

A DAUGHTER OF THE SIERRA

BY CHRISTIAN REID

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CHAPTER X

ARMISTEAD IS CONFIDENTIAL

Stop, Lloyd!—you are going off surely! Isabel, why don't you make him stay to supper?

This was Mr. Rivers' cheerful shout from the rear, when he saw Lloyd taking leave of Miss Rivers at the door of the house which contained under one roof the offices of the Caridad Company and the residence of its General Manager.

"It's all right, papa," Isabel reassured him. "Mr. Lloyd is going after Mr. Armistead. He'll be back presently."

"Be sure and bring Armistead with you! Mr. Rivers called after the departing Lloyd. "Tell him we won't take any refusal."

"There's not the least probability of a refusal," Lloyd answered with a laugh, as he strode on at a rapid pace; for the Caridad house occupied a position midway between the village and the mountain which held the mine. From its door the road ran slightly downward for several hundred yards, between stone walls, beyond which lay green fields; and then, crossing by a bridge over a small stream that in the season of the rains had become a raging torrent, became the paved thoroughfare of the village, lined on both sides with narrow, raised sidewalks and closed set houses, until the plaza which forms the centre of every Mexican town was reached.

Small but very charming is the plaza of Toppia; for it is a perfect bover of green foliage and bridges of roses, that fill the air with their rich fragrances. Here, as Lloyd had anticipated, he found Armistead seated on a bench under the shade of the church, which, with its wide, ever-open door, occupies one side of the square.

"I've been wondering what had become of you," he observed, in an injured tone, as Lloyd walked up. "You must know this place—Isn't there a better fonda to be found than the one where we went through the form of dining when we came in?"

"There is a much better one," Lloyd replied; "and I've been requested to take you to it. It is the Casa de la Caridad, which well deserves its name from the wide extent of its hospitality."

"Casa de la Caridad! That's a charitable institution,—what we call an asylum, isn't it? I don't care to go to a place of that kind."

"You'll care very much to go when you understand that the Casa de la Caridad in this case means the Company house of the Caridad Mine. It's an old joke of the employees to refer to it as an institution of charity."

Armistead remarked that pood jokes did not in his opinion gain in humor by being in a foreign language; and then having made his protest against trivial jesting, professed his readiness to proceed immediately to the Casa de la Caridad.

"You seem to have lost no time in presenting yourself there," he went on, a little suspiciously, as they walked up the street together.

"I did not present myself there," Lloyd answered. "But while you were in the hands of the barber I strolled up to the mine—you know I used to be on the staff,—and there I met Mr. and Miss Rivers, who insisted on our coming to take supper with them."

"It is certainly very kind of them, and—absolutely true. I begin to appreciate the point of that joke. How is Miss Rivers?"

"She looks extremely well." "She must be getting tired of this place."

"She didn't express any feeling of the kind."

"Oh, she must be? What on earth is there here for a woman of her stamp? I can't imagine how she has endured it even as long this, and you may be sure she's dying to get away."

Lloyd did not feel called upon to contradict the opinion. Miss Rivers, he reflected, was able to answer for herself; and after all, it was neither his business nor Armistead's whether she was or was not dying to get away.

ures. Now there were not only windows, but these windows were hung with the draperies which even from the outside he had remarked; rugs were spread on the floor; in one corner a broad divan was covered with a gaily-striped Mexican blanket and heaped with cushions. In another corner a bookcase stood; a large table loaded with magazines and papers bore in its midst a tall brass lamp, with a crimson silk shade. Pictures, photographs, a tortoise-shell kitten curled up in a work-basket,—Lloyd took it all in, and then turned his gaze on the girl who had created it.

For up to this time he had never seen Isabel Rivers except in outdoor costume; and charming as she had seemed in that, and well as it had seemed to suit her, he saw now that she was not only a girl, but a girl of an unusually attractive and charming in a woman's own realm—the drawing room. Gowned in some soft, silken fabric, in which blue and white were mingled, her slender waist clasped with a silver girdle, the whiteness of her neck and arms gleaming through the lace which covered them, she was in her delicate rustle of her draperies, in the faint fragrance which hung about her, an enchanting vision to the man who had been long exiled from all those influences of civilization of which such a woman is the finest flower.

She met his eyes with the pleasure of a child in her own. "It is a great change, isn't it?" she said. "And you can't imagine how I enjoy making it, and how I enjoy it now that it is made. Generally one doesn't think of furniture: one takes carpets and tables and couches for granted. But when one has had to create them, one's point of view radically changes. I am as proud as a peacock of my little comforts and prettinesses."

