the door, but as it closed from without he stooped, shook himself together, and swore under his breath. He took out the check, and chuckled. “I’ll get it cashed before he changes his mind,” he thought. Then a wave of anger and resentment rolled over him and he shook an impotent fist at the closed door. “Damn him!” he said aloud, “I’ll get even with him yet.”

## CHAPTER IV

### THE POWERS CONFER

Lucy Bancroft bade a smiling good-bye to her father at the door of the First National Bank, and crossed the street to a store on the corner opposite. Lingered in the doorway for her turn to be waited upon, she watched him with admiring eyes. “What a handsome man daddy is,” she was thinking; “I like a man to be tall and straight and broad-shouldered; and I’m glad he’s always so well groomed; I’d love him just as much if he wasn’t, but I couldn’t be quite so proud of him.”

Another man was coming up the street toward her father, and Lucy smiled as her eyes fell upon him. “There’s Congressman Baxter,” her thought ran on. “How slouchy and dumpy he seems beside daddy! They say he’s one of the smartest men in the Territory; but I’m sure daddy is just as smart as he is, and he’s certainly a great deal handsomer and nicer looking. And he’s just as nice as he looks, too, my dear daddy!”

Bancroft appeared the man of substance and of consequence, confident alike in himself and in the regard of the community, as he stood in the door of his bank and met the Congressman with friendly greeting. “Glad to see you, Baxter! Come in! I want to have a talk with you.”

Dellmey Baxter shook hands cordially, pleasure at the meeting fairly radiating from his round, sunburned face, even his cold gray eyes borrowing warmth from his gratified and shining countenance. One of these eyes was set at an angle slightly oblique, its peculiarity made more prominent by the loose hanging of the upper lid from the outer corner. The expression of cunning thus given to the upper part of his face was curiously at variance with his jovial look and manner.

In Bancroft’s private office Baxter’s first question was if the other had yet visited the mine at the base of Mangan’s Peak, concerning which they had had correspondence.

“Yes; I was there this week. The man who owns it hasn’t *sabe* enough about mines to know what a good proposition he’s got. He’ll sell cheap for cash, for he needs the money. I think it’s a first-class investment, and we’d better snap it up. Shall we make it half and half?”

“I don’t know about going in as a partner, Aleck. I’m getting too much tied up in all kinds of enterprises, and I don’t want to have more on my hands than I can attend to. But if it’s a good thing I’d like to help you get hold of it; I know you’d hustle its development and make all there is in it tell for the reputation of New Mexico. I’ve got too many other things on hand to go in as a partner, but if you haven’t the ready cash to buy it yourself I’ll advance you what you need and take a mortgage on the property.”

In the persuasive tones of Bancroft’s reply there was no hint of the reluctance and disappointment he inwardly felt at this prospect of having to increase his indebtedness to Baxter, concerning which he already felt some anxiety.

“That hardly seems fair, Dell. You gave me the hint about the mine, and you ought to make more than that out of it. I’m satisfied it’s an almighty good proposition and can be made to pay for itself and for the money needed in initial development inside the first year.”

“Oh, that’s all right,” Baxter responded heartily. “I’m glad to let the chance come your way, because you’ve got more *sabe* and more hustle than any other man I know, and you’ll do something worth while with it. Think about it, and we’ll talk it over again before I go back. I’m down here now mainly for politics. You know Silverside County as well as any man in it – how do things look?”

“Well, it’s always a close county, you know. But you’ll probably get the delegates to the convention, and I reckon you’ll stand as good a chance on election day as Johnny Martinez.”

The other chuckled. “Well, I rather guess! Why, he’s got no money to put into the fight!”

“No; but there are the Castletons.”

“I heard that their superintendent at Socorro Springs ranch – what’s his name? – Conrad? – had come out strong in his favor. What do they care about it? Neither one of ’em spends two weeks out of the year in the Territory.”

“Oh, if they really have any interest in it I suppose it’s that everlasting ‘cousin’ business of the Mexicans. You know Ned Castleton married a first cousin of Johnny’s, although she’s half American.”

Baxter looked thoughtful. “If he’s got the Castleton money back of him,” he began doubtfully, but broke off with an opposing idea: “I’ve heard that the wives of the two brothers fight each other to the limit on every proposition that comes along, and I reckon if Turner’s wife found out that Ned’s wife wanted Martinez boosted into Congress she’d see to it that Turner blocked the game if he could.”

“If Ned Castleton should back up Martinez with a bagful or two of his loose cash it would make mighty hard sledding for us,” observed Bancroft.

Baxter pursed his lips and whistled softly. “I reckon it would!” he said, with an air of taking the other into his innermost counsels. Then he broke out warmly: “That was damn good of you, Aleck, to come out for me as squarely as you did in the *Albuquerque Leader* the other day! It’s a good thing for me, all over the Territory, to have people know that Alexander Bancroft is supporting me. They’ve got confidence in you, Aleck. I appreciate it, I tell you, and I won’t forget it, either.”

Baxter had already served two terms in Congress, and some members of his party thought he should be willing to stand aside and give some one else the prize. This made him anxious about the outcome of the approaching convention, and set him to interrogating the banker regarding the intentions of this, that, and the other man of local consequence. At last he came back to the subject of the Castletons.

“Do you really think, Aleck, that Ned Castleton’s money is behind Martinez? If it is, that would explain Conrad’s attitude.”

Bancroft saw that the Congressman was worried by the possibility of such effective opposition. On the instant an idea was projected into his mind, born of his own secret anxiety and his knowledge of Baxter’s reputation. It came so suddenly and so vividly that it took him unawares, sending a telltale light into his eyes and across his usually impassive countenance. His lids were quickly lowered, but Baxter had already seen the revealing flash and was wondering what it might mean. The banker hesitated for a moment, his thoughts confused by the force of the bolt which had shot into his mind.

“Of course I don’t know anything about it,” he went on cautiously, the other watching him for signs of self-betrayal, “but it looks to me as if Conrad might be acting as Ned Castleton’s agent, so that Ned won’t have to be mixed up in it. That would take away the chance of Mrs. Turner’s trying to make her husband block the game. And Conrad is violently opposed to you. He handles you without gloves, and is doing all he can against your nomination. He says he’ll bolt you if you get it, and that if the other side puts up Martinez he’ll jump in and fight for him with both feet and his spurs on.”

The smile faded from Baxter’s face, and his left eyelid drooped lower than usual – a sign that his mind was busy with some knotty problem. But he was not considering the pros and cons of the Castleton money. He was wondering why that sudden purpose had flashed in Bancroft’s eyes, why he had shown that momentary discomposure, and why he was now dwelling so much more strongly on the fact of Conrad’s opposition. He drew his chair nearer and in confidential tones began to inquire about the young cattleman: “Has Conrad got much influence?”

“Yes; a good deal. He’s a bright, energetic fellow, and he’s made lots of friends.”

“Know anything about him, Aleck?”

