

A DAUGHTER OF THE SIERRA

BY CHRISTIAN REID

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CHAPTER XXV—CONTINUED

"As a matter purely of curiosity," she said, "I should like to know what you think you have to gain by these threats."

"I have nothing to gain, nothing," she returned. "But you have maddened me—you have played with me, fooled me, led me on to professional failure—"

"Shall I repeat that your charges are as absurd as they are unfounded?" she said. "I have not played with you, I have not fooled you, your own vanity alone has done that; and I have certainly not caused your professional failure. That was inevitable. Whoever came here on such an errand as yours would fail."

He bowed ironically. "Whoever was so unfortunate as to find Miss Rivers opposed to him would certainly be likely to do so; for I see now that we have all been in your hands like puppets pulled by wires. You kept Thornton from entering my employ, while you sent Lloyd to warn the Santa Cruz, and probably also to induce Randolph to desert my service. It has been as good as a play. He laughed the harsh, merciless laugh which is the extreme expression of intense anger."

"And Lloyd—Lloyd!"—has been cast for the part of hero! Your friends in San Francisco will be interested to hear of this; they will find a spice of the charming inconsistency for which Miss Rivers is famous in the fact that while posing as the champion of Trafford's divorced Indian wife, your most intimate associate and favored admirer has been a ruined, discredited, divorced man!"

"How dare you!" "Write to the lips with indignation, Isabel could only utter these words. For the first time in her sheltered life she found herself face to face with the unveiled brutality of a man's passion, and for the first time self-possession and readiness of speech deserted her. Her eyes blazed as she looked at Armistead. But his last words had contained more than an insult; they carried also a shock, from which she felt herself trembling from head to foot, and under the effect of which movement and speech seemed to become impossible. She was conscious of wondering if there was no escape—if she must stand as a target for more of these insults—when a hand was suddenly slipped into her arm, and a voice, cold and cutting as steel, spoke beside her.

"Senior," said Victoria; "you will instantly leave the lands of Las Joyas. I tolerated your presence here when I thought that you came as the friend of the seniorita; but since you have come to annoy and insult her—for your voice has told me that, though I have not understood your words, you must go, or I shall call my men yonder"—she pointed to some laborers in a field not far off—"to make you go."

"There was an instant's pause, filled with the soft rustle of the leaves over their heads. Nothing could have enraged Armistead more than this climax to an interview which already mortified him beyond endurance. To obey Victoria's command was intolerable. Yet to disregard it was only to bring on himself worse humiliation; for the determination in the dark eyes was unmistakable as their command. He seized the bridle of his horse and turned to Miss Rivers.

"The intervention of your savage friend was unnecessary," he said. "I was about to take my departure. I believe there is nothing else for me to say except to offer my congratulations on the success of your efforts, and to hope that you will be pleased with their final result."

Then he mounted and rode away, leaving the girls standing together under the arching baffle, beside the crystal water.

CHAPTER XXVI

LLOYD BRINGS A WARNING

"I am afraid that you are tired of Las Joyas, seniorita." "Miss Rivers started and looked around. She was seated on the corridor of the casa grande—the great, white-arched corridor which ran along the front of the house and commanded such a wide view of the valley and mountains, and she had been so absorbed in thought, with her gaze fixed on the sunset fires burning above the great hills, that she had not heard Victoria's approach which indeed had been silent. Now she found the girl sitting beside her on the bench where she was seated.

"Tired?" she repeated quickly. "Why do you think such a thing? How could I be tired of Las Joyas? It is the most beautiful place I have ever seen."

"But it must be dull to you," Victoria said; "and it has seemed to me that for the last few days you have been triste—sad, do you not say?"—as if you were tired.

"I am not tired, but disgusted," Miss Rivers replied.

"Disgusted?" Victoria repeated, opening her dark eyes.

"With myself, not with Las Joyas," Isabel explained. "And there is nothing more disagreeable than to be disgusted with oneself. One can support things with philosophy when one is disgusted only with others or with the world in general; but when one's self-esteem has received a shock, and one feels that instead of display-

ing the wisdom of prudence and other admirable qualities of which one has fancied oneself possessed, one has these—well, then disgust sets in with deadly earnestness, and even the Sierra ceases to have power to charm."

