

A DAUGHTER OF THE SIERRA

BY CHRISTIAN REID

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CHAPTER XIII—CONTINUED

INTO THE SIERRA

"Oh, no," he said, "that won't do. I know Lloyd. He isn't afraid of anything."

"He certainly isn't afraid of breaking his contract," Armistead returned. "I found him, dead broke, in the streets of San Francisco, and brought him down here with me on the understanding that he was to give me the aid of his knowledge of the country, the people and the language whenever I needed it. Yet now, when I need it most, he goes off and leaves me in the lurch—for what reason I can't pretend to say. Perhaps he wants to marry the Santa Cruz girl."

"That would do either. Lloyd isn't a marrying man."

"I don't care what kind of a man he is," Armistead said irritably, "further than that he is not the kind of a man that suits me, or who can be relied on to keep his word. So I want somebody—and want him as once—who has the qualifications I require. I believe that you have them, so I offer you a rare opportunity. Will you take it?"

"I am not sure of possessing the qualifications you are good enough to take for granted," Thornton answered. "You had better tell me what you want me to do."

"The first business I shall want you to undertake will be to assist me in getting together a number of men sufficient to take possession of the Santa Cruz Mine."

"By the same kind of force you would employ in ejecting a tenant from a house he refuses to leave, Trafford's title to the mine is good; but the people who are in possession of it now will neither resign possession nor accept any terms of compromise, so there is nothing to do but to eject them. I hope to accomplish this without a conflict, if I can succeed in surprising the mine. But I must have a force of men I can rely on, and some one who understands managing Mexicans. You, I think, are the man for the purpose; and therefore I offer you inducements which are very well worth your while to consider."

"They are certainly very considerable inducements," Thornton replied, rising to his feet; "and I am much flattered by your opinion of my qualifications. But I'm obliged to decline your offer. I'll stick to the Caridad, thank you."

Armistead, rising also, regarded him frowningly.

"What is the meaning of this?" he asked. "I never thought that you were distinguished for indifference to your own interests."

"Neither am I," Thornton answered. "I'm as keen for my own interest as most men. But there are some things a man can touch and some he can't. I mean no reflection on you, but I'll be hanged if I touch this business of the Santa Cruz. Good-morning. They'll be looking for me at the office."

As he walked rapidly up the road, Armistead gazed after him with a slightly sardonic expression.

"Some things a man can touch and some he can't!" he repeated. "It's very plain, my good fellow, where your scruples have been developed. Miss Rivers has got in here, work pretty well. What a fool a man is to believe that a woman thinks any the better of him for accepting her opinions! Take a big tone, let her understand that she doesn't know what she is talking about, and go your own way—that's the only course to adopt with a woman." He turned and went on toward the town.

"Evidently there's no help to be had from anybody connected with the Caridad," his thoughts continued; "so where the deuce am I to turn for the assistance I need?"

It was a difficult question to answer, and he was considering it as he walked down the long, narrow street of the town, past the open doors of the one-storied dwellings and shops, until he reached the flowery plaza. Here he sat down on a bench; and still absorbed in the consideration of his problem, did not observe any of the loungers—few at this hour of the day—who occupied the other benches in sight.

But one person who lounged on a seat not far off observed him closely. This was a man, evidently not a Mexican and probably an American, of dissipated and shabby appearance, but about whom there hung the indefinable and almost ineradicable air of a gentleman. Presently he rose, walked deliberately over to the bench where Armistead was seated, and sat down beside him.

"How do you do, Mr. Armistead?" he said in a refined and educated voice. "I didn't know you were in Mexico."

Armistead started, turned around, and with a single glance took in the condition and probable needs of the man who addressed him. Figuratively, he buttoned his pockets, as he said coldly:

"I don't remember having met you."

"Probably not," the other answered with a faint, bitter smile. "Times have changed with me since we met last. But you'll probably remember me when I tell you that my name is Randolph, and that I was connected with the Silver Queen Mine when you visited it three years ago."

