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Jessica Trent: Her Life on a Ranch



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CHAPTER I ON THE CANYON TRAIL

“Hello, there! What in the name of reason is this?”

The horseman’s excited cry was echoed by a startled neigh from his beast, which wheeled about so suddenly that he nearly precipitated both himself and rider into the gulch below.

“Oh! I’m sorry—Hold on, Zu! Go! Do, please. Quick! It’s so narrow just beyond and I can’t—”

The stranger obeyed, perforce, for his spirited animal having now headed up the slope, continued on his course at breakneck speed, pursued at equal pace by the unknown creature that had terrified him.

The race would not have been so even had the trail been wider, for King Zulu could easily have beaten his contestant, but, as it was, the fleeing bay bruised his master’s leg against the canyon wall, now and then, while bits of the bird’s plumage were torn on the same projecting rocks. There was no point of passage till

more than a mile higher on the mountain, and Jess knew this if Mr. Hale did not. He knew nothing save that he was clinging and riding for his life, and that this “Western horseback tour” which his doctor had prescribed for him, seemed now more likely to prove his death than his cure.

But when a laugh rang out, close to his shoulder, he turned his head and glanced angrily backward.

“Oh, I beg your pardon, but—it’s so funny! I’ve often wanted to try King Zu against a strange horse and now I have. Only, if we were up there on the mesa, he’d show you!”

“Does this trail never end, nor turn?”

The laughter on the girl’s face changed to anxiety.

“Not ill, exactly; only I’m not experienced at this business and it shakes me.”

“You ride too hard and stiff. That’s why. Let yourself go—just be part of your horse. He’s a beauty, isn’t he? Even the boys couldn’t stand that gait.”

“And you. Who taught you to ride an ostrich? Where did you get it? It’s almost the first one I ever saw and quite the first that Prince did. I was nearly as scared as he, meeting such a creature on a lonely mountain trail.”

“I never learned—it just happened. Zulu is ‘patriarch’ of the flock. The only imported bird left alive. We just grew up together, he and I. Didn’t we, King?”

Speech was now easier, for the speed of both animals had slackened, that of Prince to a comfortable trot. While the

sidewise lurching motion of the ostrich was enjoyable enough to Jessica, it turned Mr. Hale's head dizzy, watching. Or it may have been the blinding sunshine, beating against the canyon wall and deflected upon the riders in waves of heat.

"Whew! This is scorching. How far, yet?"

Jessica saw that what she minded not at all was turning the stranger sick, and answered swiftly:

"You wouldn't be able to get further than 'five times' before we reach the turn. There'll be a glorious breeze then. There always is."

"What do you mean by 'five times'?"

"Why, just the multiplication table. I always say it when I've something I want to get over quick. You begin at one-times-one, and see if it isn't so."

"What shall we find at the top; your home?"

"Oh, no, indeed. That is quite the other way. Down in the valley. Sobrante ranch. That's ours. Were you going there?"

"I was going—anywhere. I had lost my way. 'Missed the trail,' as you say in this country."

"I thought, maybe, you were just a 'tourist.'"

Mr. Hale laughed, and the laugh helped him to forget his present discomfort.

"Perhaps I am, even if you do speak so disdainfully. Are all 'tourists' objectionable?"

Jessica's brown cheek flushed. She felt she had said something rude—she, whose ambition it was to be always and everywhere

“Our Lady Jess,” that the dear “boys” called her. But she remembered how annoyed her mother was by the visits of strangers who seemed to regard Sobrante and its belongings as a “show” arranged for their special benefit.

“We—we are generally glad when the rains come,” she answered, evasively.

“To keep them away? Yet if, as I suspect, you have an ostrich farm, I can’t blame their curiosity. I’m hoping to visit one, myself.”

“Ours is not a real ‘farm.’ It is just one of the many things our ranch is good for. But I know my mother would make you very welcome. You—but there! Look down, please. Yonder it is, Sobrante. That means ‘richness,’ you know. And now up. The next turn will land us on the mesa, and I hope, I hope, I have come in time!”

The road had now broadened, and with a little chirrup to King Zulu, she passed and forged ahead so rapidly that she was soon out of sight. The great bird upon whose back she was perched was not, apparently, at all wearied, but poor Prince was utterly winded, while a curious feeling of loneliness stole upon his rider.

But, presently, the sound of voices came over the bluff, and Mr. Hale urged his tired beast forward. The next he knew he was sprawling on the plateau and his horse had fallen beside him. Prince’s forefoot was in a hole, from which he was unable to withdraw it.

“Oh! oh! The poor creature! And you, sir, are you hurt?”

“No, I think not. Rather a shake-up, though, and I was dizzy with the heat before. Prince, Prince, lie still; we’ll help you.”

One glance had showed the stranger that they were near a shepherd’s hut, and that its occupant was at home. The man had been sitting quietly in the shade of the little building and of the one pepper tree which grew beside its threshold. He did not move, even now, till the girl called impatiently:

“Pedro! Come! Quick!”

Then he arose in a leisurely fashion and, carefully depositing his osiers in a tub of water, came forward.

“So? He can’t get up, yes? A wise man looks where he rides, indeed.”

Despite his anxiety over Prince, Mr. Hale regarded the shepherd with amused curiosity. Pedro’s swarthy face was as unmoved as if the visits of strangers with disabled horses were daily events; but the man’s calmness did not prevent his usefulness. In fact, during every step of his deliberate advance he had been studying the situation and how best to aid the fallen animal, which had now ceased to struggle and lay gazing at his master with a dumb, pitiful appeal.

Then Pedro bent forward and, with a strength amazing in a man of his small build, seized Prince’s head and shoulder and with one prodigious wrench freed him from the pitfall. Then he stooped again and carefully examined the bruised forefoot.

“A moon and a half he’ll go lame. Yes. For just so long let him be left with Pedro. Si?”

Then he led the limping beast toward the hut and began to bathe its injured ankle with the water from the tub.

“Marvelous! I never saw anything done as easily as that!” cried Mr. Hale, recovering from his astonishment.

“Ah; but you’ve never seen our Pedro before. And to think I was so angry with him, I!”

With a remorseful impulse Jessica sprang forward and threw her arms about the old shepherd’s shoulders. He received her caress as calmly as he did everything else, though a keen observer might have seen a fleeting smile around his rugged lips.

Smiles did, indeed, spring to all three faces when, a moment later, the rattling of tins discovered Zulu rummaging a heap of empty cans, even in the very act of swallowing a highly decorated one.

The jingling startled Prince, also, from the repose into which he had now settled, and, after one terrified glance toward his unknown enemy, King Zu, he dashed across the mesa as if lameness were unknown.

At which Pedro smiled, well content.

“Good. He that uses his own legs spares his neighbors. Yes.”

“Meaning that he would have to be exercised by somebody?”

The shepherd did not answer. He had lived alone so long amid the great solitudes of nature that speech had grown irksome to him. He regarded it a sin to waste words, and his young mistress understood this, if Mr. Hale did not. To this gentleman the situation presented itself as a very serious one. There was no

habitation visible save the small hut, a place barely sufficient to its owner's simple needs and utterly inadequate to those of a lately recovered invalid. He was not strong enough to make his way to the valley on foot, and even if Prince were now able to carry him, he felt it would be brutal to impose so hard a task.

But Jessica came to his aid with the suggestion:

"If you'll come and rest behind the cabin I'll make you a cup of coffee on Pedro's little stove. He often lets me when I come up to see him, and then, when you've rested, we'll go home. I am so angry I can hardly breathe."

"Indeed; I should never have guessed it," he answered, laughing, and allowing the girl to lead him to the shelter proposed.

"Ah! but I am. And a gentlewoman never gets angry. Least of all with such a darling as Pedro. You see, he ought to have been about dying, and he hasn't even a single ache!"

"What an odd child you are!"

"Am I?" regarding him gravely. "I'm sure I don't want to be that. I want to be just—perfect."

Mr. Hale sighed as he dropped upon the bench to which Jess had guided him. "We are none of us that—ever."

"I suppose that's because 'none of us' ever try quite hard enough. But I will be, if trying will fetch it."

