

A DAUGHTER OF THE SIERRA

BY CHRISTIAN REID

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CHAPTER XXVIII

ON THE WAY TO THE SANTA CRUZ

Out into the night—the marvelous, starlit night—the party rode, the sound of the horses' hooves echoing through the stillness which held the earth, as it were, under a spell; while a low freshness of the forests, the resinous odor of the pines, the fragrance of unnumbered plants, flowers and vines along the margins of the streams, came to them on the sweet, cool air which fanned their faces as they rode. In the clear radiance of the starlight every object was distinctly visible—every fold of the great hills, every crest which cut against the violet sky, so thick inland with patines of bright gold, every group of trees on the wide expanse of the valley. It seemed to Isabel Rivers that nothing could possibly have been more glorious than the purple splendor of the night; nothing more full of poetic suggestion, of the great mystery, silence and beauty of Nature, than the outlines of the towering hills, the sleeping woods. It seemed to her that life could hold no physical delight more keen than that of riding in the wonderful starshine through these wild, lovely scenes on the errand which took them forth. For the love of adventure always strongly alive in her, was to-night quickened into a passion which helped to produce the sense of exhilaration that filled her veins like wine.

As they readily imagined however, no such exhilaration filled Lloyd's veins. On the contrary, he was conscious of a very distinct sense of depression and regret as he rode across the valley toward the hacienda de beneficio and the canon of the Santa Cruz. If he had not been a fool, so he remarked with unflattering candor to himself, he would not have gone to the casa grande, but would have continued on his way to the mine, where his business lay—if indeed he could be said to have any business in the matter, which just now he was strongly inclined to doubt. In that case none of the present complications would have arisen: Dona Beatriz' very incoherent scruples would not have asserted themselves; he would not have been led to make a promise which it was exceedingly disagreeable to him to attempt to fulfil; and—above all and most conducive to vexation—he would not have brought upon himself the embarrassing companionship of two obnoxious young women, neither of whom had any part in such an expedition, and one of whom was most particularly and grievously out of place.

Absorbed with these reflections, he rode silently and alone in the rear of the party until they reached the hacienda de beneficio. Here, filing through the great gateway into the large dimly-lighted patio, they were met by Don Mariano, who, followed by two or three other men, came hurriedly out of the office at the sound of a cavalcade riding into the court. His surprise was extreme when he recognized the members of the party, and his strong face set grimly when he heard Lloyd's story. He turned at once to Arturo.

"What are you doing here?" he asked sharply. "Why have you not ridden on to the mine to see that the men are prepared for an attack?"

Arturo shrugged his shoulders.

"I have not ridden on," he answered, "because some strange commands have been given. Dona Beatriz orders that the men shall not use their rifles."

"What!" Don Mariano fell back a step in his amazement. "Not use their rifles! How, then, are they to defend the mine?"

"They can not defend it," the young man replied. "And that is why I have refused to carry such an order."

Don Mariano turned to Victoria, his dark eyes glowing with sudden fire.

"What does this mean?" he demanded. "Has your mother lost her senses? Is she ready to give up the mine?"

"Even if she were ready to give it up, it is her own and she has a right to do so," the girl answered; "but her orders have no such meaning. She only desires that there shall be no blood shed in its defence."

"Bah!" said the man, who had been a soldier in the days of strife which are not so far gone that they can not be clearly remembered in Mexico. "This is what comes of having to do with women! Arturo, ride at once to the mine and have the men armed and ready."

"No!" Victoria cried, as she drew her mule across the gateway. "You shall not carry such an order in face of my mother's positive command to the contrary. Don Mariano, you forget yourself! My mother's authority is supreme here."

Don Mariano glared at her fiercely. "Your mother is a woman," he said, "and does not know."

"She is the owner of the Santa Cruz," Victoria interrupted, "and that is all that matters."

"It appears that she begins to doubt whether or not she is the owner," Don Mariano returned bitterly.

She has never for an instant doubted it, or she would not have held the mine," the girl answered. "But the fear of strife has tortured

her, and now at last she declares that she will sooner lose the mine than bring any stain of blood-guiltiness on her soul."

"And have you turned coward too?" Don Mariano asked with fierce bitterness.

To those looking on, there did not seem that there could be a question of cowardice in connection with the proud face and dauntless eyes which answered even before the lips.

