

A black and white photograph of a modern building with a palm tree in the foreground. The building has a prominent vertical rectangular structure. The palm tree is in the lower left foreground. The background shows a textured wall or hillside.

***GERTRUDE
FRANKLIN HORN
ATHERTON***

***THE SPLENDID
IDLE FORTIES:
STORIES OF OLD
CALIFORNIA***

Gertrude Franklin Horn Atherton

The Splendid Idle Forties: Stories of Old California

EAN 8596547226666

DigiCat, 2022

Contact: DigiCat@okpublishing.info



TABLE OF CONTENTS

THE PEARLS OF LORETO

THE EARS OF TWENTY AMERICANS

THE WASH-TUB MAIL

THE CONQUEST OF DOÑA JACOBA

A RAMBLE WITH EULOGIA[1]

THE ISLE OF SKULLS

THE HEAD OF A PRIEST

LA PÉRDIDA

LUKARI'S STORY

NATALIE IVANHOFF: A MEMORY OF FORT ROSS

II

THE VENGEANCE OF PADRE ARROYO

THE BELLS OF SAN GABRIEL

WHEN THE DEVIL WAS WELL

THE PEARLS OF LORETO

Table of Contents

I

Within memory of the most gnarled and coffee-coloured Montereño never had there been so exciting a race day. All essential conditions seemed to have held counsel and agreed to combine. Not a wreath of fog floated across the bay to dim the sparkling air. Every horse, every vaquero, was alert and physically perfect. The rains were over; the dust was not gathered. Pio Pico, Governor of the Californias, was in Monterey on one of his brief infrequent visits. Clad in black velvet, covered with jewels and ropes of gold, he sat on his big chestnut horse at the upper end of the field, with General Castro, Doña Modeste Castro, and other prominent Montereños, his interest so keen that more than once the official dignity relaxed, and he shouted "Brava!" with the rest.

And what a brilliant sight it was! The flowers had faded on the hills, for June was upon them; but gayer than the hills had been was the race-field of Monterey. Caballeros, with silver on their wide gray hats and on their saddles of embossed leather, gold and silver embroidery on their velvet serapes, crimson sashes about their slender waists, silver spurs and buckskin botas, stood tensely in their

stirrups as the racers flew by, or, during the short intervals, pressed each other with eager wagers. There was little money in that time. The golden skeleton within the sleeping body of California had not yet been laid bare. But ranchos were lost and won; thousands of cattle would pass to other hands at the next rodeo; many a superbly caparisoned steed would rear and plunge between the spurs of a new master.

And caballeros were not the only living pictures of that memorable day of a time for ever gone. Beautiful women in silken fluttering gowns, bright flowers holding the mantilla from flushed awakened faces, sat their impatient horses as easily as a gull rides a wave. The sun beat down, making dark cheeks pink and white cheeks darker, but those great eyes, strong with their own fires, never faltered. The old women in attendance grumbled vague remonstrances at all things, from the heat to intercepted coquetries. But their charges gave the good dueñas little heed. They shouted until their little throats were hoarse, smashed their fans, beat the sides of their mounts with their tender hands, in imitation of the vaqueros.

"It is the gayest, the happiest, the most careless life in the world," thought Pio Pico, shutting his teeth, as he looked about him. "But how long will it last? Curse the Americans! They are coming."

But the bright hot spark that convulsed assembled Monterey shot from no ordinary condition. A stranger was there, a guest of General Castro, Don Vicente de la Vega y Arillaga, of Los Angeles. Not that a stranger was matter for comment in Monterey, capital of California, but this stranger

had brought with him horses which threatened to disgrace the famous winners of the North. Two races had been won already by the black Southern beasts.

"Dios de mi alma!" cried the girls, one to the other, "their coats are blacker than our hair! Their nostrils pulse like a heart on fire! Their eyes flash like water in the sun! Ay! the handsome stranger, will he roll us in the dust? Ay! our golden horses, with the tails and manes of silver—how beautiful is the contrast with the vaqueros in their black and silver, their soft white linen! The shame! the shame!—if they are put to shame! Poor Guido! Will he lose this day, when he has won so many? But the stranger is so handsome! Dios de mi vida! his eyes are like dark blue stars. And he is so cold! He alone—he seems not to care. Madre de Dios! Madre de Dios! he wins again! No! no! no! Yes! Ay! yi! yi! B-r-a-v-o!"

Guido Cabañares dug his spurs into his horse and dashed to the head of the field, where Don Vicente sat at the left of General Castro. He was followed hotly by several friends, sympathetic and indignant. As he rode, he tore off his serape and flung it to the ground; even his silk riding-clothes sat heavily upon his fury. Don Vicente smiled, and rode forward to meet him.