Then she whisked inside the hut and presently there came to the gentleman's nostrils the aroma of freshly steaming coffee. He had not realized that he was hungry, but now could scarcely wait

until the little maid came out to him again with a tin cup of the liquid in one hand and a can of condensed milk in the other.

“My mother always lets her guests ‘trim’ their drink for themselves, but I’ll drop in the cream if you’ll say how much. Enough? Now sugar. One? How queer. And it’s sugar of our own making, too; beet sugar, you know.”

The tin cup was decidedly rusty, the cheap spoon dingy, and “canned” milk the aversion of Mr. Hale’s dyspeptic stomach; yet despite these facts he had never tasted a more delicious draught than this, nor one served with a gentler grace. For Jessica was quite unconscious that there was anything amiss with Pedro’s dishes, and now offered the stranger a tin of time-hardened biscuits, with the air of one proffering the rarest of dainties.

“You would better eat one of these; they’re quite fine, with the coffee.”

“I’ll—I’ll try, thank you, if you’ll fetch your own cup and sit beside me.”

“All right. Only I’ll have to wait till Pedro’s finished. There’s only this and the egg, you know. He’s rather stubborn, dear fellow. My mother has offered him more dishes, but he says ‘more care’ and won’t take them. Excuse me.”

With a dip and swirl of her short skirts, the little hostess ran into the hut, to reappear, a moment later, bearing in both hands a drinking-cup which made the guest exclaim in delight:

“What an exquisite thing!”

“Isn’t it? But just wait until you see those which Pedro made

for mother! This is fine, but they're like cobwebs."

She did not offer to show him the cup more closely, for she had seen the shepherd lay down his rushes and sit waiting, and Jessica would not disappoint the old friend for the new. Still the less, because she had so lately been vexed with him, and wholly without cause.

But when the silent fellow had emptied the cup she proudly gave it for Mr. Hale's inspection.

"An ostrich egg, you see, cut off at the top. Pedro wove all this lacelike outside, of just the common tule rushes. He splits them till they are like threads, and see that handle! Nothing could break it, nor can one tell just where it begins or ends—the joinings, I mean. There are many wonderful weavers among the Indians, but none so deft as our Pedro, my mother says.

"Now, will you not fill this again and drink it with me? For I see that our speechless friend, yonder, has gone to work again as if his life depended on his industry."

"He's always at work, like that. Yet he never neglects his flock. He has been herding ever since he was a little boy. That must have been years ago. He's so very old."

"He doesn't look it. I should guess he might be fifty."

"Fifty! Why, there's nobody anywhere around who remembers when our Pedro was born. Not even Fra Mateo at the mission, yet even he is more than a hundred," she answered, proudly.

"Possible? Well, this is all wonderful to me who have lived

always in a crowded city. This big West is like a romance, a fairy tale; not the least of its marvels to find a little girl like you riding alone on such a steed up such a desolate canyon, yet not in the least afraid.”

“Why, why should I be afraid? Except, of course, I was, for a bit, when I saw that Zulu made your horse rear. A step nearer and you’d have both gone over.”

Mr. Hale shuddered, and Jessica hastened to add:

“But the step wasn’t taken and you’re quite safe up here. Is the dizziness all gone? Many are like that before they get used to the glare. Some of the ‘tourists’ wear blue glasses, and veils, and things. They look so funny.”

Into her laughter burst Pedro’s speech.

“Ware Antonio. Is it plucking day, no? His third hand is Ferd, who lies and steals. I know. The mistress’ chest has many openings. *Nina*, go home, and bid Antonio come himself when next he’d have me die. Yes.”

Jessica sprang to her feet. These were many words for the shepherd to utter, and was not to be disobeyed. Though the old man’s age was doubtless far less than was accredited him, he was commonly considered a sage whose intelligence increased, rather than diminished, with the passing years.

“I’ll go at once, Pedro. Please forget that I was angry and—good-by.”

Mr. Hale was unprepared for this sudden departure, which bereft the scene of its fairest feature; for even while he listened

to the brief speech between this odd pair there was a flash of twinkling feet and a scarlet Tam, and Jessica was gone.

“Why—why—what? Eh, what?” he demanded, rising.

His answer came with a crash and clatter which could never have been made by one small, fleeing figure, and with the startling force with which everything happened on that eventful day.

Over the bluff scrambled a shaggy piebald burro, from whose back there tumbled at the stranger’s very feet a brace of little lads, securely lashed together; even their wrists and ankles bound beyond possibility of their own undoing.

“Horrors! Indian captives!” cried the gentleman, aghast.

CHAPTER II

A BAD BUSINESS

Captives? Far from it—save to their own reckless disregard of life and limb, and all for a bit of hitherto untested fun.

Shrieking with laughter at the success of their experiment, they rolled and floundered on the ground, till the laughter changed to cries of pain as their restless writhings to and fro drove their self-inflicted bonds deeper into the flesh.

By some dexterity they got upon their feet, at last, and one implored:

“Oh! you Pedro! or you, man! Cut us loose, can’t you? Don’t you see we can’t do it ourselves?”

Mr. Hale adjusted his eyeglasses and looked rather helplessly toward the shepherd; but that phlegmatic person was working away on his wonderful basket as stolidly as if there was none beside himself upon the mesa.

“Oh! you hateful old Pedro! Cut us free, I tell you! Ain’t I your master? You’d do it mighty quick for ‘Lady Jess.’”

The frightened little fellow, whose fun had now ebbed into a terrible fear of an indefinite bondage, began to whimper, and Mr. Hale to act. A few sharp slashings of the horsehair thongs and the captives were free to express their delight in a series of somersaults, which were only arrested by sight of Prince in

the distance, holding up his injured foot and seeking for some pasture amid the dry herbage.

“Hello! That horse is new. Is he yours, mister? What’s the matter with him? Humph! I guess you’re new, too, aren’t you? I never saw you in our valley before. Where’s your ranch?”

The questioner was a blue-eyed, fair-haired little chap whose close resemblance to Jessica proclaimed him her brother; but he was younger, sturdier, and less courteous than she. Yet his prolonged stare at the stranger had less of rudeness than surprise in it, and Mr. Hale laughed at the frank inspection.

“You look rather ‘new’ yourself, my man. About eight years, aren’t you?”

“How’d you guess?”

“Lads of my own.”

“Where?”

“Several thousand miles away, over the Atlantic coast.”

“Why didn’t you fetch ’em?”

“Couldn’t afford it.”

“Oh! couldn’t you? H-m-m.” Then he turned his attention to Pedro, with the remark: “Why aren’t you sick, like ’Tonio said? Making my sister come way up here for nothing. Don’t you dare do that again, I tell you. You’re just as well as ever, and I smell coffee. Come on, Luis!”

Catching his mate around the shoulders the boy rushed into the hut, only to be as promptly banished from it. With a swiftness matching the children’s own, the shepherd had followed and

caught the pair, a lad in either hand, and flung them out of doors, exactly as one might a couple of mischievous kittens. Evidently, what was permissible to "Lady Jess" was forbidden these, though they were not at all disturbed by their sudden ejection. Such incidents were too familiar, and, having landed in one heap upon the ground, they immediately fell to wrestling as if this were the business they had originally intended. Now the black head of Spanish Luis was uppermost, now the sunnier one of Ned, with a flying jumble of vari-colored hands and feet, till Pedro came out and offered to each contestant a cup of cold, but well-sweetened coffee.

This meant instant truce and they carried their treat to the bench Mr. Hale had occupied, leaving him to stand or sit upon the ground, as he preferred. He chose the latter and near enough to hear their eager chatter, which was still full of indignation against the shepherd's robust health.

"Cause he ought to been dead, 'most. And my mother wanting Jess the worst ever was. 'Cause Wun Lung cut hisself."

"Maybe Wun Lung die now, maybe," suggested Luis, with hopeful heartlessness.

"Pshaw! No, he won't. Chinamen don't. You never saw one, Luis Garcia. Hi! Look at Zulu. Hi! Keno, Keno, Keno! Oh, Wow!"

By a mutual impulse, Prince and the ostrich had put as wide a space between themselves as possible, and the latter had strolled close to Pedro's quiet flock before he had perceived it. This was

evident, even from the distance; but now up rose Keno, the collie, and with angry yelps rushed fearlessly upon the great bird.