“Not much. Ned Castleton ran across him in San Francisco, I believe, where he was agent for one of the big cattle ranches in southern California. He’s been their superintendent at Socorro Springs for two years, and he’s put the ranch in better shape and made it pay better, in spite of the drought, than anybody else they’ve had since their father died.”

“But where’d he come from before Castleton got him?”

“I don’t know, except in a general way. I guess he’s mostly run along with the cattle business in Colorado and California and New Mexico.”

“You really think his opposition to me down here is important?”

“There’s no doubt about it, Dell,” Bancroft rejoined, his manner becoming more earnest and his tones more persuasive as he went on. “Curt Conrad is a fighter from the word ‘go,’ and he seems to have started out with the intention of doing you up. He’ll sure do you a lot of damage if you can’t find some way of making him change his mind. He’s popular, – the sort that everybody likes, you know, – and he’s always enthusiastic and cocksure, so that he has a good deal of influence of his own, whether or not he’s acting for Ned Castleton. And as people generally believe he is it amounts to the same thing.”

“We must get at him some way,” said Baxter earnestly, his cold eyes watchful of his companion’s manner and expression. “Hasn’t he done something that would give us a hold on him?”

“No, there’s nothing in that lead. I’ve tried argument, and you might as well talk to a cyclone.”

“How about money?”

Bancroft shook his head decisively. “That would be the worst mistake you could make. He wouldn’t touch it and he’d roar about it everywhere. The fact is, Dell, we’ll have to get rid of his opposition some way. I’ve done everything I can, and now I’ll have to put it up to you.”

“Well, I’ll think it over,” said Baxter, rising and looking at his watch. “I’ll see you again about that mine business, while I’m here, and I want to talk with you about a *paisano* ranch, up above Socorro, there’s a chance of our getting. I think we’ll be able to get our development company going in less than a year. When it’s organized, Aleck, I want you to be president of it.”

“I don’t know about that,” Bancroft replied slowly, an uneasy recollection of some of Lucy’s freely expressed ideas coming into his mind. “I may prefer to stay in the background, as a silent partner, as our arrangement is now.”

“It would be good for the company to have you at its head; your reputation would be an asset,” Baxter objected persuasively.

“By the way, Dell, did you foreclose on a man named Melgares, José Maria Melgares, a month or two ago?”

“Melgares? Yes; and I was especially easy on him; let him have three months’ extra time. But I had to come down on him finally. Why?”

“He’s here in Golden now, and he’s been roaring about it. He came down here from the Mogollons, where it’s likely he’d been doing some horse-stealing. And I guess he’s been lifting chickens and things out of people’s back-yards since he’s been here.”

“Next thing he’ll be getting arrested,” Baxter chuckled, “and I’ll have to defend him – for nothing. These greasers all seem to think I’m a heaven-sent protector for ’em all, no matter what they do. So long, Aleck; I’ll see you again before I leave town.”

Baxter lounged down the street, greeting one acquaintance after another with a jovial laugh, a hearty handshake, or a slap on the shoulder, his round, red face aglow with good fellowship. But his gray eyes were cold and preoccupied. At the court-house door he stopped to talk with Dan Tillinghurst, the sheriff, and Little Jack Wilder, his deputy.

“Say, Jack,” said the sheriff, as the Congressman went on up the street, “what sort o’ hell do you-all reckon Dell Baxter’s cookin’ up now? He’s too jolly not to have somethin’ on hand. The louder he laughs the more sulphur you can bet he’s got in his pockets.”

“Be careful, Dan,” warned Jack, “or that nomination for sheriff will miss fire.”

“Don’t you worry about that – Dell an’ me’s all right; you-all just worry about the fellow that’s made his eyes look like a dead fish’s. Dell’s sure got somethin’ on his mind.”

There was something on Baxter’s mind. He was still wondering why Alexander Bancroft had insisted so strongly upon the importance of young Conrad’s opposition, which the Congressman did not believe was of much consequence. He chuckled and his left lid drooped lower as he finally

decided: “I reckon he wants me to pull some chestnut or other out of the fire for him. I’ll just let him think I’m taking it all in. I’d like to know what it is, though, for if I don’t keep a good hold on Aleck he’s likely to get heady and try to step into my shoes.”

## CHAPTER V

### CHASTISEMENT CONDIGN

Dan Tillinghurst and Little Jack Wilder sat under the big cottonwood in front of the court-house, commenting upon things in general, and, presently, more particularly upon Curtis Conrad and his mare, Brown Betty, when they espied him talking with the landlord in front of the hotel across the stream. The town of Golden lay in a gulch among the foot-hills. It had been a thriving silver camp in the older days. Discovered in the heyday of the pale metal, it had yielded so richly that the men flocking thither, in sheer, exultant contempt of the value of its yellow brother, had named the camp "Golden Gulch." The mines had been in the bottom of the gulch, and near them, along the banks of the stream, had been built all the houses of the mining days. The earliest roads had run along each side of the water, and these were still the main streets of the town. Facing one another across the two streets and the bed of the creek were all the public buildings and business houses, the two hotels, some of the best residences, and many of the poorer ones. The Mexican quarter, called "Doby Town" by the Americans, straggled along these thoroughfares and up the hillsides just beyond the heart of the town. Down their entire length cottonwoods of notable girth and majesty spread their branches.

One of the largest and finest of these trees shaded the court-house corner where the Sheriff and his deputy were sprawling their legs and waiting for something to happen. The Sheriff was burly and broad-shouldered, although his legs had not quite been able to keep pace with the growing massiveness of his torso. The occasions were rare when his blue eyes were not twinkling with good humor, while his mouth beneath its absurd little moustache curved in a smile as habitual as his cheerful kindness and universal optimism. Little Jack Wilder, who owed his descriptive title to his six feet three of height, was slender and lithe. He wasted neither words in talk nor bullets in pistol fights, and he had the reputation of being one of the best shots in the Southwest, as good even as Emerson Mead, over at Las Plumas in the adjoining county.

Curtis Conrad walked across the bridge that spanned the stream, Brown Betty at his heels, and met their "Hello, Curt!" with "Hello! Anything new?"

"Yes," said Wilder, "anyway, there's likely to be."

"What sort?"

"That's what we'd like to know," said Tillinghurst. "Jack's been sashaying around Doby Town for the last two days with his eye on a Mexican horse thief, waitin' for him to do something he can be arrested for; and the darn' fool won't do a thing! He just sits around respectable and behaves himself. Jack's gettin' all out of patience with him."

Little Jack growled a corroborative oath, and took a chew of tobacco.

"Well, if you know he's a horse thief, why don't you arrest him?" asked Conrad.

"We know it all right," said Jack; "but he ain't lifted no critters yet in this county. He's been doin' some chicken-thieving and that sort o' thing around town the last week, but we ain't goin' to arrest him for that."

