

A DAUGHTER OF THE SIERRA

BY CHRISTIAN REID

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CHAPTER IV—CONTINUED

They rode under the overhanging shade of trees, and dismounted before a house of more pretension than most of the quebrada residences...

"Ah, Don Pablo!—come esta Vd.," said Lloyd, putting out his hand.

It was dark under the trees, but Don Pablo knew the voice.

"It is Don Felipe!" he announced, delightedly. "Don Felipe himself! A thousand welcomes, señor. I knew you would come back, although you told us you were going away to stay."

"Yes, I am back," Lloyd answered. "And you are well, and Don Maria? and all the family? Good! This is my friend, Señor Armistead, another Americano. You can give us food for ourselves and our horses—pronto?"

"All that I have is yours, señor, and you shall be served as soon as possible; but there are many people here to-night, and my wife and daughter have their hands full."

"Who are the people?" "The Señores de la Caridad, with a party, señor; and the administrator of the Santa Cruz, with his familia."

"We passed the conducta out yesterday, and—what is that?" "It is the ladies in huerta, señor, singing."

"The ladies?" "Dona Victoria Calderon and the daughter of the Gerente of the Caridad."

Lloyd turned to his companion. "Do you hear that?" he asked.

"The singing? Certainly," Armistead answered. "What does he say about it?"

"He says that the singers are Miss Rivers and Dona Victoria Calderon."

"Dona—who?" "The daughter of the owner of the Santa Cruz Mine,—if you understand that better."

Armistead stared. "You don't mean it!" he said.

"It does seem like overdoing the coincidence business," Lloyd admitted. "But since things always turn up when you want them, and it's to be supposed that you want Dona Victoria, she has only followed the rule in obligingly turning up."

"Rather prematurely," Armistead returned. "I could have waited for the pleasure of meeting her; but, after all, I suppose it is a lucky accident. She doesn't know who I am or why I'm here, and this meeting will give me a chance to study her a little. We'll wash our faces and join them."

A little later they came upon a pretty scene in the huerta. The aspect of this charming place—a grove of orange-trees, forming delightful vistas for the eye, all green and gold in daylight and full of shadowy mystery at night—had so enchanted Miss Rivers that she insisted upon her tent being pitched here.

A moon but little past the full was now risen over the heights and poured its radiance into the quebrada, showing every fold of the great hills, flashing on the swift current of the crystal river, and making a fairy lace-work of silvery lights and black shadows in the wide alleys of the huerta.

The white canvas of the tent shone like snow under the broad bores of glossy foliage; and before its door, over which a Moorish lantern hung, through the light gleaming jewel-like through ruby glass, a group was gathered in various easy attitudes—Miss Rivers, Dona Victoria, Thornton and Mackenzie, on bright colored blankets and cushions; Mr. Rivers and Don Mariano a little withdrawn to one side, and more sedately seated on chairs brought from the house.

Lloyd and Armistead, as they approached under the trees, paused at sight of this group; struck not so much by its general picturesqueness as by the central figure on which the moonlight fell most broadly,—the figure of the Mexican girl, who, as she sat in the lustrous radiance, with a guitar in her hands, seemed endowed with a beauty altogether marvellous. She was singing at the moment, and what she sang was "La Golondrina,"—that sweetest and saddest of Spanish airs, the very cry of an exile's broken heart:

Adonde ira, veloz y fatigada, La golondrina que de aqui se va, O si en el viento se hallara extravada Buscando abrigo y no lo encontrara.

There was a pause, in which no one stirred; and then, like honey dropping from the honeycomb, the low, rich notes fell again on the listener's ears:

Ave querida, amada peregrina, Mi corazón al tuyo estrechare, Oire tu canto, tierna golondrina, Recordare mi patria y llorare.

With a cadence full of tenderness and pathos, the voice died into silence over the last words: and

after a moment it was Miss Rivers who spoke:

"I never heard those words of 'La Golondrina' before. They are exquisite. And one might fancy that you had been an exile like Aben Hamad in the other version, señorita,—you sing them so feelingly."

"I have been enough of an exile to understand them, señorita," Victoria answered, in a voice almost as musical as her singing tones; "but I learned these words from my mother, who has felt all that they express."

"Why, Lloyd—Armistead!" Mr. Rivers suddenly perceived the two figures now advancing from the shadows. "So you two fellows have caught up with us!"

"It hasn't been very hard to do," Lloyd remarked as they shook hands. "Your progression seems to have been most leisurely."

"Why not? Haven't we left the Land of Hurry behind? Isabel, you remember Mr. Armistead and Mr. Lloyd? And we have some Mexican friends with us. Lloyd, you know Don Mariano Vallejo, of course?"

"The Gerente of the Caridad, of course!" let me introduce Mr. Armistead, a distinguished mining expert from the States, come to examine the mineral resources of your country in the interests of capitalists.

And this is the Señora Dona Victoria Calderon. Dona Victoria, these señores Americanos desire to place themselves at your feet."

