

# THE TRAIL OF DANGER



William MacLeod Raine

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*The*  
TRAIL OF DANGER

BY  
WILLIAM MACLEOD RAINE

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TO  
DOROTHY RAINE

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# THE TRAIL OF DANGER

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## CHAPTER I THE RUNAWAY

A BLOND boyish head was lifted cautiously above the hatchway. Blue eyes swept the moonlit deck, right, left, fore and aft. Against the ship's rail a man was leaning. The pungent smoke of tobacco drifted back to Dennis Gifford. From the great bulk and heavy shoulders of the smoker the young sailor guessed he was Duff Conway, second mate of the brig *Mary Bligh*. For Conway the lad had no love. The mate had shanghaied him at San Francisco a few months before, and since that time had ridden him hard. The fellow was a brute. For the poor devils under him he always preferred a blow to a word. The purple patch that surrounded one of Gifford's eyes was a reminder of the man's discipline.

At the turn of the tide the *Mary Bligh* would put to sea. If Dennis was going to escape, it had to be now. And Conway jeopardized his chances.

Dennis meant to swim for it. His gaze turned shoreward, across the shining path of moonlit water, to the stretch of surf-beaten sand so like the ruffles of a lady's skirt. It was a long way, and every foot of it he would be in the spotlight.

With another glance at the smoker he slipped aft. He was barefoot, his boots tied around his neck. The rope he had left near he fastened, then lowered himself hand over hand.

The water was unexpectedly cold, and he could not yet warm himself by swimming. For Conway had moved along the deck and was leaning on the rail as he smoked. Apparently he was looking across at the lights of Monterey.

The sailor lay still, expecting every moment to be discovered. Conway spat into the water, not ten feet from where the runaway was submerged, only his nose above the lapping waves. If the mate should take four steps



toward the stern, he would probably see the end of the rope to which Dennis was clinging.

The mate had plenty of time. He smoked his pipe out and knocked the dottle against the rail. Even then he was in no hurry to move. To Dennis it seemed an hour before the man strolled leisurely away.

Gifford let go the rope and pushed with his feet against the side of the brig. He swam softly, with as little splashing as possible. If he should be seen or heard, he would not get halfway to the shore. A long shaft of moonlight lay in front of him. Any casual eye directed from the brig might focus on him. There were scudding clouds in the sky. He wished that some of them would drift between him and that shining circle in the heavens.

After the first hundred yards, he put more power into his strokes. His escape might at any moment be discovered. The *Mary Bligh* was no honest craft, but one engaged in nefarious trade. Between its walls were packed fear and hatred. Spying and treachery were natural concomitants. Captain Little and his officers ruled by the heavy hand. To be captured meant for Dennis that he would be triced up and flogged till the blood ran down his bare back. Twice he and a dozen other sailors had stood by and seen unhappy wretches shrieking from the pain of the cat. The furious resentment in the hearts of those watching had been repressed, for any expression of it would have been construed as mutiny.

A strong swimmer, Dennis made steady progress. Given time, he knew he could reach the shore. That plaguy moon! If only it would not shine so brightly.

Across the waters there came to him from the ship a shout—excited voices. Over his shoulder he could see men running to and fro. They were lowering a boat. Hoarse orders carried on the breeze. Figures were dropping into the boat.

Desperately he swam, with all the power he had. His arms reached for the water. To him it seemed he was making no progress.

Duff Conway's brutal bellow swept across the waves to him. 'Bite into it, my hearties. Lift her along. When I get the scut, I'll ridge his back for him, I promise you.'

The splash of the oars reached the swimmer. The boat was drawing near. He went forward, hand over hand, grim despair in his heart. The ribald jeers of the mate did not encourage him to loiter. He knew that if he was dragged back now, the *Mary Bligh* would be a hell ten times worse than it had before.

Gifford was in the surf now—through the big breakers. A foot touched bottom. He ran splashing through the water, breathing hard from the furious rush to get away from the punishment at his heels. When he reached the beach, he turned without stopping. Men were leaping from the boat. They splashed after him, with shouts and oaths.