"So you ought to be. You must have worked very hard to create all these."

"Oh, no—there were so many willing hands to help me! But I think I am most proud of my book-case. I drew the design for it and the Company's carpenter—an old Frenchman whom you probably remember—made it. Papa doesn't like it, but when I showed him my drawing he was simply delighted. That is my trade—cabinet making," he said.

"You will see, I will do a nice job for you, and I shall take pleasure in doing it." He did take pleasure in it, I am sure; and I would go to the carpenter's shop and talk to him as he worked. He was very interesting."

"Lloyd looked at her thoughtfully, as if he were about to say something, but he said nothing. "I should not have credited him with that quality," he said.

"Perhaps you never talked to him. There are very few people who are interesting when they really open themselves to one. He told me about his youth in France, and how he intended, as soon as he had made mine he had out in the Sierra,—to go back and visit his childhood's home in Burgundy."

Lloyd shook his head. "I am afraid he will never visit Burgundy if he waits to sell that mine," he said. "It is a prospect into which, when I was here, he was putting all his savings; though your father told him there was nothing in it and advised him to drop it. The old fellow was obstinate, however, and held on."

"He wanted to go back to Burgundy, you see," Isabel said. "His life was hard and without satisfaction; so he cherished one beautiful dream—to go back to France before he died. She paused a moment, and Lloyd did not understand the look which came into her face, although he was struck by its sweetness and sadness. "It is a good thing, perhaps, that he did not go, after all," she went on. "He would, no doubt, have been disappointed there. Things would not have been so beautiful as they seemed to him by the light of memory. And so it is well that he was called, and sent to go on a far longer journey to a country more remote."

"Do you mean that he is dead?" "Yes, he is dead. The bookcase was his last work. I am glad that I gave him the pleasure of doing it, and of talking to me the while of his memories and dreams. He died suddenly, just after he finished it."

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found myself in the sierra—*pura Sierra*, as the people here say. "You'll find it an awful wilderness," said Mackenzie, warningly. "When I first came to Toppia, it was by that route, and I thought I should never reach here. Such mountains! Such canyons! Such woods! Why, for days we travelled through forests where the trees shut out the sun!"

"It's a way tree have, Mackenzie," said Thornton. "I don't wonder at your surprise, since you come from a region where they are very scarce and quite incapable of such conduct. But if that is the worst you can charge against the Sierra—"

TO BE CONTINUED

LED BY A LITTLE CHILD

By A. Raybould, in Ave Maria

It was Christmas Eve. Charles Roland pushed inside his books, making the mail so heavy. Here are two packages of books for you, besides a dozen or so other things."

"How delightful!" exclaimed Miss Rivers. She came forward with shining eyes and stood by the table, the softened radiance of the lamp-light falling over her graceful figure and charming face, and catching the gleam of jewels on the white hands untying strings and tearing open wrappings. Involuntarily all the men, except Mr. Rivers, found themselves watching her, with a sense of pleasure in her beauty and grace.

"Could anything be more delightful than to get half a dozen new books all at once, when one is so happily situated as to be in Toppia with any amount of time to devote to them?" she asked, glancing up at Armistead.

"There are not many people who would describe themselves under such circumstances as 'happily situated,'" he answered, smiling.

"But how it teaches one the value of books!" she insisted. "What do people live within easy range of libraries and booksellers know of the thrill with which one opens a package of volumes that have been brought on a mule two hundred miles over the Sierra?"

"To hear you, one would think the mule gave them a special value," said her father.

"And so it does," she answered. "To a person without imagination, and I regret to say that you haven't a bit, the thing is indescribable; but, as a matter of fact, the mule does add a value."

"It is a pity he couldn't know it; for I am sure that if he were able to express himself he would wish that you had less taste for literature. Won't you look at some of these papers, Armistead?—and you, Lloyd?"

"The 13th—you've seen nothing later than that in the way of a paper from the States."

So the little group gathered round the table, reading letters, glancing over papers and books, for a pleasant half hour, until Lucio appeared in the curtain hung doorway, and, with his most impressive air, announced:

"Ya esta la cena, senorita!"

At Toppia, from its comparatively moderate elevation, the temperature of the nights is much milder than Las Joyas; so when supper was over, the party found it pleasant to linger in the corridor running along the rear of the house. It was a wide and beautiful picture of the valley rolling away to the towering eastern heights; but at night, either bathed in floods of silver moonlight, or in the still more exquisite radiance of the stars which shone with such marvellous brightness out of the vast field of the violet sky, it was touched with a mystical loveliness,—a poetic suggestiveness and a majestic repose impossible to express in words.

