

# THE AMAZING CHERUB

The Strong Man of the Rio Verde Meets His Conqueror—A Story of Picturesque Contrasts—How a Villainous Big Bandit and a Tiny Baby Fall in Love With Each Other

IN a far niche of the hills a little tree of smoke sprouted and grew. "It comes!" marveled El Calman. "Of a truth it comes!" He could understand how Vasquez the shoemaker had known that the train would pass this very spot, for here ran the iron rails that marked its trail through the hills; but how had Vasquez known that it would come in this very hour of the afternoon? So huge and powerful a thing—why should it stop merely because they had torn up a few of those little rails? Would it not see the will beyond the gap and rush on, leaving them foolish and helpless in the bushes?

It came, this train! It grew; it was bigger, fiercer than he had thought. The train topped the pass. Then with a wild shriek and a thunderous banging of its members it stopped!

El Calman rose with an exultant oar. "Now, little ones, now!" He moved forward to carry out his planned robbery, and he did not see how suddenly Vasquez and his fellows kept their shelter in the bushes. He saw, indeed, the windows of one car bristling with gun barrels; but he saw, too, the frightened faces of people waiting to be robbed.

The next minute he saw something else. The train was moving again—backward. Nobody had told him that he thing could move backward.

He hurried himself forward, to stop it. "Help me!" he belatedly cried. "It escapes!"

Through the mad sport of the monster came a sound as of the clapping of many hands. Something more him in the arm, in the side of his brawny neck; and all sound, all struggle, all things ceased.

It was night; the stars were shining and El Calman was very cold. A light something fluttered across his face, a soft weight squirmed on his broad chest. A faint wailing could be heard.

"Eh?" said El Calman stupidly. "What does thou here?"

## Cherub or Devil?

IT was certainly unreasonable that a baby should be here in these lonely hills. A very fat, very white baby, not like the skinny, brown infants El Calman knew. The falling ceased. Ah! Now he was dead. He was dead, and this was a cherub come to guide him to heaven. He knew somehow that the cherub was beating on his face, but he felt nothing. Only a thin, irksome thread of worry held him to earth, an endless, doleful whimper, a hopeless little animal sound.

"Teh! teh!" said El Calman thickly. "Angels do not weep. Stop it!"

The whimpering stopped. And the little cold hands patterned ceaselessly at his face. "No puedo," groaned El Calman. "I cannot!"

Dimly, through the sick burning in his throat and chest, he was aware of a shame. Cannot? Was he not El Calman, the strongest one? He rose, bawled. He was very sick. He must have water.

The whimpering burst into an inhuman howl. "You are not an angel; you are a small devil," he growled. His left arm was useless, with the right he caught up the assistance and staggered away to where he had left his horse.

The horse was gone. After a moment of stupid uncertainty he labored on.

He found water in a deep barranca where tall cliffs shut in the sky. He sprawled heavily on his stomach and drank. He heard the baby crying, he scooped up water in a wide, flat paw and held it to that wide, flat mouth.

"Drink, devil! There is no more water this side the Rio Verde!"

At risk of drowning the devil he preserved. Groaning, he struggled up, devil, very heavy for so small a creature. He was not to handle with one arm; he knew it made itself heavy to test his strength.

"Thou thinkest that I cannot," he muttered through set teeth, "but I can. What I will I can. I am El Calman. He heard of me, devil! I am the strongest one."

He came to the swift ford, cursing the chill current that dragged at his legs, the rock that shifted treacherously under his feet, the small devil who knew he had only one good arm, he bent his will to the task of lifting the thin, airy air that seeped from the high mesa, so that, though he was all afeared within, he might hear his muscles jerking with the impact of the cold.

## "I Am the Strong One"

IT was unfair. It was an inhuman test. Laboriously he evolved a brain thought: the devil was only a baby after all, and a baby could ever tell that El Calman failed in a bit of strength.

"We will rest here," he said craftily, and deposited his burden on a ledge beside the trail, staggered away a few paces so that he might hear if it wept, and lay down to rest.

It did not weep. It crawled after him, heedlessly near the brink. "Hola, compadre!" protested El Cal-



It crawled after him—heedlessly near the brink.

man, "but thou wilt fall to the bottom of the barranca. Hast thou no brains?"