In front of him were the lights of Alvarado Street, on his right the wharf. Beyond this loomed up the two-story customs-house, which within a decade had flown the flags of Mexico, of California, and of the United States.

He ran up Alvarado. Conway's bull voice roared after him.

'Runaway! Stop him!'

Out of a dance-hall two Californians<sup>[1]</sup> came. One called to the other in Spanish. Instantly they acted, for there was a standing reward for the return to their ships of runaway sailors. The men separated, to cut off the fugitive.

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[1] In early days a Californian was a Spaniard or Mexican who lived in California. The term was used for some years after the American conquest.

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Dennis was trapped in a narrow street. With the sailors of the *Mary Bligh* at his heels he could not turn. He had to keep going.

One of those in front ordered him to halt. He knew enough Spanish to understand that. Plunging straight at the man, he stopped abruptly, then dodged to the left, between the two Californians.

In the moonlight he caught the flash of a knife and flung up an arm to avert the blade. A flame of fire ripped through the flesh of his forearm. But he was in the clear, flying up Alvarado, with the chase pounding after him.

The lanterns above the doors of Alvarado marked his course too plainly. He dived into a dark, narrow lane, and from it doubled into another. Dennis was a fast runner. He knew that his pursuers were stringing out. Over his shoulder he caught sight of Long Jim, the boatswain, close upon him.

The man clutched at him with a sweep of the arm, caught his coat, and deliberately let go. As Dennis turned another corner, he looked back. Long Jim had stumbled and fallen. The man behind him was crashing down on top of him.

Dennis was in a road enclosed on both sides by high adobe walls. A pine tree rose in front of him, at one side of the street. Up the trunk he swarmed,

caught at the lowest branch, moved swiftly along it to the wall, and from this dropped down on the other side.

His feet struck the soft loam as the pursuit went full cry up the road. He listened. Had he been seen shinning up the pine? The first runners did not stop, but presently he heard someone call to a runner hurrying past.

‘What’s your hurry, Jock? Let Conway catch his own runaways, damn his cruel soul to hell.’

The fugitive recognized the voice of Long Jim.

The second man stopped. ‘Right you are, mate. I’m no crimp’s bloodhound. I’ll not run my legs off for that sea wolf. Got any ’baccy, Jim?’

They lit their pipes and moved away.

Young Gifford saw that he was in an old-fashioned garden of sweet peas, hollyhocks, roses, and white lilies. Near him splashed a fountain. There were walks between the flower-beds, and near the center of the garden under a cypress tree seats and a table. Walls enclosed the garden on three sides. The shadowy back of a large house completed the rectangle. All of its windows were dark.

Dennis sat on a bench to put on his boots. His feet were stone-bruised, but that did not matter. He took off his coat to examine the slash in his arm. Fortunately the knife had not ripped deeply. The wound had bled a good deal, but a handkerchief would stop that.

His heart gave a jump. The fingers of two hands covered his eyes. He heard a gay ripple of laughter, a caressing murmur of liquid Spanish. Before he could move, or speak, the hands tilted back his head and a warm cheek nestled against his.

Dennis leaped to his feet. With a cry of dismay a woman started back. She had discovered he was the wrong man.

‘Who are you?’ she demanded in her own language.

He could see the swift rise and fall of her bosom, the panic in her lustrous dark eyes. She was young, a mere girl, and she was manifestly afraid. Yet she kept her voice down. It was clear she had no wish to arouse the sleeping house.

‘I’m a runaway sailor,’ he explained. ‘They were following me, and I climbed over the garden wall to hide.’

The girl had a supple, slender body. She wore a chemise with short embroidered sleeves trimmed with lace, a muslin petticoat flounced with

scarlet, shoes of blue satin, and a silk shawl over her head. Shining black hair, in heavy plaits, hung down her back far below the waist.

She gave a soft little cry. ‘*Madre de Dios!* Your arm.’