King Zulu hesitated but an instant before he turned his back upon his assailant and made all speed over the bluff into the canyon below.

“Well, of all cowards! A creature that could have killed the dog with one kick of his foot!” cried Mr. Hale, amazed.

“Huh! No, he couldn’t. Kill you or Pedro. Kill that old horse of yours, easy as scat. Can’t kick low down as Keno. Huh! Guess I know more about ostriches than you do,” exulted Ned, in whose opinion the stranger had now greatly fallen.

“Huh! Don’t know about ostrichers!” echoed Luis, loyally, and was rewarded by a friendly slap from his pattern and playmate.

Roused by the disturbance of his sheep, Pedro hurried to quiet them, but, as he passed, fixed a piercing gaze upon the stranger’s face. The scrutiny seemed to partially reassure him, for he observed:

“Horse lame, Zulu gone, catch burro, yes. Let the feet which take the trail be young, not feeble and unused. But to him who journeys with evil in his heart evil will surely come. The widow and the orphan belong to God. Indeed, yet. ’Ware, Antonio.”

Mr. Hale reflected swiftly. He smiled at thought of his own long legs bestriding the low back of the donkey, but a memory of that heated trail down which he must pass to reach the nearest house, decided the matter. While the small owners of the burro were improving the time of the shepherd’s absence to ransack

his dwelling the sturdy little animal bore its accustomed rider out of sight.

Meanwhile, Jessica's moccasined feet were flying down the slope, her blue skirts and scarlet Tam making a moving spot of color against the sandy glare of the canyon wall, and long before she came within hailing distance catching the eyes of one who eagerly awaited her approach.

This was John Benton, the carpenter and general utility man at Sobrante; who had come up the opposite side of the canyon, where were many huge boulders, a few trees, and no trail at all. Indeed, a passage along that face of the gulch was difficult in extreme, and so dangerous that it must have been serious business which brought a lame man thither. Fortunately for his patience, the girl paused for breath at a point level with his own narrow perch upon a shelving rock, and where there was no great width of the V-shaped chasm.

"Lady Jess! Oh! I say! Miss Jessica! Lady Jess!"

The girl looked about her, up and down, everywhere save to the further side where nobody ever went if it could be avoided. But she answered, cheerily:

"*Hola!* Coo'ee! Coo'ee! Who are you?"

The man made a trumpet of his hands and shouted back:

"The flume! Look east—to the flume!"

She followed his example and called through her own fingers:

"What's wrong? How came you there?"

He pointed downward, and she shaded her eyes from the

blinding sunshine to see why, but could discover nothing new in the familiar scene.

“The water! That’s where it goes! The flume is cut!”

Even at that pitch, his tones were full of excited indignation, and her own anger leaped at once.

“Somebody’s cut the flume? Who dared! Wait—wait—I’m coming!”

“No, no! Don’t. You can’t help it—you’ll break your neck! Oh! Lady Jess!”

“I’m coming! Wait for me!”

The carpenter laughed. “Might have known she would, and wanted she should, I suppose. Surest-footed little thing in the world. Guess I needn’t fret. Though when I think what this old ranch would be without her, I don’t feel any great call to send her into danger, myself. My! she’s as nimble as a squirrel! Down to the bottom a’ready. Up this side in a jiffy, and won’t her blue eyes snap when she sees this lowdown trick? If I knew whose job it was, well, I’m a peaceable man if I’m let, but there wouldn’t be room enough in this here valley for the two of us. And it’s all on a piece with the rest. One thing after another. There’s a snake in this wigwam, but which ’tis? H-m-m! Beats me. Beats me clear to Jericho.”

Then he fell to watching the slower, steady ascent of Jessica, who had descended the further side so swiftly, and who had clambered lightly enough over the roughness of the gulch bottom; at times filled with a roaring torrent, but now quite dry after a

long, hot summer.

“Well, here I am!”

“And a sorry sight to show you. Look a’ that now. Isn’t that a regular coyote piece of work?”

Along this face of the canyon descended a line of small wooden troughs, closely joined, and supported upon slender but strong cedar uprights. This flume connected with the distant reservoir of an irrigating company and had been built by Jessica’s dead father at a great and ill-afforded expense. But of all good things there was nothing so precious to the tillers of that thirsty land as water, and the cutting off of this supply meant ruin to Sobrante.

Young as she was, Jessica fully understood this, though she could not understand that any human being should do a deed so dastardly.

“John Benton, you mustn’t say that. Some of the cattle have done it. It’s an accident. It can be mended. I’m sorry, of course, but so thankful you found it. And I see you’ve got your tools.”

“Oh! I can mend it, all right, but it won’t stay mended. You’ll see. ’Tisn’t the first break I’ve patched, not by any means.”

“Of course it isn’t. Only last week in that stampede, when the boys were changing pasture, the creatures ran against it and you fixed it, good as new. There isn’t anything you can’t do with an ax and a few nails.”

John passed the compliment by unheeding.

“There’s breaks and there’s cuts. Reckon I can tell the

difference quick enough. This is a cut and isn't the first one I've found, I say. 'Twas a fresh-ground blade did this piece of deviltry, or I'm no judge of edges. Now, who did it? Why? And how's old Pedro?"

Despite her faith in her friends, the small ranchwoman's heart sank.

"He—he—why, he isn't sick at all! I was sent up there on a fool's errand, and just on plucking-day, when I was so needed at home. With Wun Lung hurt and mother so busy, I ought to have a dozen pairs of hands. Of course, I'm glad he's well, dear old fellow, but I shouldn't have gone this morning if somebody hadn't told Antonio wrong. I met a stranger on the trail, too, and Zulu scared his horse, and it stumbled in a gopher hole or something and is lamed for ever so long. He'll likely come to Sobrante, if he can get there, but he looked ill if Pedro didn't, and the sun nearly overcame him. Can't I help you hold that board?"

John accepted her offer of help less because he needed it than because he always liked to have her near him.

"So 'twas Antonio sent you, eh? H-m-m!"

"He didn't send me. Course not. He just said somebody said Pedro was dying."

The carpenter laughed, but his mirth was not pleasant.

"Queer how stories get mixed, even in this lonesome place. There; you needn't hold that. Your little hands aren't so very strong, helpful as they may be. This isn't any great of a job; it 'twould only stay, once 'twas finished!"

“Then I’ll go. Maybe I’d better send up one of the boys to help you. Shall I? Who do you want?”

Upon the point of declining, the carpenter changed his mind.

“Yes, you may. I wish you would. Send Antonio.”

“Send—Antonio! Why, I should as soon think of ‘sending’ that stranger I told you about. You’re teasing me, for you know well that Antonio is the only one who ever ‘sends’ Antonio. Even my mother, who has a right to ‘send’ everybody on the ranch whither she will, never orders the manager. Well, good-by. You shall have a nice dinner out of the house-kitchen to pay for your hard climb.”

“Take care where you step in your hurry, and just try that word on the ‘senor.’ Tell him there’s a bit of a break in the flume I’d like his advice about.”

The workman’s laugh followed the girl down the rough and perilous way, and just as she passed out of hearing came the parting shot:

“Send Antonio.”

“H-m-m! I don’t see what it all means. First is old Pedro, with his grim “Ware Antonio!” And now John Benton speaks in that queer way, as if there were two meanings to his words. Heigho! I hear somebody coming up. I wonder who!”

Hurrying downward as fast as the uneven path allowed, her own softly-shod feet making no noise, she reached a turn of the road and suddenly slackened her pace. The man approaching was one of the few whom she feared and disliked.

“Ferd, the dwarf!”

Instinctively, she hid behind a clump of shrubbery and waited for him to pass, hoping he would not see her. He did not. He was too engrossed in handling, apparently counting, something within a deep basket that hung on his arm, and his bare feet loped around over the rocks as easily as they would have carried him across the level mesa.

As soon as he had gone by Lady Jess started onward, but she had grown even more thoughtful.

“That’s queer. Antonio must need Ferd to-day if ever he does. Indeed, nobody seems able to serve him as well as that poor half-wit. What could he have had in his basket? And—ha! how came *this* here?”