"Oh!" Armistead adjusted his eyes, glasses and scrutinized the good looking, dissipated ravaged face before him. Of course he remembered the visit to the Silver Queen—a mine in Arizona which had been offered to Trafford, and the manner in which he had been entertained by the staff of the mine, of whom Randolph was one. Armistead had thought that he knew something of the way in which managers of mines frequently spend the money of toiling capitalist-owners afar, but even his eyes had been opened at the Silver Queen. Such extravagance of expenditure and unchecked dissipation on the part of all concerned he had never seen elsewhere. The staff had left nothing undone to give him a good time, and the memory of it was not likely to be forgotten. He thought it probable that he should now have to repay a little of that exuberant hospitality.

"I beg your pardon, Mr. Randolph," he said politely but not warmly. "Of course I remember you now; but you have—altered a good deal since I saw you then."

"A little, no doubt," said Randolph, dryly. "Those were rare old times at the Silver Queen, but the bottom fell out of that when you reported against the mine (rather shabby of you, by the by, considering all the champagne we poured out to give you a rosy view of it); and since then I've found it rather hard to find or keep a good position."

Armistead did not think this remarkable, but forbore to say so. "You have been long in Mexico?" he asked.

"I've been at one or two mines, but—didn't stay. Yes—as he caught Armistead's significant glance—"of course you can see what the trouble is. My habits are bad."

"That's a pity," said Armistead. "No man with bad habits can keep employment very long, you know."

"If I had ever doubted the fact, my experience lately would have convinced me of it, so I've sworn off—no not in the usual way. I believe I've a little will-power left; and it's life or death with me now to exert it. I have got as far down as a man can go and not be a beggar. I haven't come to that yet, though I've seen ever since I sat down here that it's what you are afraid of. Don't be afraid. I've no intention of asking you for money; but I would like some work, if you have any to give."

A singular expression came over Armistead's face. He did not reply immediately, but gazed at the other for a moment with eyes so keen and cold that they seemed searching him through. Then he said slowly:

"It's a little odd. I am just now in need of a man to do some work for me, and I have not known where to find him. You might do—if I could have any assurance that you would keep sober."

"I can give you no other assurance than my promise," Randolph answered. "But, as I've told you, it's a life and death fight with me now; and if I fail, the remedy's in your own hands. You can discharge me."

"I should certainly do that without a moment's hesitation," said Armistead, coldly. "Meanwhile I'll give you a trial. He rose as he spoke. "Come to my room. We can settle matters there."

CHAPTER XV. AT THE SANTA CRUZ

The Santa Cruz Mine, over which such conflicting interests were struggling, and around which old wrongs, exasperations and bitterness were waking to new life, lay deep in one of those mountain fastnesses where Nature seems to delight in hiding her richest treasures. The only practicable approach to it was by a canon which opened out of the valley of Las Joyas, and with a constraining common in the Sierra, was as stern and wild of aspect as the plain was gentle and pastoral. A narrow road or trail—

it was no more than the last, worn by the passing feet of innumerable mules and men, wound along the side of the canon, with precipitous heights rising above; while below there was a sheer drop of hundreds of feet to dark, green depths, into which no ray of sunlight ever pierced, and where a ceaseless stream filled the chasm with the tumult of pouring waters. Wild enough at its outset, the gorge grew wilder as it penetrated farther into the heart of the giant hills, until at length it terminated in a natural cul-de-sac, where a great mountain, like a couchant lion, closed the way, and where, high in the side of this height, lay the Santa Cruz Mine.

Six hundred feet above the bottom of the gorge, into which the stream, leaping in a white cataract down an arroyo, plunged with a thunderous roar, was the arched entrance of the main tunnel into the mine; and before this the patio for the sorting of ores, buttressed on its outer side by an enormous dump of waste rock. And here, crowning a mass of boulders, stood a tall cross, the first object to meet the gaze of any one advancing up the canon.

