



MILKING TIME.

Monte, by the way? Had he—despite their protestations—arrived, and met with foul play? But no. Pepita had said that he had not been there, and Gibb believed her.

He came to a standstill, all his senses on the alert, as he saw a form gliding towards him in the darkness. A hand caught his arm, and a voice whispered, "It will be better for the senior to press on to Requena's to-night."

"Is that a threat or a warning?"
"For the love of God!"
Gibb laughed. "I'm played out," he yawned, stretching himself. "I guess I'll go up to the dobe and turn in."

Gibb's room was at the end of the adobe, with a door opening upon the veranda. He had no intention of sleeping. Whoever should come would not catch him napping. However, he rolled himself in his blanket.

Before he knew it, he was asleep and dreaming of Pepita; Pepita riding round the bend in the trail, erect on her bronco; Pepita hovering behind her father with her inexplicable warning; Pepita in the square of yellow light from the doorway, with a scarlet flower drooping from her hair to her neck; Pepita, always Pepita.

IV.

He awakened with a start, feeling somebody was near him in the darkness of the room. A hand touched his throat even as he grasped his revolver. Struggling, he clutched the hand at the wrist.

"Sh! Dios mio! Will yo' be quiet. Yo' must ride—ride on to Requena's. Pepita will show yo' tha' leetle trail. Vasquez, he cut the riata and drive your pinto into the chaparral; but I put your saddle on Estrella."

"Vasquez. That kid!"

As they stole forth from the door opening upon the veranda, old Domingo, cursing, was upon them. The two men grappled, swaying and straining. Pepita, tense, watchful, had drawn back within the doorway. There she stood, her eyes glittering, her hands clasped over her breast.

Gibb forced the old man backward, pinioning him that he might not drive home the knife gleaming in his right hand. Domingo uttered a groan. Another figure came bounding down the corridor. Then it was that Pepita made a spring like a panther, and her stiletto flashed twice.

"That Vasquez," she explained afterwards, "he have—what you say?—gr-r-eatly annoy!"

She ran to where her bronco was standing, and swung herself into the saddle. Gibb followed, scrambling up behind her, and the good little horse made a swift leap forward.

A shot ran out—then another, mingled with the trampling of hoofs. Pepita ducked, throwing herself on the bronco's crest. Gibb wound his legs round the horse's loins, and, turning, engaged his gun.

The Mexicans fell back, their ardor a little cooled. Greasers can't shoot to hit. A minute they were at it again. "Vasquez de Cristo, what was

Gibb would have clasped Pepita in his arms once, for he thought their last hour had come; but the girl, invincible to the last, evaded him, leaning forward and peering into the shadows. Suddenly the dusky shades of the mesquite opened miraculously to receive them—the bronco stood motionless—and the Mexican ponies passed at a gallop into the faintness of distance.

Gibb in his surprise reeled, and very nearly pitched over the precipice. In the interests of safety it was necessary for him to encircle Pepita's waist. She bore her fate resignedly, sitting firm as a rock in the saddle, laughing low and caressingly.

"Thees leetle trail," she murmured in a gleeful onslaught on the American's language, "not evon my brother know him!"

Half an hour later they emerged upon the stage road. Pepita drew rein and slipped to the ground. "It ees feenish! Go' by. Yo' leave behin' your pinto, but I leave Estrella. What yo' say?—fair egshange is no robber!" She turned towards the trail with a proud gesture of dismissal. "Adios, senior!"

Gibb sprang in front of her, seizing her hands. "Pepita, what do you mean? It is too late for you to go back. They would kill you. Besides—Pepita—there is a padre at the Mission. Will you come?"

Pepita raised her brows and laughed. She had drawn back her arms' length, was moving her head tantalizingly from side to side.

"Pepita, come—I love you." There was an eternity of entreaty in his voice.

All at once the girl trembled and drooped. "Ay, Dios! It is too late to go back—yes!" she faltered.

In the morning a girl on a bronco and a tired man trudgiving beside her walked into San Fernando. Vasquez had a new pinto, but Gibb had won a wife.

It was a steaming hot day, and the scholars were fidgety to a degree, and, not unnaturally, the teacher was irritable and exasperated to the last degree. She was, in fact, at the point where hysterics would be welcomed as a relief. She looked up.

One of the biggest girls in the room was sprawling in an ungainly attitude over her desk, her feet were stretched over the aisle, and she was industriously chewing some sticky sweet-stuff. It was the last straw.

"Maria," she snapped, "take those sweets out of your mouth and put your feet in!"

And the guffaw which went the round of the class did not tend to mend matters in the least.

The story is told of a well-known man who, not finding his wife, went out into the kitchen where the laundry was busy with the family linen, and inquired: "Bridget, do you know anything of my wife's whereabouts?" "Yis, sor," replied Bridget, "I put them in the wash."

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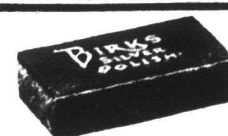
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