‘A man gashed it while I was escaping,’ he said.

Her gaze passed over him, took in his wet clothes, his clear-eyed, lean-flanked youth. He was a boy, she thought, a nice boy, and his sudden smile was naïve and reassuring.

‘Have you a—a—kerchief?’ she asked in halting English.

He had not. She used her own to bind the wound. The touch of her fingers, the nearness of her perfumed hair, thrilled his pulses. He had never before been ministered to by a gracious and beautiful young señorita.

‘Now you must go,’ she said when she had finished. ‘Quickly. And forget you have ever been here.’

‘*Muchas gracias*, señorita,’ he said, in the soft liquid vowels of her own Spanish. ‘At your feet. I shall never forget your kindness.’

She answered with the common phrase, ‘*Buen provecho*, señor.’ (‘May it do you good.’)

From the top of the wall a soft voice spoke derisively. ‘All cats are gray in the dark. One lover does as well as another. Is it not so, *cariña?*’

A light figure dropped into the garden and moved forward. It carried itself with negligent grace, with a catlike litheness that somehow suggested to Dennis the killing pounce.

‘Señor Bandini!’ the girl cried.

‘It was to have been Juan,’ he reminded her, his dark eyes fixed on the sailor. In them burned a flame of jealousy that held an imminent threat. ‘You have, it seems, other friends who get favors. I regret that I arrived too soon—or too late. My memory so bad. I forget the hour, perhaps, and I interrupt.’

‘He is not my friend. He is a poor man in trouble whom we must help, a seaman from a ship in the harbor——’

‘Ah! A sailor with a sweetheart in every port. I have heard of them.’

The girl drew up her slight figure to haughty dignity. ‘Is it necessary that you insult me, señor?’

The newcomer was a caballero gay with silver and gold and girt with a crimson sash from beneath which the handle of a long knife and the butt of a revolver showed. He had black, curling hair, an olive skin of remarkable texture, and delicate features which might have been effeminate but for the

bold and brilliant eyes. Gifford thought he had never seen a handsomer man—nor one more sinister.

‘Do I insult you, *mi muy querida?*’ the Californian asked, his voice a soft and yet savage purr. ‘Do my eyes lie to me when they tell me a stranger is here?’

‘A stranger is here. But you do not ask how he came.’

‘I do not even ask how and where he will go,’ Bandini said, and his white teeth flashed in a smile that held no friendliness.

Dennis spoke. ‘I’m a runaway sailor—from the brig *Mary Bligh*. Shanghaied at San Francisco and held a prisoner on board. Tonight I slipped overboard, was seen, and pursued. To escape I climbed the tree outside and dropped into the garden.’

‘Where you found beauty waiting for you, with a kerchief to bind on the knight’s arm,’ Bandini jeered. ‘You are lucky, Mr. Yankee, whatever your name is, if you have one. Yet I am not so sure. I ask myself a question. Is it lucky to be too lucky—for a short time? Oh, a very short time.’

A pulse beat fast in the throat of Gifford, as always when he knew himself in the presence of danger. To look into the black opaque eyes of this olive-skinned youth was to know that he was ruthless. Dennis was reminded of a tiger. Bandini had the same crouched look, the sinuous, rippling muscles waiting for the spring. He was biding his time.

The girl stamped her foot, anger sparkling in her big eyes. ‘Are you a fool? Do you not see he is wounded? And that he is a sailor, as he says? See! He is wet. He swam from his ship, as others do.’ The flare of anger died. ‘I do not understand you, Señor Bandini. I thought—you told me—that——’

He broke in, swiftly, in Spanish. ‘And it is true. I love you. No man shall come between us. None. I, Juan Cas—Bandini, swear it. You are mine. I would strike a knife in the heart of one who interferes.’

She heard him with distress. Was this the cavalier whose eyes had poured love into hers, so filled with passionate ardor, but so gentle and protective toward her?

‘This man is nothing to me—nothing,’ she insisted, also in her own tongue. ‘I never met him before.’