"In hoc signo vinces!" Lloyd murmured to himself, as he rounded a corner of the gorge and caught sight of the great symbol, so high uplifted and so impressively relieved against the mountain side. He felt himself suddenly thrilled, not only by its marvellous picturesqueness, towering at the head of this mountain defile, and by the poetry of the faith which placed it there, but also by a conviction that it stood as an omen of victory for those who held the mine beneath it. The words of Dona Beatriz recurred to his memory. "I swear by the holy cross that stands over the mine!" she had

said. And what she swore was that neither the man who claimed it nor any one whom he sent should ever possess the Santa Cruz. At this moment Lloyd, too, could have sworn that they never would. For, as he walked his horse along the narrow way, with the roar of the torrent below filling his ears, the stern heights encompassing him and the majestic cross dominating the wild grandeur of the scene, he saw how admirably situated the mine was for defense, commanding as it did the head of the canon, with no other way of approach than the trail which he was following, and which, winding along the side of the gorge, finally entered the patio on a level. Unless surprised, the Santa Cruz could never be taken by force, if those who held it were minded to resist. And that they would be minded he could not doubt, knowing as he did the indomitable temper of one at least of the women who were its possessors. It was impossible not to smile at the thought that Trafford, whose progress had been so triumphant for many years, and whose road to fortune had been marked by the ruin of whoever opposed him, might now at last have a taste of defeat at the hands of his own daughter.

But they should not allow a stranger to ride unchallenged into their patio!" he thought impatiently, as he entered, and looked over a scene of a kind very familiar to him—men bringing ore out of the mine; groups of boys seated on the ground rapidly breaking and sorting it into heaps, from which numbers of mules were being loaded, to carry all, save what was known as the export ore, down to the arastras at the mouth of the canon, for reduction by the ancient process of Mexico.

It was a busy and animated scene; and so absorbed was each person in his particular occupation that it was several minutes before any one approached the newcomer, who, drawing up his horse, quietly waited. Presently a young man, detaching himself from a group of men and mules, came forward. It was not altogether a pleasant surprise that he proved to be Arturo Vallejo, who on his part was evidently astonished as unpleasantly as possible by the sight of Lloyd.

"Buenos dias, señor!" he said coldly and with evident suspicion. "You have business here—in the Santa Cruz?"

"Else I should not be here, señor," Lloyd answered. "I wish to see your father, Don Mariano Vallejo."

"My father is just now in the mine, señor. But I am in charge of the patio. You can tell me your business."

"I would prefer to speak to Don Mariano," said Lloyd. "With your permission, I will wait for him."

"The words were civil enough, but it was, perhaps, the manner of the other which exasperated Arturo. At all events, his reply was distinctly rude:

"It can not be permitted, señor, that you shall stay here. We do not allow strangers—who may be enemies or spies—in our patio."

"A very good rule," returned Lloyd, coolly; "but it would be better if you took more precautions to enforce it. You should certainly not permit a stranger to ride, as I have done, unchallenged into your patio."

The young man flushed angrily. The admonition, so plainly justified, would not have been agreeable coming from any one. Coming from this source, it was intolerable.

"I stand in no need of advice from you," he said haughtily. "We are able to take care of ourselves. You would not have entered if the watchmen had not been off guard just then. It is, however, impossible that you can be allowed to remain."

"In that case," said Lloyd, with the same exasperating coolness, "I will trouble you to say to Don Mariano when he comes out of the mine that I will see him at Las Joyas."

This was something Arturo had not anticipated.

"At Las Joyas!" he repeated violently. "It is impossible—you can not venture to intrude there!"

Lloyd smiled.

"You may be in charge of the patio of the Santa Cruz, Don Arturo," he said, "but I hardly imagine that you are in charge of Las Joyas. Kindly give my message to your father."

He was about to turn his horse, when the young Mexican laid a quick hand on the rein.

"I may not be in charge of Las Joyas, señor," he cried, "but I feel it my duty to prevent such an intrusion on the ladies who are there alone. If you must see my father, you can wait in the office yonder"—he waved his hand toward a small building beside the mouth of the tunnel—"until he comes out of the mine."

"You are extremely kind," said Lloyd, with subdued sarcasm; "but I think it will perhaps be better if I go."

To Las Joyas, he was about to add when the words were stopped on his lips by the appearance of a figure which suddenly rode into the patio. It was a feminine figure, rebozo shrouded about the head and shoulders, but not so closely that it was possible to mistake the beautiful face and eyes of Victoria Calderon. As she entered, she halted, lightly and easily without assistance from her saddle to the ground, and called to a boy from one of the ore heaps to take her mule. At the same moment Lloyd also dismounted and advanced quickly toward her.

"Dona Victoria," he said, "I am happy to meet you!"

