

The girls dissolved toward one another in horrified protest.

"Oh, Señor! Oh, Don Ricardo! Not last year! Many years ago! We are *doñas* grown these five years!"

The Colonel bore down on them, bowed low, and bending forward in his most courtly fashion stopped their protests by thrusting between their lips one apiece of the celebrated peppermints. Then he bowed again gravely and turned away, leaving them giggling, their dignity all gone.

The two men now approached the heart and centre of all this activity. Behind three tables of a construction more substantial than those just visited was enclosed a large open space. Here several fires were burning. Over some of these fires kettles had been suspended. Others had been built under grills or grates, and were being plied with oak and willow fuel in order to establish beds of coals. The pits had been heated, and even now contained the bull's head, the huge joints, and the mutton of the main barbecue. All this was presided over by a very sleek, stout good-looking Californian, who was perspiring freely even thus early, and who wore a look of busyness, responsibility, and care evidently out of his usual character. He seemed to have two official assistants—young swarthy chaps: at least, two young men of the many present seemed to be doing something. One was whetting a finishing edge to a pile of long, thin butcher knives. The other was mixing something in a bowl. Of the rest a few squatted about on their heels, staring rather vacantly and in general at the preparations; a few more seemed engrossed in some sort of game about a blanket; but most were, though idle, very much interested in what was passing—especially girls. Two of them had guitars on which they strummed as a sort of sweet and plaintive undertone to their conversation. Every few moments they, or two or three of the others, or even all the group together, would catch a few bars of the lilt and sing it forth full voiced—a few bars only, so that it seemed almost as though a passing breeze had lifted and let fall melody. To one side, on rough trestles, rested two aromatic barrels. A single old one-eyed man sat on a camp stool by them. Two laughing youths, their hands on each other's shoulders, stood before him.