"But why should you feel this disgust?" Victoria asked. "What has happened to make you think such things of yourself?" "You know what has happened. You know of the visit of that detestable man."

"I know you have not been the same since he was here, but I do not know why his visit should have affected you so much."

"It is rather hard to tell," said Miss Rivers, after a pause. "In the first place, it made me feel that I had interfered with matters which did not concern me, and had—as we say in English—made a fool of myself."

"That," said Victoria, with conviction, "you could not do."

"Oh, yes, I could—I can—with great completeness! I have laid myself open to misapprehension—not that, in my mind that all—I have found out how odious a man's admiration can become; I have learned that one should not suffer oneself to grow interested in mysteries, for they are likely to prove commonplace and disgusting; and—altogether I feel that the Santa Cruz could have got on very well without my aid, and that I should be much more comfortable if I had let it alone."

"I don't understand all that you mean," said Victoria, who was indeed very much puzzled; "but I am sure that you are mistaken about the Santa Cruz. There can be no doubt that you saved the mine when you sent Mr. Lloyd to warn us—"

"And nearly caused his death," said Isabel, with a somewhat hysterical laugh. "Don't let us forget that. Oh, I am tired—tired of it all!" she cried suddenly, passionately in English. "And I feel as if it were not over—as if trouble, tragedy were yet to come."

She arose with an abrupt movement and walked to the edge of the corridor, where, leaning against a pillar, she looked out over the darkening landscape. The wide solemnity of the plain and hills and bending sky failed for once to impart their tranquillity to her. She was filled with a restlessness which she did not understand, as well as the disgust of which she had spoken to Victoria. As a matter of fact, what she was tasting was that bitter sense of the unprofitableness of all things which few persons are so fortunate as to go through life without knowing, but which had never assailed her before. For there could be no doubt that she had heretofore lived very much on the surface of existence—in an atmosphere of admiration, of acknowledged queenship, which made life seem a very roseate and satisfactory thing indeed. And now, suddenly, the shielding veil was torn aside and she saw life as it was—felt rather than perceived its ugly depths, its harshness and its pain. Armistead's abrupt change from the flattering deference which is the outward attitude of many men toward women, to the coarse brutality which in their inward attitude, had enlightened her even more than it angered her. Anger was reserved for another man, for one who had ventured to approach her—to rouse her pity, her sympathy, her interest, while having upon him a stigma from which of all things she shrank most; against which, as she had once said, her taste revolted as much as her faith condemned. Justice after a while would remind her how carefully he had abstained from any attempt to rouse this interest; but just now she was only conscious of the unreasonable anger and the deep seated disgust.

Meanwhile Victoria, who had come again to her side with silent tread, was listening to a sound which, though still far off, was momentarily drawing nearer; and she suddenly spoke.

"Some one is riding fast," she said. "That is not common in the Sierra." Isabel glanced at the speaker quickly. She had not heard the sound; but this did not surprise her, for she had learned the difference between Victoria's ear and her own.

"Is the riders coming from the mine?" she asked.

"No," Victoria answered; "from the other direction—from Urbeleja." "Isabel knew that at Urbeleja was the one telegraph office—established in a cave—in this part of the Sierra, and her thoughts leaped at once to a conclusion. "It is a dispatch, perhaps."

"Perhaps," Victoria responded, but doubtfully and without any trace of anxiety. Dispatches were infrequent and meant little at Las Joyas.

Then the sound reached Isabel's ear, and to her the rapid beat of the horse's hoofs as he galloped along the valley seemed filled with the suggestion of haste, of trouble, of all the wearing cares of life and civilization which even the great hills could not keep back. She found herself listening intently, the same question in her mind as in Victoria's—would the rider pass the gate of Las Joyas or would he enter?

It was a question soon answered. The rapid hoof-beats ceased—that was for the opening of the gate—and then were heard again, advancing across the valley toward the house. And now, too, the figure of a horse and rider could be perceived even through the gathering dusk.

Isabel turned to her companion, as sure of the keenness of her glance as of her ear.

"Who is it?" she asked.

But Victoria did not answer at once. Indeed the twilight made

identification difficult even for her vision, so that it was not until the horseman rode up before the corridor that she exclaimed:

"It is the Senior Lloyd!"