It was all over presently—the hand-shaking, bowing, compliments; and the señores Americanos dropped into their places,—Armistead by the side of Miss Rivers, and Lloyd near Thornton, who expressed his pleasure at seeing him again.

"I was afraid you had grown disgusted and left us," he said. "I'm glad to see you haven't. There are great chances here, once this region is opened up; and you have spent too much time in the Sierra to let prizes go to other men."

"They are likely to do that any day," Lloyd answered. "I have long since made up my mind that I'm one of the unlucky dogs of the world, who win no prizes."

"It's your own fault if you are—but it doesn't look like it just now. To have got hold of Trafford's expert is pretty good luck."

"The book is on the other leg—he has got hold of me."

"Whichever leg it is on, you can make use of him can't you? He's here to look up mines, isn't he?"

"To some extent."

"Oh, I'm not asking you to violate confidence! One knows the mystery in which these gilded experts enwrap their business. Diplomats settling the affairs of nations aren't to begin to put on such airs myself. It seems the only road to success."

"Don't begin yet. You are too good a fellow to be spoiled. And really Armistead doesn't put on the airs to which you allude to any offensive extent. But tell me how things are going with you, and how you come to be with these people of the Santa Cruz?"

"Purely by accident. They came up with us at the noon rest to-day, and we've travelled together since. I wish they were—elsewhere."

"Why?" "Well, Miss Rivers has taken a great fancy to Dona Victoria, and devotes all her attention to her. This makes things rather tiresome for the rest of us."

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magnetism, which her presence diffused. But as it changed her, too, had talked with her under the stars in the patio of the hotel at Guaymas, he knew by personal experience the delightfulness of her companionship; and he was conscious, therefore, of a temptation to share, even with others in the conversation, so sweet, so gay, so full of that quick comprehension and sympathy which is the fine flower of culture. But duty intervened. As they were entering the huerta, Armistead had said:

"You know my Spanish isn't good enough for conversational purposes, so I wish you would cultivate the Santa Cruz young woman. Try to find out, as far as possible, what kind of person she is."

"I didn't engage for diplomatic service," Lloyd reminded him.

"But you engaged to do my talking, and this is a case where it's very important that it should be done," Armistead responded impatiently. "I'd like to exchange some of my French and German for a little Spanish just now; but, since that isn't possible, I must use yours—and I want the benefit of all the brains you have in the bargain."

It was the recollection of this which moved Lloyd when, in reply to Thornton's last words, he answered a little reluctantly:

"Thanks!—no. Miss Rivers will be quite sufficiently monopolized with yourself and Armistead. I believe I'll join Mackenzie and cultivate the heiress of the Santa Cruz."

CHAPTER V. UNDER THE ORANGE TREES

That Mackenzie was quite ready to resign his place by the heiress of the Santa Cruz became apparent as soon as Lloyd approached them. He arose with alacrity, commending the newcomer to Dona Victoria's consideration, and then himself made haste to join the group around Miss Rivers.

Lloyd looked after him with a smile, and the smile was still on his lips when his glance returned to the Mexican girl, as she sat on her Oriental-like pile of cushions, with the Moorish lantern hanging from the end of the ridge-pole of the tent above her head. These accessories—fragments of the modern craze for things Eastern and bizarre,—which had been brought by Miss Rivers for purposes of decoration, seemed to lose their note of strangeness, and to fit into the scene as perfectly as the Hispano-Moresque architecture of the country, or the ancient lamps of wrought iron swinging in so many shadowy arcades and dim chapels since the sixteenth century. Especially suited this girl, who belonged to the world they suggested, or at least to a world remote from all that is closed under the term modern. With this knowledge of the widely differing strains of blood which met in her veins, and of still more widely differing hereditary influences which might be supposed to have aided in moulding her character, Lloyd found himself regarding her curiously; but, except in the fairness of her skin, he could perceive no trace of alien blood. Otherwise she seemed to him a perfect type of a race he had ways admired, a superb impersonation of the finest physical traits of her people.

"She is a true daughter of the Sierra," he said to himself; and then he spoke aloud: "I suppose that you are on your way home, señorita?"

"Si, señor," she answered courteously but briefly.

"I had once the pleasure of seeing your home. It is very beautiful," Lloyd went on, choosing the only topic which seemed available, and to fit into the scene as perfectly as the Hispano-Moresque architecture of the country, or the ancient lamps of wrought iron swinging in so many shadowy arcades and dim chapels since the sixteenth century. Especially suited this girl, who belonged to the world they suggested, or at least to a world remote from all that is closed under the term modern. With this knowledge of the widely differing strains of blood which met in her veins, and of still more widely differing hereditary influences which might be supposed to have aided in moulding her character, Lloyd found himself regarding her curiously; but, except in the fairness of her skin, he could perceive no trace of alien blood. Otherwise she seemed to him a perfect type of a race he had ways admired, a superb impersonation of the finest physical traits of her people.

