

A DAUGHTER OF THE SIERRA

BY CHRISTIAN BRID

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CHAPTER XXIX—CONTINUED

She did not answer; but her memory bore witness for him, testified earnestly in his behalf, that he never had. She remembered how she had even accused him of avoiding her, of being sorry to meet her in the Quebrada Onda. And then she heard his voice speaking again.

"You must not think me ungrateful for all your kindness," he was saying.

"I have comprehended perfectly, almost from the day of our first meeting, that you recognized that life had in some way gone wrong with me, and, being much inclined to charity, were anxious to help me. I knew that you couldn't help me—not at least in the way you desired; but I have been grateful for your sympathy, or why shouldn't I say your pity? It is the same thing."

"No," she interposed now, "it is not the same. What I felt for you has been sympathy, not pity."

"We won't quarrel over a name," he returned. "Sympathy or pity, or both, I have been grateful for it. Perhaps I shouldn't have been—well, if you were not you. I am afraid I have worn a very early front when others offered me anything of the kind. But there's something strangely magnetic in your mental touch. The astatic spirit might endure it. And your comprehension is wonderful. Although I have not talked of myself, you have understood that I have suffered moral shipwreck—that I am one of the bits of human debris and jettison floating about the world,—and you have offered me a compassion so gentle that I have not only not hesitated to accept it, but I have felt in it something almost like healing."

A flood of the compassion of which she spoke rose within her as she listened, mingled with a sense of wonder at herself—wonder that she could have forgotten the simplicity and sincerity which had always so deeply impressed her in all that he said or did, and that she could have felt toward him a resentment which she now acknowledged to have been unreasonable and unjust.

"I am glad," she said, "if I have been able to offer you anything even like healing, and I am sorry that I have been so presumptuous as to think—to do you injustice."

"Never mind about that," he interrupted. "Perhaps you were right—perhaps I should have told you that I was a man marked with disgrace."

"No, no! How can you say so?" "It is what I have always felt. You see I come from a country where such a thing is held as a disgrace. We are very 'unprogressive' in the South. Divorce is almost unknown with us, and marital infidelity—for it is sternly dealt with. Having been brought up in this society, where all the old standards are still in force, you can imagine my bewilderment when I drifted to the West and found myself in a society where divorce reigned supreme; where all around one were men and women who had been married and unmarried on the most trivial pretenses."

"I know—alas! I know only too well," she answered. "The inevitable result—how marriage in these regions has lost all its sanctity, and outside of the Catholic Church, is regarded only as a bond to be broken at will. Knowing and seeing this, you will say that I deserved all that has befallen me because I married a woman reared in that society, who, besides having no moral training, possessed no moral instincts stronger than those of a butterfly. She was a pretty frivolous creature, with whom I drifted into a flirtation and married because—well, briefly, because I was a fool. I soon paid the penalty of my folly. Having been a flirt before marriage, she continued to be a flirt afterward; and when I objected, she grew angry as at an invasion of her rights. One day I came home from a prospecting trip—we were living in a mining camp—to find my house empty, and a note from my wife telling me that she had gone to get a divorce. Of course she had no difficulty in obtaining it; and the next news I heard was that she had married a man who had been one of those most intimate in my house,—one under many obligations to me, but whom I knew to have a strain of weakness in his character which had made him peculiarly susceptible to her influence. Even before she went away I had seen the effect of this influence on him; I had not seen that she made him her confidant and that he took her side as against me in all our differences. The natural end was that as soon as she had obtained her decree of divorce he married her. His name was—is—Isabel started.

"Not the man whom you went back to the Quebrada Onda to meet?" "The same," Lloyd answered. "I had heard that she had in turn divorced him, and that he had gone to the dogs about as completely as a man could go; but I was hardly prepared to find the wreck I did. The man was once, as I said, very much under my influence—before he fell under hers,—and when he appealed to me to help him out of the depths into which he had fallen, I could not refuse. And if the effort not to re-

fuse was hard, it was rewarded; he told me what I did not know before—that the woman who had ruined both my life and his is dead."