It was a joyful exclamation—so joyful that even her quick ear did not catch the sharp indrawing of her companion's breath. At this moment Miss Rivers would have given much if a way of retreat had been open to her. But, consistent with dignity, there was none. So she stood silent—a quiet, dignified figure in the dusk—as Lloyd dismounted and came forward. He shook hands with Victoria, whose eager, cordial welcome left nothing to be desired; and then, as he took the hand which Miss Rivers extended, something like a shock passed over him. He could not see her face very distinctly, and there had been nothing to warn him of any change in her feeling toward him; but when he felt the cool, light touch of her fingers—so reluctantly given so hastily withdrawn, so entirely without the magnetic cordiality which is felt in the hand clasp of friends, he knew that a change had occurred. For the brief instant that he held her hand he glanced at her questioningly.

"How do you do, Mr. Lloyd?" she said. "This is very unexpected, seeing you at Las Joyas."

"My coming is unexpected to me," he answered. "This he turned to Victoria. "Is Don Mariano here?" he asked.

"No," she replied. "He is at the hacienda de beneficio. The conducta for Culiacan started today, and there has been much business needing attention."

"Ah! the conducta started today!" said Lloyd. He was silent for a moment, as if reflecting. Don Arturo, then?—he is here?" he asked.

"Yes, Arturo is here," said Victoria with evident surprise, her voice indicating what her next words expressed plainly. "What do you want with Don Mariano or with Arturo that I can not do?"

"I only want to say a few words to one or the other of them," Lloyd answered. "Indeed I think I will ask Don Arturo to ride on with me to the hacienda de beneficio."

"Something is the matter," said Victoria quickly. "What is it? You have no right to withhold from me any news about the mine."

"I am not sure that anything is the matter," Lloyd replied; "and it is because I am not sure that I do not want to disturb or annoy you. I have had a warning which may amount to nothing—"

"A warning that the mine is to be attacked?"

"It is really hardly more than a rumor; but I wish to be sure that Don Mariano is on his guard. So if I may ask you to call Arturo; we will ride on—"

"You must come in," Victoria interposed peremptorily. "Arturo can go immediately. But you must rest and take refreshments; for you have been riding hard to reach here—"

"How do you know that?" he asked. "But for the sake of my horse—yes, you can take him, Pacheco—I will wait a little, if Arturo goes on at once."

"He shall go," the girl said; and turning hastily, entered the house.

There was an instant's pause of silence with the two left together on the corridor. Then Miss Rivers said in a voice which she strove to make as usual, but in which to Lloyd's ear there was a suggestion of delicate ice:

"What is the meaning of this? How did the warning reach you? I ask because a day or two ago I heard that Mr. Armistead had abandoned his intentions of taking the mine by force and had left the Sierra."

"So you have heard that?" said Lloyd. He glanced at her quickly and keenly, as she stood, a graceful, white clad figure in the dusk. "I, too, heard something of the kind; but there is reason to believe that we were misinformed or that Armistead has changed his mind."

"I was not misinformed," said Isabel; "but it is possible that Mr. Armistead may have changed his mind. Please tell me what you know."

"Really not very much," Lloyd answered. "Perhaps I should begin by telling you that when I left you in the Sierra and went back to the party there was Randolph—that is, Armistead's—on its way to attempt the surprise of the Santa Cruz."

"Ah!" she exclaimed quickly. "Then he never meant to keep his promise to me! I am glad of that."

Lloyd did not ask why she was glad; he only went on quietly:

"I told Randolph that he would find the mine thoroughly prepared to resist attack; and he—acting to a certain degree on his own responsibility, and knowing that he could not count on his men in such an event—decided to turn back and await direct orders from Armistead."

Even the twilight could not hide the flash in Miss Rivers' eyes. The ice seemed to be thawing as she said eagerly:

"And then—?"

"Well, then we rode together back to Canaleja," said Lloyd. He hesitated a moment,—it seemed difficult for him to go on. "I think I told you that I thought it possible I knew the man—Randolph, I mean," he continued, with an effort which was plain to her. "I found that it was he—the man I had known many years ago, and who was connected with certain passages in my life. At that time he had been very much under my influence—until he fell under

the influence of another person—and perhaps the old feeling revived. At all events, he decided after hearing my opinion of this matter, to resign his service with Armistead. It was after this that Armistead made up his mind to abandon any further attempt against the Santa Cruz."