Wilder shut his jaws with a determined snap, while Tillinghurst went on to explain in answer to Conrad's look of surprise: "If we arrest him for that he'd be taken before a justice of the peace; and you-all know what kind of a mess Diego Vigil would make of it. He'd likely fine the man whose chicken-coop had been raided because he didn't have more stuff in his back-yard to be stolen, and he'd discharge José Maria Melgares with a warning not to wake people up o' nights by letting the chickens squawk!"

The Sheriff's smile broadened and ran down his throat in a chuckle. Little Jack Wilder burst explosively into brief and profane speech that showed his opinion of Mexicans, and especially of Mexican justices of the peace, to be most contemptuous.

“Then why do you give them the office?” Curtis demanded. “Both parties do it, all over the Territory, though you all know that every time they get a chance they make justice look like a bobtailed horse. Up north last week one of ’em fined a man five dollars for committing murder and warned him not to do it again or he’d have to make it ten next time. You folks all knew what you might expect from Vigil when you gave him the place.”

“Oh, well, Curt, you-all ain’t run for office yet. When you do, you’ll appreciate the fact that the greasers have got to be put where they’ll do the most good. I’m willin’ to give ’em that much, and I’m only too thankful old Vigil and his friends don’t strike for the Sheriff’s place.”

Tillinghurst chuckled, while Wilder smiled grimly and profanely reckoned he wouldn’t serve under Vigil or any other Mexican. “Mebbe that pock-marked Melgares has been up to some mischief by this time,” he added. “I hain’t set eyes on him for nigh two hours. Let’s go down to the Blue Front, have a drink, and find out if anything’s happened.”

They went down the street together, Brown Betty following with the bridle over her neck. A block farther down stream, a good-looking Mexican came out of the First National Bank and passed them. The Sheriff turned a second keen glance upon him. “That looks like Liberato Herrera,” he said to his deputy in a hasty aside. Raising his voice he accosted the man in Spanish.

The Mexican turned and replied in precise English with grave courtesy, “Did the señor speak to me?”

“Yes; ain’t you Liberato Herrera?”

“No, señor. My name is José Gonzalez.”

The Sheriff apologized, and the other bowed politely, fell behind, and crossed to the other side of the stream. Conrad asked Tillinghurst if he did not believe Herrera guilty of the murder of which he had been acquitted several months before.

“Of course he was. And it’s likely that ain’t the only one either. I’m glad this man ain’t him. If he was down here it would be on some business for Baxter, and it wouldn’t do for me to find out too much about it.”

Conrad snorted contemptuously, and Wilder said, “Dan, you’re talkin’ too damn much.”

“Oh, Curt’s all right,” replied the Sheriff, placidly. “He couldn’t hate Baxter any more than he does if he tried, but he don’t go back on his friends. This man Melgares,” he went on, “that we’re hopin’ will make up his mind to do somethin’ worth while, tells a queer yarn. He says he used to have a good ranch in the Rio Grande valley, between Socorro and Albuquerque, but he borrowed money on it from Baxter. Of course he couldn’t pay, Dell foreclosed, and Melgares had to get out.”

“Yes; I heard the other day about Baxter’s operations up there,” Conrad broke in hotly. “I understand he’s got hold of a lot of land in just that way. It’s a cursed, low-down, dirty piece of business.”

“Oh, well, better men than Baxter have done the same sort of thing,” the Sheriff responded. “From all I can find out about Melgares I reckon he was honest enough up to that time; but he’s been goin’ it pretty lively ever since. I think he’s aimin’ to work down to the border, where he can do the crisscross act.”

Conrad turned with an exclamation of sudden remembrance. “By the way! Bill Williams told me just now that Rutherford Jenkins is here, at his hotel. Have you seen him? Do you know what he’s here for?”

“I haven’t talked with him, but I reckon he’s here on some deal for Johnny Martinez.”

Curtis tied the mare to the hitching-post on the corner. “I’ve heard,” he said cautiously, “that he has a venomous tongue and uses it recklessly. Do you know whether he’s been doing any outrageous talking lately?”

“Well, I reckon nobody would believe anything Jenkins said, anyway. But I haven’t heard anything. Have you, Jack?”

Some other men came along, and they all stopped to talk together. Curtis leaned against the mare and stroked her glossy neck. She poked her nose into his coat pocket and found a lump of sugar, which she ate with much dainty tossing of her head. It was some minutes before they entered the saloon.

The “Blue Front” was a two-roomed shanty on the edge of the Mexican quarter. Gambling games of various sorts occupied the back room; and there, too, political deals were arranged and votes bargained and paid for between the American politicians and the leaders of the Mexicans. When Conrad and his friends came down the street a number of men were in the rear room, some talking and others busy at cards. At a table near a side window men of both races were engaged in a poker game. One of the players, a pock-marked Mexican with a defective eye, frequently glanced down the street. When he saw the Sheriff and his two companions approach, he rose and watched them. The others wanted to know what he was looking at, and he asked who was the man with the brown mare. A tall, dark American, with slightly stooping shoulders, looked up with interest as he heard them give Conrad’s name, and joined the group at the window. Several of the men spoke with enthusiasm about Brown Betty, and one, who said he had once worked at Socorro Springs ranch, told them that Conrad thought more of her than of anything else he owned. When the men in front entered the saloon, the pock-marked Mexican cashed in his chips and slipped out through the rear door.

The sound of Conrad’s voice in the bar-room caught the attention of the tall, dark American. An angry flush reddened his face, his beady eyes snapped, and the tip of his tongue licked his lips. Then something amusing seemed to occur to him, for his features relaxed into a smile and he glanced briskly around the room.

“See if you can find Melgares, will you?” he asked the Mexican with whom he had been talking. “Tell him I’ll wait for him outside the back door.”

He stepped out into the bright sunshine, smiling and rubbing his hands together. Back of the shanty was a high adobe wall surrounding the corral of the Mexican houses fronting on the next street. A wooden door in the wall opened cautiously, and the pock-marked face looked out.

“You sent for me, Señor Jenkins?” the Mexican asked.

“Yes. It’s all right. You needn’t be afraid. I want you to do something, Melgares.”

They stepped inside the corral and Melgares bolted the door. “You saw Conrad’s mare just now?” Jenkins began. “Fine creature, isn’t she?”

“Splendid, señor. The finest I have seen in a long time.”

“I’ll warrant it! I never saw a better myself. Looks like a good traveller, doesn’t she?”

“Si, señor.”

“And a stayer, too, I guess! It wouldn’t be hard to get to the Mexican border on her back, would it?”

Melgares grinned, then shook his head. “But my family – I could not take them with me.”

“Well – see here, Melgares. Here’s fifty dollars. If you’ll get away with Conrad’s mare you can have it for your trouble. It will take your family down there all right.”

“But you, señor, – where do you come in?” He looked suspiciously at Jenkins.

“Oh, never mind me. Conrad did me a bad turn a while ago, and I’m evening up the score. That’s all I want out of it.”

“But now, señor?”