There was a silence, after his voice fell over the last word, which lasted until Isabel said softly:

"God have mercy on her soul!"

"Amen!" Lloyd answered gravely, yet with the note of sternness with which he had told his story still in his voice. "I am willing to believe that she was only partly accountable for all the harm she did," he went on after a moment; "but it is impossible to forget how great it has been."

"Try to forget," the soft voice beside him said. "Remember that it is over now, and perhaps the suffering has taught you some things that you are the better for knowing."

"I have taught me one thing," he said, "which you will think I am the better for knowing, and that is the divine wisdom of the Catholic Church in her attitude toward divorce; and from that my eyes have been opened to recognize her divine wisdom and divine authority in all things."

"Thank God, then, for anything and everything which has brought you to that knowledge," the sweet voice said again. "Sometimes one is made ashamed of one's little faith—sometimes one has a wonderful glimpse of His purposes."

"Yes," Lloyd assented. "I feel now as if every road in my life, every step I have taken, has led straight—here; as if, no doubt, has foreseen and purposed, just as it matters, pain, as you have said, can serve a noble end, especially if it be the pain which springs from knowing and from loving you."

"Ah!" cried Isabel, involuntarily—quickly. "There is no harm in telling you so, out here in the wild Sierra, so far removed from your life, as it has been and as it will be, that we might be in another world," he said quietly. "You see, I ask nothing—nothing."

He broke off; for there was a sudden stir, a movement on the path below them, and a voice—that of Arturo—cried sharply:

"Senor!—Don Felipe!" "Here!" Lloyd answered. "Come—quick!" the voice went on. "The men have returned. The party is close at hand."

"No coming," Lloyd said, rising to his feet. "At the same instant Miss Rivers rose too. Neither knew how her hand found its way into his. "God be with you," she said in a very low but calm tone. "And remember, though you do not ask, I am ready to give—everything."

CHAPTER XXX

THE SURPRISE PARTY IS SURPRISED

"The party are near at hand!" Lloyd repeated, when he joined Arturo at the entrance to the patio of the mine. "How near?—where are they?"

Arturo made a motion indicating the other side of the mountain. "They are in an arroyo over there," he said, "waiting, it is to be supposed, for a later hour of the night to surprise the mine."

"God! Let us go to them at once. You are coming with me, are you not?"

"Certainly," Arturo answered. "But we shall take some men along shall we not?"

"No. We are not going as a surprise party, you and I, but as envoys of peace."

"Peace is all very well," the young man returned; "but—how if they are not disposed for it?"

"Even then they can't shoot us down in cold blood, you know,—two men alone. They are not supposed to be here for murder. Come! I want to get the thing over. Where is our guide?"

"I'll call one of the men." Arturo's tone was a little reluctant as he turned back to the patio. The expedition did not please him. Just now what he wanted, what all his young, indignant blood was clamoring for, was not peace at all, but war; and this going to offer peace to those who were ready for war was not to his liking. It was a proof of his strong regard for Lloyd, and of the latter's strong influence over him, that he consented to go; but he expressed his disgust in a few forcible words to Victoria, whom he met, while calling for one of the scouts who had lately returned.

"Knowing where they are and what they have come for, we could surprise them, we could fall upon them,—wipe them out—annihilate them!" the young man cried, with flashing eyes. "But instead we are going to offer them peace—to beg them to go away—as if we were not men with arms in our hands! Oh, it is too much—too much!"

Victoria inwardly sympathized to the full with this feeling; but outwardly loyally made it necessary for her to support her mother and Lloyd. "You talk like a child, Arturo," she said severely. "They are not to be begged to go away; the Senor Lloyd is only going to tell them that it is useless for them to come, since we are ready for them. And he will take a party of armed men to show that we are ready."