"What my mother says," she said, "Victoria replied, as she had replied in the patio of Las Joyas. 'You know well that if left to myself I would defend the mine at any cost, but I would rather give it up forever than add the least weight to her burden of suffering. And this would be the worst suffering of all; for it would touch her conscience, which has always hitherto been at peace. Do you think I would do that for all the wealth of the Santa Cruz?' In this matter no one is concerned but my mother and myself, and I am here to see that her orders are obeyed."

Involuntarily Lloyd and Isabel Rivers glanced at each other, and each read in the eyes of the other the same quick, passionate admiration which had thrilled both at Las Joyas. It was a feeling in which Don Mariano did not share, but he fell back and motioned toward the gate.

"Go, then!" he said. "Go and give your orders at the mine. I will stay here."

He was striding back to the office when Lloyd rode up to him.

"Don Mariano," he said earnestly, "let me beg that you will go to the mine. Your presence there is absolutely necessary to keep order and to resist attack if an attack should come."

Don Mariano turned upon him fiercely.

"How is it possible to resist attack without using weapons?" he demanded.

"If it came to a question of self-defence, I am sure Dona Beatriz would not desire that the men should not use their weapons," Lloyd replied. "But I have promised her that I will try to prevent any such necessity."

"You!" Don Mariano interrupted. "How can you prevent it?"

"I may not succeed in preventing it," Lloyd answered; "but I will make the attempt. And in order to do so it is my intention to go out in search of the men whom we have reason to believe are coming, instead of waiting for them to reach the mine."

Don Mariano looked up curiously into the quiet face looking down at him.

"And when you find them, señor—what then?"

"Then," Lloyd answered, "I will try to bring some arguments to bear on their leader which may possibly change his purpose. If I fail—well, we shall only be where we are now; but I have promised that I will make the attempt. Meanwhile I hope that you will go to the mine, for I want Don Arturo to come with me."

Quiet as the face and voice both were, there was a wonderfully compelling power in them which Don Mariano found it impossible to resist.

"Very well," he replied. "I will go to the mine. But if an attack is made on it, I refuse absolutely to be bound by or to regard Dona Beatriz' orders about the use of firearms."

"I am sure," said Lloyd, significantly, "that you will respect Dona Beatriz' wishes as far as possible. She would certainly not wish the men to allow themselves to be overpowered without making any resistance. Now I will take Don Arturo and go."

"Stop!" said Don Mariano. "Do you know where to go?"

"Only the general direction."

"Then I advise you to wait until the party has been located. I will send some men out as scouts who will know the Sierra thoroughly. They will soon find exactly where the party is, and you will do well to wait until you have their report."

Recognizing the wisdom of this suggestion, Lloyd agreed; and a few minutes later, with the addition of Don Mariano and several men from the hacienda, the cavalcade was again in motion and riding toward the Santa Cruz.

Before leaving the mill, an effort had been made to induce Victoria and Miss Rivers to return to Las Joyas; but since Victoria positively refused to do so, Isabel also announced her intention of going on to the mine; and this time Lloyd made no protest when she declared her resolution. Silently they filed out of the great gateway, which closed with a loud clang behind them, and rode toward the mouth of the dark canon between the heights.

And if this canon was dark and forbidding in daylight, it was almost appalling in the gloom which now filled it for the night, so glorious and radiant out on the wide plain, was here terrible in its enveloping shade, its suggestions and possibilities of danger. Into the deep, narrow defile the starlight had no power to penetrate; and the roar of the torrent in its depths seemed intensified and menacing in sound as it rose between the rocky walls. Brave as she was, Isabel Rivers felt her heart sink a little, and the sense of adventure became somewhat less delightful as the road entered the canon and she remembered the narrowness of the shelf along which the trail lay, and the depth of the abyss that yawned below.

It was with intense relief that she was suddenly conscious of a hand laid lightly on her bridle, of a figure walking at the head of her

maule along the perilous way. Even in the darkness she knew that figure; and, although no word was spoken, she was conscious of a confidence which banished fear as she felt herself led along the unseen path, with the outlines of rugged heights towering above, and the loud clamor of furious waters below.

