

A DAUGHTER OF THE SIERRA

BY CHRISTIAN REID

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CHAPTER XX

IN THE QUEBRADA ONDA

Among the many quebradas which abound in the Sierra, the greatest and deepest, as its name implies, is the Quebrada Onda. This vast chasm cuts across the range, and is of such extent that no trail following the course of the Sierra can avoid it; so that those who journey there must of necessity consume at least half a day in going down into its depths and climbing out of them again. It is all up-and-down work; for the quebrada, though several thousand feet deep, is so narrow at the bottom that it would be possible to fling a stone across it. Hence the traveller who last followed the trail as it zig-zags for miles down the steep mountain slopes to the depths of the abyss, must immediately face a similar acclivity on the opposite side, and has an opportunity to decide which is worse—to journey painfully and perilously downward, or to strain laboriously and perilously upward.

Most travellers pause a little between the two experiences, in order to rest themselves and their animals. But it is not likely that the marvelous picturesqueness of the spot appeals to many of them. The tourist has not yet penetrated into the Sierra; and to those who journey among these mighty heights, the tremendous canon is only a very unpleasant feature of the way. "Ah, que mala!" the arrieros say, shaking their heads, when the Quebrada Onda is mentioned; and this is the sum of popular opinion concerning it.

Occasionally, however, chance brings a pair of eyes into these scenes which are capable of perceiving their picturesque grandeur, their wild, entrancing loveliness. Such eyes belong to one or two travellers who on a certain day rode down into the Quebrada Onda. The first of these was a Mexican—a mozo of the type found in rich men's households—a man of muscular frame and honest, trustworthy face, wearing tight-fitting breeches of leather, girded about the waist with a red sash; short jacket, also of leather, elaborately braided; wide, heavily-trimmed sombrero, high boots and great spurs. The second was a young woman dressed in a habit of water-proof serge, and heavily veiled to guard against the sunburn which even men dread in these regions; but not so heavily as to hide the outlines of charming features, not to obscure the luminous glances of eyes which lost no detail of the beauty through which their owners were passing. These eyes were shining with delight when, as the two riders reached the bottom of the quebrada, the mozo who had led the way down the steep trail drew aside, and the girl—Miss Rivers, in brief—rode forward toward the crystal-clear stream which flows through the gorge. For Nature has lavished on this spot, hidden deep in the everlasting hills, everything which is here to give. Here are great masses of rock—like titanic bastions and towers, luxuriant verdure, groups of stately, tapering pines, flashing water, stupendous over-shadowing heights, and far, far above a sky of lucent sapphire.

"O Manuel," she explained in Spanish, "how beautiful—how wonderfully beautiful! You never told me of the Quebrada Onda was so lovely!" "No, senorita," responded Manuel, gravely. "It is bad—very bad indeed, the Quebrada."

The girl laughed, not only at his words but for very joy in the beauty around her. "Oh, it is heavenly!" she cried. "I must have a picture of it. Quick! give me my camera and bag."

She sprang lightly to the ground as she spoke; and the Mexican, who had already dismounted, lifted from his shoulder the straps of a camera case and a small bag and brought them to her.

In an instant she had the camera out, and, going a little farther up the stream, where the channel was strewn with rocks, sprang from one to another until she gained a mid-point in the current. "Perfect!" she said to herself, as her eye took in the view of the water, the rocks, the foliage, and the majestic heights, with their jutting cliffs, which closed the vista. But while she gazed into the "finder," endeavoring to bring as much of this picture as possible into her photograph, a figure suddenly passed into her field of vision and passed her. A horseman had ridden into the stream where the trail crossed it, and sat motionless, while his horse drank—his face turned with what she felt was astonishment toward herself.

It was not necessary for her to look up to recognize this horseman. She knew him even in the "finder," and was conscious of a distinct throbbing of pleasure, while the eyes behind the silvery veil shone a trifle more brightly. But she did not speak. She only smiled as she gave the touch which moved her shutter, and then quietly proceeded to wind up the camera for another view.

Meanwhile Lloyd knew almost as soon as herself what fortune—good or bad—it was which had befallen him. His heart did more than throb; it gave a great bound as he recognized the graceful figure, veiled though the face might be. For a moment he remained quite still. Then, touching

his horse with the spur, he rode up the stream towards her. "So you have come into the Sierra, after all!" he said, as drawing up beside the rock where she stood, he leaned from the saddle to take her hand. And Isabel, looking up at him, replied: "Did I not tell you that I would come? You were very discouraging about the prospect of our meeting. Yet, you see we have met—after all, as you say."