With a cry of surprise she lifted a small, soft object from the ground before her and regarded it in gathering dismay.

CHAPTER III

SEÑOR TOP-LOFTY

Ever since Jessica could remember, Antonio Bernal had been manager of the Sobrante ranch, and after the death of her father, a few months before, he became practically its master. Even Mrs. Trent deferred to his opinions more and more, and seemed to stand in awe of him, as did most others on the great estate. He was the only person there, save his own servant, Ferd, who did not treat the little girl with that adoring sort of reverence which had given her the love-name of "our Lady Jess." For some reason unknown to her he disliked her and showed this, so that she shrank from and feared him in return.

As she emerged from the canyon upon the broad, sandy road which crossed the valley, she saw him loping toward her on the powerful black horse with which he made his daily rounds to inspect the many industries that Mr. Trent had established. Jessica could always tell by the way he rode what Antonio's mood might be, and it did not lessen her dread to see that his sombrero was well over his eyes and his shoulders hunched forward.

"Something's put him out, but I can't help that. I must stop him and speak to him."

So she placed herself in the middle of the road and shouted her familiar:

“*Hola!* Coo-ee! Coo-ee!”

Any other ranchman would have paused and saluted his “lady,” but the “senor” made as if he would ride her down, unseeing.

Jessica did not flinch. That ready temper which she was always lamenting flamed at the insult, and she would not move a hair’s breadth from his path.

“*Hola!* Antonio Bernal! I must speak to you, and—see that?”

Suddenly bending forward she waved something long and black under Nero’s nose, who reared and settled on his haunches in a way to test a less experienced rider.

“What do you mean, child—” began that irate gentleman, but pausing at sight of the object she held.

“I think this a plume from Beppo’s wing, don’t you, Antonio?”

He muttered something under his breath, and she went on, explaining:

“I found it in the canyon, just after Ferd has gone up it. I knew it in a minute, for I was looking Beppo over yesterday, and I never saw such perfect feathers on any bird. How do you suppose it came there, and why?”

“The fool! One of the very best. How dared he. But suppose I’ll have to admit he stole it. I don’t see how, though, for I did the work myself. Give it to me, senorita; I’ll put it with the others.”

Somehow, when Antonio was saved “our Lady Jess” liked him less than when he was sharp of speech. His native “senorita” jarred on her ear, though she blamed herself for her injustice,

nor did she yield him the feather.

“Not yet, please. I’m going to show it to mother. She’ll be so delighted to know the plucking was a rich one; and if Ferd did steal this, or has others in his basket, of course you’ll make him bring them back.”

“Of course,” answered Antonio, though he frowned and searched her face with his black eyes as if to read all her suspicions.

But as Jessica was not suspicious; she was vaguely troubled, as if she had come into some dark and unknown world. Surely Antonio was able to clear off all these little mysteries, and she checked him again as he was about to ride on.

“There’s something else, senor,” adopting his title in imitation of his addressing her; “John Benton is up the gulch fixing a break in the flume. It’s a bad one, and more a cut than a break, he says. He asked me to tell you and wishes you’d go up there to advise him. I’m to send up a man to help him. But he wants you, too.”

“Why should I waste my time on such a fool’s errand, eh? I knew there was a leak somewhere and am glad he’s found it. There’s been no water in the ditches these three days—more, ten, maybe—and the oranges are falling. Send up that idler, Joe; and, by the way, how’s Pedro?”

It was the blue eyes now which turned keen and searching, and under their gaze Antonio’s were averted toward some distant point in the landscape, though the contemptuous smile remained upon his lips.

“That was a fool’s errand, too, Senor Bernal, and I did so want to be at home this morning. Pedro was never livelier. Whoever told you he was ill was quite mistaken.”

Antonio gave a short, derisive laugh, dug his spurs into Nero’s sides and loped away. A picturesque, noticeable figure in his quaint, half-Spanish dress and his silver-decorated sombrero, bestriding the heavy Mexican saddle upon his powerful horse.

“Vain as a peacock,” was his fellow-ranchmen’s opinion of their “boss,” though had his affectations been all his shortcomings these had not lessened their liking for him.

Lady Jess looked after him for a moment, her face still sober and perplexed.

“I ought to be at home, helping mother, this minute; but I’m going first to the corral to speak a word of comfort to poor Beppo, and see how big a plucking there was. If it was a good yield that will be so much the better news to tell my dear, and this certainly is the finest plume we ever got. Good! There are some of the boys over there, too, and I’ll save time by getting one of them to go up the canyon to John. *Hola!*”

Her soliloquy ended in the gay little Spanish salute, and this was now instantly answered by a hearty shout of welcome from a group of rough-garbed men, taking a moment’s rest in the shade of the old adobe packinghouse.

As lightly as if she had not already walked a long distance, the girl ran to her friends, to be at once caught up by a pair of strong arms and gently placed upon a cushion in the box of an

empty wagon.

“But this was your place, Joe Dean. I saw you get up from it.”

“It’s yours now, Lady Jess. You do me proud. What’s the good word? How’s old Pedro?”

“Well just plain, every day well. Never been sick a minute. Had all that climb for nothing; or, maybe, not quite for nothing, because I met a stranger up there and liked him; and saw John Benton as I came down, and—found this! Isn’t that a plume to be proud of? Raised right here on our little Sobrante.”

“Whew! It’s a beauty, sure enough. A dozen like that would be worth a tidy sum. How found it?”

“Has anybody seen King Zu? Though, of course, I know it can’t be his. He was plucked such a little while ago, nor could he have gotten across the gulch without losing more. Besides, Antonio said ‘stole.’”

Then she gave a hasty account of her morning’s adventures, during which meaning glances were exchanged between the trio of workmen who, by the time she had finished, had grown as glum as they had before been cheerful.

“Now, what do you think? Is there anybody who’d be mean enough to cut off my mother’s irrigation, on purpose, or steal her feathers? Even poor Ferd; I’m sure she’s always been good to him and pitied him.”

“Ferd has hands. Others have heads,” said Joe, as spokesman for the rest.

They nodded swift assent.

“Except yourself, Lady Jess, nobody ever sees the ‘senor’ handle the feathers, and you not often. Only he and his shadow, foolish Ferd, can manage the birds, he claims. I’ve been smoking that in my pipe along back.”

“Oh! Joe, you shouldn’t be suspicious of evil.”

“No, I shouldn’t be anything you don’t want me to be, but I am.”

“Even if I don’t like him very well, because he’s a little cross, Antonio Bernal is a good man. He must be. Else my father and now mother wouldn’t trust him so. She lets him get all the money for everything first and she has what’s left—after you’re all paid, I mean.”

“Poor little woman!”

“Not poor, exactly, Samson. And it isn’t Antonio’s fault that there isn’t so much as there used to be when father was here. If there were, mother would carry out all father’s plans. She’d irrigate that tract beyond the arroyo, toward the sand hills, and test it with strawberries, as he meant. There shouldn’t be an inch of untilled land on all the ranch, if the crops we have paid out just a little better. But, no matter. As long as you boys get your due wages, we can wait for the rest.”

There was another exchange of glances which Jessica did not see. Neither did she see herder Samson, lying at length on the ground, lift his great boot and significantly point to a hole in its toe. Nor would she have surmised his meaning had she done so. Indeed, she suddenly remembered her errand at the

packinghouse and ran to its open door, but failed.

“How queer! Why should this be locked? I didn’t know it ever was. Where can the key be?”

“In Antonio Bernal’s pocket,” said Joe quietly.

“Then even before I found this feather he must have suspected somebody and taken care of the others. But it’s dreadful if we have come to turning keys on one another, here, at dear Sobrante. Well, I’m off to mother, now; and, Joe, Antonio said you should go to help John. Will you?”

“For you, fast enough, Lady Jess, though I’m about quit of Top-Lofty’s orders.”

“Grumbler!” laughed the girl, hurrying away, with her gayety quite restored by this few minutes’ chat with the beloved “boys” who had petted her all her life.