"He refuses to do anything of the kind. We are going alone—he and I and Pedro Garcia."

"That is impossible to trust those to whom you are going; and—and we do not wish them to think that you go because we are not prepared for them here."

"I will render that very clear, senorita," Lloyd replied, turning to her with a smile which even in the torchlight struck her as possessing a strange, unusual brightness. "Don't fear that I shall not make them understand that the Santa Cruz is not the least afraid of them."

"But you will take some men—"

"No; there is no need to do so. As I have just reminded Arturo, we are going as envoys of peace, not of war. And Arturo is not in the least a desperado. This is purely business with him; and when we have met and discussed the matter, I think he will be ready to go quietly away without running any chance of being shot himself."

Victoria shook her head. She could not forget the look on Armistead's face when he hurried away, leaving Isabel and herself under the trees by the pools. There had not been very much of the man of business in that face just then.

"I do not believe that he will go away quietly," she said. "I believe that he will be very angry."

"No doubt," Lloyd agreed. "A man is always angry when he is frustrated in something that he has been frustrated at once that he has no chance to take the Santa Cruz, now that it is prepared to resist attack. But we are wasting precious time!—Arturo!"

"Here, senor!" Arturo responded. "And here is the man who will guide us over the mountain—"

"One word, senor!" Victoria cried hastily, as he turned to go. "Where did you say that the senorita—Donna Isabel—is?"

Lloyd pointed to the boulder above the path, where, in the light of the torches, a white hand was seen to wave in that pretty Mexican salutation which is like a fluttering bird.

"It will be well, I think, for you to bring her down to the patio now," he said; "or else to go to her."

"And for you, senor—Vaya Ud. con Dios!"

Again, as once before, the beautiful words sounded in his ears and accompanied him like a blessing—a blessing which his heart echoed as he went on his way. For no sunshine about his path could have made it seem brighter than that for which he had to thank God—the great blessing which had come to him, and which he was hardly able as yet to realize, in Isabel Rivers' last words. They were still ringing in his ears, and his heart was like a feather in his breast as he climbed the dark mountain steps, conscious of strange, light-hearted impulses to laugh or sing, which would have very much astonished his companions had he yielded to them.

So far from yielding, however, it was in perfect silence that he followed Pedro Garcia across the shoulder of the great height. They went in single file—the tall, lithe Mexican, with his soundless tread in front; Lloyd next, and Arturo last,—although to the quick ear of the latter it seemed more than once that he was not last; that other, stealthy footsteps were following. Once or twice he paused and looked back, but then all was silence; the encompassing forest lay mute around them, guarding the secret of whatever life it held.

How long they had been on their way no one of them could have told; but they had left the canon of the Santa Cruz behind, and wound around the mountain by a path known only to their guide, and were on the side opposite the mine, when the ground suddenly seemed to open beneath their feet and they found themselves looking down into an arroyo—a wild, picturesque ravine, extremely narrow and with precipitous, forest-clad sides—where a party of men were gathered about a fire.

There was not an instant's doubt that it was the party they sought. Even if the number and arms of the men had not made this clear, it was light shone most broadly as, with hat pushed back on his head, he stood looking up toward the hill, the three men were descending the hillside. As yet they could not be seen by those below; but the dislodged stones which their feet sent down the steep declivity heralded their approach sufficiently; and one of the men by the fire, snatching up a rifle, brought it to his shoulder as he cried in Spanish:

"Who comes there?" "Armistead," Lloyd's quiet voice replied, "tell that fellow to put down his rifle if he does not want his brains blown out."

Armistead extended his hand and threw up the rifle, with a brief, energetic remark to his holder. Then, in a voice filled with anger, he said:

"So it's you, Lloyd, is it? What do you want?" "I want," Lloyd answered, as he came down the mountain into the full light of the fire, accompanied by Arturo, "to save you from a blunder into which you are on the point of falling. I am here to tell you that the people of the Santa Cruz are thoroughly informed both as to your whereabouts and your intentions, and that they are ready for you. In other words, the mine is prepared for defence; and it may interest you to know that neither your party nor five times their number could take it."