"I see!" She did not tell him what she saw, as she gazed across the night-shadowed valley toward the forest-clad heights which overhung the sleeping pools; but he divined that it was something that had to do with her own information of Armistead's intentions. "And now," she went on quickly, as her glance returned to his and he felt again the dilating flash of her brilliant eyes, "what reason have you for thinking that he has changed his mind again?"

"The reason of a dispatch from Randolph, who is still in Canaleja, which returned to me at Urbeleja today. When I returned to the Sierra I told him to advise me of anything he heard—"

"Yes, yes. And he has heard—?"

"That Armistead has wired a certain unscrupulous Mexican—Pedro Sanchez—to collect the men already employed and bring them to him in the Sierra. It looks as if he intends to make an attempt, after all, to seize the Santa Cruz; probably counting on the fact of his intention to abandon any such attempt being known at the mine and so putting them off guard. I am more inclined to believe this since I hear that the conducta has left today—carrying, of course, a number of the best men with it."

"I am sure that you are right," said Isabel. "It is all perfectly plain. He came here a few days ago—oh, yes, he ventured even that!—to tell me that he was leaving the Sierra, having given up all intention of trying to take the Santa Cruz. Perhaps this was really his intention when he came; but afterward he determined for many reasons that he would not go away defeated; that he would take advantage of the news of his withdrawal being known at the mine—of guard being, therefore, probably relaxed—to surprise and seize it. In his anger he permitted himself to say something before he left—to make a threat which should have prepared me for some such action on his part."

"This settles it," said Lloyd. "I haven't the least doubt now that he hopes to find the mine unguarded, and so surprise it—probably tonight."

"But if you have just had your dispatch from Canaleja, the men can not have reached him—"

"That dispatch, unfortunately, has been lying at Urbeleja for two or three days. I only reached there today."

"Then the danger is pressing?"

"Very pressing, I think I had better see why Arturo delays."

He turned toward the open door of the house as he spoke, but at that moment Victoria appeared in it.

"Don Felipe," she said, "my mother wishes to speak to you." Then she extended her hand to Isabel. "You will come too, seniorita," she added.

TO BE CONTINUED

BLESSINGS

The last straggling gleams of sunlight had bade farewell to the windows of mill and shop, which a few minutes before they had playfully gilded. The curling rings and tunnels of smoke that now rose from the tall chimneys of these hives of industry told of a day that was spent.

Within the office of the Doyle & Benson shop, where the daylight had not long vanished, Dan Doyle, one of the proprietors, leaned his fat elbow on his desk and listened while Jean Larochelle, his clerk, talked in his soft, liquid tones.

"Fine thing Jean! Nice custom!" Dan remarked.

"Yes, well, good night, Mr. Doyle!" Jean's dark, expressive eyes flashed and his tall, lithe figure swung out of the door.

"Good night, boy," Dan Doyle rose and ventured into an inner office. "Hello, boss!" he called cheerily as he entered.

Tom Benson looked up. Gray was the color of his hair and eyes. But the eyes were bright, sharp, and revealed a mind, keen and alert.

"Wake up, old man! The holiday didn't hit you hard like Jean!" his chubby-faced partner continued.

"Darn it! Massachusetts didn't need another holiday—until some fool decided we ought to start the New Year—loading!" Benson exclaimed.

Dan Doyle whistled—the other's ire made little impression on him. "Perhaps," Dan thrust his hands into his coat pockets. "Kind of a nice thing—Jean Larochelle was just now telling me. 'Tis a French custom for the young people to go back home on New Year's Day—all the sons and daughters—and kneel down and ask for their fathers and mothers' blessing!"

"Um," Benson grunted but listened. "Yes, Jean spent the day in Brentville, and they had a family reunion—all journeying back home on that day to get the old folk's blessing. It is a French or a French-Canadian custom!"

"One of their good ones!" Benson admitted with another grunt. "Say," Dan glanced at the pile of papers on the desk. "Going to work all the week, Tom? I can't. The wife is waiting. Your New Year's resolution must have sounded like the post-horn. 'Work, work, work!' With a laugh, Dan vanished.