“Yes; now’s your chance. He’s in the saloon, and the mare’s tied at the corner.”

“The Sheriff is in there, too. The risk is great.”

“Well, I’ll go in and keep them busy. I’ll raise excitement enough inside so that nobody will even look out of the windows. Get out there in five minutes, be quick about it, and ride off down the valley road.”

“Give me the money, señor. I’ll take the chance.”

Jenkins returned, and entered the bar-room with his former companion without attracting the attention of Conrad and his friends. The other spoke of the report about the Castleton money and mentioned Curtis Conrad's name. Jenkins raised his voice in angry reply:

“Oh, damn Conrad! Martinez don't want his help!”

Curtis heard the words and turned sharply around, his face flushing. Jenkins appeared not to see him, and went on:

“The Castletons are all right, but Conrad's help would be a disgrace to any party. Martinez don't want it!” His voice rang loud and shrill above the silence that had fallen suddenly upon the room.

Curtis's face paled, even under its ruddy tan, and his eyes blazed. With head up he strode forward. “Jenkins,” he said, without raising his voice, although it shook with a warning tremor, “I advise you to be careful. You may have your opinion about me, as I have mine about you – and you know what that is. But don't you say that again, nor anything else of the sort!”

Jenkins turned toward him with an ugly sneer. Recollection of former indignities at Conrad's tongue and hands blazed up in his heart and carried him farther than he had meant to go. With an oath and a vile name he flung his glass in Conrad's face. In an instant the young man's arms were around his body. The others crowded in and tried to stop the quarrel.

“Let us alone!” shouted Curtis, pushing his way toward the back room. “Wilder, take his gun, will you? Get mine out of my pocket, too. This won't be a gun play.”

Tillinghurst took Conrad's pistol, and Wilder succeeded in getting Jenkins's revolver, at the cost of a kick on the shin, which he repaid in kind. With Jenkins almost helpless in his grasp, Curtis struggled into the rear room. The others were all crowding after him. He turned back a face still pale and set with anger, although a twinkle of amusement was creeping into his eyes.

“Dan,” he called, “shut that door and keep out the crowd!”

Instantly there were cries of disapproval.

“Fair play!” “You're bigger than him!” “We want to see it's on the square!”

Curtis scowled. “If any of you think it won't be on the square, just wait for me till I get through with him,” he shouted.

The Sheriff slammed the door, and set his bulk against it, saying with smiling cheerfulness: “Well, gentlemen, I reckon Mr. Jenkins won't get any more than is comin' to him, and as Sheriff I call on all of you to keep the peace and not interfere.”

Alone in the back room with his prisoner, Conrad dropped into a chair, dragged the other over his knees, face downward, then threw out one sinewy leg and caught under it Jenkins's two unruly limbs. Still keeping a firm grip with his left arm, he raised his right hand.

“Now,” he said grimly, “you're going to get the sort of spanking your mother didn't give you enough of.”

One after another the resounding smacks came down, while Jenkins, his strength spent in futile struggle, could do nothing but writhe helplessly under the smarting blows. The sound of them penetrated to the front room. As the men there realized what was happening they broke into laughter so uproarious that it smote upon Jenkins's ears and forced a hysterical shriek from between his gritted teeth. In Conrad's heart it inspired compassion and he desisted.

“I guess that'll do for this time,” he said, releasing his hold and standing the culprit on his feet. “I don't want to have to hurt you, but let me tell you, you damned skunk,” and he seized Jenkins's shoulders and gave him a vigorous shake, “if you ever dare talk about me again in that way, or tell another human being what you told me about Bancroft, I'll make you wish you'd never been born.”

With a parting shake he let Jenkins fall back into the chair, sobbing aloud. Then he stalked to the door, not even doing his enemy the slight honor of going out backward.

## CHAPTER VI

### A STERN CHASE

As the shout which greeted Conrad's entrance died away the Sheriff called out, "Now, gentlemen, you must all have one with me," and every one lined up at the bar. A rollicking din of chaff and laughter filled the room, and no one except Little Jack Wilder noticed the entrance of a Mexican at the street door. He heard the step, turned quickly, and recognized the man who had told Tillinghurst that he was not Liberato Herrera. Glancing along the line of backs at the bar, the Mexican singled out Conrad and touched his arm.

"I beg your pardon, señor, but did you send some one to ride your mare?"

"To ride my mare? No; what do you mean?"

Before he could answer Wilder sprang forward demanding, "Is she gone?" and Conrad started for the door.

"A man has just ridden her away on the run," the Mexican said excitedly, and every one in the room rushed for the street.

"She's gone!" shouted Conrad.

"Did you see him? What was he like?" demanded the Sheriff.

"A pock-marked greaser with a bad eye?" yelled Wilder, towering threateningly above the bearer of the news.

Gonzalez threw back his head, folded his arms across his breast, and answered deliberately, "He was a Mexican, señor, he was pock-marked, and he was blind in one eye."

"Melgares! He's done it at last! Hooray!" shouted Wilder.

Far down the street, beyond the last cottonwood, against the gray, sun-flooded road, they could see a dark object, distorted by the heat haze, but still showing the form of a man on a galloping horse.

Tillinghurst's smile became an eager grin as he started up the street on a run. "Everybody come that wants to," he called over his shoulder. Wilder and Conrad were already half a block ahead of him, and several others quickly followed.

When they presently came pelting back, their horses at top speed, a crowd of men still stood on the sidewalk, where the Blue Front made a splash of brilliant color against the sombre grays and browns of the surrounding adobes. Wilder's tall, thin figure was in the lead, bending forward in the saddle like a sapling in a gale, the wide, limp brim of his sombrero flapping in the wind. Conrad and Tillinghurst were pressing him close, and half a dozen others were pounding along behind these three, while a stout man, who rode awkwardly, trailed along in the rear.

The crowd at the Blue Front shouted encouragingly as they clattered past, and made bets on the chances of catching the fugitive. The Mexican, Gonzalez, watched Conrad closely as he sped by, and said carelessly to the man beside him, "Señor Conrad is a good rider, the best of them all. I hope he will get back his fine mare."

The horsemen swept down the street past the last straggling houses, and out into the open plain. Fleeing down the road, perhaps two miles ahead of them, galloped the Mexican. Tillinghurst measured the distance with a careful eye, and said to Conrad, "He's our meat. We can get him easy." He glanced backward, chuckled, then turned in his saddle, and called loudly, "Come along there, Pandy! Don't get discouraged!"

Another of the party turned his head and yelled, "You're all right, Pandy! You'll get there before Dan does!"

The stout man who brought up the rear had made sure of his gray slouch hat by tying it on with a red bandanna handkerchief. He was gripping his bridle with both hands and bouncing in his

saddle like a bag of meal. “Don’t you worry about me!” he yelled back good-naturedly; “you can’t lose me if you try.”

“Who is he?” asked Curtis.