"At your service, señor," he said, lifting his sombrero.

"Take your mustangs back to Los Angeles!" cried Don Guido, beside himself with rage, the politeness and dignity of his race routed by passion. "Why do you bring your hideous brutes here to shame me in the eyes of Monterey? Why—"

"Yes! Why? Why?" demanded his friends, surrounding De la Vega. "This is

not the humiliation of a man, but of the North by the accursed South!

You even would take our capital from us! Los Angeles, the capital of the Californias!"

"What have politics to do with horse-racing?" asked De la Vega, coldly.

"Other strangers have brought their horses to your field, I suppose."

"Yes, but they have not won. They have not been from the South."

By this time almost every caballero on the field was wheeling about De la Vega. Some felt with Cabañares, others rejoiced in his defeat, but all resented the victory of the South over the North.

"Will you run again?" demanded Cabañares.

"Certainly. Do you think of putting your knife into my neck?"

Cabañares drew back, somewhat abashed, the indifference of the other sputtering like water on his passion.

"It is not a matter for blood," he said sulkily; "but the head is hot and words are quick when horses run neck to neck. And, by the Mother of God, you shall not have the last race. My best horse has not run. Viva El Rayo!"

"Viva El Rayo!" shouted the caballeros.

"And let the race be between you two alone," cried one. "The North or the South! Los Angeles or Monterey! It will be the race of our life."

"The North or the South!" cried the caballeros, wheeling and galloping across the field to the doñas. "Twenty leagues to a real for Guido Cabañares."

"What a pity that Ysabel is not here!" said Doña Modeste Castro to Pio Pico. "How those green eyes of hers would flash to-day!"

"She would not come," said the Governor. "She said she was tired of the race."

"Of whom do you speak?" asked De la Vega, who had rejoined them.

"Of Ysabel Herrera, La Favorita of Monterey," answered Pio Pico. "The most beautiful woman in the Californias, since Chonita Iturbi y Moncada, my Vicente. It is at her uncle's that I stay. You have heard me speak of my old friend; and surely you have heard of her."

"Ay!" said De la Vega. "I have heard of her."

"Viva El Rayo!"

"Ay, the ugly brute!"

"What name? Vitriolo? Mother of God! Diablo or Demonio would suit him better. He looks as if he had been bred in hell. He will not stand the quirto; and El Rayo is more lightly built. We shall beat by a dozen lengths."

The two vaqueros who were to ride the horses had stripped to their soft linen shirts and black velvet trousers, cast aside their sombreros, and bound their heads with tightly knotted handkerchiefs. Their spurs were fastened to bare brown heels; the cruel quirto was in the hand of each;

they rode barebacked, winding their wiry legs in and out of a horse-hair rope encircling the body of the animal. As they slowly passed the crowd on their way to the starting-point at the lower end of the field, and listened to the rattling fire of wagers and comments, they looked defiant, and alive to the importance of the coming event.

El Rayo shone like burnished copper, his silver mane and tail glittering as if powdered with diamond-dust. He was long and graceful of body, thin of flank, slender of leg. With arched neck and flashing eyes, he walked with the pride of one who was aware of the admiration he excited.

Vitriolo was black and powerful. His long neck fitted into well-placed shoulders. He had great depth of girth, immense length from shoulder-points to hips, big cannon-bones, and elastic pasterns. There was neither amiability nor pride in his mien; rather a sullen sense of brute power, such as may have belonged to the knights of the Middle Ages. Now and again he curled his lips away from the bit and laid his ears back as if he intended to eat of the elegant Beau Brummel stepping so daintily beside him. Of the antagonistic crowd he took not the slightest notice.

"The race begins! Holy heaven!" The murmur rose to a shout—a deep hoarse shout strangely crossed and recrossed by long silver notes; a thrilling volume of sound rising above a sea of flashing eyes and parted lips and a vivid moving mass of colour.

Twice the horses scored, and were sent back. The third time they bounded by the starting-post neck and neck, nose to nose. José Abrigo, treasurer of Monterey, dashed his

sombrero, heavy with silver eagles, to the ground, and the race was begun.

Almost at once the black began to gain. Inch by inch he fought his way to the front, and the roar with which the crowd had greeted the start dropped into the silence of apprehension.

El Rayo was not easily to be shaken off. A third of the distance had been covered, and his nose was abreast of Vitriolo's flank. The vaqueros sat as if carved from sun-baked clay, as lightly as if hollowed, watching each other warily out of the corners of their eyes.