The corridor which commanded this wide outlook over valley and mountains and sky was itself a delightful place; and in one of its corners Miss Rivers had fitted up a nook, where swung the Moorish lantern which had done duty before the door of her tent on her journey up the quebrada, and where long steam-chairs invited to lounging. Here the group of men, with cigars and cigarettes lighted, gathered around her; and there was much gay talk and laughter, chiefly about people and events in the distant world which they called home. But suddenly Miss Rivers paused, and, turning her graceful head, looked out over the silent valley, where only a few lights, gleamed here and there, toward the great encircling ramparts of the cliff crowned hills, their mighty outlines cut against the star-strewn heaven.

"We are frightfully frivolous," she said with a little sigh. "In the face of anything so grand as this scene."

"What would you have us do?"—quote Wordsworth?—asked Thornton. "I confess I've never tried living up to scenery; but if I should select something less elevated than the Sierra."

"Sea-level would about suit your capacity, I should think," remarked Mackenzie, with gentle sarcasm. "This is a very good distance from which to admire the Sierra," said Armistead, leaning comfortably back in his chair. "At nearer range one's sentiments toward it are not exactly those of admiration."

"Oh, I can't imagine that!" said Miss Rivers, quickly. "I am sure my sentiments of admiration would increase the nearer I came to it. I shall never be satisfied"—she glanced smilingly at Lloyd—"until I have climbed the Eastern pass yonder and

thought with pleasure of the transformation which could be effected in her appearance by pretty clothes. The child trotted by his side, quite unabashed by her sudden change of circumstances; and, taking it for granted that the young man was to be her special providence that day, expressed to him with frank simplicity all the desires nearest to her heart.

"And a doll to open and shut its eyes, and with pink clothes to come off,—real clothes with buttons and things."

"A nature baby?" suggested Charles, vainly trying to remember where he had got hold of the term of its significance.

"No! Me like a real doll, with a nice face, and blue eyes and yellow hair."

"Well, you can choose for yourself. But first you must come and have a bath."

"I'm not dirty."

"That's a nice, warm bath," said Charles, soothingly; "and your hair curled—"

"And tied with blue ribbon? Den I won't mind the bath."

"He gave the child in charge to one of the bathing women at the public baths, and then went his way, with the intention of procuring a complete outfit for his portegés."

He was beginning really to enjoy his whim. Going into a large store, he gave an order for an entire suit of clothing for a girl of six, naming an approximate price. But so general a order could not be carried out without some personal choice; and when it came to selecting between lace-trimmed garments the existence of which he hardly suspected, he felt that it was time to draw the line. Compromise, he saw, must enter into the best intentions; and he decided discreetly to withdraw from the choice, confiding the whole matter to a competent and motherly-looking saleswoman, whose sympathy saved the young man from further embarrassment. At last only the coat and hat and the inevitable blue ribbon remained for his personal taste to decide upon; and these being chosen Charles emerged from the shop with a goodly sized parcel and a freshly grown crop of parental feelings.

Charles looked down and smiled. The little scene was not without its humanizing effect; and it brought back to his mind with a rush many things which he had forgotten among others that it was Christmas Eve. Gazing out at the snowflakes and down at the children playing under his window, he reflected rather bitterly that Christmas held no meaning for him anyway. He was an exile and alone, and to give or to receive presents was a joy he could not hope to share. He had drifted away from family and friends; he had also drifted away from his childhood's faith; yet the thought of Christmas now recalled memories which he could not lightly set aside,—recalled the need of human sympathy and human kindness; made him feel acutely the necessity of taking some human being to his heart.

The 13th—without any conscious purpose that love of his kind which, in spite of all his sophistication, had not quite died out of his heart.

Charles put on his hat and great-coat and went out. The children he had watched from the window had disappeared, but he knew other children would be easy to find. The words, "and a little child shall lead them," kept repeating themselves in his mind, without any conscious acquaintance on his part; though he knew himself to be now in search of a little child.

He walked towards the church and the schools, and looked at his watch to see if it was past the time when the schools would discharge their inmates. No, it still wanted a quarter of an hour to the appointed time of the girls' school. In the porch the curé was waiting. Charles knew his appearance well enough. The curé, belonging as he did to the meek of the land, waited patiently, something even of a smile upon his russet face. Charles took note of the old man's and majestic repose impossible to express in words.

At that moment the school doors opened, and the children came tumbling out in mad disorder, like a stream of water which had broken its dam and was free to flow where it would.

The curé stood aside, but he watched the children. He knew personally every unit in that motley whole. Presently he seized one child and separated her from her companions; then another and another, until a little group remained in the porch with Charles and the priest.