It was an experience she was never likely to forget, this silent ride through the darkness of the wild defile; not yet the scene which suddenly burst upon their view as the last turn of the way brought them in sight of the mine. The foremost riders had already reached the patio, and had lighted some torches of resinous pine—prepared and always kept in readiness by the men—the red glare of which now lighted up all the mighty escarpment of the mountain and the towering cross on its great pile of boulders.

"Oh, how wonderful!" Isabel cried, when she first caught sight of the marvellously picturesque effect.

She spoke to herself, but the tall figure walking beside the head of her mule heard and glanced back at her.

"It is wonderful, isn't it?" said Lloyd. "What a scene for a painter!"

"What a scene to remember always!" she said, her gaze riveted in fascination upon it. "Who could have dreamed of anything so wildly picturesque, so terribly grand?" Then she lifted her eyes to the great dominating cross. *In hoc signo vinces!* she murmured softly.

Again Lloyd caught her words; and, remembering how they had come to his own mind, his own lips, when he first saw the cross of the Santa Cruz, he smiled a little. There certainly was a wonderful sympathy of thought and feeling between Miss Rivers and himself.

"Yes," he said, "I believe that in and by that sign the Santa Cruz will conquer; but I understand why Dona Beatriz does not wish that the symbol of peace should look down upon conflict and possible bloodshed."

"I also understand now," Isabel answered. "One can not look at that cross and think of all that it signifies without understanding. Dona Beatriz has not only looked at it long, but borne it as well, and there is wonderful wisdom to be learned from a cross borne heroically. I suppose that what she wishes to do is to leave her cause in the hands of God. But do you believe that those men yonder—she pointed to the group of figures in the patio—will be satisfied to do so?"

Lloyd shook his head.

"I am sure they will not," he said; "for, despite their deep and earnest faith, human passions are exceedingly strong in them. And if ever such passions were justified, it is in this case of the Santa Cruz."

"It seems so to me," Isabel remarked; "and yet—her glance again sought the great cross—one can comprehend the higher, the more heroic view."

They had by this time almost reached the point of entrance into the patio; and Lloyd, suddenly bringing the mule to a halt, looked up into her face.

"Miss Rivers," he said, "I am foolish, perhaps, to expose myself to another rebuff, another reminder that I have no right to offer advice to you; but I must venture to beg that you will remain outside the patio of the mine. We are hoping that no struggle will occur here; but the fact remains that if the attacking party suddenly appears, a struggle will take place; and, despite Dona Beatriz' orders, it will be a desperate and probably a bloody one. The patio will, of course, be the scene of it; and considering the possibility of this, I hope you will overlook my presumption in advising you, and heed the advice."

"I am afraid," she said, "that my interest has perhaps done harm instead of good to the Santa Cruz."

"I think that I understand what you mean," Lloyd answered; "but I believe you are mistaken. Armistead would have done everything which he has done even if he had not felt resentment against you for possible interference with his plans."

"I am not sure of that," she replied. "When he came to see me a few days ago he told me that he was on his way out of the country; that he had abandoned the idea of attempting to take possession of the mine by force, and then—well, then he went away very angry, making some threats, and—the next we hear is this."

"It seems as if there might be a connection between the threats and—this," said Lloyd. "The statement made had not been very lucid, but he grasped without difficulty an idea of what had really happened. He paused again for a moment and then turned to Miss Rivers abruptly.

"Will you let me inquire what Armistead told you about me?" Isabel started.

"Why should you imagine that he told me anything about you?" she asked.

"I don't imagine," Lloyd answered; "I am sure of it. Your manner has told me so from the first moment we met at Las Joyas; and now I only beg that your lips may be equally frank."

"I—really don't see—" Isabel began; and then something in the influence of time and place—in the solitude and remoteness which seemed to isolate them here on this mountain side, in the sense of impending danger, in the presence, as it were, of the great realities of life and the absence of its conventionalities—compelled her to the frankness he asked.

"He told me," she said, "some things which—changed my opinion of you."

"As for example—?"

"That you are—divorced."

"Ah!" Lloyd drew in his breath sharply. "He told you that? And it changed your opinion of me! Why?"

"Do you need to ask why?" Miss Rivers was a little haughty now. "You know what I think—what every Catholic must think—of divorce."

"Yet you are now staying in the house of a divorced woman, I believe."

"Mr. Lloyd! How dare you speak so of Dona Beatriz? I—I could not have believed it of you."