The black continued to gain. Halfway from home light was visible between the two horses. The pace became terrific, the excitement so intense that not a sound was heard but that of racing hoofs. The horses swept onward like projectiles, the same smoothness, the same suggestion of eternal flight. The bodies were extended until the tense muscles rose under the satin coats. Vitriolo's eyes flashed viciously; El Rayo's strained with determination. Vitriolo's nostrils were as red as angry craters; El Rayo's fluttered like paper in the wind.

Three-quarters of the race was run, and the rider of Vitriolo could tell by the sound of the hoof-beats behind him that he had a good lead of at least two lengths over the Northern champion. A smile curled the corners of his heavy lips; the race was his already.

Suddenly El Rayo's vaquero raised his hand, and down came the maddening quirto, first on one side, then on the other. The spurs dug; the blood spurted. The crowd burst into a howl of delight as their favourite responded. Startled

by the sound, Vitriolo's rider darted a glance over his shoulder, and saw El Rayo bearing down upon him like a thunder-bolt, regaining the ground that he had lost, not by inches, but by feet. Two hundred paces from the finish he was at the black's flanks; one hundred and fifty, he was at his girth; one hundred, and the horses were neck and neck; and still the quirto whirred down on El Rayo's heaving flanks, the spurs dug deeper into his quivering flesh.

The vaquero of Vitriolo sat like an image, using neither whip nor spur, his teeth set, his eyes rolling from the goal ahead to the rider at his side.

The breathless intensity of the spectators had burst. They had begun to click their teeth, to mutter hoarsely, then to shout, to gesticulate, to shake their fists in each other's face, to push and scramble for a better view.

"Holy God!" cried Pio Pico, carried out of himself, "the South is lost! Vitriolo the magnificent! Ah, who would have thought? The black by the gold! Ay! What! No! Holy Mary! Holy God!—"

Six strides more and the race is over. With the bark of a coyote the vaquero of the South leans forward over Vitriolo's neck. The big black responds like a creature of reason. Down comes the quirto once—only once. He fairly lifts his horse ahead and shoots into victory, winner by a neck. The South has vanquished the North.

The crowd yelled and shouted until it was exhausted. But even Cabañares made no further demonstration toward De la Vega. Not only was he weary and depressed, but the victory had been nobly won.

It grew late, and they rode to the town, caballeros pushing as close to doñas as they dared, dueñas in close attendance, one theme on the lips of all. Anger gave place to respect; moreover, De la Vega was the guest of General Castro, the best-beloved man in California. They were willing to extend the hand of friendship; but he rode last, between the General and Doña Modeste, and seemed to care as little for their good will as for their ill.

Pio Pico rode ahead, and as the cavalcade entered the town he broke from it and ascended the hill to carry the news to Ysabel Herrera.

Monterey, rising to her pine-spiked hills, swept like a crescent moon about the sapphire bay. The surf roared and fought the white sand hills of the distant horn; on that nearest the town stood the fort, grim and rude, but pulsating with military life, and alert for American onslaught. In the valley the red-tiled white adobe houses studded a little city which was a series of corners radiating from a central irregular street. A few mansions were on the hillside to the right, brush-crowded sand banks on the left; the perfect curve of hills, thick with pine woods and dense green undergrowth, rose high above and around all, a rampart of splendid symmetry.

"Ay! Ysabel! Ysabel!" cried the young people, as they swept down the broad street. "Bring her to us, Excellency. Tell her she shall not know until she comes down. We will tell her. Ay! poor Guido!"

The Governor turned and waved his hand, then continued the ascent of the hill, toward a long low house which showed no sign of life.

He alighted and glanced into a room opening upon the corridor which traversed the front. The room was large and dimly lighted by deeply set windows. The floor was bare, the furniture of horse-hair; saints and family portraits adorned the white walls; on a chair lay a guitar; it was a typical Californian sala of that day. The ships brought few luxuries, beyond raiment and jewels, to even the wealthy of that isolated country.

"Ysabel," called the Governor, "where art thou? Come down to the town and hear the fortune of the races. Alvarado Street streams like a comet. Why should the Star of Monterey withhold her light?"

A girl rose from a sofa and came slowly forward to the corridor. Discontent marred her face as she gave her hand to the Governor to kiss, and looked down upon the brilliant town. The Señorita Doña Ysabel Herrera was poor. Were it not for her uncle she would not have where to lay her stately head—and she was La Favorita of Monterey, the proudest beauty in California! Her father had gambled away his last acre, his horse, his saddle, the serape off his back; then sent his motherless girl to his brother, and buried himself in Mexico. Don Antonio took the child to his heart, and sent for a widowed cousin to be her dueña. He bought her beautiful garments from the ships that touched the port, but had no inclination to gratify her famous longing to hang ropes of pearls in her soft black hair, to wind them about her white neck, and band them above her green resplendent eyes.