She started as she turned toward him, extreme surprise in her face

and manner, but, as he felt at once, no trace of suspicion.

"Senior Lloyd!" she exclaimed. "It is very unexpected to meet you here."

"I am sure of it," he answered. "I am here to see Don Mariano, but I am told that he is in the mine just now."

"But no doubt that he never remains there very long," she said. "So you can wait a little, or"—she looked at him with sudden keenness—"if your business relates to the mine, you can transact it with me. It is as you like."

"It is as you like, rather," he said. "My business certainly relates to the mine; but it was because I was unwilling to disturb your mother and yourself that, instead of going to Las Joyas, I came here to see Don Mariano."

"Whatever concerns the mine concerns my mother and myself first of all, señor," she replied; "and you need not have hesitated to disturb us. What is your business? Do you, perhaps, bring some message from the man who is trying to take the mine from us?"

"No, señorita. I have no connection with Mr. Armistead in the matter of the Santa Cruz, and bring no message from him. I shall be glad to tell you what I have come to say to Don Mariano. But"—he glanced at the people around them—"I do not find a more quiet place in which to talk."

At this moment Arturo approached them.

"I have told the señor that he can wait for my father in the office," he said stiffly to Victoria.

"It is not necessary that he should wait; he can speak to me," she rejoined, with an air of authority which somewhat amused Lloyd.

"Give your horse to José," she said to the latter, indicating the boy who had taken her mule; "and we will find a place to talk."

She turned as she spoke, not toward the office as he expected, but in the opposite direction—toward the outer edge of the patio, which, being enlarged by the vast accumulation of waste rock from the mine, sharply overhung the mountain side. Here, on a pile of timbers awaiting use, she sat down. There was no thought of the surroundings in her mind, but Lloyd could not but be struck by them: the great heights towering into the burning blue of the jewel like sky, the thunder of leaping waters, the strong sunlight smiling the rocks and pines and wealth of verdure in the wild gorge below. It all made a frame of stupendous grandeur and picture-queens for the busy scene around the mouth of the mine and for the figure of the girl, whose face looked up at him out of the blue folds of her rebozo with steady dark eyes.

"Will you not sit down, señor?" she said. "This is a good place to speak, for no one can overhear you here."

"Thanks, señorita!" he answered. And as he seated himself beside her on the timbers, he drew from his pocket the pale gray note with its faint violet fragrance, which seemed before him. "As I have said, I did not expect to have the pleasure of meeting you," he went on; "but, nevertheless, on the chance of doing so, I thought it best to bring this."

With a wondering expression she took the note, and the wonder had evidently deepened when, after reading it, she looked at him again.

"This," she said, "is from the señorita Americana—the daughter of the Gerente of the Caridad, with whom I travelled up the quebrada?"

"The same," Lloyd answered. "Miss Rivers remembers you so well that she hoped you would also remember her."

TO BE CONTINUED

HUCKLEBERRY MOLLY

Huckleberry Molly trudged up the steep path to the little house at the foot of the mountain. The long basket on her back, partly supported by the band of cloth that passed across her forehead, was half full of huckleberries. As she sank down wearily on the top step she slipped the heavy basket from her shoulders.

Alice Gordon came out on the small porch. Her cheeks were flushed and there were berry stains on her apron. The pleasant odor of boiling fruit came from the house.

"What! Alice saw Huckleberry Molly she frowned a little. At times Alice, in common with some of her neighbors, got a little tired of Molly's visits; but the girl's natural kindness of heart always came to the top as it did now.

"My, you're tired, aren't you, Molly?" she said. "And it's so warm! How far have you carried that heavy basket?"

Molly smiled up at her. "Eight-nine miles, to-day, over on Pine Mountain. Huckleberries thick over there. You want some more?"

Alice Gordon considered. "Well, I've got sixteen quarts put up already. That ought to be enough, with the rest of my fruit."

Without a word Huckleberry Molly reached for her basket and began to slip the supporting band round her forehead.

"Wait!" said Alice. "I think I will take them, Molly. I'll get a pan and you measure them out. How much are they now?"