“Pendy? Oh, he’s a tenderfoot. Blew in from the East two or three weeks ago. Somethin’ wrong with his bellows – or likely to be, though you-all wouldn’t think it, considerin’ his fat. He’s grit clear through, though! Just look at the way he rides!”

Conrad glanced back, laughed, and replied, “Oh, it’ll be good for his liver!” Then he went on seriously, “Dan, do you think there’s any truth in the story that this man Melgares began horse-stealing because Dell Baxter did him out of his ranch?”

“Oh, I don’t know! Baxter got his ranch all right, but the greaser didn’t have to go to stealin’ horses on that account. Chickens are safer; and *chilis* don’t even squawk. I reckon likely he steals horses because he’d ruther.”

“Well, anyway, Dan, all I want out of this is to get Brown Betty back. I shall not make any complaint against him. So, if he gives up the mare, I’d rather you let him go.”

“Huh,” grunted the Sheriff, with an apprehensive glance at Wilder, a full length ahead. “For God’s sake, Curt, don’t let Jack hear you say that! He’d be so disgusted he’d turn tail and go straight back to Golden!”

The fugitive kept his distance well; it seemed to Conrad’s eye that he even gained a little. Now and again they could see him look back, and with spur and quirt urge the mare to a fresh burst of speed.

“Brown Betty’s a stayer,” said Curtis, bringing his horse beside Tillinghurst’s again, “and she’s fast. I don’t believe we’ll catch him unless something happens to her.”

The Sheriff turned a smiling face and said confidently, “If we get a little nearer I reckon somethin’s likely to happen to *him*. Hello, Pendleton!” he exclaimed as the stout man came up on the other side. “That noble steed of yours is sure gettin’ a gait on him, ain’t he? If you-all don’t wait for the rest of us there’ll be trouble, I’m tellin’ you!”

“Say, Sheriff,” called Pendleton between his gasps and grunts as he bounced up and down, “are you going to keep up this pace all day?”

Tillinghurst eyed him benignly. “As long as he does,” he said, nodding toward the fleeing spot of black down the road. “Say, Pendy,” he went on in a kindly tone, “it’s a pretty stiff gait for you-all, and unless you’re anxious to take your meals standin’ for the next month you’d better drop out and go back. It’s likely to be an all-day job.”

“Not much! You can’t lose me till the fun’s over!”

“Hooray for Pendy! He’s all right!” yelled a man behind, giving Pendleton’s horse a sharp cut across the flank with his whip. The beast jumped, and its rider lurched to one side, fell forward, and saved himself by grabbing the mane with both hands. The men shouted with merriment as Pendleton righted himself, turned a laughing face and shook his fist at the man who had played the joke on him. “Just wait till I get you where I want you, Jack Gaines,” he called, “and you’ll be sorry you ever played tricks on a tenderfoot.”

The gulch spread out into a wide, shallow valley – a draw, they called it – and the waters of the stream disappeared, sucked up by the thirsty earth. The valley curved to the east, the road climbing over its rim and holding straight toward the south. The figure of Melgares, mounted on Brown Betty as on a pedestal, stood out boldly for a moment against the turquoise sky as he crossed the summit, then sank out of sight beyond the hill. The party galloped on, and as they crossed the ridge and saw him on the top of a smaller hill beyond, Conrad’s eye swept the distance lying between and he exclaimed, “We’ve gained on him!”

At the same moment Little Jack Wilder, who had been watching the road intently, shouted joyously, the first words he had spoken since leaving the town, “She’s cast a shoe! Now it’s a cinch!”

Tillinghurst turned his head and shouted, “Get your gun ready, Pendy! your chance is comin’.”

Jack Gaines, riding neck and neck with the Sheriff, looked back and yelled, “Come a-runnin’, Pendency! The greaser can’t wait for you all day!”

They were gaining rapidly on Melgares and, as they swept over the top of a little hill and saw him cross the next low rise, Conrad exclaimed, “She’s limping, damn him! If he hurts Brown Betty – ”

“You won’t mind so much if we hurt him,” quietly put in the Sheriff, who was riding on his lee. Curtis spurred his horse to Wilder’s stirrup.

“Jack,” he said, “I don’t want the fellow hurt. If he’ll give up my mare I’m willing to let him go.”

Little Jack grunted contemptuously without replying.

“I want you to understand,” Conrad went on, “that if you take him I shall make no complaint against him, provided I get Betty unhurt.”

“You don’t have to make no complaint,” Jack growled; “I’ll do that myself.”

They gained steadily on the fugitive, and presently Curtis curved his hands about his mouth and called, “Betty! Betty B!” They could see the mare check her speed, and the faint sound of her whinny reached their ears. Conrad called again; and the mare wheeled in her tracks. The Mexican jerked her back, lashed her furiously, and set her forward again at a gallop. Curtis called again and again, and every time they could see Melgares using whip and spur to force her on. But presently the mare dropped tail and head, arched her back, and, stiff-legged, began to jump up and down.

Conrad laughed joyously and slapped his thigh. “Bully for Betty B! I never knew her to buck before.”

They urged on their horses and pounded down the hill toward the small circus Brown Betty was making of herself. She cavorted, shook herself, humped her back, jumped up and down, stood on her front feet and almost sat on her tail, and did everything that equine intelligence could devise to rid herself of the masterful hand on her bridle. But the Mexican kept his seat and his grip upon the rein. With spur and quirt and compelling voice he finally forced her into submission. As she quieted down they were facing the pursuing posse and Melgares had just turned the mare’s head in another desperate attempt at escape when Conrad’s voice rang out once more, and Brown Betty refused to move. She tossed her head, laid back her ears, and whinnied, but would not lift a hoof. The Mexican drew his revolver and shouted, “Stop!”

The horsemen, not more than a hundred yards distant, drew rein at the word – all except Pendleton, who came pounding and bouncing to the front, his horse still on the gallop. Gaines, just behind Tillinghurst and Wilder, called out laughingly, “Hooray for Pendency! Go on and get him, Pendency!”

Pendleton had been too much occupied with keeping his seat to try to stop his horse, and as it went on half a length in advance of the rest Gaines leaned forward and gave it a cut across the flank with his quirt. It leaped forward smartly and Pendleton, taken unawares again, bobbed down on its neck and grabbed for its mane. Melgares saw the horse start forward and instantly his revolver flashed. The bullet left a singed streak across the back of Pendleton’s coat, whistled on, and found refuge in Gaines’s side.

Wilder’s gun was out and cocked. He saw Pendleton lying on his horse’s neck, and heard Gaines cry out, “I’m hit!” as he fell forward across his pommel. “Stop that!” he called. “Fire again and you’re a dead man!”

Melgares leaped from the mare’s back and ran at full speed down the valley, away from the road. Brown Betty came trotting to Conrad’s side, whinnying joyfully. Pendleton sat upright, calling out, “Say, fellows, is there any blood on my back?” They told him no and as he climbed down from his saddle clumsily he grinned and said:

“Well, I can still die of consumption, then!”