"Unbend thy brows," said Pio Pico. "Wrinkles were not made for youth."

Ysabel moved her brows apart, but the clouds still lay in her eyes.

"Thou dost not ask of the races, O thou indifferent one! What is the trouble, my Ysabel? Will no one bring the pearls? The loveliest girl in all the Californias has said, 'I will wed no man who does not bring me a lapful of pearls,' and no one has filled the front of that pretty flowered gown. But have reason, niña. Remember that our Alta California has no pearls on its shores, and that even the pearl fisheries of the terrible lower country are almost worn out. Will nothing less content thee?"

"No, señor."

"Dios de mi alma! Thou hast ambition. No woman has had more offered her than thou. But thou art worthy of the most that man could give. Had I not a wife myself, I believe I should throw my jewels and my ugly old head at thy little feet."

Ysabel glanced with some envy at the magnificent jewels with which the Governor of the Californias was hung, but did not covet the owner. An uglier man than Pio Pico rarely had entered this world. The upper lip of his enormous mouth dipped at the middle; the broad thick underlip hung down with its own weight. The nose was big and coarse, although there was a certain spirited suggestion in the cavernous nostrils. Intelligence and reflectiveness were also in his little eyes, and they were far apart. A small white mustache grew above his mouth; about his chin, from ear to ear, was a short stubby beard, whiter by contrast with his copper-coloured skin. He looked much like an intellectual bear.

And Ysabel? In truth, she had reason for her pride. Her black hair, unblemished by gloss or tinge of blue, fell waving to her feet. California, haughty, passionate, restless, pleasure-loving, looked from her dark green eyes; the soft black lashes dropped quickly when they became too expressive. Her full mouth was deeply red, but only a faint pink lay in her white cheeks; the nose curved at bridge and nostrils. About her low shoulders she held a blue reboso, the finger-tips of each slim hand resting on the opposite elbow. She held her head a little back, and Pio Pico laughed as he looked at her.

"Dios!" he said, "but thou might be an Estenega or an Iturbi y Moncada.

Surely that lofty head better suits old Spain than the republic of

Mexico. Draw the reboso about thy head now, and let us go down. They expect thee."

She lifted the scarf above her hair, and walked down the steep rutted hill with the Governor, her flowered gown floating with a silken rustle about her. In a few moments she was listening to the tale of the races.

"Ay, Ysabel! Dios de mi alma! What a day! A young señor from Los Angeles won the race—almost all the races—the Señor Don Vicente de la Vega y Arillaga. He has never been here, before. His horses! Madre de Dios! They ran like hares. Poor Guido! Válgame Dios! Even thou wouldst have been moved to pity. But he is so handsome! Look! Look! He comes now, side by side with General Castro. Dios! his serape is as stiff with gold as the vestments of the padre."

Ysabel looked up as a man rode past. His bold profile and thin face were passionate and severe; his dark blue eyes were full of power. Such a face was rare among the languid shallow men of her race.

"He rides with General Castro," whispered Benicia Ortega. "He stays with him. We shall see him at the ball to-night."

As Don Vicente passed Ysabel their eyes met for a moment. His opened suddenly with a bold eager flash, his arched nostrils twitching. The colour left her face, and her eyes dropped heavily.

Love needed no kindling in the heart of the Californian.



The people of Monterey danced every night of their lives, and went nowhere so promptly as to the great sala of Doña Modeste Castro, their leader of fashion, whose gowns were made for her in the city of Mexico.

Ysabel envied her bitterly. Not because the Doña Modeste's skin was whiter than her own, for it could not be, nor her eyes greener, for they were not; but because her jewels were richer than Pio Pico's, and upon all grand occasions a string of wonderful pearls gleamed in her storm-black hair. But one feminine compensation had Ysabel: she was taller; Doña Modeste's slight elegant figure lacked Ysabel's graceful inches, and perhaps she too felt a pang sometimes as the girl undulated above her like a snake about to strike.

At the fashionable hour of ten Monterey was gathered for the dance. All the men except the officers wore black velvet or broadcloth coats and white trousers. All the women wore white, the waist long and pointed, the skirt full. Ysabel's gown was of embroidered crêpe. Her hair was coiled about her head, and held by a tortoise comb framed with a narrow band of gold. Pio Pico, splendid with stars and crescents and rings and pins, led her in, and with his unique ugliness enhanced her beauty.