He struggled up and caught the rash on even as it pitched from the ledge. The baby, too, was shivering and the tiny fingers that clutched him were little claws of ice.

He pushed it back on the ledge and began a one-handed struggle with his shirt. His dead arm hampered him, he fumbled for the knife in his sash and cut the garment and peeled it off and wrapped it clumsily round and round the baby.

Then he toiled on, emerging on the hill, starlit mesa, his great torso naked, head hanging, a small crustacean and death fighting the mighty strength that was in him. The cold stars wheeled on; the sky paled and the sun flared white over the nebulous hills. It rose and grew hot, beating on his shaggy head, but El Calman could no longer distinguish between fire without and fire within.

"I am El Calman," he mumbled to the now blood-stained bundle under his arm. "Dost hear me, devil? I am the strong one, and what I will I can."

From Tequila, the metropolis of the Rio Verde district, the cavalry rode valiantly out and found no bandits, and the matter was officially closed. To be sure, those careless American parents who had lost a baby were not satisfied. The father, not content with bawling a Comandante who had done all that a man may do, himself took up the search. But the hills are vast and the trails are many, and after all he was only an ignorant foreigner. He might better have spent his life time in his office in Guadalajara, being young and from a rich family.

She could only sit in the meson in Tequila, waiting, watching the slow creeping of the sun across the patio, remembering and remembering that harsh grinding of the brakes, the shock that had hurled her little son from her arms. Remembering! She had been tired and fretful. Her last words to him had been fretful. "Oh, do stop fussing! See the pretty trees!"

## "Where's the Baby?"

DAY after day, remembering—her thin hands helpless in her lap, her eyes lifting only to question her husband when he came from his endless, fruitless riding in the hills. For them, you see, the incident would never be closed.

No, certainly there were no bandits in the Rio Verde district! Vasquez, you will remember, was a shoemaker; the cavalry need have ridden only a few doors from their barracks to find him stitching virtuously in his shop. El Calman was a carbeno, a peaceful hewer of wood and burner of charcoal; only a few leagues from Tequila you might pass the trail that climbed to his hut, might hear the ring of his axe and see the smoke of his fires curl up from the mountainside.

There were some weeks when the customers of El Calman bought charcoal from another, for he did not

appear. Then at last his little donkey-train came down from the hills again and the shadow of El Calman's voice cried through the streets, "Carbon! Carbon!" It was indeed the shadow of El Calman who shuffled there, his great frame gaunt with illness and sagging with fatigue, for he came afoot. It was this matter that brought him to the shop of Vasquez, the shoemaker. Leaning heavily in the doorway, he begged, "Who keeps my horse?"

"What?" cried Vasquez, "thou art not dead? Big one, I rejoice!"

"Thanks. Who keeps my horse?"

"I know not," declared Vasquez, "this was true, for he had said the horse weeks ago. Thoughtfully his eyes, which had widened at the apparition of a man he had seen dead in the bushes, narrowed again.

It was not the wild beasts of the hills who had disposed of the body of El Calman. El Calman had not died. What, then, of the baby of the Americans? A golden thought, for it is well known that all Americans are rich.

When they had drunk he said abruptly, watching the face of his student, "Listen, thou! The parents of the child are here."

"The child? Which child?" said El Calman, and even his hands that trembled with weariness grew still.

The shoemaker smiled. "Calman, I am no fool. Where is the baby?"

"Come," said Vasquez, "the big man doggedly."

But he was only a hewer of wood, not clever enough to cope with Vasquez the shoemaker. His heavy face twitched; his eyes dropped and shifted.

"Come," said Vasquez, "I will show thee the father."

"The father of whom?" muttered El Calman, for his brain could compass no other defense.

"Of the child," snapped Vasquez with pardonable asperity. "Be not a blockhead, Calman! It is the child of Americans. They will pay great ransom. We shall be rich!"

El Calman clung desperately to his little pretense of ignorance. Adroitly the shoemaker shifted ground: "Speak—the baby lived?"

"It died," he lied.

"A pity. Eh, well," said the shoemaker piously, "what God wills must be," and crossed himself—and smiled.