"It is exceedingly kind of you to come and give me this information,"

Armistead returned sarcastically, "but I am inclined to think that if it were true, the Santa Cruz would have quietly awaited the arrival of my party."

"The Santa Cruz would have waited with the greatest pleasure," Lloyd said, "but for its owner, Donna Beatriz. Shameful as she knows this attempt at robbery to be, she is most anxious that no blood shall be shed in defence of her rights. Now, there is nothing more absolutely certain than that blood will be shed if you attempt to seize the Santa Cruz. Therefore, to save her from pain, as well as incidentally to save you from a tremendous blunder and perhaps a violent death, I have come over the mountain, accompanied by my friend, Don Arturo Vallejo, son of the administrador of the Santa Cruz—Arturo bowed with the air of a minister plenipotentiary,—to put the state of the case before you. If you care to attempt to take the mine after this warning, I can only say that we shall be happy to oblige you with a fight. But if you are wise—the speaker's voice took a deeply significant tone—"you will be glad to have a good excuse to drop the business and get out of the Sierra—alive."

Armistead during this speech had leaned against a tree, his arms folded, his eyes half closed but never leaving Lloyd, his lips wearing a bitter sneer. "Was he answered it was in a tone of concentrated fury.

"In return for your kind advice, I should like to inquire how much the Santa Cruz is paying for your extremely valuable services. I am aware that you betrayed my plans to them when you deserted my service."

"You know that you are lying," Lloyd interrupted coolly; "and, considering that no one present understands what you are saying except myself—and Don Arturo perhaps,—it wastes my time. Come, Armistead! have some sense enough to recognize that when you came into the Sierra to take the Santa Cruz you came on a fool's errand, and that you owe your life to-night to a woman's compassion. If we had allowed you to come to the mine—well, there would not have been very many of you left to go back."

"We could have given an account of some of you!" Armistead sneered. "No doubt," Lloyd agreed; "but you wouldn't have taken the Santa Cruz. Don't make any mistake about that. Now I'll go. I've too good an opinion of your sense to think that you are likely to come over the mountain after what I have told you. But if you should decide to do so, we will be ready for you. That's all I have to say."

He turned as he spoke, and in the same moment Armistead's hand went to his hip pocket. The next instant his hand, revolver in hand, facing the long, pearl-handled pistol which, quick as lightning, Arturo had drawn and with which he covered him.

"So you would shoot a man in the back, senor, and one who had come to you as a friend!" the young Mexican cried in a high key of indignation.

"At the words Lloyd wheeled around, drawing his pistol as he turned. Then he saw that the situation was threatening enough. Arturo indeed held Armistead covered, so that he could not level the revolver he had drawn; but at the first sign of a possible fight the men in the background had snatched up rifles and drawn pistols, and only Lloyd's stern face and levelled weapon held them temporarily as he knew in check.

"The first man that draws trigger I will shoot where he stands!" he shouted in Spanish; and there was a gleam in his eyes, as well as a ring in his voice, which told that he meant what he said. "It can't be that you are such cowards as to begin a fight with two men alone, who have come into your camp as friends. If you want to fight, come like men to the Santa Cruz, and we will give you all you like."

"If you don't order those men to put down their guns," said Arturo to Armistead, "I will send a bullet into your heart instantly."

There was no mistaking the sincerity and determination of the speaker. His blazing eyes and set face accented the threat so well that Armistead—a brave enough man as men go, and one who had faced danger often and credibly—knew that death as when looking at the barrel of the pistol which covered him now.

He turned and gave the order commanded. As the men somewhat reluctantly and sullenly obeyed it by lowering their weapons, there was a sound on the hillside above which made everyone start and look upward.

