

A DAUGHTER OF THE SIERRA

BY CHRISTIAN REID

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CHAPTER XV.—CONTINUED

"I remember her very well, senior; but I do not understand why she should write to me and ask me to trust you, whom I have had no thought of distrusting."

"You are very good to say so, seniorita; but we—Miss Rivers and myself—could not be sure of that; for we remembered that you had only seen me when I was with the man whom you regard as your enemy."

"He is our enemy," she interposed quickly; "but you, even when you were with him, proved yourself our friend."

"I certainly felt as your friend," Lloyd answered; "but I had so little opportunity to prove myself that I should not have been surprised if you had distrusted me—perhaps as much as Don Arturo does," he added, with a smiling glance in the direction of that highly indignant young man.

"Arturo is a boy," said Victoria, who was probably three or four years his junior. "It is unnecessary that you should think of him. I would have trusted you without this letter; so now you can tell me at once what it is you have come to say."

"Briefly, then, I have come to warn you that it is Mr. Armistead's intention to surprise the mine and take possession of it by force."

"Ah! He thinks that he can!" A flash of fire leaped now into the dark eyes. "You have learned this from himself, senior?"

"No," Lloyd replied; "for in that case I could not have told you. I have learned or divined it from an outside source, which left me free to warn you. But I do not think there is any doubt of his intention; and if he succeeds, you will never recover your mine. Your only hope, as matters stand, is in keeping possession of it. Surely you must know this."

"We do know it," she said sternly; "and we are ready to fight any one who comes to take it."

"You will have no chance to fight if Armistead carries out his plan. Do you not understand? Two mine-walkers will steal into your patio, overpower the watchman and take the mine. After that you can never retake it; for those who will then be in possession will not only use every precaution against surprise, but they will have the law on their side."

"You are mistaken. We would take it from them if we had to bring every man in the Sierra to do it. Victoria cried passionately. "But there is no need to consider that; for they shall never obtain possession of it."

"Then," Lloyd said gravely, "you must keep better guard. I, a stranger, rode unquestioned into your patio. Why might not a hundred men do the same?"

"She stared at him for a moment, and as she drew her dark brows together over her blazing eyes, he saw all the imperious force of her character written in her face."

"It shall never happen again," she said. "If it does, everyone in charge shall go on the instant. Yonder is Don Mariano now. Wait for me a moment, senior."

"She rose and walked rapidly away to the mouth of the tunnel, where Don Mariano had indeed appeared and was standing, giving some orders. Lloyd watched her draw him aside and speak for a few minutes with low-toned vehemence, and evidently to his great surprise; then both turned and came toward him."

"The bronzed, grave Mexican greeted Lloyd with a certain stiffness in his courtesy. It was plain that he thought the warning which had been given the impetuous young woman at his side should have been reserved for his ear."

"Dona Victoria tells me that you have done us a great service, senior," he said, after they had shaken hands. "Have you reason to be certain of what you have told her—that it is intended to take possession of the Santa Cruz by means of a surprise?"

"I have very good reason to be certain of it, senior," Lloyd answered. "But even if I had not such reason, he could not forbear adding, 'I should know that it would be the thing most likely to be attempted, and therefore to be guarded against.'"

happens we have been a little careless—we have gone on in our accustomed manner, forgetting the treacherous ways of the gringos."

"All gringos are not treacherous," Victoria interposed quickly. "Senior Lloyd has come here to warn us against his own countryman, to do us a service which we can not repay. But for him we might—I believe that we should—have lost the mine."

"She turned to Lloyd, her eyes now all smiling and glowing. "How can we thank you, senior?"

"I am sufficiently thanked, seniorita, if the warning I have given proves of service to you," he answered. "Do not forget that you have some one else to thank besides me." He glanced as he spoke at the note still in her hand.

"Ah, yes; the seniorita! Will you assure her of my gratitude?"

"Do you think it possible that she would care to come into the Sierra?" she asked.

"I am sure that she would be delighted to do so," Lloyd answered confidently.

"Then I will write and ask her to come. But you, senior,—you will go now to Las Joyas? My mother will wish to see and thank you."

"Nothing, however, was further from his wishes or intentions than to go to Las Joyas for the thanks of Dona Beatriz. In fact, all that he now desired, having accomplished his errand, was to get away as speedily as possible."