## The Beautiful Senorita

EL CALMAN cheerfully accepted the suggestion that they visit the Inn of the Red Rose. Now in the hostelry of the Red Rose lodged the foreigners. As they entered the bar Vasquez spoke words aside to the porter, and the American came.

"Senor," Vasquez said, "this is the man that has your child."

And the father cried, trembling, "Where is he? Where is my boy?"

El Calman took off his hat; desperately he sought for words, but he could manage only his futile, "Which boy, senor?"

He was edging toward the door. The American leaped on him, shook

him, shouting, "Where is he? Where is he? No you don't!"

The American himself was a big man, a strong man with the added strength of frenzy; but El Calman, wasted with illness though he was, embraced the American with one of the breath-destrorying smashes of two bodies in collision. They collapsed on the damp tiled floor and El Calman was gone.

Within the hour the countless police had captured his donkeys dozing placidly in the street; the very next day they sallied into the hills and surrounded him. They prepared to pour fierce volleys of lead into that dwelling of iniquity; but the frantic father broke from them and ran, and disappeared. After a discreet interval, following, they found him standing stupidly in the middle of the bare dirt floor, holding in his hands a small garment. Shamefully he was weeping.

But life goes on, though many in the students remain unclosed. After a time the Americans departed, returning to the great city of Guadalajara, taking their sad memories with them. And in a secluded valley beyond the mountains El Calman came on the very flower of womanhood, washing clothes by a river of little stones.

He came to a halt beside her, murmuring, "Good day, senorita. Your servant."

Her big black eyes lifted and took in his goodly proportions. The forest had fed him and the sun and air had brought zest again into his blood; not twice had that secluded valley seen such a specimen of virile youth. Her glorious lips curved into a smile, her smooth cheek dimpled, and her eyes dropped demurely, as a maiden's should. "Good day, caballero, your servant."

"Will your grace have the goodness to tell me how this village is called? I am a stranger."

## Bound With Chains

SHE told him, her eyes downcast, so faintly slapping a corner of a soapy shirt on the flat stone.

"I am called Andres Tobar, senor. In my country of the Rio Verde, they name me El Calman. Your grace has heard of me? I am the strong one."

And she looked up again, and down again, and dimpled but did not speak. "And your grace?" he begged.

"I am called Chona Sanchez, your servant, caballero."

"Your servant," he acknowledged, and bowed so deeply that the woman cried out in alarm. "Ay, senor, you will drop your little son!"

For El Calman came bareheaded, carrying his great hat in his hands, as only Gringos and fools do in this latitude; but there was a reason for that. Astride his shoulder, clutching his shaggy hair, rode a sturdy, sun-browned man-child, who lurched perilously with the chance, but only gurgled and crowed and clung the tighter.

"He will not fall," boasted El Calman. "He is very strong. He is the strongest little man in the world. Look!"

He offered a thick forefinger to the young acrobat, who without hesitation transferred his grip to it and shrank with glee as El Calman swung him about and about. The woman caught her breath, for the rocks were sharp; but with a nonchalant flourish El Calman returned the child safely to his shoulder.

"Ay," breathed the admiring female, "he is indeed strong, indeed the son of El Calman. How is he called, the bebe?"

El Calman did not waver between his personal pride and the greater pride of the incomparable man-child. "He is not the son of any pelado," he gentled indignantly. "He is of parents the most fine, both blond and very rich. See, his eyes are like the sky and his hair like the silk of corn. Could a countryman of the Rio Verde, even the strongest, have a son like this?"

"How is he called? What does your grace with him?"

It is not the first time that boasting to a woman has led a man into danger. "I call him Diabito," he muttered. "The Little Devil. He is the strongest, bravest little man in the world."

She laughed, for certainly there was nothing satanic about that little one whose blue eyes looked so fearlessly, merrily on the world, and a strident voice cried from one of the huts along the arroyo's bank. "Thou, Chona!" Even among the humble ones it is a parent's duty to see that no maiden converses unchidden with a man. Chona shouted innocently. "Yes, what, mama?" but her eyes made the stout heart of El Calman to hammer in his chest.

"Come thou hither, accursed one!"

"At once, mama," As she got lithely up, Chona murmured, "There is lodging in the house of my uncle, old Sanchez the cantinero," and her eyes bound him to that village with such chains as even the strength of El Calman could not break.