They did not laugh, however, as they watched her going, and Joe, rising to do her bidding, slapped his thigh emphatically and remarked:

“I call it the time has come. The longer we put it off the worse it is. Poor little missy! Getting our wages due! That little angel ’d cry the blue out of her pretty eyes if she knew how long ’twas since we’d seen the color of our money. Pass the word along, boys, and let’s confab, to-night, and settle it. Time, about moon-up, in John’s shop. How’s that?”

“Count me a mutineer,” said the ex-sailor, Samson, as he strolled toward his cattle sheds.

“I’m with you,” echoed Marty, departing for his orange grove.

“Mutiny’s an ugly word aboard ship, I’m told, but when psalm-singing Samson takes to using it right here on dry land I reckon the case differs. Anyhow, if it’s a bid ’twixt the little one and Top-Lofty, I’m for the little one every time.”

Scruff knew the road home as well as another, and doubtless reasoned in his burro mind that the sooner he reached there the sooner he would be rid of his awkward rider. So he made all speed over the steep descent, though Mr. Hale used his own feet, now and then, as human brakes to check the creature’s pace; and, whimsically, remonstrated when the jolts became too frequent.

“Here, you beast! Hold on! If ever I ride a donkey again just let me know about it, will you? Keep that front end of yours up, please. I’ve a notion of sliding over your head, just to accommodate. Steady, there, steady. I flatter myself I can stick if I can’t ride. And we’re getting along. We’re getting along.”

Indeed, much earlier than he had hoped for, they were on level ground and had struck out upon that road where Jessica had met the manager, and which for some distance followed the tree-bordered arroyo—just then a river of sand only—leading straight toward a group of buildings and an oasis of greenery most welcome to the stranger’s sun-blinded eyes.

“Sobrante ranch, that must be, and the home of my little ostrich rider. I hope she’ll be there to greet me, for a tempting spot it looks.”

The nearer he approached the more charming it appeared, with its one modern, vine-covered cottage, and its long stretches

of low adobe structures—enough to form a village in themselves—and as dingily ancient as the other was freshly modern.

In reality, these old adobes were remnants of a long-abandoned mission, but still in such excellent repair that they were utilized for the ranchman's quarters and for the business of the great estate. Antonio Bernal was the only one of all the employees who had his own rooms at "the house," as the cottage was called where the Trents themselves lived.

From the kitchen of this attractive "house" now floated a delectable odor of well-cooked food, and with the reflection that he was always hungry nowadays, the visitor crossed to its open window; there came, also, a girlish voice, exclaiming:

"Yes, mother, I'm sure he was a gentleman, though he didn't look well. I told him you weren't fond of strangers and had little time to give them, but that I thought you'd make him welcome. Indeed, there's nowhere else for him to go, since his horse is lame and we so far from everybody. He lost his trail, he said. Was I right?"

Then his shadow fell across the sun-lighted floor and Jessica faced about. With a whisk of the saucepan, in which she was scrambling eggs, she added: "Well, right or wrong, here he is!" But she was talking to empty air, for her mother had disappeared.

CHAPTER IV

AN INTERRUPTED SUPPER

The young ranchwoman placed her pan in safety and ran out upon that north porch, where the table was already spread, to meet the visitor.

“Oh! I’m glad you’ve gotten here all safe. How did you do it? It’s a long walk for those who aren’t used to it. Even for those who are, too. Did you ride your horse? Was he better?”

She rattled off her questions without waiting for replies and to give him time to recover his breath, which he seemed to have lost. Then she poured him a glass of milk and urged him to drink it, with the remark:

“That’s Blandina’s own. She’s the house-cow. You’ll find it delicious. Don’t you?”

“It’s fine milk,” answered the other, cautiously; “but, if it isn’t too much trouble, a bit of ice would improve it.”

“Ice? Why, where could I get ice? Sometimes, in the winter, a little forms along the arroyo, but now—I’m very sorry, indeed. I’d be so glad to get it if I could.”

Mr. Hale swallowed the sickeningly warm liquid with a gulp and hastened to apologize.

“It wouldn’t be good for me if you could. My compliments to your house-cow, and I’m very grateful for my refreshment. You

have a beautiful home.”

“Haven’t we? The prettiest in the world, I guess. My father thought so and my mother loves it. So do we all, but to her it is dearest. Because, you see, father and she have made it all it is. Please, just let me move your chair nearer the edge of the porch. So. Now, look away off to the east. Father said there could be no view more uplifting. He wished everybody who had to live in cities could see it. He knew it would make them better men.”

Magnificent though it was, Mr. Hale found his small hostess more interesting than the view.

“Your father—” he began, questioningly.

“Isn’t here, now. He passed heavenward a year ago. Since then nothing seems just the same, and dear mother is often sad and troubled. You know she wants to carry on all father’s experiments, she doesn’t want his ‘life work to be wasted,’ she says, and Antonio isn’t able to get as much money as he used to be. She tries so bravely not to let it fret her, and I don’t see where she is. She was in the kitchen with me. We were getting dinner because Wun Lung, the cook, cut his hand, and Pasqual isn’t to be trusted. Of course, he’s a good enough boy, can make beds and such things, but—cook! One must be very dainty to do that. My mother can cook deliciously! She taught herself everything and the why of it. When she and father came here they lived in that tiny adobe away at the end of the second row. Do you see it? By the old corridor. Their table was a packing box and they had just a little camping outfit. Now there’s all this.”

Jessica Trent's sweet face glowed with loving pride in her fair home, but this was as nothing of the tenderness which filled her eyes as they now caught sight of a tall woman in black coming over the garden path.

"There she is, my mother!"

Mr. Hale rose as the lady drew near and one glance showed him what model "Lady Jess" had chosen as a type of that "perfect" breeding to which the little maid aspired. The mistress of Sobrante was a real gentlewoman, even though her gown was of cheapest print and her surroundings those of an isolated western ranch. Her daughter ran to cast a clinging, yet protecting, arm about her, and proudly turning toward their guest, presented:

"My mother, Mrs. Trent, Mr. —" and smiling waited for him to finish the sentence.

"Hale. I had forgotten to mention my name before, even though we have chatted so cosily. Permit me, madam."

The card he offered bore the inscription:

"Mr. Morris Hale, Attorney at Law, 156 Broadway, New York."

Watchful Jessica saw her mother's face pale, while into her native cordiality of manner crept that slight hauteur with which she regarded the most objectionable of "tourists." This, then, was one such, and the girl was sorry. She had liked the stranger so much and was already planning pleasant entertainment for him; but if her dear did not approve of him her own opinion went for naught.

Yet it was only the statement of the gentleman's business that had caused Mrs. Trent's momentary coldness, for at that time, though her daughter did not know this, the mere suggestion of law or lawyers disturbed her. But she was quick to feel the possible injustice of her fear and to atone for it by a deeper cordiality.

"You have come just in time to share our dinner, Mr. Hale, and we'll not wait any longer for laggards. I was looking for the children. Jessie, dear, have you seen them?"

"Not since breakfast, mother. But they can't be far away, for there's Scruff yonder, trying to get into the alfalfa."

"Antonio hasn't come up, either, since the plucking. I wish he would while the food is fresh. If you'll—"

"We needn't wait for him, because I met him riding toward the foothills, as I came home. He's probably off to the mines and that means an all-day's trip. But I'll help you dish up, and seek the boys, though they don't often need seeking at mealtime. You sit right down with Mr. Hale, dear, and I'll serve you. Pasqual can bring in the tureen, and I hope the eggs aren't spoiled by waiting."

"Is Scruff that mottled burro poking his nose through that fence?" asked the guest.

"Yes. He belongs to my little son, Ned, who shares him with his playmate, Luis. An inseparable trio, usually."

"Then I'm the cause of their present separation. I rode that animal down from old Pedro's cabin and at his advice," Mr. Hale described his meeting with the two small lads, the fright they

had given him, and his own desertion of them. "Though now I'm ashamed to recall how readily I consigned them to a tramp I was unwilling to take myself. I wish I'd brought them with me. We could have used Scruff's back, turn and turn about."

"Oh how could they! One misstep and they'd have been killed."

"What is it, mother?" asked Jessica, seeing the lady's hand shake so that she could scarcely serve the soup which formed the chief dish of their plain dinner.