Tillinghurst, Wilder, and several of the others were galloping after Melgares, who was running for his life down the valley toward a clump of cactus and juniper.

“Wing him, Jack!” called the Sheriff. “There’s a crack in the ground down there where he can hide and pick us off as he pleases.”

Little Jack brought his horse to a sudden stop, aimed low, and the Mexican reeled and fell, the blood gushing from a wound in the calf of his leg. He scrambled to his feet, and fired his second shot. The bullet nicked the brim of the Sheriff's hat. There was another flash, and Wilder heard the bullet sing past his ear.

“Stop it, you damned greaser!” he yelled, “or I'll let daylight through your head.” In quick succession he put two holes through the Mexican's sombrero. “The next one is for your other eye!” he called, and Melgares dropped his weapon.

Wilder leaped to the ground and ran toward him. He glanced at the group of horsemen, each with revolver drawn, and at Wilder coming with his gun at cock, then threw back his head with his own pistol at his temple. Little Jack grabbed his arm, but Melgares fought desperately. The others came running to Wilder's assistance, and it was not until they had taken his revolver, put handcuffs upon him, and taken from his clothing another pistol, a knife, and a belt full of cartridges, that he gave up his struggles.

They put him on the horse that Conrad had ridden, with his feet tied under its belly. Tillinghurst and Wilder, revolvers in hand, rode on either side of him. Conrad, mounted on his own mare, and another were side by side with Jack Gaines laid across their laps. Two more went on at a gallop to bring out a doctor and a carriage for the wounded man. The rest rode slowly back through the hot sunlight and the high wind, guarding their captive and carrying his victim.

## CHAPTER VII

### TALK OF MANY THINGS

Golden prided itself upon being “the most American town in the Territory,” but for all its energy and progressiveness it had not developed an ordinary regard for its own safety. After the mines which had given it birth had been worked out, it became the depot of supplies for the widespread miles of cattle country in the plains below, the mining regions in the mountains above, and the ranches scattered along the streams within a radius of fifty miles. As its importance increased a railway sought it out, the honor of being the county seat came to it, and the ruthless Anglo-Saxon arrived in such numbers and so energetically that its few contented and improvident Mexicans, thrust to one side, sank into hopeless nonentity. When Lucy Bancroft first set upon it the pleased eyes of youthful interest and filial affection, it was a busy, prosperous place of several thousand souls.

But it still clung to the gulch wherein had been the beginning of its life and fortune. All the houses of its infancy had been built along the stream that sparkled down from the mountains, and there the town had tried to stay, regardless of the floods that occasionally swept down the canyon during the Summer rains. At first its growth had been up and down the creek; afterward cross streets had been extended far out on either side, especially where gradual hill slopes gave easy grades, and roads had also been made lengthwise along the hillsides and even on their crests, where now a goodly number of homes looked out over the plains and down upon the town-filled valley at their feet.

Newcomers gazed curiously at the high sidewalks, raised on posts above the level of the thoroughfares, asking why, if there was such possibility of flood, the people continued to live and do business along the bottom of the gulch. The residents thought the walled sidewalks rather a good joke, a humorous distinction, and laughed at the idea of danger.

Lucy Bancroft’s eyes grew wide and solemn as she listened to the tale Dan Tillinghurst told her of the first year he was in Golden, years before, when a mighty torrent roared down the gulch, carried away most of the houses, and drowned a dozen souls. “But the very next day,” he added proudly, “the people began rebuildin’ their houses on the identical sites from which they had been swept.”

“Why didn’t they rebuild on higher ground?” Lucy asked. “And aren’t you afraid there will be another flood that will destroy all these houses and perhaps kill a great many people?”

“Oh, there’s no danger now,” he assured her confidently. “The climate’s changin’. There’s not nearly so much rain as there used to be. The creek is dry half the time nowadays, and in my first years here it never went dry at all. Just look at these flood-marks,” and he pointed out to her on the side of the brick building that housed her father’s bank the lines to which had risen the high waters of each Summer. She saw that those of recent years were all very low. “Yes,” he assured her, “the climate’s changin’, there’s no doubt of that. There won’t be any more floods.”

Between Lucy and the Sheriff a mutual admiration and good-fellowship had arisen, such as might exist between an elephant and a robin. The day after her arrival Tillinghurst had told Bancroft that his daughter was “the prettiest piece of dry goods that had ever come to Golden, and if he ever let her pull her freight he’d sure deserve nothin’ less than tarrin’ and featherin’ at the hands of an outraged community.”

Notwithstanding her confidence in the big Sheriff, Lucy did not like the idea of living in the gulch, and persuaded her father to build their home on the brow of the *mesa* overlooking the town from the west. She had no definite fear of the floods nor, after her first few weeks in the place, did she so much as think of danger from such a source. She liked the site on the *mesa*, although it was new and raw and treeless, because it commanded a far-reaching view, to the mountains on the west and north and, in front, across the town and the valley to the wide gray level of the plains.

She sat on the veranda of her new home with Miss Louise Dent, telling her friend what pleasure she was taking in its arrangement and direction. “At first daddy didn’t want me to do it. He thought it would be too much care and responsibility for me, and that we’d better board. But I said if a girl eighteen years old wasn’t old enough and big enough to begin to take care of her father she never would be, and so he gave up. And now! Well, you’ll see how he enjoys our home! He just beams with happiness every time he comes into the house. And I’m perfectly happy. Daddy is so good, and it’s such a pleasure to make things nice and comfortable for him!”

“I’m so glad,” Miss Dent replied, “that you are happy here with him. He has had so many years of lonely wandering. And I know that he has long been looking forward to the time when you and he could have a home together. Your father hasn’t had an easy life, dear. You could never guess all that he has been through. But he is a strong and determined man, and he’s finally won success – just as I always knew he would. That’s what I admire in him so much – that he never would give up.” She stopped, a faint flush mounting to her brow. Lucy threw both arms around her neck and kissed her.

“Of course, Dearie,” she exclaimed, “you must appreciate my father, for you’ve known him so long; but it makes me love you all the more to hear you say so – and oh, Dearie, I’m going to make such a beautiful home out of this place!” Lucy looked about, her girlish face glowing with proud and pleased proprietorship. “I know how new and barren it looks now, but just wait till I’ve been at work at it for a year!”

She went on to speak of her plans, asking Miss Dent’s advice. In the back-yard the gaunt wings of a big windmill gave a touch of ultra modern picturesqueness and promised the fulfilment of the girl’s hope of a lawn and flowers, trees and shrubbery, in the near future. A little conservatory jutted from the southern side of the house, while a deep veranda ran halfway across the eastern front and around the other two sides. The neutral, gray-green color of the structure melted into the hue of the hills and the surrounding *mesa*, leaving its barren newness less aggressive.