‘Yet you, Rosita Martínez, of the best blood in Spain, degrade yourself by tying up the wound of a dirty Yankee sailor, a runaway who will be dragged back to taste the whip.’

Beneath the girl's olive skin a flush of shame ran. 'You do well to remind me, Juan Bandini, that I have forgotten I am a Martínez. Else why would I be waiting here for you, a wicked girl, who has come out alone in the night to see a man? You are right, I degrade myself. I am lost to all sense of decency. I will go back to the house and tell my mother and be well whipped as I deserve.'

Rosita turned impulsively, but Bandini was in front of her before she could move. His smile had become a thing of evil, a menace which chilled her heart.

'One moment, *carísima*. Since this man is nothing to you, it will be no concern of yours that I am going to blow his brains out beneath the cypress. Happy dreams, Rosita.'

He stood aside and bowed raffishly.

The girl stopped, all her outraged dignity banished. In her great dark eyes fear fluttered. 'You do not mean that, Juan. He has done nothing to you—no harm. Is he not only a poor man trying to escape slavery? You do not believe me. Why?'

'But I believe you,' the Californian replied. 'I have seen your friend before—on Alvarado Street, not twenty minutes since. He was a young man in a hurry, but after all not quite quick enough. It was my knife ripped into his arm while he was running.'

'You did it?' she cried. 'But why?'

'I do not like these Americans. They come here to rob us of our country. Everywhere they are swarming. So I am glad to send one back to his ship to be beaten. *Viva California!* Down with the Gringos!'

Rosita looked at Bandini with startled eyes. This man was a stranger to her. He was not the gay young caballero who had taken her girlish fancy. She caught for a moment a glimpse of something dark and sinister in him, something that almost frightened her.

'That is true, but this boy is not to blame. Be generous to him, Juan. Do not do this dreadful thing you threaten.' The girl put a hand pleadingly on his arm. 'But I know you jest, because you are angry at me. Tell me that you will not harm him.'

The Californian smiled, maliciously. 'I will not harm him, Rosita, since you beg for him. But this is a dangerous coast for a boy as innocent as you say this one is. There are Indians and banditti. I will see him back to his ship where he will be safe.'

‘But he does not want to go back to his ship, Juan. He has run away from it. Did you not hear him say so?’

‘I heard him say so, but he has changed his mind.’ Bandini turned to Gifford and showed his fine ivory teeth in a hateful, flashing smile. ‘Is it not so, señor? You wish to be safe from the dangers of this wild California. Your heart longs for the deck of this ship of yours. If I am wrong you will correct me, will you not?’

The sailor understood he was being offered an option. This man would either shoot him down as soon as the girl had gone into the house, or he would take him back to the *Mary Bligh* and get a reward for the runaway’s return. The American might take his choice.

It was hard to believe that this Mexican meant murder. There seemed no adequate reason for it. But Dennis knew that Joaquín Murrieta and scores of other bandits were roaming over California intent on wiping out as many Americans as possible. They had persuaded themselves it was a patriotic duty to destroy the foreigners who were taking over the country so rapidly. Bandini might hold the same viewpoint. Certainly the man’s ruthless glittering eyes held a threat not to be ignored. The revolver in his belt was not there as a form.

Dennis grinned. He might as well make the best of it for the moment, though he had no intention of being taken back to the brig.

‘Yes, I’ve changed my mind. A life on the ocean wave for me, Señor Bandini. I’ll feel safer when I get back to the *Mary Bligh*.’

‘Ah, you hear, Rosita. Was I not right? I give you my word I will take him back like a little lamb to the fold.’

Rosita was disturbed. She did not want this American returned to the ship where he had been unhappy and from which he had escaped. That Juan was jealous she understood. A good many men had not liked it when she smiled on others. But she had not been flirting with this runaway. Out of common humanity she had helped him. That was all. Juan ought to be magnanimous enough to aid her in a cause to which she had engaged herself. He ought to be more discerning. In a sense this sailor had made appeal to her hospitality and to her chivalry. It would be intolerable to desert him, to let him be taken back to his ship for a reward. That would be the same as selling him. Any man was entitled to sanctuary against his enemies, unless he was a vile criminal. And this brown-faced boy with the honest eyes was not that—not unless faces lied atrociously.