"Many thanks, seniorita!" Lloyd answered, beckoning the boy who held his horse to bring the animal up; "but it is not possible for me to have the pleasure of going to Las Joyas at this time. May I beg that you will present my respectful salutations to Dona Beatriz and assure her—"

"But Victoria interrupted his compliments ruthlessly. "You are going away—after what you have done for us—without entering our house!" she exclaimed.

"That is impossible, senior,—I can not allow it."

"He held out his hand, smiling. "I am going to San Andres, and have come out of my way to visit Santa Cruz; so now I must get on quickly. Another time I will have the pleasure of visiting Las Joyas."

"When the seniorita Americana comes?"

"Hardly then, I fear; but later, perhaps. And now adios, seniorita! Adios senior! My best wishes for your success in holding the mine."

A few minutes later he was again on the mountain trail, with the great cross of the Santa Cruz behind him, and the memory of a pair of very reproachful dark eyes accompanying him."

CHAPTER XVI.

AN ENCOUNTER ON THE TRAIL

At that point in the winding gorge where the first and last view of the cross over the mine was to be obtained, Lloyd turned in his saddle for a final glance at the pictures que scene dominated by the great symbol; and then rode on, only to be surprised, if not startled, a minute later, by the sudden appearance of a man in the road before him."

There would have been nothing surprising in this if the man, like himself, had been following the trail; but he sprang down the mountain side into the path; and this Fra Diavolo mode of appearing is, in the Sierra, likely to startle all but those of the strongest nerves. Lloyd's nerves were strong as nerves are made; but when the agile figure landed on the road, his hand quickly and instinctively went to the revolver which, like everyone else in the country, he carried attached to a belt buckled around his waist. He did not draw it, however; for the next moment he saw that the man was Arturo Vallejo, who had taken a short cut across the hill and so intercepted him. His hand left the pistol, but the lines of his face settled sternly as he drew up his horse; for the young man paused directly in the narrow way."

"Have I forgotten anything, that you are good enough to follow me, Don Arturo?" he asked. "There should be some important reason to excuse your appearing in this manner before a horseman on a dangerous trail."

"Yes, you have forgotten something, senior," Arturo answered, with tone and manner offensive in the extreme. "You have forgotten to apologize to me."

"For what, may I ask?" Lloyd inquired, with the calmness which always angered the other more than rudeness could have done.

"For your insults—your insolence!" Arturo replied, speaking with set teeth and flashing eyes. "You come—as a spy I believe—to the mine which you are helping your countryman to steal; and refuse to tell your business to any one but a woman, a girl whom it is easy to deceive; but I am a man, and will not submit."

"I should call you a foolish boy," interposed Lloyd, with contempt. "Be kind enough to get out of my way. I have no time to waste on you, and no desire to do you any injury."

"The tone, even more than the words, infuriated Arturo. He made a step forward and seized the bridle of Lloyd's horse."

"You will not go until you apologize to me!" he cried passionately; "until you explain why you have dared to come to the Santa Cruz!"

Forbearance had plainly ceased to be a virtue. The threatening voice, the hand from which the horse reared back, suddenly roused in Lloyd an anger which, when roused, was all the more fierce for his ordinary quietude.

"Take your hand from my rein," he commanded, "or I will knock you down to teach you better manners!"

It is unnecessary to record the reply. Spanish is a language as rich in terms of vituperation and insult as in everything else, and what followed was extremely simple. Lloyd leaped forward, his hand shot out, and Arturo went down."

But he was on his feet again in a moment—for to ride over him was impossible,—clinging to the bridle of the now almost uncontrollable horse, and, in a paroxysm of fury, trying to drag Lloyd out of the saddle. Under ordinary circumstances he might as well have tried to drag from its base a rock like that against which Fitz James set his back; but the narrow ledge was a fearful perilous place for such a struggle, and Lloyd felt that in another instant he and his horse would go crashing down the mountain side together."

To dismount was the hope of saving himself and at the same time of riding himself of this young wildcat, for such he seemed.

To dismount from a plunging animal on a shelf only a few feet wide was, however, extremely difficult and dangerous, even if the assailant had not to be reckoned with. It did not even occur to him to use his pistol against the latter; for, as he had truly said, he had no desire to injure him seriously, but only to be rid of him as expeditiously as possible. So, taking his foot from the stirrup, he was in the act of leaping from the saddle, when a plunge of the horse and a blow from Arturo, coming together, sent him backward over the precipice—down—down."