As they talked Lucy now and then cast a lingering glance down the street that climbed the hill from the town below, and Miss Dent thought that sometimes a shade of disappointment dimmed the bright face for an instant. She was twenty years Lucy’s senior, although both looks and manner gave the lie to the fact. The loving friendship between them was one of those unusual ties between a younger and an older woman which, when they do occur, are apt to be marked by an overflowing measure of enthusiasm and loyalty. Louise Dent had been the intimate friend of Lucy’s mother and, after her death, had given the bereaved girl such love and care and sympathy as had won her instant and ardent devotion, and the relationship thus established had grown stronger and closer as the years passed and Lucy matured into womanhood. The girl’s enthusiastic affection had enabled her to find in Louise Dent intimate friend, elder sister, and mother combined. This complicated feeling making it impossible for her to address the elder woman by either formal title or first name, she had soon settled upon “Dearie” as a substantive term expressing their relationship, and “Dearie” Miss Dent had been to her ever since, whether between themselves or among her own intimate friends.

As the shadows grew longer and the hot white sunlight became less vivid, Lucy seemed to grow restless. She rose and moved about the veranda, or ran down into the yard and back upon some trivial errand, each time stopping on the steps to send an inquiring eye down the street. Standing there, when the afternoon was far spent and the fierce westerly wind had ebbed into a gentle breeze, she pointed out to Louise the statuesque sapphire mass of Mangan’s Peak against the turquoise blue of the eastern sky, and told her of the drive thither and back she and her father had taken a fortnight before, and of their call at Socorro Springs ranch. “It’s an interesting place,” she went on; “such a huge ranch! Why, its grazing rights extend more than a hundred miles south, away across the Mexican border. Father knows the superintendent very well, and we’ll get him to drive us out there some day.” A higher color rose in her cheeks; she quickly turned away, drew her chair well back, and sat down. “There’s Mr. Conrad, the superintendent, coming up the hill now!” she exclaimed. “Daddy told me at luncheon that he was in town.”

Lucy bore her new role of hostess with a dignity so easy and gracious that it surprised Louise, and made Conrad think her more attractive than ever. Bancroft came a little later, and Curtis was urged to stay to dinner. Lucy showed him in her conservatory the collection of cactus plants she had begun to make and listened with eager interest while he gave her information about the growth of the species she already had, and told her where she could find others less common. She was anxious to have his opinion whether it would be possible to make a hedge of mesquite to replace the wooden paling around the yard; he did not know, but offered to help her try the experiment.

They dined on the side veranda, where Lucy, with the help of a screen or two and some plants from her green-house, had contrived an out-of-doors dining-room. The high spirits of the two younger people dominated the conversation, as they jested and bantered, laughed, and crossed wits in little wordy sword-plays that called forth applause and encouragement from the others. Lucy sparkled and dimpled, and her color rose, while Curtis's eyes darkened and flashed. Miss Dent, watching them, realized what an attractive young woman Lucy had grown to be, and how much she had blossomed out even in the few months since their last parting. "She will have plenty of admirers," the older woman thought, with a little twinge at her heart. Still, she was very young, and it would be a long time yet before she would think of marriage. But – if she were to marry and leave her father – he would be very lonely – perhaps – and then she felt her cheeks grow warmer, and hastened to resume her part in the conversation.

Louise was pleased with Conrad's face. It seemed full of character, with its broad brow, tanned cheeks, large nose, and well-set chin. She noted especially the strong, firm jaw and chin, saying to herself that they betokened a strength of will and constancy of purpose that foretold success in whatever he might undertake. He was amusing them with an account of the feud between the wives of the Castleton brothers.

"But don't the men take up the quarrels of their wives," Louise asked, "or allow any feeling to come between them?"

"Not in the least; nor does there seem to be any ill-feeling between the ladies. They are always good friends, and the men look upon the whole thing as a good joke. If Mrs. Turner, for instance, cooks up some new scheme for getting the better of Mrs. Ned, she tells her husband about it, he tells Ned, and they laugh over it and make bets about which will win."

Lucy was interested in the Castleton ladies. Conrad said that Mrs. Turner Castleton was considered a great beauty, but that he liked Mrs. Ned, who was half Mexican, much the better and thought her the more interesting and charming. She asked if they ever visited the ranch. "Yes," said Curtis; "Ned and his wife come up for a few days every Spring. This year they'll be there after the round-up is over and the cattle shipped. Would you like to meet them? All right, we'll arrange it. While they are there I'll get up a barbecue and a *baile*, and ask some people. You and Miss Dent and your father must all come."

The American in the Southwest, arrogant and contemptuous as the Anglo-Saxon always is when brought face to face with a difference in race, a difference in ideals, or a difference in speech, regards the Spanish language with frank disdain and ordinarily refuses to learn it. But where the Mexicans are present in large numbers, as in New Mexico, he adopts from the other's language a good many words which soon supplant their English equivalents. An evening party of any sort, whether a public dance in the town hall, a select affair in the house of a prominent resident, or a gathering in the Mexican quarter, is always a "*baile*," a thriftless, insignificant person of either race a "*paisano*," while upon "*coyote*" the American has seized with ready tongue, applying it to any creature, human or other, for which he wishes to express supreme contempt.

Miss Dent had to have *baile* explained to her, and their talk drifted to the subject of the Mexican people. Bancroft told her the story of the bold theft of Conrad's mare, the chase and capture of Melgares, and the wounding of Gaines. "It is thought that poor Jack cannot live," he said in conclusion, "and the Mexican is held in jail to await the result. If he dies the fellow will be tried for murder."

“I’ve heard a queer story about Melgares,” said Conrad, and went on to tell how the Mexican had lost his little ranch. Lucy listened attentively, with indignant eyes fixed on Curtis’s face.

“How shameful!” she broke out. “What a detestable way of getting money! The poor Mexicans! Just think of their being turned out of their homes in that way, with nothing to fall back on! I don’t wonder poor Melgares became a thief – but he ought to have gone to Santa Fe and stolen Mr. Baxter’s horses!”

Bancroft’s eyes were fixed on his plate. Had the others been watching him closely they would have seen no more than a flicker of his eyelids as his face took on a stony impassiveness. But they were looking at Lucy who, with head erect, face flushed, and eyes sparkling, made a pretty picture.

“I’m glad you feel that way, Miss Bancroft,” Curtis exclaimed, his face alight with approval and admiration. “I think myself it’s about as despicable a way of getting money legally as man ever devised. Baxter knows when he loans the money that the poor wretches will never be able to pay back a cent of it. He wouldn’t loan it to them if he thought they could, for it’s their land he’s after. I’ve heard that he’s getting control in this way of a big tract in the Rio Grande valley and that he intends to form a company, advertise it through the East, and sell the land, which is really valuable, at big prices.”

“Well, I think it’s a shameful piece of business, and I’m surprised that Mr. Baxter is engaged in it!” said Lucy with decision.

“Before you condemn him so severely, daughter,” interposed Bancroft, his eyes still lowered, “you should remember that the business of the loan mortgage companies has the full sanction of law and custom, and that many of the most reputable business men of the United States have engaged in it.”