## Taken for Ransom

G RANDLY El Calman lounged and boasted before the wine shop of an old Sanchez, at night Chona met him, by great stealth of course, while the village shut one eye and grinned. And the little one went into any house he chose, laughing with his fearless blue eyes, so that all hearts were his.

But Chona loved him more than me," she pouted, and was very cold. "Shall he be between us always, that little Gringo who thinks himself lord of all the earth?"

"Who has said that he is a Gringo?"

"In Magdalena, I have seen them, those arrogant blue-eyes. What dost thou with the child of such? Come," she coaxed him, melting, "tell me. Tell thy Chona."

El Calman told her his tale.

When Chona's uncle, Sanchez the cantinero, came down on a journey soon after El Calman saw him ride away; but he paid little heed, for man-child was missing. Ranging like a distracted bull through the forest, seeking, calling, he saw his betrothed coming back along the trail. Before he could speak she cried out to him, "The little one, where is he?"

"I have sought him everywhere!"

At day long, and for many days thereafter, the woods and canyons of that secluded valley echoed the great shouts of one who sought in vain: "Diabito! O Little Devil! Thy Calman seeks thee. Answer!"

Come to Vasquez the shoemaker in Tequila, then, came old man Sanchez, bearing treasure. He was indeed dismayed to learn that he must journey farther, even to the fabled city of Guadalajara, if he would convert that treasure into gold; but Vasquez rose to the occasion. Together they braved the terrors of the train. And with them went a tiny man-child in new shirt, new pantaloons, new blanket, even shoes, a man-child who could weep no more but covered in a corner of the dirty, second-class coach and trembled at the noise and grandeur of it all.

So it came about that Vasquez was rich. Sanchez was rich, Chona was rich; but the parents of the little man-child were very poor. For that foolish American father paid the first price they asked, without bargaining or threatening, pleading only for time to get the money. He borrowed a son who would not eat nor rest but only covered in a corner and wailed and wailed, "Calman! Calman!"

A calman is an alligator. What could the child want with an alligator? In despair they brought him a very little one, but he thrust it from him and wailed, "Calman! Calman! Calman!"

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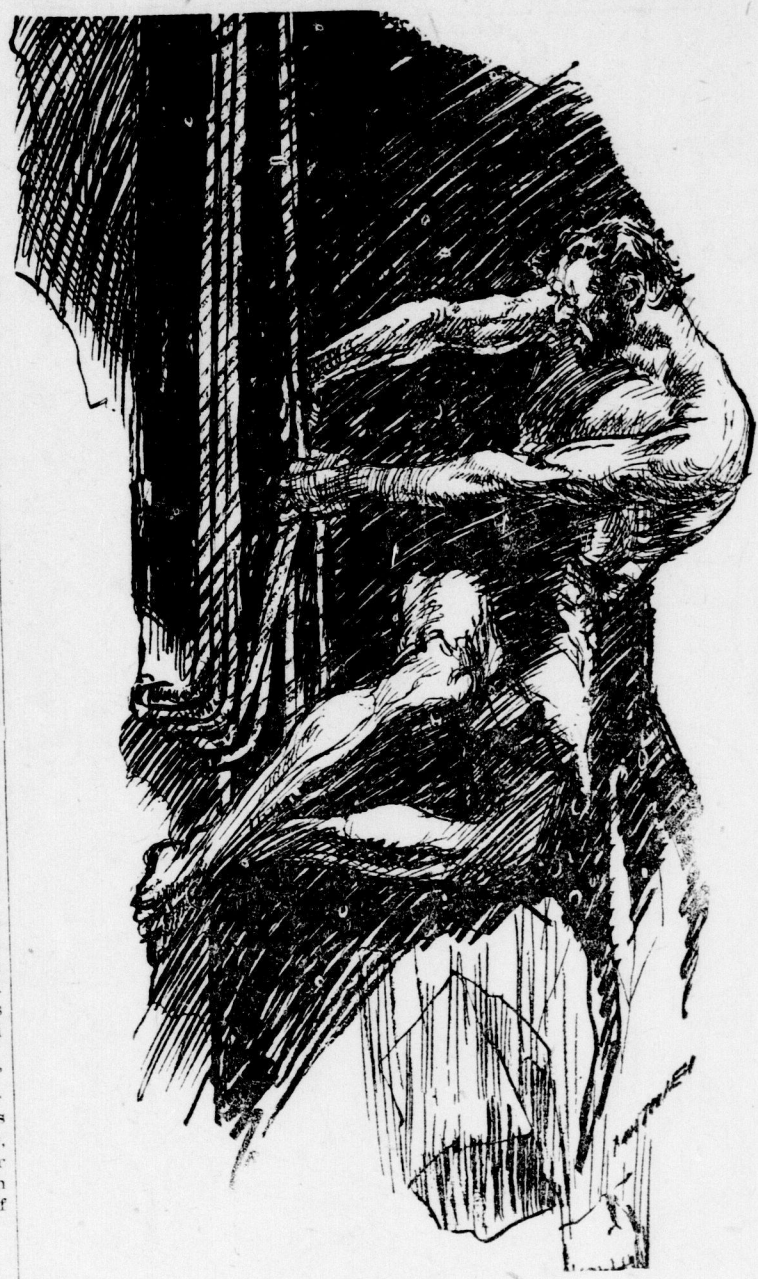
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Victory! A fastening yielded.