At the same moment the frightened horse, tearing his rein from the hand of the startled assailant, dashed off widely along the trail, the loud ruck of his flying hoof-beats mingling with the crushing sound with which the man fell through the undergrowth that covered the steep hillside. As both sounds died away, an awful silence followed,—a silence in which Arturo stood sabbat, a picture of consternation and terror. After a minute which seemed to him an age of fearful listening, he approached the edge of the abyss and peered over. A few broken boughs and bushes near the edge showed where Lloyd had first fallen, but of his farther progress no sign was to be seen from above. The green verdure of the mountain covered the path his body had made as completely as the ocean covers all trace of the swimmer who had sunk beneath its waves. Somewhere down there in the endless depths of the gorge—perhaps on the rocks, perhaps in the stream that filled the stillness with its voice—he lay, senseless, of course; dead, almost certainly."

White and shaking, Arturo drew back. What, he asked himself, could he do? Surely this was a terrible and unlooked-for result to have followed to simple a thing as demanding an apology for an insult. But it was an accident,—purely an accident. The man's horse had thrown him,—might have thrown him if he, Arturo, had never appeared. Why, then, should he allow his connections with the accident to be known? There could not be the least doubt that the man was dead. To entertain any doubt of this, to seek assistance and make a search for him, would be to confess his own knowledge and how it was obtained. That he felt to be out of the question. Every instinct of his shrinking soul prompted him to fly from the spot and to be silent. The man might in time be missed and his body found—or it might not. The last was more probable; for no one ever entered, it was hardly likely that any one ever would enter, the wild depths below. And for his share in the deed there were no witnesses. He looked guiltily around, sweeping the green, silent mountain sides with his glance, and turning it half-daintily, toward the brilliant sapphires sky, where he knew well one witness sat. Then, with a wild, overmastering impulse of flight, he turned and the next moment was following in the track of the flying horse down the gorge."

An hour later Victoria left the mine. She was alone as she had come; and, while her mule paced slowly but sure-footedly along the narrow trail, her thoughts were with the man who had so lately preceded her on this road. She was oppressed by a sense of obligation toward him which had found no adequate expression; for after Lloyd's departure, inquiry into the precautions taken against surprise fully revealed the fact that his warning had indeed saved the mine from easy capture. And he, a stranger, a gringo, had come to give them this warning, and then had gone away without any return for so great a service! This was what she was saying to herself with a passionate regret, which was not lessened by the recollection that Lloyd had put aside thanks and refused to accept even hospitality. It was characteristic of her ardent, self-willed nature that, despite this fact, she was considering how she could reach and force him to allow them to discharge in some way the obligation under which he placed them. "Obstacles; things to be overcome," was a formula which so far

in life had expressed her practice, if not her theory; and she had no intention of being daunted now in her determination to express the deep and growing sense of gratitude which burned within her."

But, absorbed as she was in these thoughts she was not so much preoccupied with them, as to fail to observe certain significant signs when she reached the point on the road where Arturo had lay dead. Lloyd. She drew up her mule sharply, and looked with surprise at the deep prints of iron-shod hoofs where Lloyd's horse had struggled, reared, and partially slipped backward over the edge of the precipice, recovering himself only at the cost of several inches of the path. Noting this, her quick eye also perceived the broken and crushed growth on the mountain side below. Clearly something or somebody had fallen there. Her glance swept the road as it lay before her; and, seeing there also the deep indentations of the horse's hoofs as he started on his frantic run, she knew that he had not gone down into the gorge. What, then, had fallen? She sprang from her saddle and, advancing as close to the edge as safety would permit, passed her arm around a tree to preserve herself from falling, and leaning over, gazed anxiously downward."

Suddenly she uttered a cry. Her keen glance detected something which had entirely escaped Arturo's shrinking observation. This was Lloyd's hat, lodged in the branches of a shrub where he had first fallen. Instantly she knew that it was he—the man of whom she had been thinking with so deep a sense of the service he had rendered her—who lay in the dark, green depths far below. For a moment horror unnerved her, and she clung to the tree, shuddering and sick. She did not ask herself how such a thing could have occurred, what could have startled the horse, or how so good a horseman could have been unseated. Those questions would present themselves later; just now she only thought of the terrible fact that Lloyd had plainly gone down where it did not seem possible that any man could fall and live."