"Yes, we have met," he observed, in apparently unnecessary confirmation of her statement. "It is kismet."

If it occurred to her that he had not said he was glad to meet her, she showed no sign of any consciousness of the omission. Her manner had never been more brightly frank than when she replied: "And this is better than the mountain top on which I foretold that I should meet you. The Quebrada is the culmination of all the enchanting picturesqueness through which I have been traveling, and therefore it is the most appropriate place in which I could thank you for the invitation to Las Joyas which has brought me into the Sierra. I am sure that I owe it to you."

"Only in a very limited sense. But are you wandering in the Sierra alone, like a lady in a romance?" "Oh, no! Papa is behind, with mozo and mules galore. But I ride in advance, in order to have time to stop and take pictures when I like. Manuel—do you know our major domo—is in charge of me, and very sensible of his responsibility."

"He had better exercise it, then, by hurrying you on at present; for there is a heavy cloud coming up. You cannot see it from here, but it may overtake you before you reach the top of the mountain, if you do not make haste."

"A cloud!" She looked up incredulously at the strip of brilliant sky overhead. "I know it is near the top of the mountain—everyone told us we should have come into the Sierra earlier—but there are always clouds for many days before it begins to rain, are there not?" "And even if it should rain, how would we be any better off at the top of the mountain than here?"

"Not better off than here, perhaps; but better off than climbing a steep and dangerous trail, hanging between heaven and earth."

"Then, cloud or no cloud, I shall wait here for papa. And meanwhile it strikes me that, unless you are in haste to go on, fate seems to have clearly intended that you shall make a sketch for me of this wonderful place."

"I should be very happy to do so, but I have no materials for drawing."

She motioned toward the bank where her bag lay. "I have everything there; for I, too, make attempts at sketching sometimes. So if I am really not detaining you—"

It would have been easy to say that he could not delay, to express regret at his inability to gratify her, to utter a few platitudes of farewell to shake hands to ride away; but he did none of these things. A great hunger leaped up within him to enjoy for a little while the delight of her society, to taste for a little while the things he had renounced. What did a few hours more or less matter? It would be no more than that—a few hours or minutes of pleasure such as might never again come into his life. And if this pleasure was to be paid for afterward with pain—well, had he not learned that pain is the price which, sooner or later, must be paid for all things?

"You are not delaying me," he said. "Wherever night finds me in the Sierra I lie down and sleep. But even if you were, there are delays which more or less matter. Can I assist you to the shore?"

She shook her head. "There is no need, I shall be there as soon as you, and then we'll decide on the best point of view. I want those grand cliffs, which I couldn't bring into my photograph."

And so it came to pass that, far down in the depths of the wildest canon of the Sierra, Lloyd, putting all thought of past or future away from him, knew some entirely happy moments. For if he had found Isabel Rivers charming when he met her in Topia, where the atmosphere around them was in a certain sense conventional, what term could fitly describe what he found her now, when the spell of the Sierra, its wild freedom and surpassing beauty, seemed to have entered into and to possess her, "like a passion"? While they sat together and he sketched the scene before them, she talked to him of the other scenes through which she had been passing, and every word was full of keenest pleasure and deepest appreciation.

"I have been in many picturesque countries," she said, "but I have never felt in the same degree the exaltation of which one is conscious here. One does not feel as if breathing common air. It is an elixir of the gods. And the untrodden freshness, the majesty of these great heights—" Then abruptly: "You have read 'Prince Otto,' of course?"

"Long ago—at least as long as is possible."

louched so strangely home, they were so hued and scented, they were so beset and canopied by the dome of the blue air of heaven?"

"I remember them," he said; and to himself he added that they would ever after be associated with a voice which was like a haunting strain of music, and the shining of a pair of eyes full of golden light.

"I am not very much like the princess," Isabel went on with a laugh; "but the description has seemed to suit my case. I, too, as I have 'sped along in the bright air,' have 'looked with a rapture of surprise' on scenes so beautiful that they seemed to touch and thrill in the deepest, strangest, yet most familiar manner. Is there a strain of the dryad in some of us—or the gypsy, perhaps?"

"The dryad in you, I am sure—Ah, there it comes!"