"Two bits quart. Me give you big quarts, you good to me long time." When Molly had measured out the berries Alice brought her some cool lemonade and something to eat. The

old shanty was plainly glad to sit on the shady porch and rest while she ate the luncheon. When at last she rose to go, she looked up at the towering peak of Old Eagle that reared its rocky summit a thousand feet above the house.

"You stay here this winter?" she asked. "You live in this house?"

"Why, of course!" said Alice. "While my husband's work is here we'll live right here. This is our house." She said it a little proudly as she glanced round at the porch and the bright little flower garden in front.

"I like better you not live here this winter!" Molly muttered. "Heap snow! Big, big snow—more than for long time. Me? I know—Injun know 'bout big snow. Old Eagle slide—mebbe kill!"

Alice Gordon laughed. "Mercy!" she said. "Are you a witch, Molly? How do you know there'll be big snow this winter?"

"Injun buck bill bear last week—much fat, heap fat. Injuns know. Can't fool old Molly."

Mumbling to herself, she shuffled awkwardly down the path.

When John Gordon came home from work that night, his young wife told him of Huckleberry Molly's doleful prediction.

"Well," he said, "I guess if any one knows, it's an Indian. People up here say they never fall. Seven years ago was the last big snow—more than twenty feet deep on the level."

Alice laughed incredulously. "How absurd! Why, twenty feet would be clear over the roof of this house!"

"I should say so!" John Gordon replied smiling. "This house is only fifteen feet high. We're likely to get snow under if we stay here, but there's no danger of Old Eagle's sliding. There've been plenty of slides round here—the railway knows all about them—but Old Eagle has never slid. They say it's too steep—the snow keeps sloughing off and doesn't stay on long enough to form an avalanche. So don't you worry, dear."

After supper they took the baby out on the cool porch, and sat in the dusk swinging slowly in the hammock. The baby in his white nightgown was asleep on Alice's arm. Their young hearts were full of content as they watched the stars come out one by one in the small patch of sky over the high peaks round them.

At first when the young railway man had brought her to this wild, deep nook in the mountains, Alice had been filled with something almost like fear. From the pleasant, level stretches of southern California, to which she had always been accustomed, to these deep, dark canons and towering crags of the High Cascades had been for her a marvelous and not altogether pleasing change; but gradually she had become used to the place, and had grown to love the great gray rocks and the hardy green ferns that grew round them, the swift cascades, from which the mountains got their name, and the wild, unconquered fierceness of it all.

August with its hot, dreamy days melted into September and the smoky, hazy days began. Far off there were mountain fires. Some days the sun shone only as a yellow ball and at night the moon was red. Then October came and with it the flaming colors of changing leaves. Old Eagle was afire with red and yellow.

In October, Alice rose one morning and, looking from her window, could not repress a cry of wonder and delight. Halfway up Old Eagle the wonderful colors were suddenly blotted out by an expanse of glistening white.

It was the first snow that Alice had ever seen, and for long periods that day she stood at the door and looked up at the mountain peaks. John enjoyed her childish delight in the spectacle.

"Come early," he said, with a laugh. "Here it is only the 7th of October and the first snow! I guess Huckleberry Molly knew what she was talking about, all right. It's likely to be a tough winter. The fellows down at the station say there'll be trouble a-plenty on the railway, just as there was seven years ago when not a wheel except the rotary snowplough turned for a whole month."

Alice looked at him with shining eyes.

"Oh," she said, "what an experience! How glad I am there to be lots of snow this winter! Think, John, I never even touched it in my life!"

October slipped into November. The days were short and dreary, and each brought either rain or snow. Early in December the snow began to fall in earnest. Flakes of almost incredible size floated down steadily all day and all night and all day again. Trains became irregular, and at last stopped running altogether.

Six miles below the mountain hamlet a freight train was stalled between two slides, and while standing there it was caught by another slide and carried bodily down into a canon seven hundred feet deep. A few days later a mountain slide covered with green timber tore down in an avalanche and wrecked a long bridge over a ravine.

The railway men worked long hours and risked their lives every day. Accidents occurred but no fatalities, and the men unconsciously went on keeping the road as clear as possible.

In the little house at the foot of Old Eagle, Alice Gordon did not fear any danger. Her neighbors from the valley below often came up to see her, and they assured her that no house in the hamlet was safer

than hers. Old Eagle had never slid—would never slide.