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"There is no merit in hospitality toward those who come to ruin and rob," she said. "And if they did not, they would change all things. It would be no longer our country after many Americans came into it, as they would make them all stay away!"

"You would banish us all—even Miss Rivers, who admires the country so much?"

Victoria hesitated an instant. Plainly Isabel Rivers' charm had been potent even here. But potent as it was it did not make her waver. "Yes," she said, "I would wish that even Miss Rivers did not come, because she may bring others; and, whether they admire our country or not we don't want them."

"If admiration of a country is not a passport, then there is clearly no place for me," said Lloyd, who was at the same time amused and sympathetic. It is possible that these sentiments might have yielded to a sense of moral offence at such plain speaking but for his remembrance of the story which justified both the feeling and the manner in which it was expressed. A mingling of curiosity and interest made him probe a little farther. "I suppose that with these sentiments you would close the gates of your hacienda in the face of all Americans?"

"Americans do not come to our hacienda, señor," Victoria answered. "But if they should—our gates are never closed to strangers. It is not the way of the Sierras."

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the only one. He had been brave; she must be brave, too. But it is easier to be brave for a moment in the heat of battle than through the gray monotony of long years. It is from women such courage is demanded.

She rose slowly from the window and went up to her room. It was time to dress for dinner.

Her maid looked at her with sympathetic eyes. The news that trouble was in the air had traveled to the servants' hall.

"My black dress, please, Newman. And, Newman, Colonel Graham brought bad news. Mr. Jack has been killed in action."

The woman stopped halfway across the room, the dress in her hands. She looked at her mistress for a moment, then let the dress fall, and burst into tears.

"And I have not even shed one tear," thought the mother.

When her husband came in later, she knew from his face that Colonel Graham had been to the club with the news. It was good of him to save her what pain he could.

"Graham has been here?" said Sir John. His eyes did not meet hers.

"Yes," said Lady Mitchell. "Sir John coughed. 'I'm—I'm out up,' he said. 'But, bless me, I feel it worse for you, Di; I know what he was to you.'"

She could not answer, and together they went into the dining room. It was a very silent meal. When their glasses had been filled with port and the butler had withdrawn, Sir John looked across the table at his wife. Every night since their son had left Woolwich with flying colors the same toast had been drunk.

"Jack, God bless him!"

But tonight Sir John's hand trembled, and he raised the glass unsteadily. By an effort he straightened himself.

"To the man our boy saved," he said huskily.

And then she broke down.

It was the beginning of a long illness, one to which the doctors could give no definite name, and during which she was conscious only on fatigue. Even the moments between sleeping and waking ceased to terrify her. She did not actively wish to die, but neither did she wish to live. Life, death, everything, had become a negation; fatigue was the only active force within her, if anything so languid can be termed active.

The illness lasted for six months, and the first signs of a recovery showed themselves in the wish that she were less tired. Fatigue became a monotony, and gradually—very gradually—her mind resumed to resent it. She had been moved from London to their house near the sea, and whenever his work in town allowed of his escape, Sir John came down to her.

The window of her room faced south, and from her bed she could see the blue water, and the boats as they went sailing by.

How long was it since that day Colonel Graham had stood in the London drawing room? She would count the boats; that would tell her how many months had passed.

She began to watch, dreamily, lazily. There was a cutter with red sails, that was one. Next came a yawl, that was two; then a fishing smack, then another yawl; that made four. Then came a ketch, and after that a little fussy, spluttering steamer, vomiting forth clouds of black smoke. Its chimney wanted sweeping. No; it wasn't chimneys on a steamer, it was something else.

"Nurse, where does all the smoke from that steamer come from?"

The pleasant-faced, white-capped nurse turned to the window.

"Why, from its funnels, Lady Mitchell. The coal they are using on board must be very dirty stuff."

Lady Mitchell laughed a little.

"I thought its chimneys wanted sweeping. How silly of me! I don't know whether I was going to count steamers or only sailing boats. Nurse, how long is it since that day—that day—since—she broke off."

"Since you were taken ill? It's just six months. But you are going to get well quickly now."

Lady Mitchell looked at her.

"Yes," she said, with a little sigh, "I am going to get well. But I am not quite sure that it will be quick."

It was not; at any rate not so quickly as the white-capped nurse had hoped. At first there was a great improvement. She could be read to for two or three hours at a time, and she looked forward quite eagerly to the doctor's visits. But then again came lassitude, and that old terror fatigue.

"Nurse," she said one day, "I suppose a lot of letters came for me after I was taken ill?"

"Yes; a great many," replied the nurse. "I read some of them to you and Sir John answered most of them. But you were really too ill then to take much notice, though you asked to hear them."

"Was there any special letter—one I asked to keep? I seem to remember something."

The nurse crossed to a drawer and took out a little folded piece of paper.

"This came from Mrs. Desmond, with a great box of violets. They were in a bowl near your bed till they faded. I pressed two for you; they are between the paper."

"You are both in God's hands, H. D."

Lady Mitchell looked long at the paper. Yes; Helen