"I am stating a simple fact, Miss Rivers. No one admires and respects Dona Beatriz more than I do, but she is a divorced woman."

"By no fault and no consent of hers."

"Exactly! And therefore you do not hold her accountable for the position in which she has been placed by the acts of another. To be consistent, then, you must extend the same tolerance to me."

"If—if it is deserved, you know that I would do so."

"Yes, I know," he said more gently. "I have never doubted your tolerance or your kindness; but I saw no cause why I should make a demand on either. My unhappy story seemed my own. There was no reason why I should trouble you with it. If I had ventured ever to approach you as an admirer—bah! let us be frank—as a lover, you would have reason for resentment; but I never ventured to do that."

"TO BE CONTINUED"

EASTER MORN

Rocco Marroni looked gloomier than usual as he came out of church that Good Friday afternoon carrying his baby child and surrounded by the three others.

"Will Mother be home for Easter, Papa?" timidly asked the eldest of them, a pale faced little girl of eight, with an anxious look in her soft dark eyes very sad to see in so young a child.

"No, I hardly think so," answered Rocco in a tone which clearly forbade any further allusion to the subject. And yet, though he would not have owned it, he, too, had been longing for his absent wife almost as much as did his little daughter, Fortunade.

He was a tall, powerful man, and though not exactly handsome, his face was very interesting and attracted one's trust and sympathy. His dark eyes had such a look of gentleness and sorrow that they quite belied the stern, firmly set mouth.

The younger children evidently had no fear of him. They chatted merrily, telling him of all they had done and heard that day at the convent, where he left them every morning on his way to work. They had reached home by this time and, while listening to them, he was helping his little daughter to light the fire, cook the dinner, lay the cloth, and tidy up the room. Everything was scrupulously clean, and the little ones were as neat and bustling looking as if they had had a mother to look after them. This was partly due to little Fortunade's efforts, and it was no wonder the poor child herself looked pale! Still, Rocco did a great deal for them; he had to be both father and mother to them now, he thought, but was it not somewhat his own fault?

"Papa," exclaimed the eldest boy suddenly, "shall we have the Easter breakfast on Sunday and everything just as we did last year?"

"Just as we did last year!" The words went through his father's heart like a dagger. Last year his sweet-faced, dearly loved wife had prepared the Easter breakfast, the most important meal of the whole year to the Italian peasantry.

When they had returned from their Easter Communion and had entered the chamber which had been cleansed, decorated, and blessed the day before, she had knelt at his feet, as was the custom for every good wife to do on that occasion, and had begged him to forgive her for any sorrow she might have caused him during the year. With what love and joy he had raised her up, taken her in his arms and, kissing her, had declared that he had nothing to forgive, as she had never given him anything but happiness! Then she had stood by his side and, one by one, their children had knelt at their feet to beg for forgiveness. They, too, had been embraced by both father and mother and pardoned for any little wrong-doing in the past year.

When this touching ceremony, peculiar to some parts of Italy, had been gone through, with what joy in their hearts they had sat down to eat the blessed meal and rejoice in the Risen Lord!

How happy they had been! Only one short year ago!

Then, a few months later, they had had a foolish quarrel about some trifling matter, so trifling that it was not worth a second thought, and would most likely not have had if his mother-in-law had not unfortunately been staying with them at the time.

By her unwise interference she kept adding fuel to the fire, and at last she so embittered matters that she persuaded Estella, her daughter, to say she would accompany her home and would not return to her husband unless he apologized to her. This, her mother assured the young wife, Rocco would be glad enough to do as soon as he found himself hampered with the care of the children and with no one to cook his dinner for him.

But she did not know her son-in-law. He was one of those quiet, thoroughly good men who are slow to anger, but who are bitter and unforgiving when once their temper has been thoroughly roused. When his wife told him of her decision he had answered coldly that she had better think twice before taking a step—which would be irrevocable.

Estella had trembled and hesitated, only reluctantly yielding to her mother's persuasions. Almost as soon as she had left home she had realized her mistake, and written a deeply penitent letter to her husband, beseeching him to forgive her burst of temper and allow her to return to him.

His answer had been curt and decisive. It was not he who had driven her from her home, and since, in spite of his warning, she had chosen to do so she must abide by her decision. He was not a man to be dropped like an old glove.