What came was a blaze of white light around them, and simultaneous crash of thunder over their heads which seemed to shake the encompassing heights. Lloyd sprang to his feet almost as hastily as he had sprung when they sat together at the San Benito and he heard the sound of the loosened boulder on the mountain side above them.

"Come!" he said. "There isn't a moment to lose, if you don't want to be smothered to death."

"But—where can we go?" she asked bewildered, snatching up her camera, while she stuffed the dry ingredients into the bag and threw it over her shoulder.

"You'll see," Lloyd answered. "Only come quickly, for the rain will be here in a half a minute."

She asked no more questions, but ran with him toward Manuel and the animals. The former stood a picture of consternation.

"Ah, Don Felipe!" he gasped, as Lloyd came up. "Las aguas have arrived! I told Don Roberto—"

"The mule of the senorita—quick!" Lloyd interrupted.

He seized the bride of the animal, held out his hand, and the next instant she was in the saddle. He flung himself into his own, and, bidding her follow him, dashed across the stream. On the other side he turned down the quebrada toward a mass of towering cliffs which projected from the over-shadowing mountain. Another blinding flash of lightning, another terrific crash of thunder, and the rain came down in a pouring sheet just as he led the way, at breakneck pace, up a steep incline to the shelter of a great overhanging rock, which formed the roof of a deep cave. Here he sprang quickly to the ground as Miss Rivers rode up.

"Any port in a storm!" he said. "Here we can at least keep dry."

"Why, this is an admirable port!" she gasped breathlessly. "Who could have imagined such a perfect place of shelter within reach?"

"There are many of these caves along the trail—regular camping places of the arrieros. But I think not many know of this in the Quebrada Onda."

"It is lucky for us that you knew of it. Manuel, what should we have done if we had not met the senor?"

"Very badly, senorita, Manuel, who had now ridden up, acknowledged. "For I did not know of this place, although I know of many like it farther along the way. The blessed saints must have sent the senor to assist us."

"I did not think of that," said Isabel, looking at Lloyd; "but it is quite evident that fate—or the blessed saints—had a kinder purpose even than I imagined in sending you into the Quebrada Onda. You have certainly played the part of a guardian angel, although it has been somewhat unwillingly. For if you knew of this place of shelter, why did you want to send us on in the face of a coming storm?"

Manuel crosses himself. You had better draw farther back into the cave, Miss Rivers; for the storm is increasing in violence, and the very windings of heaven seem opened."

CHAPTER XXI

IN A CAVE OF THE SIERRA

Kismet!—It is Fate! Lloyd had said when he found whom he had been journeying to meet in the Quebrada Onda; and he repeated the words to himself while he sat beside Miss Rivers in their place of refuge during the hour or so that the rain lasted. It was a torrential down-pour, accompanied by lightning which filled the air with the blinding glare of its white fire, and thunder which echoed in crashing peals from crag to crag. Lloyd arranged a seat for Isabel in the back of the cave, where the rock shelved down nearly touching their heads; and he was relieved to note her fearlessness in the face of a storm which tried even the iron nerves of Manuel, and made the animals now and again start and quiver from head to foot, as some particularly vivid flash of electricity seemed to envelop them, some terrific shock of thunder to shake the solid foundations of the granite hills. At such moments he found himself glancing apprehensively at his companion; and he had a new realization of what a great thing is courage when he met her eyes, bright with excitement and something like pleasure.

"Isn't it magnificent?" she cried to him once or twice; and he shouted back: "Wonderful!"

But Lloyd had occasion to repeat "Kismet" again, when, after the storm had passed—the cloud rolling away with its thunder still echoing loudly among the heights, and a great flood of sunshine breaking forth and making the world brilliant,—he went out like the dove from the Ark, to learn how matters were; and, like that adventurous wanderer, found that the waters covered the face of the earth,—at least all that part of the earth which at present concerned him. The river, which even in its normal state flowed very near the foot of the height in which the cave was situated, had now risen until it swept the base of the cliff, completely covering the path by which they had gained their eyrie; so that to leave it was impossible without incurring certain discomfort and possible danger.