It was the same sound, or succession of sounds, which had accompanied the approach of Lloyd and Arturo—stones dislodged and thrown downward by descending steps, boulders broken or cracking under advancing feet. Lloyd and Arturo shot a quick glance of interrogation at each other, while the men, without waiting for orders, caught up their guns again; but as they did so foliage covered the mountain side—the ominous click of many revolvers—"Drop your arms!" a voice cried peremptorily in Spanish—the voice, as Arturo instantly recognized, of the foreman of the Santa Cruz—"or we will pour a volley into you. The first man that fires a shot goes down!"

The men stared at each other for a moment, and then obeyed the order with a haste that indicated how

entirely they grasped the situation. There was, in fact, not a chance for resistance. They were caught in a trap and commanded by unseen but none the less unmistakably evident foes. For keen eyes, searching the hillside, could catch the gleam of the rifle barrels through the foliage; and there was not one so stupid as to fail to realize that the tables had been turned upon them in the most unexpected fashion; that they who had intended to surprise were themselves completely surprised and taken at a hopeless disadvantage.

Armistead, grasping the full significance of the situation, turned upon Lloyd, cursing him furiously.

"This is what it meant—your pretending to come alone, to give a warning and talk peace!" he cried. "You were talking while your companions were getting into position to shoot us down, themselves unseen."

"As you proposed to shoot the men of the Santa Cruz," a quiet voice replied,—a voice so unexpected and so familiar that Lloyd and Armistead started as if they had been shot. The next moment Miss Rivers walked deliberately out of the shadow of the hillside growth into the open space illuminated by the light of the fire. She was followed by Victoria, and there was an audible murmur of amazed comment among the men when the two feminine figures appeared and paused between the two hostile forces.

There are cases on record, chiefly in fiction—of women who have appeared in such situations and on such occasions as forbidders of strife, gentle bearers of the olive-branch of peace; but there was no suggestion of that kind about these two young women. No one could look at Victoria's bent brows and flashing eyes without feeling that if she followed her inclination a volley from the rifles above would blaze out very quickly. And even Miss Rivers' charming face was set in stern lines, and her dilated eyes were full of indignant light as she fastened them on Armistead.

"I answer for Donna Victoria, because she does not speak English very well," she went on in clear, ringing tones. "She wishes you to know that Mr. Lloyd had nothing whatever to do with the coming of the men whose guns he holds the hillside above. He refused to take any party with him, and insisted on going to you accompanied only by Don Arturo. But Donna Victoria did not believe that this was safe. She had little faith in the honor of men who would come on such an errand as yours; and her doubts have been fully justified. So, to protect, if necessary, those who went to you on behalf of her mother, she took a party of men from the mine and followed you. You know whether or not we have come in time; whether or not you and the cowards in your pay—she sent a sweeping glance of brilliant scorn, for which no interpreter was needed, around the circle of silent men—"were not ready to murder the two men who had come to you as friendly envoys."

"Extremely friendly!" Armistead said with a bitter sneer. "And have I the pleasure of speaking to the commander of the rescue party when I address Miss Rivers?"

"You know that you have not," Miss Rivers replied. "I have simply accompanied Donna Victoria Calderon, who does command it, and who will now speak to you herself. I have no doubt that you know Spanish enough to understand her."

"She turned as she spoke to Victoria, who stepped a little forward. As she did so Lloyd thought that he had never seen anything quite so splendid as her appearance and attitude. With her superb figure in a pose of unconscious command, her fine head thrown back on its slender neck, and her dark eyes shining under their bent brows, she looked like a queen to rebellious subjects.

"Besides what the senorita has been good enough to say for me in order that it may not be misunderstood, I have nothing to say to you, senor," she said, addressing Armistead, "except to give you this message for—the man who sent you here. Tell him that, for the sake of the God of whom he knows nothing, and to save my mother from further suffering, I Victoria Calderon, have allowed you to go with your arms in these lands of the Santa Cruz upon your hands. But assure him that if ever you, or any one else, come back on such an errand, you will not go away alive. Understand this clearly; for in the Sierra what we say we do. Now, you and all your men will lay your arms down there"—she indicated a spot not far from where Lloyd and Arturo stood. "And if you have any disposition to refuse, I need only remind you that every man here is covered by a rifle."