She glanced eagerly about the room whilst replying absently to the caballeros who surrounded her. Don Vicente de la Vega was not there. The thick circle about her parted, and General Castro bent over her hand, begging the honour of the contradanza. She sighed, and for the moment forgot the Southerner who had flashed and gone like the beginning of a dream. Here was a man—the only man of her knowledge whom she could have loved, and who would have found her those pearls. Californians had so little ambition! Then she gave a light audacious laugh. Governor Pico was shaking hands cordially with General Castro, the man he hated best in California.

No two men could have contrasted more sharply than José Castro and Pio Pico—with the exception of Alvarado the most famous men of their country. The gold trimmings of the general's uniform were his only jewels. His hair and beard—the latter worn *à la Basca*, a narrow strip curving from upper lip to ear—were as black as Pio Pico's once had been. The handsomest man in California, he had less consciousness than the least of the caballeros. His deep gray eyes were luminous with enthusiasm; his nose was

sharp and bold; his firm sensitive mouth was cut above a resolute chin. He looked what he was, the ardent patriot of a doomed cause.

"Señorita," he said, as he led Ysabel out to the sweet monotonous music of the contradanza, "did you see the caballero who rode with me to-day?"

A red light rose to Ysabel's cheek. "Which one, commandante? Many rode with you."

"I mean him who rode at my right, the winner of the races, Vicente, son of my old friend Juan Bautista de la Vega y Arillaga, of Los Angeles."

"It may be. I think I saw a strange face."

"He saw yours, Doña Ysabel, and is looking upon you now from the corridor without, although the fog is heavy about him. Cannot you see him—that dark shadow by the pillar?"

Ysabel never went through the graceful evolutions of the contradanza as she did that night. Her supple slender body curved and swayed and glided; her round arms were like lazy snakes uncoiling; her exquisitely poised head moved in perfect concord with her undulating hips. Her eyes grew brighter, her lips redder. The young men who stood near gave as loud a vent to their admiration as if she had been dancing El Son alone on the floor. But the man without made no sign.

After the dance was over, General Castro led her to her dueña, and handing her a guitar, begged a song.

She began a light love-ballad, singing with the grace and style of her Spanish blood; a little mocking thing, but with a wild break now and again. As she sang, she fixed her eyes coquettishly on the adoring face of Guido Cabañares, who

stood beside her, but saw every movement of the form beyond the window. Don Guido kept his ardent eyes riveted upon her but detected no wandering in her glances. His lips trembled as he listened, and once he brushed the tears from his eyes. She gave him a little cynical smile, then broke her song in two. The man on the corridor had vaulted through the window.

Ysabel, clinching her hands the better to control her jumping nerves, turned quickly to Cabañares, who had pressed behind her, and was pouring words into her ear.

"Ysabel! Ysabel! hast thou no pity? Dost thou not see that I am fit to set the world on fire for love of thee? The very water boils as I drink it—"

She interrupted him with a scornful laugh, the sharper that her voice might not tremble. "Bring me my pearls. What is love worth when it will not grant one little desire?"

He groaned. "I have found a vein of gold on my rancho. I can pick the little shining pieces out with my fingers. I will have them beaten into a saddle for thee—"

But she had turned her back flat upon him, and was making a deep courtesy to the man whom General Castro presented.

"I appreciate the honour of your acquaintance," she murmured mechanically.

"At your feet, señorita," said Don Vicente.

The art of making conversation had not been cultivated among the Californians, and Ysabel plied her large fan with slow grace, at a loss for further remark, and wondering if her heart would

suffocate her. But

Don Vicente had the gift of words.

"Señorita," he said, "I have stood in the chilling fog and felt the warmth of your lovely voice at my heart. The emotions I felt my poor tongue cannot translate. They swarm in my head like a hive of puzzled bees; but perhaps they look through my eyes," and he fixed his powerful and penetrating gaze on Ysabel's green depths.

A waltz began, and he took her in his arms without asking her indulgence, and regardless of the indignation of the mob of men about her. Ysabel, whose being was filled with tumult, lay passive as he held her closer than man had ever dared before.

"I love you," he said, in his harsh voice. "I wish you for my wife. At once. When I saw you to-day standing with a hundred other beautiful women, I said: 'She is the fairest of them all. I shall have her.' And I read the future in"—he suddenly dropped the formal "you"—"in thine eyes, cariña. Thy soul sprang to mine. Thy heart is locked in my heart closer, closer than my arms are holding thee now."