house and knocked at the iron-barred inner door, quite as if he came on some lawful errand.

"I wish to speak to the master of the house," he begged humbly of the porter, who looked with scorn on big, shy countryman who wore cotton pantaloons instead of trousers and who carried dusty saddle bags.

"He is not here."

"I will wait," said El Calman, and squatted patiently on his heels; so that when at evening the master came in he did not see at once how big his visitor was. While El Calman was rising the porter unlocked the iron-barred door.

"What offers itself to you?" inquired the master of the house.

"It was a mistake," said El Calman simply. "I will not sell the boy."

Now, the American knew him. Through a murderous haze he saw the man who had stolen his happy, healthy baby and had sent him back a poor little savage who whimpered all day and moaned all night like some wild animal that could not endure captivity; and because he was of that curious race who fight with their hands he struck El Calman heavily in the face. El Calman never knew how to defend himself against this unique attack; he staggered and shook his head and charged into those flailing fists, smashing the American against the wall, whirling him about and smashed him against the other wall and pitched his breathless bulk into the street.

Then he charged, not for the open door, but for the inner door, hurling the ponderous headlong from it. Madly he bounded from room to room, shouting for the devil; but he found only a pale lady crooning over the shrunken form of a tiny man-child who was like to die because he would not eat. Stupidly El Calman stopped and dragged off his hat and threw out a hand in incoherent pleading.

A gendarme came up behind the madman unheeded and thumped him smartly with his club. The skull of El Calman was not thicker than the skulls of other men; he fell, and he dragged his carcass away. And quiet descended in that house of trouble. There was only the eager voice of the little sick boy, who struggled in his mother's arms and cried, "Calman! Calman!"

## Breaking Jail

A LONG time El Calman lay in that iron cage where they had flung him. Slowly his brain began to work. He attempted only one problem at a time. In the corridor paced a sleepy guard with a rifle.

El Calman groaned, begging hoarsely:

"Water! Water!"

The guard, being soft of heart, brought water; and El Calman came out too steadily to the bars and put out his hands. He seized the unsuspecting guard and throttled him.

When the guard was limp he exorcised him gently to the floor and exorcised the person. The man had no piousness, no reverence, no respect for the law. El Calman took the rifle and tried to pry open the door. The bars bent and the door buckled and the bolt slipped. There was no noise; the door struck the body of the guard.

At the outer door paced two other guards. It was a still and weary hour of the night. Pausing together for a sociable cigarette and a moment of gossip, they became aware of a huge countryman, uncertain, beside the portal.

"Excuse, senores," said El Calman humbly, "have your graces the great goodness to direct me to the Street of Placeres?"

The house of the American stood on a corner. Along the dark side street passed a bulky shadow, who whispered under the barred win-

—By C. E. Scoggins  
ILLUSTRATED BY H. G. WENTWORTH

from his lips. He struggled up, ashamed.

"Ay, senora! It is nothing. Do not molest yourself."