Armistead, white to the lips with rage and mortification, turned to his men.

"There is nothing else to be done," he said. "They are cowards—they have the advantage of us,—they will not come out in the open to fight like men."

"Your taunts are useless, senor," Victoria said quickly. "My men will obey my orders; and those orders are that no blood shall be shed unless—and very stern was her voice here—"you force the shedding on us. Lay down your arms!"

There was no mistaking the peremptory command of her tone; and a slight stir among the foliage above as the men taking aim, seconded it with excellent effect. Armistead threw the revolver, which up to this time he had held in his hand, on the ground; and one by one the men

brought their rifles and piled them up at the spot designated. The business proceeded in unbroken silence under Victoria's eye. Lloyd and Arturo standing beside her with cocked pistols in hand. When the last man had deposited his gun and fallen back, she spoke again:

"Now you will all leave the lands of the hacienda at once. Arturo, take half a dozen men from there"—she nodded to the hillside—"and march them to the camino real. When you leave them, give this"—she stopped and picked up Armistead's revolver—to the senor, since he is a stranger in the sierra."

Ten minutes later the sullen, captured men had been marched away by Arturo and his armed band, and the victors, standing over the heap of guns, looked at one another as if hardly realizing what had been accomplished. Miss Rivers was the first to speak, as she threw her arms around Victoria.

"Isn't she magnificent!" she cried to Lloyd. "Could anybody—any man—have done better?"

"No general could have done better," he replied. "It was a military movement admirably conceived and perfectly executed. Donna Victoria, I believe that I owe you my life, and it was never worth so much to me as tonight."

"Ah!" said Victoria, with a little gasp. Her glance went swiftly from one to the other of the two faces before her, and she read plainly what had happened in the eyes of each. She clasped Isabel close, while she held out her hand to Lloyd.

"Gracias a Dios!" she cried.

THE END

THE EASTER LADY

Marcella smiled a little grimly to herself as she ascended the steps and slipped the key in the lock. She was wondering how she would break the news to Jasper.

"I'll have an extra nice dinner," she planned, "and his own favorite pudding, and then when he is feeling good, I'll tell him." But though it sounded easy enough she found herself a little nervous at the prospect.

"The dinner was good, the pudding superb, and Jasper in excellent spirits. In fact he was so gay and full of fun that Marcella put off the evil moment as long as possible. Then, just as she was about to speak, Jasper threw a bomb at her feet.

"What do you think I did today, Marcella?" he asked, smiling broadly. "I rented the south room."

Marcella gasped, then her jaw fell slowly open.

"Jasper! What do you mean?" she managed to stammer. "The south room?" Anything like the amazement in her face Jasper had never seen.

"The south room, of course," he returned. "What's the matter with you? Haven't you always wanted to rent the south room? I don't see anything in the statement to strike you dumb!"

Suddenly Marcella began to laugh. "Oh no, of course not," she murmured as soon as she could stop, "except that I rented the south room today also!"

Jasper, who had been standing staring at his sister with his hands in his pockets, sank simply into his Morris chair.

"Well, I'll be jiggered!" he exclaimed blankly. "I should think so," Marcella rejoined, still laughing. "To whom did you rent it?"

Jasper looked up and grinned sheepishly. "Uncle Josephus," he said.

"Uncle Josephus, of all people!" Marcella was surprised again.

"He's rented his house," Jasper explained hurriedly, "and he came into the office this morning feeling blue, I could see that. Of course he's lived there all his life, and it's mighty hard on him. I felt sorry for him," he stopped. "I felt sorry for him," he went on after a moment, "and I remembered that you had always wanted to rent the south room, and I always told him that he could come here and—and—"

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