Poor Estella was broken-hearted, and soon finding that her mother had no wish to keep her indefinitely she had taken a situation in a rich

family going abroad and Rocco had not heard another word about her.

Yet he loved her still, and the sorrow was great as his heart. He had fled from the city where they had been so happy together and had come to live at Livorno, where he was believed to be a widower.

An earnest Catholic, and until then a very zealous one, he had in his bitterness turned away from God. What was the good of his going to the sacraments with such hatred and anger in his heart? He could not do it and he would not forgive, he had said.

But today, as he prepared the children's dinner, and his thoughts flew back to his happy days, a great yearning came to him to receive holy Communion once more. It had never missed his Easter Communion, since he was a little boy, and his conscience was calling loudly to him not to do so now. But he tried to stifle it.

While he was thus battling within himself the children had been whispering together.

"Papa," they all cried at last, "shall we not have the Easter breakfast?"

"No," he answered rather sharply.

"Oh, but Papa, everybody has it; we are not so poor as all that, are we?" said his little girl, the tears coming into her eyes.

"Well, don't cry, Fortunade," he exclaimed; "if I can find time to clean out the room and prepare the table you shall have it—as usual," he added hesitatingly.

The next day he came home from work at noon and cleaned a small room out very thoroughly, then prepared a large table, covered it with a white cloth and arranged on it all manner of dishes of pig meat; sausages, ham, bacon, and cold roast pork. In Italy pork of all kinds is forbidden by law during the summer and by the Church during the whole of Lent, so I suppose that is why this Easter breakfast consists almost entirely of what has been forbidden fruit for so many weeks.

Rocco had barely finished preparing the meal, and had just laid on the table baskets of brightly dyed Easter eggs and vases of flowers, when there was the sound of a tinkling bell, and he hurried down to receive the priest who was going from house to house that day to bless each room, but more particularly the one containing the Easter meal.

The good Father came in accompanied by his acolyte carrying the crucifix and holy water, and after he had blessed the table and the meal on it they all went out and Rocco locked the door and put the key in his pocket, as this chamber was not entered again till the next morning after Mass.

As the priest, a kind-faced old man was about to leave the house he turned suddenly and, laying his hand on the workman's shoulder, said kindly:

"My son, I have seen you sometimes at Mass, and I have read sorrow in your face. I hope you have been to confession to-day."

Rocco blushed painfully. "Not yet, Father," he stammered.

"Ah, do not fail to go, my son!" said the priest earnestly. "Remember the loving call of Him who has said: 'Come to me all ye that suffer and are heavy laden and I will refresh you.' Do not let Him knock in vain at the door of your heart, and remember the example you owe to your children."

After he had gone Rocco stood as if rooted to the ground, while again the great struggle went on in his heart. Could he be deaf to the loving call of the Master? Yet, if he received holy Communion, he must forgive us!

All day long the battle raged within him. All day long he seemed to see the face of his Saviour looking pleadingly at him. At last, after he had put the children to bed, he made a sudden resolve, and, asking a neighbor to look after them during his absence, he fairly ran to the church and hastened to the confessional.

When he came out of church half an hour later there was great peace in his heart but, sorrow also. Ought he not to forgive his poor wife as freely as God had forgiven him his many months of sinful revolt against Him? Yet how was he to find her now?

The next morning, as he returned from Mass and Communion, the children around him shouted joyfully at the thought of the beautiful Easter breakfast awaiting them, but his heart felt like breaking when he thought that his wife would not be there to take her accustomed place.

As he entered his poor cottage he left the door ajar, he hardly knew why, and with his eyes full of tears led the way to the room of the Blessed Meal. He felt strangely moved and pressed his lips on his baby's forehead with a passionate kiss as he threw open the door and went up to his place at the head of the table.

The children hesitated. Were they to kneel as usual? Before him alone? They stopped undecided, as if waiting for some one, and hardly seemed surprised when a woman came swiftly in and fell at their father's feet with a heart-rending cry:

"Oh, forgive me! In the name of our Risen Lord, forgive me Rocco!"

The next minute she was sobbing in her husband's arms and he had given her the kiss of peace, that Easter kiss which meant so much that year.

"Dearest," he murmured, as he pressed her to his heart. "I, too,

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