Day by day the snow crept higher; it completely covered the windows and then the roof. John had cut a narrow passage-way upward from the porch so that he and his wife could go up to the surface by steep, hard-packed snow steps.

People on snowshoes walked over one another's houses and in some places over the snow-buried electric light wires. In the hamlet the long, covered snow shed that had been built years before for the children to use in going back and forth between home and school was in constant use. Leading off from it at intervals were smaller sheds that connected the various houses with that main artery of passage. Thus the women could visit one another without exposing themselves to the cold and the snow. Little by little, however, the snow sifted into the sheds through the openings that had been left for light and in time you had to bend almost double in order to get through. Fortunately, the little town was supplied with electric light; otherwise life in the darkened, buried houses would have been much less endurable. No shed connected John Gordon's house with the main artery, but there was a hard packed path that went straight from the steps in the snow to the nearest covered passage.

At Christmas every one of the twenty homes in the place had its own Christmas tree, and there were happy gatherings, good dinners and much laughter. Turkeys and chickens had been brought in on the rotary snowplough and the one store of the village was well supplied with necessary staples. There was no fear of famine as yet, but no one knew at what moment a slide more disastrous than the others might cut off the supplies from outside.

At last, a week or two after Christmas, the snow ceased falling and it began to rain. For two days rain fell without ceasing. A warm chinook wind had blown up from the south and the snow began to loosen on the mountain sides. The men in the village became anxious. More than one would have given much more than he would have sent his wife and children out of the place, but no trains had been running for three weeks. Several families had moved to the schoolhouse to sleep; the seats had been taken up and school dismissed until conditions should become better.

Anxious eyes were lifted to Old Eagle, the tallest and steepest of all the mountain peaks. But many sloughs and minor slides that occurred renewed the feeling of confidence. Old Eagle could not slide.

On the second day of the rain Huckleberry Molly clambered awkwardly down the steep, narrow snow steps of the Gordon's house. When Alice opened the door, the old squaw stood looking at her strangely.

"You come!" she said. "Wrap baby. I carry. You get what you want—you come! Old Eagle going to slide soon—tonight—mebbe tomorrow—you come!"

Alice stared at her. She refused to be alarmed; she even felt a little indignant with the old squaw.

"Why, Molly," she said, "I should say not! I guess my husband knows whether there is any danger. And baby is sick, too—he had a touch of croup night before last. I shouldn't think of taking him out in this rain. There isn't a particle of danger. Every one says Old Eagle is safe!"

Huckleberry Molly listened patiently. Then she repeated stolidly: "You come. Old Molly know—Injun always know. You come. Old Eagle going to slide. Where your man?"

Alice became angry. "Molly," she cried, "I will not go! My husband would come and get me if there were any danger. He's off on the snowplough. He knows these mountains—he says Old Eagle is safe—they all say so."

Huckleberry Molly hesitated a moment, and then pushed her way into the house. "Where baby?" she asked. "Go get blanket. I wrap him up—carry him. You come!"

Alice Gordon was almost in tears with vexation. "Molly," she said, "you go away! I promise you that if I hear any noise that sounds like a slide I'll take baby and go. I'll run down through the snowshed."

"You no hear slide—all this snow over house! Rain now—much rain make snow loose on Old Eagle. You come—please!" The Indian woman began to coax. "We go down to depot or somebody's house down there."

"Molly, I tell you once for all—no! These other people who run away from their homes—they're afraid! I'm not afraid! I shall stay here!"

Without a word Huckleberry Molly gathered her blanket close round her and went out.

That night at 8 o'clock when John Gordon should have come home, Alice went to the door; she thought she would go up and watch for him. She opened the door and gave a low cry of horror. Before her rose a solid mass of frozen snow—the door way was completely blocked. The snow had caved in and the rain had turned it to ice.

For one moment her heart seemed to stand still—then it leaped violently. Trapped! It was utterly impossible to get through that wall of ice and snow. When John came—so she tried to assure herself—he would know what to do. He would break a way through that awful barrier and come to her and the baby down there under the snow.

But suppose he did not come! Last night Andy McDowell had not come home, and his wife had walked the floor all night. It might be

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