The strength of his embrace was violent for a moment; but Ysabel might have been cut from marble. Her body had lost its swaying grace; it was almost rigid. She did not lift her eyes. But De la Vega was not discouraged.

The music finished, and Ysabel was at once surrounded by a determined retinue. This intruding Southerner was welcome to the honours of the race-field, but the Star of Monterey was not for him. He smiled as he saw the menace of their eyes.

"I would have her," he thought, "if they were a regiment of Castros—which they are not." But he had not armed himself against diplomacy.

"Señor Don Vicente de la Vega y Arillaga," said Don Guido Cabañares, who had been selected as spokesman, "perhaps you have not learned during your brief visit to our capital that the Señorita Doña Ysabel Herrera, La Favorita of Alta California, has sworn by the Holy Virgin, by the blessed Junipero Serra, that she will wed no man who does not bring her a lapful of pearls. Can you find those pearls on the sands of the South, Don Vicente? For, by the holy cross of God, you cannot have her without them!"

For a moment De la Vega was disconcerted.

"Is this true?" he demanded, turning to Ysabel.

"What, señor?" she asked vaguely. She had not listened to the words of her protesting admirer.

A sneer bent his mouth. "That you have put a price upon yourself? That the man who ardently wishes to be your husband, who has even won your love, must first hang you with pearls like—" He stopped suddenly, the blood burning his dark face, his eyes opening with an expression of horrified hope. "Tell me! Tell me!" he exclaimed. "Is this true?"

For the first time since she had spoken with him Ysabel was herself. She crossed her arms and tapped her elbows with her pointed fingers.

"Yes," she said, "it is true." She raised her eyes to his and regarded him steadily. They looked like green pools frozen in a marble wall.

The harp, the flute, the guitar, combined again, and once more he swung her from a furious circle. But he was safe; General Castro had joined it. He waltzed her down the long room, through one adjoining, then into another, and, indifferent to the iron conventions of his race, closed the door behind them. They were in the sleeping-room of Doña Modeste. The bed with its rich satin coverlet, the bare floor, the simple furniture, were in semi-darkness; only on the altar in the corner were candles burning. Above it hung paintings of saints, finely executed by Mexican hands; an ebony cross spread its black arms against the white wall; the candles flared to a golden Christ. He caught her hands and led her over to the altar.

"Listen to me," he said. "I will bring you those pearls. You shall have such pearls as no queen in Europe possesses. Swear to me here, with your hands on this altar, that you will wed me when I return, no matter how or where I find those pearls."

He was holding her hands between the candelabra. She looked at him with eyes of passionate surrender; the man had conquered worldly ambitions. But he answered her before she had time to speak.

"You love me, and would withdraw the conditions. But I am ready to do a daring and a terrible act. Furthermore, I wish to show you that I can succeed where all other men have failed. I ask only two things now. First, make me the vow I wish."

"I swear it," she said.

"Now," he said, his voice sinking to a harsh but caressing whisper, "give me one kiss for courage and hope."

She leaned slowly forward, the blood pulsing in her lips; but she had been brought up behind grated windows, and she drew back. "No," she said, "not now."

For a moment he looked rebellious; then he laid his hands on her shoulders and pressed her to her knees. He knelt behind her, and together they told a rosary for his safe return.

He left her there and went to his room. From his saddle-bag he took a long letter from an intimate friend, one of the younger Franciscan priests of the Mission of Santa Barbara, where he had been educated. He sought this paragraph:—

"Thou knowest, of course, my Vicente, of the pearl fisheries of Baja California. It is whispered—between ourselves, indeed, it is quite true—that a short while ago the Indian divers discovered an extravagantly rich bed of pearls. Instead of reporting to any of the companies, they have hung them all upon our Most Sacred Lady of Loreto, in the Mission of Loreto; and there, by the grace of God, they will remain. They are worth the ransom of a king, my Vicente, and the Church has come to her own again."



The fog lay thick on the bay at dawn next morning. The white waves hid the blue, muffled the roar of the surf. Now and again a whale threw a volume of spray high in the air, a geyser from a phantom sea. Above the white sands straggled the white town, ghostly, prophetic.

De la Vega, a dark sombrero pulled over his eyes, a dark serape enveloping his tall figure, rode, unattended and

watchful, out of the town. Not until he reached the narrow road through the brush forest beyond did he give his horse rein. The indolence of the Californian was no longer in his carriage; it looked alert and muscular; recklessness accentuated the sternness of his face.