"Only another prank of those terrifying children. Bound themselves—or had help to bind—and rode Scruff bareback up the canyon! They're always 'playing Indian,' and I wish they'd never heard of one. It's that Ferd eggs them on. He 'dares' them and—Excuse me, Mr. Hale. Mothers are anxious people. Try some of Jessie's scramble, please. She is just learning to cook and likes to be appreciated."

"But I didn't see them, as I went up or down. They must have taken the long road around by the north end. Where the old Digger village is," observed Jessie.

"A forbidden route. It's to be hoped they'll follow the shortest road home. If they're not here in an hour one of the men must go to fetch them."

Jessica laughed and kissed her mother.

"Don't you worry, dear, and do, please, eat your dinner. Aren't those children always having hairbreadth escapes, and are they ever hurt? Pedro'll send them down in a hurry. He knows his

mistress and her ways, and wouldn't let her be troubled if he could help it. They'll get no dinner at Pedro's, and dinner is something they've never missed yet. Hark! Aren't going to miss now! Listen. They're fighting along home in their regular fashion. By the sound they've about got to prickly-pear hedge. *Hola!* Ned! Luis! Oh! beg pardon. I forgot I was at table. Excuse me, mother, and I'll bring in the youngsters—after a deluge!”

Already there was an uproar in the outer kitchen, where two tired and hungry little boys were assaulting the unoffending Pasqual, diligently scrubbing away at his pots and pans. Any victim will do, at a pinch, to vent one's wrath upon, and Pasqual was nearest. But he was not one to suffer patiently, and promptly returned the puny blows of his assailants with much more vigorous ones, till Jessica reached the spot, rescued the truants, and conducted them to the washbasin.

From there, disdaining the towel, they made rapid transit to the porch and the presence of the stranger. All along their enforced walk home they had laid plans of vengeance, among which “tommyhawking” and “shootin' chock full o' arrers” were the wildest. But, alas! Now that their enemy was in their very power, they had no fiercer weapons than four grimy little fists. Better these than nothing, was Ned's instant decision, and Luis was but Ned's second thought. As Ned's right descended upon Mr. Hale's shoulders, Luis' left delivered a telling blow upon the gentleman's hand, uplifted toward his lips. This was small assistance to the yellow-haired chief, for the spoon fled straight

from the victim's fingers and landed squarely in Ned's face.

This created intense diversion. The blows intended for the guest were now bestowed upon each other, and so impartially that neither side was worsted. Mrs. Trent rose in her place, flushed and apologetic, though the stranger was far more surprised than offended, while the sister had once more appeared and terminated a battle almost before it was begun. With a strength of which she did not look capable she caught up and lifted a child into each of the two high chairs in waiting—but wisely placed at opposite sides of the board. There they settled themselves composedly, beaming and smiling upon each other like a pair of wingless cherubs, while Ned thrust forth a tin basin and demanded:

“Give me my soup, mother.”

“Gimmesoup!” echoed Luis, choking over a piece of bread he had filched from Jessica's plate.

“Children!”

“Oh! Huh! Please give me my soup, mother.”

“Plea' gimmesoup, *madr'*.”

“Isn't your *madre*, Luis Garcia. Isn't nobody's mother but mine, so there!”

“Humph!” remarked Jessica. “What about me?”

This set Ned off into a giggle, in which Luis dutifully joined, and the laughter restored the best of feelings all around. The meal over, Mrs. Trent offered the guest the use of a room in which to rest, and this he gladly accepted; adding that he wished he

might be able to make some arrangement with her by which he could occupy it indefinitely, till his health was restored and the business which had brought him to that region was completed. Any terms she would make would be most satisfactory to him, for he was charmed with Sobrante and most anxious to sojourn there for a time.

Jessica was already clearing the table, yet watching her mother closely, and was surprised to see a moment's hesitation on the dear face before the expected and customary answer came:

"We are always glad to make our friends welcome at Sobrante, and for as long as our simple life suits them, but we could not accept payment for our hospitality. I am glad you like our home, and Jessica will show you to the friend's room at once. Tell Pasqual, my dear, to attend Mr. Hale and see that he has all which he requires. All that may be supplied at this isolated spot, that is," she added, with a smile.

Mr. Hale thanked his hostess and withdrew, but he felt that he had practically been dismissed from the ranch and that he had no past friendship to urge as a plea for any but the briefest visit there.

Yet the cool chamber into which the traveler was shown proved so restful that the "forty winks only" which he intended were prolonged till sunset. Then he hastily descended to the lower floor to find that the early supper of the household was over; though Mrs. Trent had kept his own portion hot, and smilingly waved aside his apologies as she placed before him a dish of delicately broiled quail, prepared by her own skillful hands.

“Why, this is a luxury! and to be expected only at some great hotel. By the way, where is the nearest one? I should have been on my way long ago.”

“I hope not. And you cannot well reach any hotel to-night. The nearest is thirty miles away, and for a long distance the road is a mere track across the plain. Even those who are used to it, would find it difficult to keep it on a moonless night, as this will be.”

“Oh! I’m so sorry.”

The hostess’ face grew anxious. “Is it so important? I thought—”

“Humph! That’s another of my blunders. My regret is that I must force myself upon your hospitality after—”

Mrs. Trent interrupted with a laugh.

“I imagine we’re talking at cross-purposes. While I cannot make any guest comfortable at Sobrante ‘indefinitely,’ as you proposed, I should be disappointed to have you leave us hurriedly, I’d like you to inspect the ranch, thoroughly, and that will require at least a week. Besides, since I’ve learned from your card that you are a lawyer, I would like to ask your advice. Of course, if you are willing to give it in a business way.”

“I shall be happy to serve you and more than happy to stay for the week you propose, I came—”

But he did not finish his sentence. There rang through the quiet room the echoes of rifle shots, repeated singly and in volleys, and accompanied by shouts and shrieks, so fierce and unearthly that Mr. Hale sprang to his feet while his hand sought

his own pistol pocket.

“Horrible! In the midst of this peace—an Indian outbreak!”

A curious thrill ran through his veins, as if his sixty years had suddenly turned backward to sixteen, and, with an answering cry, he leaped through the open window and rushed straight into the arms of a man who had already reached the porch and was making for the very room that the stranger had just quitted.

CHAPTER V

COUNTER REVOLT

The collision staggered both men and gave Mrs. Trent time to reach the side of her guest and to lay a restraining hand upon his arm. Her voice was tremulous with laughter as she explained:

“It’s only a rifle practice. The ranchmen and the children—all children in this sport—and always noisy. I’m sorry it disturbed you, but—Indians! How could you imagine it. Ah! Antonio, good-evening. Have you had supper?”

“No, senora. I need it.”

“It is waiting. This visitor, Mr. Hale, Senor Antonio Bernal, the manager of Sobrante.”

The gentlemen bowed, one with the brevity of a busy man, the other with the profound salutation of his race. But they parted immediately, for the Easterner was anxious to witness the shooting and the superintendent to break his long fast; and with disgust at his own readiness to fancy danger where none existed, Mr. Hale followed the sound of the yells and cheers.

“Hi! hi! for the little one! Hit him again, blue jacket!” shrieked Samson, as, steadying upon a tie-post the rifle he was too small to support, Ned sighted the bull’s-eye of a distant target, took a careless aim, yet struck it squarely.

Whereupon the strong ex-sailor thrust the weapon aside and

tossed the lad in the air as if he had been a ball. Yet caught him as he lightly descended, and placed him astride his own shoulders.

“Who’ll beat the little master? Three times out o’ seven, with an iron heavy as that, how’s the showing for an eight-year-old?”

But Ned slipped from the ranchman’s back, picked up his own tiny, perfectly finished gun, and swung it over his head.

“Huh! That’s nothing! Huh! This the feller! Huh! Guess ’tis. Shot more’n forty-’leven quails this day ’t ever was. Had ’em for my supper. Had ’em for the man broke his horse’s leg and stole Scruff. Hello, Mister! Had your supper? Wasn’t them good birds? I shot ’em for you. I did.”

“You?” demanded the gentleman, astonished. He had now joined the group surrounding the three children, and his presence caused a lull in the uproar which had preceded his arrival. “You! Why you aren’t big enough to do such a thing.”