She made the sign of the cross and her pale lips quivered in prayer for a moment. Then, bracing herself with a strong effort as she drew back from the abyss, she asked herself what was the first thing to do, or, rather, how best to set about that first thing, which was to reach and recover, whether dead or alive, the man who lay below. Seizing the rein of her mule, she was about to spring into the saddle again, when around the shoulder of the height which hid the mine from view came the train of animals laden with ore for the hacienda de beneficio at the mouth of the gorge. She drew up her hand, and the gesture, together with a quick word of command, brought the train to a halt; the string of mules stood still, while the men in charge of them hastened forward to her."

"See!" she said, pointing to the hoof-prints at the edge of the road, the broken boughs and hat below. "The senior who came to the mine a little while ago has fallen there. We must get him. Run back to the mine—run, Salvador—and tell Don Mariano to come quickly, to bring ropes and best men."

"Si, seniorita," answered Salvador, and was gone like a flash. The other men meanwhile scrutinized eagerly the signs pointed out to them and agreed as to their significance.

"Yes, yes, it is true," they said; "a man has certainly fallen there,—pobreccio!"

And then one of them drew attention to another telltale sign in the road—the print of hoof-beels ground deeply into the soil, which, being a rich, black loam, never became very hard.

"Mir!" he cried. "The senior dismounted, he struggled with his horse, and in the struggle was thrown down the hillside,—it is plain!"

"Yes, it is plain," they agreed again. But as Victoria looked at the marks indicated, a sudden fear clutched her heart. What if those were not Lloyd's footprints? What if he had been waylaid and assaulted, killed perhaps, almost at the gate of the Santa Cruz? And if this were so, who had assaulted him? Certainly no man of the lower class; for all these were the ordinary sandals of the country, which have no heels, being simply flat pieces of leather, cut out roughly to suit the foot and tied on with leather strings. All the men around her now wore such sandals, all the miners were them, and all the workmen at the hacienda de beneficio. If, therefore, the foot-prints were not Lloyd's, they were those of some other man who wore boots; and at the Santa Cruz only three men wore these—Don Mariano, the foreman of the mine, and Arturo. She tried to recollect if Arturo had been at the mine when she left it. She could not recall having seen him; but if he were there, he would certainly come now with the party of rescue. Surely, surely they were slow, this party of rescue! She wrung her hands together in her impatience."

"Run, Silvio,—run!" she said to another of the men. "Tell them to make haste!"

"They are coming now, seniorita!" called out a man who was watching at the turn of the road. A moment later they appeared—a number of men bearing coils of rope, and followed by Don Mariano, but not by Arturo. So much she saw at once, then dismissed him from her

mind and gave all her attention to the work to be done. Don Mariano, who had been exceedingly incredulous when he received the message delivered by the panting Salvador, was quickly converted to her opinion when he saw the broken boughs and Lloyd's hat on the mountain side.

"I fear there is no doubt he is down there," said Don Mariano; "and if so, he is certainly dead."

"Dead or alive, we must find him!" cried Victoria. "Quick!—who will go down?"

Half a dozen volunteered, Don Mariano selected three men—lean, muscular, lithe as greyhounds, noted even among their comrades for the great strength which distinguishes the native Mexican. These, taking ropes with them, the ends of which were held by those above, let themselves over the edge of the precipice and went down its almost perpendicular side with the mounting skill of true sons of the Sierra. Following Lloyd's track, they were soon lost to sight in the dense foliage; but their path could be traced by the sounds with which they broke through the undergrowth as they went downward."

The group above listened and waited in almost complete silence. Now and again a man spoke in a low tone to his neighbor, setting forth how he would have proceeded; or some one uttered a pious ejaculation as the sounds coming up from below made everyone start with fear lest one of the rescuers had lost his footing and fallen to the rocks and forest; or on entering into the thick growth they had discarded the ropes, which lay slackly on the hillside. How long this suspense lasted no one knew; but presently a prolonged shout far below brought to every lip the cry, "They have found him!"

Then the question, *how* had they found him—dead or alive? It was a question impossible to answer, however, until that slow, laborious ascent, hidden from sight but audible to the ear, which now began, should be over. Don Mariano alone uttered a word of hope.

"They found him not more than halfway down the mountain," he said. "He must have been stopped by some tree strong enough to support his body; so there is a chance—barely a chance—that he may be alive."

It seemed a chance hardly worth hoping for; but when the men, after their toilsome climb in the gloomy depths of verdure, came once more into sight, their first shout to those above then was:

"He lives!"