"Make your choice, sir," said the curé. "You are not the only one who has designs on these youngsters. Providence is always very busy in their behalf at Christmas-tide."

Charles looked at the children, and, as many a man in his place would have done, chose the prettiest—a dark-eyed, curly-headed mite of six, who, in her dingy, threadbare coat and faded cap, and broken shoes and stockings, was still a pleasant object to look upon. Charles

"Yes, I'll come to see you. But you must go home now."

"Everything stops," she said at last. "I want something that keeps on all the time. Does things stop up in heaven, too?"

"You mean do things come to an end in heaven? No; in heaven things last forever and ever."

"Den I wants to go to heaven; and I wants you to go, too! Don't you want to go to heaven?" Charles blushed and hesitated.

"I believe I do now, for your sake, girlie."

"And you'll come to the Crib tomorrow! Oh, it's lovely! Lots of lights and flowers and things! And the little Infant Jesus—oh, He's so wonderful! You'll come to see Him, won't you?"

"They had reached a dingy street, and at the door of one of its poorest houses the child stopped.

"I lives here, up at the top of that big house where you see the clothes drying in his window."

"Then I must say goodbye here, but I'll come to see you."

"You'll come soon—very soon? And you won't forget the Crib to-morrow, will you?"

He transferred the parcels from his arms to those of the child. She could hardly hold them all. As he stooped to kiss her, her eyes filled with tears.

"I'll come very soon," he promised.

"And you'll come to the Crib to-morrow?"

"Yes, perhaps—"

"Say really, truly!"

"Yes, I'll come."

She brightened at once.

"The little Jesus will give you lots of presents," she whispered. "I'll ask Him, 'cause I's got nothing to give you myself."

He watched her tugging up the dusty stairway of the wretched house. Half-way up she turned to call a last adieu; and he saw her there as a thing of beauty and sweetness—a flower fresh from the hand of God, blossoming in the midst of decay and dirt and ugliness. And he thanked Heaven for that flower which seemed to have sprung up along life's dusty highway just for him.

"Alice McCaffrey, a Christmas story."

Father McGee was worried. His usual cheery smile had given place to a troubled expression, especially evident at this season of Christmas.

Mrs. Dillon noticed it immediately when she came to him to get the names of the poor whom she was to make glad at this joyous time.

"You look worried, Father," she said, as she was about to go on her errand of mercy.

"Dear me, and it is so evident? Indeed I am worried, and yet to you it may seem a trivial matter. It's about our Christmas music. You know the pride I have taken in the music always—this may be my punishment—and how hard we worked at it, and here at the last moment most of the singers are sick, and it's too late to get others, and so on. And that's my trouble; not as bad as a fire or an earthquake, but bad enough, and the people are so used to a beautiful program at Christmas."

"Mrs. Dillon smiled. "I'm so glad that no greater trouble is impending. But about your music. Do you know an idea has entered my head this instant to make your musical program the best in the city. You know Dr. Johnson, of Wheeler Street? Of course not, he came here only a month ago. His wife is a beautiful singer, in fact a star of the first magnitude up to three years ago when he married her. Possibly you know her as the famous Alice McCaffrey."

"The queen of song?" Father McGee trembled at the prospect.

"The same, known in all the civilized world."

"And you think she would sing for us?"

"Undoubtedly, if I ask her. She and I were classmates at Notre Dame and bosom friends for years."

"She is a Catholic then?"

"Nominally so. I fear the practical faith is weak. Dr. Johnson—enormously wealthy you know—is an avowed atheist, a sort of iconoclast, an anti-everything, and I fear that Alice has borrowed many of his ideas."

"Hardly a suitable person to sing at the Mass—do you think so?"

"I know Father, but then—it may stir up old memories. Who knows?"

"True, Mrs. Dillon. Dear me, what a providential body you are! Always ready when you are needed most. See Mrs. Johnson if you will. We'll have the finest music in the city."

And so it was agreed that Mrs. Dillon would ask the celebrated singer to assist in saving from destruction the musical efforts of a poor parish priest. She felt that she had a good cause to plead, and without a fear of defeat she drove immediately to the grand home which the doctor had built for the happiness of his celebrated wife. As she sat in the reception room awaiting the entrance of her old friend she could not help contrasting the oriental magnificence about her with the humble little cottage in which Alice McCaffrey had grown to maid enhood, and the simple rooms of the convent of their school days. In the wildest dreams neither had imagined an ending so romantic, so luxurious, and tonight, when her mind was up on music, Mrs. Dillon could fancy the rich rooms transformed into the ex-

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