Benson settled himself back in his chair and took up his papers again. An instant later he dropped them from his long, lean fingers.

"Blessings, blessings," he repeated, and a quick pain shot through his heart. "Confound these French and Irish with their customs and their lingo!"

But his quarrel was not with either he had mentioned, but with his own thoughts and himself.

He liked Dan Doyle, his cheerful, honest friend for twenty years. When they had but little and now much success they had stood together and stood the testing well. No, it was with himself that Tom Benson argued.

He drew down his desk, locked it and walked out of the office.

But his inner disturbance had not abated when he reached home.

"You're late again tonight, Dad," chided the dark-eyed girl who met him in the hall and brushed his cheek with a light kiss. "Isn't it a fine night, Dad?"

"Yes, Bab," he assented, but his voice lacked vim.

Elfi like, eager-eyed Barbara viewed all the world as happy. "Hurry to dinner, Dad! We are going to a party, you know!"

"Oh, I forgot!" He usually forgot such incidental. "Who is going?"

"Tom, Anne and I."

"All hands," he commented.

"Yes. We told you all about it—the Allens are giving it."

A comfortable fireside and home lights had not ceased the aching in Tom Benson's heart. He threw aside the newspaper that he had made a pretense of reading when a few minutes before the trio comprising his family had come to say a merry word of parting. There was Tom's only son—a good, manly chap—the laughing, little Bab and the more demure and staid Anne—all off for an evening's pleasure. And he was alone!

"I'm blue!" he pondered aloud. "Dan Doyle's nonsense about the blessings—" he paused and a swift memory came of a girl who had pleaded with him. "Send me away with your blessing, Dad. Bitterly he had refused. "I'm an old fool!" he sighed aloud.

But like an on-rushing current, memory would not be stemmed, and Tom Benson sank back in his chair with half-closed eyes.

Yes, another year had begun. How did it find him? Lacking in many things. The wife he loved, dead these ten years, yet whose presence was as real as if they had parted yesterday. Death had snatched her away before she could enjoy the profits his children held so lightly. He was lonely tonight; it was heart hunger. Then his retrospective called back another face. With a cry of pain and bitterness the man turned away from the image of his sweet-faced eldest daughter.

"I did my part, God," he murmured aloud. "Yes, it was all this Church! I haven't bated it. I held my children to it—dearer than if it were my own faith. I was true to the trust and promise given, but—"

Tom Benson paused again and reflected. He had even sought to embrace the faith—when God took from him what he loved most—his wife, and bade him enter with a sacrifice in his hand, in anger he drew back. He waited. Then under the influence of his own dear child Lilly, he was ready again to accept the grace when once more God and this Church had robbed him. His Lilly had left him to become a nun. Then in his bitterness he had cried out against God. Yes, three years had since dragged by and found him in sulky anger with himself and the world.

He groaned and pondered: "God, you might have taken Tom. He's a good boy, and as a priest—I'd have been secretly proud of him. But Lilly I wanted for myself. True, I love them all—little Bab and Anne. They are all my children, but Lilly would not have left me alone tonight in my agony of regrets! Yes, God you asked too much from me!"

His thoughts turned to his wife. "Alice," lovingly his lips framed her name, as if he thought her listening presence was there. "Alice, I've never spoken Lilly's name for three years. I've been angry with her and with God! Why? Because she chose Him—God—yes, the God who took you from me, too! Alice, the days and years have come and gone since you left me, and the future days and years—where will they find me? With you? Heaven is with you! God!" He leaned forward, his eyes wide open, staring, and his lips parted.

He rose and strode the floor. He could almost hear his name spoken by men: "Benson's not here. He's gone—dead." They would soften it and say: "Benson's passed on." The man's lips twitched with agony. Not yet, he pondered, but the year must come and the day must come when they would say it. His work swept away—nothing would remain to him in that hour.

Then swiftly the man remembered the certainty of the Church which he had never doubted.

He turned into the hall, pulled on his coat and went out into the moonlight.

The snow glistened, and patches of silvery whiteness lay along the dark road. He gazed upward toward the heavens jeweled with stars. "Tis some place far beyond there," he murmured, I must go to meet you, Alice. How do I get there? I must find the way!"