‘But he does not mean it, Señor Bandini,’ she protested. ‘Do you not see? He is afraid of you—of what you mean to do to him. That is absurd. You are a Spanish caballero. Is it not so?’ The pleading voice of the girl broke as she lifted her big velvety eyes in supplication to the Californian. ‘He does not know you are just teasing me, that you cannot harm one who has thrown himself upon our protection or turn him over to his foes for money.’

‘Did he throw himself on my protection?’ Bandini asked sulkily. ‘I do not think so.’

‘On mine. Is it not the same? If you are my—my friend—as you say you are——’

‘Ah! Then he knew you were here—in the garden.’

‘Why do you say that when you know it is not true?’ Rosita flung back at him. She drew herself up with a certain proud disdain, for her own conduct certainly and perhaps for his too. ‘I came into the garden to meet—a gentleman—who—who had begged me for a few minutes alone. I was a bad girl. It was wicked of me to come. That it was wrong I knew. The only excuse for me—and that is no excuse, none at all—was that I felt sure he would understand—would rather burn his hand in fire than dishonor me with evil thoughts of what I was doing. I am punished. Why did I think I knew so much better than my mother who has taught me what is right?’

‘Have I said I do not understand?’ Bandini demanded in a surly way.

‘You have been saying it, one way and another, ever since you came.’ In the look she gave him was dismayed helplessness. She had thought she knew what manner of man he was, and she found she did not know at all. ‘I cannot blame you. What would you think of me for coming here but that I am—bad?’

Dennis caught in Bandini’s eyes, which were treacherous as those of a cat, a tigerish ferocity that gleamed a moment and was gone.

The man bowed to the girl. ‘I will not take this Yankee dog back to his ship, since you do not wish it, *niñita*. Your desire is law to me. Are you content?’

Her troubled eyes were still full of doubt, but she told him she was content. To Dennis she turned, timidly, with a word.

‘I hope your wound will not trouble you long, señor.’

The Californian answered for him, his white teeth gleaming again in a swift smile. ‘I am sure it will not, *carísima*. For it I have a certain specific.’



His strange smile left her still uncertain. 'You will take care of him, I know,' she murmured.

'Do I lose my little hour with you?' Bandini asked in a low voice.

'It must be so—for tonight. I must hurry back to the house.'

'And tomorrow night?'

'Perhaps,' she said. 'I do not know yet. *Adios, amigo.*'

He caught her hand and raised it to his lips. She turned and ran, gathering up her skirts that they might not impede her as she flew to the house.

## CHAPTER II

### SHOTS IN THE NIGHT

DENNIS GIFFORD knew that not for an instant had the Californian been unaware of him during the talk with Rosita Martínez. He could not have made a move to escape or to attack without having had bullets flung into his body. The man was watching him warily.

As the girl disappeared, Bandini turned on him, almost with the pounce of a panther. The Californian had lost ground with Rosita, and he needed all her favor to overcome his handicaps. He was a stranger, unknown to her family, and he could show no credentials that would justify him in aspiring to her hand. His only hope lay in the romantic appeal he made, and the intrusion of this American sailor had shaken his position with her.

‘So, dog of an American, you interfere!’ he cried. ‘You win the lady’s pity. She is all tender heart for you. I am to do this and I am not to do that. Bah! *ciertamente!* Am I a fool? I, the famous Juan Castro, known from the northern border of Alta California to the farthest fringe of Baja California? No, I will not take you back to your ship, but to Point Lobos, where there is a precipice and many sharp rocks below and a tide that will sweep all left of you far out to sea.’