“I did! I did! I never told a lie in all my life—never, never, never! So, there!” and unable to endure such an imputation, the child rushed upon his traducer and pounded him well with the butt of his little rifle.

“Ned! Edward Trent! Stop! You—a little gentleman—mother’s son!”

Jessica’s arms were about her brother, restraining his movements and for a moment making him drop his head in shame. The next he had broken from her grasp, caught up another gun and dragged it toward her.

“Your turn, Jess. Hurry up. There’s just an inch of sun left—I

mean there was a minute ago—hurry up! Me an' Luis's got to go to bed quick as a wink! Hurry—hurry!”

“Hurry up!” echoed Luis, with a yawn, and dropping down where he stood, was instantly asleep.

John Benton crossed to the visitor's side and remarked:

“Now, I tell you, stranger, you'll see the sight of your life. If I was a betting man I'd back Our Lady Jess again' any other girl-shooter on the globe. You just watch out—if the dark holds off a spell.”

There were a dozen, maybe, of the ranchmen standing or lying around in a semi-circle, but now all quiet and intent upon the little girl, as, nodding and smiling upon her guest and her beloved “boys,” she stepped into the open space before them all. “Forty-niner” March, unerring marksman and the children's instructor, took his place beside her, examined her rifle, handed it to her and also observed to the stranger:

“Now, if nothin' happens, you'll see sunthin'. Sorry it's so dusk, but any gent what doubt's is free to walk up to the target and look where the ball strikes. You, lady, do me proud.”

“I'll try,” said Jessica, simply. “Is it the little nail in the center?”
“Just that.”

She sighted and fired; and a ranchman who had run forward to the target, shouted back across the darkening space:

“Hit her plumb!”

A roar of applause greeted this announcement, but the girl accepted this tribute with no comment save another nod and

smile, as she waited her teacher's next direction.

This was given silently by a gesture downward.

Instantly Jessica dropped upon the ground, rested herself upon her elbows, aimed, fired, and—"Hit her again! Hooray for Our Lady! Hooray—hooray—hooray!"

In his excitement big Samson seized Mr. Hale by the sleeve and compelled that gentleman to jog-trot across the open and view at closer range the wonderful skill of the little maid who was so dear to them all.

"Stand aside, Psalm Singer. Your head's in the way!" cautioned somebody.

Still clutching his companion, Samson obeyed, and they saw Jessica now lying upon her back, sighting upward and backward over her head a small, white object that had been placed in the target where the tack had been. There was no cheering then, nor any movement among the eager watchers who fairly held their breaths lest they disturb their darling in that supreme moment of her success or failure.

"But she'll not fail!" thought more than one, and would have given a year's wages that she should not.

There was a swift rush of something through the air, so close to Mr. Hale's nose that he visibly drew back, and a double report as the bullet hit the toy torpedo which had been the chosen mark.

After that, pandemonium; or so it seemed to Mr. Hale. Those gray and grizzled men—for there were few young among them—shouted themselves hoarse and gave way to the wildest

expressions of pride and delight. As for Jessica, the heroine, though her eyes sparkled and a flush rose to her cheeks, she was by far the calmest person present. Even Mr. Hale's heart was beating rapidly and he caught the girl's hands and shook them violently, in his congratulations.

"That was marvelous! marvelous! I've seen pretty good sharp-shooting done by professionals, but never anything so fine as that last shot of yours. How could you ever learn it, so young as you are?"

"How could I help learning? It is 'Forty-niner's' work, a deal more than mine. He's been teaching me ever since I could hold a tiny bow and arrow. He's wonderful, if you please; but I—Well, it seems just to do itself, somehow. But I must go in now. Time for the little ones to be in bed. Come, Ned. Come, Luis. Oh, dear! he's fast asleep."

"I'll pack him for you, lady. And say, boys, isn't this the time?"

Samson had lifted the sleeping Luis, tucked him under one arm and swung Ned to the other, but now paused to glance around among his fellow-workmen.

"Time was 'moon-up,'" answered Joe, minded to be facetious.

"This would be 'moon-up,' if the old girl knew her business," retorted the sailor. "In ten minutes we'll be with you. Come, on, my lady. I've a word to say to you and the mistress."

The daily evening sport was over and the ranchmen rapidly dispersed, each to his own quarters, and none considering it his especial business to entertain the stranger, who was now strolling

slowly houseward mindful of the sudden chill which came with the nightfall and of his own unfitness for exposure.

Proudest of all, "Forty-niner" gathered up the weapons and carried them off, to clean and put in order for the next evening's practice. He was well satisfied with his pupil's achievements, though already planning more difficult feats for their performance. The man was eighty; yet, while his abundant hair was white, his back was still straight and his step firm. The joy of his old age was the athletic training of the Sobrante children, and it would have amazed him, even broken his heart, had he been told that by such means he did not well earn his keep. He was eldest of all the elderly workmen that the late master of the ranch had gathered about him, and his appreciation of this good home in which to end his days perhaps, the greatest of all. It was, therefore, a terrible shock which awaited him, as entering his own room, he lighted his lamp and saw lying on his table a white envelope addressed to himself.

He knew what it meant. Dismissal.

One year before, when Cassius Trent died, there had been twenty employees where there were now but thirteen—he the "odd one" of the "baker's dozen." Seven times, when least expected or desired, some one of these twenty had found in his room just such an envelope, containing his arrears of wages, and the curt information that, "by the order of Mrs. Trent, his services were no longer required at Sobrante, nor would any wages be forthcoming from that day forward."

These men had all been friends, rather than servants, and in each case the result had been the same. Cut to the heart by the manner of discharge, and, for the first time it may be, realizing that he was no longer young, and, therefore, valuable, the recipient of the envelope had quietly disappeared, saying farewell to nobody.

“My turn! My turn, at last!” broke from the aged frontiersman’s lips, and a groan followed. “Ten years I’ve lived in this old adobe cell till I’ve come to feel like the monk for whom it was first built. Now—”

The white head drooped forward on the outstretched arms and all the burden of his eighty years seemed suddenly to have descended upon that bowed and shrunken figure.

In the pretty dining-room Antonio Bernal had eaten a hearty supper served by his own mistress, since Wun Lung was not to be found and the house-boy, Pasqual, claimed his usual recreation hour at the rifle practice. But neither thought anything amiss in this, and the manager would, indeed, have asserted that it was quite the proper thing. Was not he a Bernal, and superior to all at Sobrante? Even though he was, for the time being, receiving wage instead of bestowing. Well, it was a long lane that had no turning.

Pushing back from the table, Antonio had murmured the proverb in Spanish, with a smile of satisfaction lighting his dark face, and Mrs. Trent had failed to hear distinctly, though she was familiar enough with the language so often in use about her.

“Beg pardon, I did not understand.”

“Begging pardon, one’s self, senora, it is seldom that you do. It is the business was never made for the small brains of the women, no? ’Tis the senora’s place to be beautiful and let the business rest in the capable hands of I, myself. *En verdad.*”

Mrs. Trent colored and bit her lip. This man’s insolence was becoming insupportable, and she could scarcely recognize him for the obsequious fellow who had been her husband’s right-hand dependence. His brief authority had turned his head, she reflected, and, again, that she must in no wise offend him. The welfare of her children demanded this, and forcing herself to smile as pleasantly as if his insult were a jest, she remarked:

“The gentleman whom you met, as you came in, is a lawyer. A New York lawyer. I—I would like to consult him about our—this business you mention. I was born and reared in New York and have a feeling that anything which comes from there must be all right. Even a lawyer, though I’m not fond of the profession usually.

“The senor is not wont to waste so many words upon her most humble servant, no. And as for the lawyers, have I not this day been to the consulting of the most eminent, the wisest of his kind, no? But yes; and the truth is, senora—believe me, it breaks my heart so to inform you, but this barren rancho of Sobrante belongs not to the Dona Gabriella and her children, but to one Antonio Bernal, even I, myself.”

“To you! Belongs—to—you?” gasped the astonished woman.

The manager shrugged his shoulders and tossed another Spanish proverb toward her: "What I have said, I have said."