“I can’t help it, daddy, if all the Congressmen and lawyers and business men, and preachers too, in the United States are engaged in it – that doesn’t make it right. Somehow it seems a different matter with these poor Mexicans, they are so helpless. Why, it’s almost like stealing their homes. I’m sorry, daddy, to speak so about Mr. Baxter, but that’s really the way I feel about it; I suppose he doesn’t realize what an injury he’s doing them. Oh, daddy,” and she leaned forward eagerly, her face flushing, “you and he are such good friends, maybe you could tell him what harm he’s doing and persuade him to give up that part of his business!”

Conrad smiled grimly. “It’s plain, Miss Bancroft,” he said, without waiting for her father to reply, “that you are not intimately acquainted with Dell Baxter. I’m sorry about this Melgares business, for I can’t help feeling a sort of responsibility. If the fellow is hung his family will be left destitute. Yes, he has a wife and four children,” he continued in answer to Miss Dent. “I had a talk with him about the affair, and he asked me to send for his family for him. He had money with which to pay their fares, though where he got it probably wouldn’t bear too close an inquiry.”

Lucy was looking at him eagerly, her face full of sympathy. “The poor things!” she exclaimed. “When they come you must let me know, Mr. Conrad.”

Bancroft abruptly changed the subject, and presently the talk drifted to a story that had just come out about the postmaster at Randall. “It’s a characteristic New Mexican tale,” said Curtis, turning to the ladies. “You’ll soon find out, Miss Bancroft, if you don’t know it already, that the cowboy song of ‘What was your name in the States?’ can often be applied in earnest.”

“Confound the fellow,” thought Bancroft irritably, “why is he always harping on that subject!”

“This is a particularly audacious case, though – don’t you think so, Aleck?” Curtis went on. “Here this man has been living for several years in Randall, a respected citizen, holding office, with influence in the community, when, behold, it is discovered that just before coming here he had skipped from some town in Missouri, where he was postmaster, with all the money in his office and another man’s wife. But his sin has finally found him out.”

“It always does,” observed Lucy coolly.

Louise Dent was conscious of a fluttering in her throat and realized that her heart was beating loudly. The moment's pause that followed seemed to her so long that she rushed into speech, without thought of what she said: "I'm afraid it does."

"Why do you say 'afraid,' Dearie?" asked Lucy, with surprise. "Isn't it right that it should?"

Louise made brief and noncommittal reply and Bancroft hurriedly asked Curtis how the round-up was getting on.

"Well, we've got the thing started, and are ready to move the cattle on the north part of the range toward Pelham. We'll begin shipping within two or three weeks. But something seems to have struck the cowboy market this year; I've been short of hands all the Spring."

"Perhaps I can give you some help," said Bancroft. "A Mexican from up North has been to me looking for work. He came the day you had the chase after Melgares and was in again to-day. He has worked for Baxter, and Dell says he is an expert cowboy and sure to give satisfaction."

"He must be an unusual sort of greaser if he's looking for work," laughed Conrad. "If he's that sort, I guess he'll strike my gait."

They found the Mexican sitting on the steps of the front veranda when they finished dinner.

"Why," exclaimed Curtis with hearty interest, "he's the same chap that told me my mare was stolen. I hope you can ride and throw a rope; I'm obliged to you already, and I'd like to do you a good turn. I'll meet you down town presently, and if you know anything about the business I'll take you behind me on my mare to the ranch to-night, and you can go to work in the morning."

The moon had just risen, and its huge white disk seemed to be resting on the plain only a little way beyond the town. Its brilliant silvery light was already working weird transformations in the landscape.

"Oh, are you going to ride home to-night, through this wonderful moonlight!" Lucy exclaimed. "How I envy you!"

"Yes," he answered, lowering his voice and speaking in a tone different from any she had before heard from his lips; "and it is indeed a wonderful ride! I don't know anything more impressive than the landscape of this country under a marvellous moon, like that over there. I hope we can have a ride by moonlight together, some time, when the moon is full. Does Miss Dent ride?" His voice went back to its usual tone. "I know your father is a fine rider. Perhaps we can make up a party some night, when I don't have to hurry home. I expect my brother here this Summer, to spend his vacation with me. You and Miss Dent will like him, I'm sure, for he's a fine lad. I hope we can all have some pleasant excursions together."

At the sound of his softened voice Lucy felt herself swept by sudden emotion, and hastily put her hands behind her lest he should see that they were trembling. And later that night, when she looked out from her window at the white moon floating in the violet sky, suddenly her nerves went a-quiver again and her eyes sought the far, dim plain as she softly whispered, "Under a marvellous moon, like that over there!"

The Mexican asked Bancroft how to reach the place where Conrad was to meet him, and the banker walked to the gate and pointed out the streets he was to follow. As he finished Gonzalez bent a keen gaze upon him and asked, significantly, "Has the señor further instructions for me?"

Bancroft's start and the shade of annoyance that crossed his face as he realized that it had been noticed were not lost upon the man, whose searching look was still on him. His equanimity had been well tried already that evening, and this sudden touch upon a half-formed and most secret desire startled him for an instant out of his usual self-control. Heretofore he had merely dallied with the thought that Conrad's removal would mean his own safety, for the rest of his life. It had appeared to him merely as something the consequences of which would be desirable. His hand could not be concerned in it, he wished to know nothing about it – but if Baxter thought best – to further his own ends – why had the Mexican come to him with this impudent question?

"I'm not hiring you," was his curt answer.

“Certainly not, señor,” the man answered calmly, his head erect, his arms folded, and one foot advanced. The trio on the veranda noted and laughed over his attitude. Lucy said he looked like a hero of melodrama taking the limelight. Miss Dent added that he was handsome enough for a matinee idol, and Conrad declared that there was no telling how many señoritas’ hearts he had already broken. Bancroft turned to go back to the house, but paused an instant, and the Mexican quickly went on in a softly insinuating voice: “But if the señor should wish to say anything particular? Don Dellmeyer thought it might be possible.”

Bancroft lingered, flicking the ashes from his cigar. “I – I know nothing about it,” he blurted out, uncertainly. “If Don Dellmeyer had anything to say to you I suppose he said it.”

As he turned away he heard the man say gently, “Thank you, Señor Bancroft. I shall not forget our talk.” There was no reply, and the Mexican, whistling a Spanish love tune, disappeared down the hill in the weird mixed lights of the fading day and the brilliant moon.

Alone on the veranda, Alexander Bancroft walked restlessly to and fro, stopping now and again as if to listen to the music from within, which he did not hear, or to look at the moonlit landscape, which he did not see. Over and over he was saying to himself that he had no idea what Dellmeyer Baxter had said to this Mexican, and, whatever it was, he had distinctly told the creature that he knew nothing about it. The man had come to him recommended as an expert cowboy, he had passed the recommendation on to Conrad, and that was all there was about it.

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