It was with a very grave face that he returned, shook his head in answer to Manuel's eager inquiries, and went up to Miss Rivers, who was now standing on the verge of the great rock, gazing rapturously out over the marvelous beauty of the rain-drenched, sun-bathed scene, and listening to the sound of the streams, which formed a wonderful diapason of harmony. For blending with the deep voice of the river below, was the music of unnumbered waterfalls, leaping in white cascades over rocks and down defiles where before the rain had been no drop of water; their flashing, tumbling beauty gleamed through the wealth of verdure which was already fresher, greener, more delightful to the eye for the gracious gift of the rain; and their hurrying waters singing as they poured into the gorge to join the brimming river."

Isabel held up her hand with a silencing gesture as Lloyd came to her side.

"Listen!" she said. "Is it not like a grand Te Deum? As if Nature were calling aloud, praising and thanking God!"

He was silent for a moment, listening as she commanded. Then he said: "Yes; the Sierra is speaking. I have often gone far out into the mountains after a storm to listen to its voice. There is nothing like it, when the great hills, unlocking their fountains, send up a cry to heaven—though whether it is a Te Deum or not I can't say."

"Isn't it worshipful enough to be one?"

What is worshipful, like the prosperity of a just, rests in the ear of the listener. To me it only expresses the spell of the Sierra, its austere loneliness, its wild and perfect solitude."

She looked at him now with a smile. "It is the loneliness which appeals to you most, is it not?" she said. "I begin to understand why you do not care to meet your friends in the Sierra."

"And yet," he parried reproachfully, "you said only a little while ago that you, too, felt the charm of the loneliness of these enchanting solitudes."

"I do," she eagerly affirmed. "Indeed I can understand how the charm might become so great that one would break away from all the attractions and restraints of civilization to bury oneself in the wild, green recesses of the hills, and to say with all one's heart:

Now thanks to heaven, that of its grace Hath led me to this lonely place!"

It was his turn to smile. "I hope you will remain thankful to Heaven for leading you to this particular lonely place when you hear that all these malicious waters have made you a prisoner, he observed. "A prisoner! Impossible! How could they—in so short a time?"

"You don't know the resources of the Sierra. Besides, that rain was a veritable cloud-burst, concentrated in this quebrada. Look down—but give me your hand before you do so, and you will see how the river has risen over our path."

She gave him her hand, and, leaning out over the edge of the beetling cliff glanced down at

the river, which, churned to the white foam over its rocks swept in turbulent, rushing flood below. When she drew back she looked a trifle started.

"It has certainly risen very high and has a very wild aspect," she said; "but it can't possibly be deep. We must simply ride through it. A little wetting will not matter."

"You would get more than a little wetting if you attempted to ride through that water—even if your mule could keep his footing, which is doubtful," Lloyd answered. "There is a terribly strong current. I tried it."

"You tried it!" Miss Rivers' glance swept over him and rested on some soaked garments. "Plainly you don't mind a wetting."

"Oh," he said carelessly. "I turned back when the water rose over my boots! I saw that it would not do for you to venture. There is really nothing for it but to stay here until the stream goes down."

"And how long will that be?" "Not more than a few hours."

"A few hours!" What will papa think has become of me? And what will he do?"

"If he comes down into the quebrada, he will have to remain on the other side of the river until it falls."

"In absolute uncertainty about my fate—whether I have been swept away by the flood or struck by lightning!"

"I don't think Mr. Rivers has a sensational imagination. I have no doubt he will be anxious about you, but he will not be likely to anticipate anything worse than that you have been thoroughly drenched."

"But I certainly should have been but for you. I suppose there is no doubt, alas! that he has been drenched?"

"Not much, I fear. But he is an old Sierra traveller, who knows how to take care of himself and to accept the inevitable with philosophy."

"Which we must practice also. Manuel, do you know that the river has made us prisoners here?"

"Yes, senorita," Manuel replied; "but that is better than that we should have been without shelter in the storm. We can wait until the waters go down."

"What do you think Don Roberto is saying?"

Manuel shrugged his shoulders. Plainly he did not care to commit himself to any conjecture on this point.

"He will be glad when he knows that the senorita has been so safe," he replied.

The senorita laughed as she sat down on a stone. "Really," she said, "this is quite unexpectedly adventurous! I think I should positively enjoy it if you were a shade more hospitable, Mr. Lloyd."

"What can I do?" Lloyd asked. "My castle is yours, but the possibilities of hospitality are somewhat limited—unless I can offer a little teguila—"

Miss Rivers declined the teguila by a gesture.

"You might sit down and try to look as if you, too, were enjoying the adventure," she suggested.