As he rode, the fog receded slowly. He left the chaparral and rode by green marshes cut with sloughs and stained with vivid patches of orange. The frogs in the tules chanted their hoarse matins. Through brush-covered plains once more, with sparsely wooded hills in the distance, and again the tules, the marsh, the patches of orange. He rode through a field of mustard; the pale yellow petals brushed his dark face, the delicate green leaves won his eyes from the hot glare of the ascending sun, the slender stalks, rebounding, smote his horse's flanks. He climbed hills to avoid the wide marshes, and descended into willow groves and fields of daisies. Before noon he was in the San Juan Mountains, thick with sturdy oaks, bending their heads before the madroño, that belle of the forest, with her robes of scarlet and her crown of bronze. The yellow lilies clung to her skirts, and the buckeye flung his flowers at her feet. The last redwoods were there, piercing the blue air with their thin inflexible arms, gray as a dusty band of friars. Out by the willows, whereunder crept the sluggish river, then between the hills curving about the valley of San Juan Bautista.

At no time is California so beautiful as in the month of June. De la Vega's wild spirit and savage purpose were dormant for the moment as he rode down the valley toward the mission. The hills were like gold, like mammoth fawns

veiled with violet mist, like rich tan velvet. Afar, bare blue steeps were pink in their chasms, brown on their spurs. The dark yellow fields were as if thick with gold-dust; the pale mustard was a waving yellow sea. Not a tree marred the smooth hills. The earth sent forth a perfume of its own. Below the plateau from which rose the white walls of the mission was a wide field of bright green corn rising against the blue sky.

The padres in their brown hooded robes came out upon the long corridor of the mission and welcomed the traveller. Their lands had gone from them, their mission was crumbling, but the spirit of hospitality lingered there still. They laid meat and fruit and drink on a table beneath the arches, then sat about him and asked him eagerly for news of the day. Was it true that the United States of America were at war with Mexico, or about to be? True that their beloved flag might fall, and the stars and stripes of an insolent invader rise above the fort of Monterey?

De la Vega recounted the meagre and conflicting rumours which had reached California, but, not being a prophet, could not tell them that they would be the first to see the red-white-and-blue fluttering on the mountain before them. He refused to rest more than an hour, but mounted the fresh horse the padres gave him and went his way, riding hard and relentlessly, like all Californians.

He sped onward, through the long hot day, leaving the hills for the marshes and a long stretch of ugly country, traversing the beautiful San Antonio Valley in the night, reaching the Mission of San Miguel at dawn, resting there for a few hours. That night he slept at a hospitable ranch-house

in the park-like valley of Paso des Robles, a grim silent figure amongst gay-hearted people who delighted to welcome him. The early morning found him among the chrome hills; and at the Mission of San Luis Obispo the good padres gave him breakfast. The little valley, round as a well, its bare hills red and brown, gray and pink, violet and black, from fire, sloping steeply from a dizzy height, impressed him with a sense of being prisoned in an enchanted vale where no message of the outer world could come, and he hastened on his way.

Absorbed as he was, he felt the beauty he fled past. A line of golden hills lay against sharp blue peaks. A towering mass of gray rocks had been cut and lashed by wind and water, earthquake and fire, into the semblance of a massive castle, still warlike in its ruin. He slept for a few hours that night in the Mission of Santa Ynes, and was high in the Santa Barbara Mountains at the next noon. For brief whiles he forgot his journey's purpose as his horse climbed slowly up the steep trails, knocking the loose stones down a thousand feet and more upon a roof of tree-tops which looked like stunted brush. Those gigantic masses of immense stones, each wearing a semblance to the face of man or beast; those awful chasms and stupendous heights, densely wooded, bare, and many-hued, rising above, beyond, peak upon peak, cutting through the visible atmosphere—was there no end? He turned in his saddle and looked over low peaks and cañons, rivers and abysses, black peaks smiting the fiery blue, far, far, to the dim azure mountains on the horizon.

"Mother of God!" he thought. "No wonder California still shakes! I would I could have stood upon a star and beheld the awful throes of this country's birth." And then his horse reared between the sharp spurs and galloped on.

He avoided the Mission of Santa Barbara, resting at a rancho outside the town. In the morning, supplied as usual with a fresh horse, he fled onward, with the ocean at his right, its splendid roar in his ears. The cliffs towered high above him; he saw no man's face for hours together; but his thoughts companioned him, savage and sinister shapes whirling about the figure of a woman. On, on, sleeping at ranchos or missions, meeting hospitality everywhere, avoiding Los Angeles, keeping close to the ponderous ocean, he left civilization behind him at last, and with an Indian guide entered upon that desert of mountain-tops, Baja California.