On he walked in the clear, still night until he reached the dark shadow of the church. He hesitated,

then entered. In the inner gloom he distinguished the shadowy forms of a few people. His eyes sought the crimson flame that marked the earthly thrones of the heavenly prisoner.

He stole into a pew and waited. Soon he discerned two figures—Dan Doyle and his wife kneeling side by side.

How pleased Alice would have been to have knelt thus with him! Truly he had waited too long. A tear trickled down, and the poignancy of memory thrilled him. Now he recalled his wife's half stifled sighs as she had gone on her way through life—holding on alone to that which her heart held dearest.

Dan Doyle and his wife were going out now. Tom Benson shrank back and hid his face in his hands. Unrecognized they passed him by. Still the man knelt and waited—his eyes on the throbbing flame that echoed the pulse of his heart.

Father Egan, small, bent and white-haired, quitted his confessional. Tom Benson rose and followed the old pastor into the sacristy. He stumbled in the darkness.

The priest turned and hurriedly switched on the light: "Ob, 'tis you, Tom Benson!"

"Father," the man began huskily. "You married me and baptized my children—would you help me?"

"My help. You you surely will have," replied the priest kindly. "And then Tom Benson related his long story and pledged his new resolution.

When he had finished Father Egan said: "Yours was one of the hundredth cases, son. You have been a Catholic at heart for years, yet you lacked—"

"I tried to fight it out with God," the man interrupted. "With grace—"

"But it won't, Father."

"Grace always triumphs if it gets but half a chance with a soul," the old priest commented gently.

An hour later as Tom Benson threaded his way through the still splendor of the starlit, wintry night, he pondered and recalled a line: "What is the fulness of joy but peace?"

He possessed peace at last. Tomorrow he would go and see Lilly and tell her what her sacrifice had accomplished, and that her prayers were answered. Even now, how he longed to see her, to feel her arms around his neck and her warm tears on his cheek. Now he would give her the blessing so long deferred!

Suddenly he paused and the tears gathered in his eyes. "Does Alice know? But surely her hands have sent this to me, the best of all God's blessings, faith—Mary Hayden Harkins in The Missionary."

THE TRAITS OF POPE BENEDICT

ARCHBISHOP CERETTI PAYS TRIBUTE TO PRESENT PONTIFF

Extraordinary charity, unvarying thoughtfulness for those about him and affability are among the outstanding traits of His Holiness Benedict XV., who always charms with his gracious democratic manner those who have the happiness of an audience, the most Rev. Bonaventura Ceretti, D. D., Under-Secretary of State, declared recently in Washington, D. C., while attending the celebration of the episcopal golden jubilee of Cardinal Gibbons. His Excellency, who journeyed from the Eternal City to this country to convey the personal felicitations of the Sovereign Pontiff to the venerable Archbishop of Baltimore, gave some personal glimpses of the Holy Father as he has seen him day after day busied by his many cares.

"The Holy Father," His Excellency said, "is tall and strong—despite the fact that he rarely permits himself as much recreation as a walk in the garden—and his hair is black despite his sixty-six years."

UNVARYING THOUGHTFULNESS "Among the outstanding traits of his character are his affability, his unvarying thoughtfulness for those about him and his extraordinary charity. Those who have the happiness of an audience with him are always charmed with his gracious, even democratic manner. A touching instance of his thoughtfulness is the fact that on the birthday or feast day of one of his secretaries, his are the first greetings to reach the prelate, accompanied with a token of His Holiness' esteem. (On my birthday last year I received from him a handsome Crucifix.) When, on any little delicacy, for example bouillon or conserve, are sent him, he shares them with all."

As for the Holy Father's charity, you can have no idea how great it is. For example, if a poor woman in Rome writes to him for help, at once he sends her a sum of money; to any appeal that comes to him, he responds without a question. On one occasion a priest of France wrote him, telling him of an association which had been formed to work for the rebuilding of the ruined churches of Northern France and asking that he send the members his blessing and encouragement. I spoke to His Holiness and asked if he would send his blessing. 'You are very simple,' he said to me, 'we must not only send him our blessing and encouragement—we must send him money, and he handed me \$4,000. At another time he received a letter telling him of the sad condition of the Syrian, that they had no food and no clothes, and that the same time thanking him for previous help given them."

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