Mrs. Trent felt her strength leaving her and sank into a chair, still gazing incredulously at the other, who now lounged back in his own chair and began to leisurely pick his teeth. It was a trivial action, but one wholly disgusting to the gentlewoman's fastidious sense, and it angered her, which was a good thing, for her anger banished her momentary faintness and gave her boldness to demand:

"The proof!"

"It will be forthcoming, senora, at the right time. Yes. Meanwhile, I am content you shall remain, you and your little ones, until—well, say a month. By that date all things should have been arranged and the senora will have found herself another home less lonely than Sobrante. One so beautiful as the Dona Gabriella must have hosts of friends who—"

Senor Bernal paused. There were footsteps approaching, and the merry voices of children, and an instant later Samson was in the room, still carrying the little lads in his arms, and with Jessica clinging affectionately to his ragged sleeve.

One glance showed the faithful ranchman that something was amiss. There was fresh sorrow, even consternation, in the beloved face of Sobrante's mistress, fresh insolence in that of her chief assistant. He was not one to hesitate when his friends were in trouble, and turned to Antonio with an angry demand:

"What have you been worrying your betters with now, senor?"

“Keep a civil tongue in your head, rascal.”

“Returnin’ the compliment, if you please. All the same, don’t you know that a man—*a man*— doesn’t go around worrying women as you worry Mrs. Trent? You, that hadn’t a shirt to your back when the boss took you in and made you what you are! I’m anticipatin’ a mite, and I don’t know just how some of the boys’ll take it, but we’d laid out this very night at moon-up—if there’d been a moon sensible enough to get up, which there isn’t—to haul you and a few other matters over the coals and stir up a fresh sort of blaze. Now, I warn you, just you let matters slide, peaceable, and you—just you, yourself, keep that civil tongue you recommend, or you’ll light out of here so quick ye won’t see your heels for dust, dry season though it is. Hear?”

“Hear? Yes, I hear. Now, ’tis your turn. You go tell those malcontents you call ‘the boys’ to take their packs and foot it. Times have changed. Things have changed. There’s another master here now, and not a weak-willed mistress. That is me—I—Antonio Bernal, owner of Sobrante rancho and all that appertains thereto. Now, go. Vamos. Depart. Clear out. Get!”

Samson went—as far as the long, open window, and stepped out upon the porch. He did not see Mr. Hale, who had seated himself in a rocker, an unintentional witness of a scene he would gladly have missed, and putting a whistle to his lips blew a summons which was understood by every fellow-workman on the ranch. Then he quietly re-entered the house, folded his arms, and leaned carelessly against the door frame.

Senor Bernal started up as if he would forcibly eject the herder, but thought better of this and sank back nonchalantly in his great chair. Jessica had placed herself behind her mother, and clasped Mrs. Trent's shoulders with the protecting tenderness habitual to her. Ned had sprung to his mother's lap and Luis continued his nap at her feet; while all seemed waiting for some fresh development of the affair.

This came and speedily; for, in answer to Samson's whistle, there filed over the porch and into the room, Joe, the smith; Marty, the gardener; and Carpenter John. There was missing old "Forty-niner," commonly the dominant fifth of this odd quintet, but nobody wondered much at that. Doubtless he was polishing his darling's rifle and making ready for some astonishing display of her skill wherewith to dazzle the stranger upon the morrow. In any case he rarely disagreed with the opinions of his cronies and was sure to be one with them in the matter of that hour.

With a respectful salute to Mrs. Trent, a grin toward the children, and a scowl for Antonio, these stalwart ranchmen lined up against the wall and stood at attention. Mr. Hale, observant through the doorway, again noticed that each of these was well along in years, that each had some slight physical infirmity, and that, despite these facts, each looked a man of unusual strength and most entire devotion. Indeed, the gaze fixed upon the little lady, was one of adoration, and the situation boded ill for anybody who meant harm to her.

"Ahem. What say, mates? Has the hour struck?"

"The hour has struck," answered John Benton, solemnly, shifting his weight from his lame leg to his sound one.

Samson strode a mighty step forward and pulled his forelock.

"Then I state, madam, that we here, on behalf of ourselves and our whole crew, now, and hereby do, throw off all 'legiance to that there Spanish skunk, a-settin' in your easiest chair, and appoint Our Lady Jess, captain of the good ship Sobrante. Allowin' you to be the admiral of that same, madam, but takin' no more orders from anybody save and excepting her—under you, of course—from this time forth, so help us."

Then there burst from the trio of throats a cheer that shook the windows, and called a contemptuous laugh from the superintendent so valiantly defied.

The cheer died in an ominous silence which Senor Bernal improved.

"Highly dramatic and most edifying, *en verdad*. Senor, I kiss your hands in even greater devotion. But the play has one little drawback. To I, me, myself, belongs Sobrante. Already I have had the law of which you spoke. My claim I have proved. From the long back generations the good title from the Mission Padres to my own fathers, yes. Sobrante? *Si*. More and better. Wide lies the valley of Paraiso d'Oro. Mine, Mine. All—all mine. No?"

He rose to his feet and pompously paced up and down the room, insolently handsome and proud of the fact, while out on the darkened porch Mr. Hale had heard a word which set his own pulses beating faster and the row of ranchmen started forward as

if minded to throw the braggart out of the house.

But Jessica stepped forth and cried, triumphantly, though still with an effort toward that courtesy she desired.

“Beg pardon, Senor Antonio Bernal, but surely you are quite mistaken. My father taught me some things. He said I was not too young to learn them. He—he only—has the title deed to dear Sobrante, and I—I only—know the safe place where it is kept!”

Antonio halted in his strutting march and for a moment his face grew pale. The next instant he had regained more than his former confidence, and with a sneering laugh, exclaimed:

“Seeing is believing, no? To the satisfaction of the assembled most honorable company,” here he bowed with mock politeness, “let this most interesting document be produced. *Si.*”

Jessica flew from the room and in an intolerable anxiety the whole “honorable company” awaited her long-delayed return.

CHAPTER VI

NIGHT VISIONS

When the tension of waiting was becoming intolerable, and Mrs. Trent was already rising to seek her daughter, Jessica reappeared in the doorway. Her white face and frightened eyes told her story without words, but her mother forced herself to ask:

“Did you find it, darling?”

“Mother, it is gone!”

“Gone!”

“Gone. Yet it was only that dear, last day when he was with us, in the morning, before he set out for the mines, that he showed it to me, safe and sound in its place. He was to tell you, too, that night—but—”

“It was that, then, which was on his mind, and I could not understand. I—Antonio Bernal, he entrusted you and you must know; where is that missing deed?”

“Deed, senora? This day, just ended, is it not that I have been over all the records and there is none of any deed to Sobrante later than my own—or that proves my claim. In truth, the honorable Dona Gabriella is right, indeed. I was the trusted friend of the dead senor, and if any such precious document existed, would I not have known it? *Si*. What I do know is the worry, the trouble,

the impossibility of such a paper broke the senor's heart. It does not exist. Sobrante is mine. He knew that this was so—I had often spoken—”

The untruth he was about to utter did not pass his lips. There was that in the white face of Gabriella Trent which arrested his words, as, clasping her boy in her arms, she glided into the darkened hall and entered her own rooms beyond.

The “boys” had not moved, nor Jessica followed, and she now firmly confronted the manager, saying:

“I am sorry to tell you, Antonio Bernal, that you are not acting square. My father did have that title deed, and I believe you know it. Somebody has taken it from the place where his own hands put it, but I will find it. This home is ours, is all my mother's. Nobody shall ever take it from her. Nobody. You hear me say that, Senor Antonio Bernal, and you, dear ‘boys?’”

“Ay, ay,” echoed her friends, heartily; but the superintendent regarded her as he might have done some amusing little insect.

“Very pretty, senorita. The filial devotion, almost beautiful. But the facts—well, am I not merciful and generous, I? There is no haste. Indeed, no. A month—”

“Before a month is out I will have found that deed and placed it in my darling mother's hands. I may be too young to understand the ‘business’ you talk about so much, but I am not too young to save my mother's happiness. I can see that paper now, in my mind, and I remember exactly how it looked inside and out. It seemed such a little thing to be worth a whole, great ranch. I don't

know how nor where, but somehow and somewhere, I shall find that paper. ‘Boys,’ will you help me?”

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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