Rapid travelling was not possible here. There were no valleys worthy the name. The sharp peaks, multiplying mile after mile, were like teeth of gigantic rakes, black and bare. A wilderness of mountain-tops, desolate as eternity, arid, parched, baked by the awful heat, the silence never broken by the cry of a bird, a hut rarely breaking the barren monotony, only an infrequent spring to save from death. It was almost impossible to get food or fresh horses. Many a night De la Vega and his stoical guide slept beneath a cactus, or in the mocking bed of a creek. The mustangs he managed to lasso were almost unridable, and would have bucked to death any but a Californian. Sometimes he lived on cactus fruit and the dried meat he had brought with him; occasionally he shot a rabbit. Again he had but the flesh of

the rattlesnake roasted over coals. But honey-dew was on the leaves.

He avoided the beaten trail, and cut his way through naked bushes spiked with thorns, and through groves of cacti miles in length. When the thick fog rolled up from the ocean he had to sit inactive on the rocks, or lose his way. A furious storm dashed him against a boulder, breaking his mustang's leg; then a torrent, rising like a tidal wave, thundered down the gulch, and catching him on its crest, flung him upon a tree of thorns. When dawn came he found his guide dead. He cursed his luck, and went on.

Lassoing another mustang, he pushed on, having a general idea of the direction he should take. It was a week before he reached Loreto, a week of loneliness, hunger, thirst, and torrid monotony. A week, too, of thought and bitterness of spirit. In spite of his love, which never cooled, and his courage, which never quailed, Nature, in her guise of foul and crooked hag, mocked at earthly happiness, at human hope, at youth and passion.

If he had not spent his life in the saddle, he would have been worn out when he finally reached Loreto, late one night. As it was, he slept in a hut until the following afternoon. Then he took a long swim in the bay, and, later, sauntered through the town.

The forlorn little city was hardly more than a collection of Indians' huts about a church in a sandy waste. No longer the capital, even the barracks were toppling. When De la Vega entered the mission, not a white man but the padre and his assistant was in it; the building was thronged with Indian worshippers. The mission, although the first built in

California, was in a fair state of preservation. The Stations in their battered frames were mellow and distinct. The gold still gleamed in the vestments of the padre.

For a few moments De la Vega dared not raise his eyes to the Lady of Loreto, standing aloft in the dull blaze of adamantine candles. When he did, he rose suddenly from his knees and left the mission. The pearls were there.

It took him but a short time to gain the confidence of the priest and the little population. He offered no explanation for his coming, beyond the curiosity of the traveller. The padre gave him a room in the mission, and spent every hour he could spare with the brilliant stranger. At night he thanked God for the sudden oasis in his life's desolation. The Indians soon grew accustomed to the lonely figure wandering about the sand plains, or kneeling for hours together before the altar in the church. And whom their padre trusted was to them as sacred and impersonal as the wooden saints of their religion.

IV

The midnight stars watched over the mission. Framed by the cross-shaped window sunk deep in the adobe wall above the entrance, a mass of them assumed the form of the crucifix, throwing a golden trail full upon the Lady of Loreto, proud in her shining pearls. The long narrow body of the church seemed to have swallowed the shadows of the ages, and to yawn for more.

De la Vega, booted and spurred, his serape folded about him, his sombrero on his head, opened the sacristy door and

entered the church. In one hand he held a sack; in the other, a candle sputtering in a bottle. He walked deliberately to the foot of the altar. In spite of his intrepid spirit, he stood appalled for a moment as he saw the dim radiance enveloping the Lady of Loreto. He scowled over his shoulder at the menacing emblem of redemption and crossed himself. But had it been the finger of God, the face of Ysabel would have shone between. He extinguished his candle, and swinging himself to the top of the altar plucked the pearls from the Virgin's gown and dropped them into the sack. His hand trembled a little, but he held his will between his teeth.

How quiet it was! The waves flung themselves upon the shore with the sullen wrath of impotence. A seagull screamed now and again, an exclamation-point in the silence above the waters. Suddenly De la Vega shook from head to foot, and snatched the knife from his belt. A faint creaking echoed through the hollow church. He strained his ears, holding his breath until his chest collapsed with the shock of outrushing air. But the sound was not repeated, and he concluded that it had been but a vibration of his nerves. He glanced to the window above the doors. The stars in it were no longer visible; they had melted into bars of flame. The sweat stood cold on his face, but he went on with his work.

A rope of pearls, cunningly strung together with strands of sea-weed, was wound about the Virgin's right arm. De la Vega was too nervous to uncoil it; he held the sack beneath, and severed the strands with his knife. As he finished, and was about to stoop and cut loose the pearls from the hem of