TO BE CONTINUED

JOE'S REWARD

Joe was a strong, rugged boy, well equipped for the struggles of life, but his few companions did not think that his path was lined with roses. Although no one ever heard him complain, sometimes his eyes lost much of their brightness, and he walked as if he were carrying a heavy burden. Those who knew him best said he carried his burden like a man, though he was but fourteen years old. His father had been killed by a premature explosion in the coal mine where he worked. A year later Joe's mother died, leaving him to care for two sisters, aged six and ten years respectively, and a brother four years old.

Joe worked at the great crusher at the mine and earned \$5 a week, which supplied his little family with the actual necessities of life, while the wives of the miners gave the children the clothing their own little ones had outgrown.

During the long summer days, Joe had secured jobs after his work at the mine was finished. His extra earnings he had saved for Christmas for he knew how unhappy his sisters and brother would be on Christmas morning to find their stockings empty when the other children of the small town would be talking of the beautiful presents Santa Claus had brought them.

It was Christmas Eve, and Joe went to the woods near by to get the box containing his earnings, which he had buried beneath a large oak tree. With a light heart he cleared away the snow, but was panic-stricken to find the hole empty, for someone had seen him bury the box and had stolen it while he was at work. For a few minutes the disappointment of the poor boy was overwhelming, and he sat down in the snow almost broken-hearted, until he remembered what his good mother had said to him the morning she kissed him good-bye for the last time:

"My dear boy," she said, "I must leave to you the care of the little ones; they are all I have to give you. Never abandon them; and don't give up if matters no how dark life may seem, for the sun will shine for you again."

"No, I won't give up," said Joe aloud, as he sprang up, "but I don't see how the kids are to have any Christmas this year. We'll go to the 5 o'clock Mass and when we come home they will run to see what old Santa brought them, and they will find nothing. I can't stand that. Something has got to be done now. I don't know just which way to turn for I can't make up what I lost. I was going to buy a turkey and two dolls and a sled, for Kate and Sue love dolls, and Frank would go wild over a sled, sure."

Joe walked slowly to the house and went to his own room and knelt before the statue of St. Joseph his

mother had given him the Christmas before she died, and prayed: "St. Joseph, I have always trusted to you when in trouble. You have helped me many times when I was down and I am pretty low today. Will you help me out and I won't forget it? That is all, amen."

Joe felt stronger after he had supplicated the aid of his patron, and although the snow was piling up in great drifts in the streets of the little Pennsylvania town he did not think he could afford to be idle if it were a holiday at the mines. He knew he could not get a job in the town, so he decided to go to Mr. Gilbert's, a farmer who conducted a large farm a few miles distant, and try to get employment husking corn, for he knew that the farmer had his large barn filled with corn taken from the stalks without being stripped of the husks.

Bidding the little ones good bye, and cautioning them to be careful with the fire, he started down the road singing a hymn the Sunday school had been practicing for a month:

"O blessed St. Joseph, how great was thy worth,
The one chosen shadow of God upon earth,
The father of Jesus—ah then wilt thou be,
Sweet spouse of our Lady, a father to me."

Mr. Gilbert was a wealthy farmer and had much work to be done, so cheerfully gave Joe a job for the day. At noon he kindly took the lad to dinner and encouraged him by relating his own experience, having come to the locality twenty years previous a poor boy and by his industry and perseverance had secured what he modestly termed a competency.

Joe feeling more cheerful was sent back to work and was calculating what he could purchase with the dollar promised him when he heard the fearful cry of fire. He rushed out in the snow and saw a large tenement—a short distance from the barn wrapped in flames. There were but few men on the place, the majority having gone to town to prepare for the great feast, so there was but little hope of saving the frame structure, and after a vain struggle it was abandoned to the flames. The men were standing idly by listening to the cracking timber when they heard a fearful cry and saw a woman running down the hill begging them to save two children who had been locked in a back room to protect them from playing in the snow while she went to a neighboring house. It was discovered later that one of them was the child of Mr. Gilbert and had been entrusted to the care of the woman while his mother went to town. The men were stupefied by the hopeless-ness of trying to rescue the poor little ones.

Mr. Gilbert was the only one capable of making an effort to reach the room in which the children were locked. His only hope was in securing a ladder to reach the room from playing in the snow while she went to a neighboring house. It was discovered later that one of them was the child of Mr. Gilbert and had been entrusted to the care of the woman while his mother went to town. The men were stupefied by the hopeless-ness of trying to rescue the poor little ones.

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