"There is no trying required," he declared. "I have only been repressing my enjoyment because I felt that I ought to sympathize with your anxiety to get away."

"But you see I am not suffering from anxiety. On the contrary, I am resigned to being a troglodyte as long as necessity requires. And now what shall we talk about? Oh, of course the Santa Cruz! You have not told me anything about it."

"There is nothing to tell. The enemy's forces may be mobilized, but they have not yet made a hostile demonstration. In other words, there has been no attempt to 'jump' the mine."

to be damaging and uncomfortable. Briefly, there was an accident. I fell down the mountain of the Santa Cruz, was picked up insensible and taken to Las Joyas—"

"A moment, please!" interrupted Miss Rivers, regarding him closely and a little suspiciously. "You have not said how the accident occurred. I am sure you are for too good a mountaineer to have fallen down a mountain."

"You are very kind; but, owing to the attraction of gravity, even the best of mountaineers must fall if he is thrown over the edge of the precipice."

TO BE CONTINUED

THE WAY IT HAPPENED

By Helen Moriarty

Baker of the Flying Corps had a few hours' leave, and sallied forth sought the adjacent small town where the boys were wont to find relaxation from the strain of their work. It was a lively little town, even in war time, full of American and English soldiers, and the usual entertainments were going at full swing. The day was a beautiful one for November, the air bland and the sunshine as golden and glowing as on a summer morning. Paul whistled as he drifted along the narrow streets, stopping to chat with first one crowd of soldiers and then another, amusing himself idly until he should be joined by others of the airmen who were coming in later. He was particularly fond of this town, where with his companions he had spent so many carefree hours, and had told his mother more than once how quaint and interesting it was, with its curious straggling streets and compact, small houses. He knew all the shopkeepers, too, especially the Little Postage Stamp Woman, as he called her, whose tiny stall obtruded itself on the street at one of the busiest corners. He had given her that name first, because she was never out of stamps, and, second, because she was not unlike a postage stamp herself, he declared—small, and square, and always on the spot." Her postcards, too, were of the most attractive kind, and as small as was her stall, there was a table and two chairs, seldom empty of soldiers, who were welcome to the pens and the clean blotter, and the ink, "with a regular French backbone" in it. Here he would up today, removing his cap with a flourish when he saw that Mother Beauvoir was alone.

"Hello, Mother Postage Stamp!" he called gayly.

"Ah, M'sieur Paul, it's you, is it?" her face breaking into a welcome smile. "I did not expect you today."

"She had acquired a fairly good knowledge of English and was proud of it, preferring to have the boys speak to her in their own tongue."

"No? This is my regular day." He began running through the cards.

"Yes," she answered, eyeing him a bit doubtfully, "but the cure—what you say?—the chaplain, has gone out today to your camp, to hear confessions, and it is his last day; so I have been told."

"Oh, yes, Father Rainer," carelessly. "I know. He and I are great friends. He's been here a week, you know, and he's spent most of it with us. He went up with me the other day. He's a good sport. He never turned a hair."

"Ah, in a relieved tone," he is your friend. Then all is well."

The young man gave her a quizzical glance. Then he dropped his eyes to the cards again.

"Oh, I don't know," he drawled. "If you mean by that you suppose I went to confession and all that sort of thing, you've got another guess coming. Oh, here's a dandy card for mother! I just wrote to her yesterday, but she likes the cards—"

"Ah, M'sieur Paul!" Mother Beauvoir's voice was gently reproachful.

"Don't you want me to send a card to my mother?" innocently. "Ah, M'sieur Paul!" she repeated, shaking her head.

"Very well, I won't. And I shan't buy so many from you, and your receipts will fall off, and—"

"Such a rattle!" Mother Beauvoir broke in in a grumbling tone. "Here is your chair, and the pen and the ink. Voila! Tell her that you are a very bad boy!"

"No use. She thinks I'm an angel child."

He scratched away industriously for a minute looking up to laugh into the stall-keeper's friendly eyes. "I believe I will tell her what you said, just for fun, but I'll also tell her what Father Rainer said—"

"What's that?" Who's taking my name in vain? Why, it's Paul!"

It was Father Rainer himself who peered over the high-shouldered counter, summoning the airmen with a pleasant, peremptory gesture. "You're just the one I want. Come along, my boy—we've got to round up some of the lads. It's my last day at the Field."

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