He heard her speaking, fixing a firm look on her husband. "This is not one of those who stole the child. This is the man who found the baby and this man saved his life. From the shameless ones who sold it for ransom he has recovered the money."

## Understanding at Last

"BUT ay, senora!" cried El Calman, remembering. "I have lost it. I have lost the money. I can never buy him back now. Where can a poor carbeno get so much gold?"

"It is here," said the American, oddly gentle; and El Calman saw his own saddle bags that he had dropped in his mad search that first day. To the police he said: "We shall reward him. But first I wish to reward the vigilance of the police. He counted shining gold pieces into each palm. A sergeant spoke uncertainly."

"Your grace means, it will not be necessary to take him?"

"Precisely, sergeant. There is no charge against him. I will not appear against him, and those shameless ones dare not."

A man who has both hands full of gold is one whose words have weight. The sergeant bowed. "Still," he hinted delicately, "there is the matter of the broken door at the jail."

"Oh," said the American. "I did not know. But the fault is mine. I did not understand or I would never have let him go to jail. I will see the judge to-morrow. Meantime, will this pay for the door?"

"But surely, senor!" Very deeply the sergeant bowed. His eyes fell on the twisted grating of the window. "The miscreant has wickedly ruined your reja, senor. Shall we not take him for that?"

"Oh, that," said the American. "I did that myself. I—I learned against it."

Doubtless the apprehensive neighbors wondered why a raid in force should end in laughter.

El Calman shuffled his free foot, one ankle being embraced by the man-child sitting on the floor, and gazed dumbly at his fosterer, who could know that he had never been told. "Senor," he begged, "who has told you those things of me?"

"My wife," said the American, curiously humble.

"My son," said the woman; and it seemed to El Calman that they had some smiling secret between them.

But the behe, he cannot talk, senora! He is so very little. But he is very intelligent," he boasted, "and strong! He is the strongest little man in the world. Look!"

He bent and offered a thick forefinger. The child grasped it with both hands; but when El Calman would have lifted him the grip failed. El Calman grunted an earnest confession, flung out a vehement, pleading hand. "Senor," he cried, "Senor! A wickedness! Senor! A wickedness! Hebe requires to eat, to grow big and strong. When he is mine—"

He stopped, abashed, for the woman laid her frail hand on his mighty arm.

## Queerest of Nurses

"CALMAN," she said, "your name is Calman, is it not true?"

"I am Andres Tobar, your servant, senora," said El Calman, embarrassed. "That is a foolish name the countrymen give me because I am very strong."

"The behe is yours, Andres," said the woman, smiling. "See how he loves you! For us he does not wish to eat. If I bring him milk now—"

"And then," cried El Calman, "then I shall take him away!"

"You shall stay here and make him eat and play and grow big and fat and strong."

El Calman gazed with awe on furniture that gleamed where the light struck it; on pictures that were not of saints nor yet of crucifixion, but of white woolly lambs and children strangely arrayed. The room felt like the softest grass, a litter of curious wooden blocks, a small gay contrivance that was not quite a horse and not quite a chair. "I," he stammered, "here, senora? In this house?"

"In this house."

He moved gingerly thereafter and his voice was hushed to a timid tinkle in his throat. But half an hour later, while he promenade the patio with a comfortably snoring man-child in his arms, there was violence and uproar. The porter burst in, shouting, "The gun, senor! The gun! He comes!"

"He called me a nana, a nurse-maid! Throw him to me, senor!"

But the master of the house only laughed and brought gold and sent the porter away. El Calman himself should be the porter and guard the door so that no harm should come to the little one; and none should call him nurse. It was in the grey, warm peace of dawn that the woman, slipping from her bed, beheld El Calman squatting on his heels, one thick elbow pillowed in a small contrivance that was not quite a horse and not quite a chair, gently snoring. Even the strongest man of the Rio Verde could not break the grip of those small possessive fingers that clutched him by the hair.

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## Worth Remembering

WHEN changing a right tire to the left side of the car the forms inner side should be to the outside. Its new position can run in the same direction, a feature which is claimed to prolong its life. As the inner side of the tire will invariably be dirt, this should be a simple way to keep the directions in mind. Also a gentle reminder to clean the tire and rim when mounted in their new position.