A chill wind swept over Dennis. This man was Juan Castro then, the infamous bandit, the murderous raider of mining camps, the killer of many Americans, the outlaw upon whose head was a purse of five thousand dollars, dead or alive. That the man had doomed him he had no doubt. It was notorious that he hated Americans. How much more would he dislike one who had spoiled his rendezvous and made a rift between him and the lady he fancied.

Young though he was, Dennis had lived a life crowded with adventure. He knew he was in deadly peril. To get panicky would be fatal. If he was to escape, it must be by the cool use of his brains. The fellow had unconsciously given him one lead. Vanity stood out in him like a bandaged thumb, a weakness to be made the most of until a better opening offered.

‘The great Juan Castro,’ Gifford repeated, his voice awestruck. ‘But why do you say known to the boundaries of California when one hears of Castro far back in the cities of my country and at campfires on the trail and in ships

beating round the Horn? I have heard of Joaquín Murrieta too, but far, far more of Juan Castro.'

'Murrieta is an upstart,' the outlaw said sharply, resentment in his voice. 'I raid the Yankee camps, and everybody cries, "Murrieta at work again." Bah! He is nothing.'

'It is strange that I have met you so soon. The governor—the alcalde—anyone can meet them—but Castro himself. That is different. I am in luck.'

'Bad luck,' the Californian amended grimly, though he sunned himself none the less in the naïve admiration of this Gringo.

'Perhaps. I do not know. It is surprising that you who are so young have done so much. I expected an older man—middle-aged.'

'Before I am through I shall sweep the Americanos out of California. You will not live to see it. Yet it is so.'

The Mexican made this prediction with fatuous complacency. Americans were pouring into California by thousands—across the plains, by way of the Isthmus, in ships up from the Horn. But some natives still cherished the hope that their country would yet be redeemed from the plague of foreigners. The bandits recruited their companies by the patriotic appeal.

'Perhaps,' Dennis said.

'It is time to be off. Up the wall, and when you reach the top do not move unless you want a bullet through you.'

Gifford found footholds in the adobe brick and by means of them reached the top. He was ordered to leave his legs dangling until Castro had joined him. A moment or two later the bandit was astride the wall.

'I shall go down first, and my eyes will be on you all the time,' he told his prisoner.

'Yes,' said the sailor meekly.

Castro jumped lightly to the ground, without the aid of the tree. An instant later, almost before his feet had landed, Dennis too was on his way down, but on the garden side of the wall.

A harmless bullet flew skyward at him. Dennis ran toward the dark house, raising his voice in a shout.

'Castro is here! Juan Castro the bandit! Open the door, for the love of Heaven!'

What followed happened much more swiftly than it can be told. A bullet struck the side of the house close to Dennis. Another splintered through the

door upon which he was hammering. A third flung a spurt of dirt from the ground. From the top of the wall Castro fired until his revolver was empty.

The door opened. A voice cried, '*Quién está ahí? Who is there?*'

Dennis stepped inside and closed the door. He had recognized that frightened voice.

'It is I, señorita. Dennis Gifford, the American sailor. Bandini is Juan Castro the bandit. He is trying to kill me.'

In the darkness he heard Rosita gasp. 'Juan Castro the bandit! *No, es imposible.*'

But he knew the shock of what he had said had struck home.

There were noises in the house. Someone called, 'Pedro, what is the disturbance?' A man with a candle appeared at the end of a passage.

Rosita murmured, 'My father! What will I do?'

'Leave it to me,' Dennis told her in a low tone, and almost without a break continued in a louder voice: 'I am desolated to disturb you, señora, but I am a hunted man. I beg of you shelter and refuge.'

The man with the candle moved forward. He wore a poncho over his night-clothes. 'What is all this noise and shooting?' he demanded. Then, sharply, 'Rosita, why are you here?'

'I heard shots and cries,' the girl explained. 'Someone begged to be admitted. I opened the door—and then you came. Did I do wrong, my father?'

'Who are you?' Ramon Martínez asked the young man imperiously. 'Why do you come knocking at my house in the night?'

Already other men and a middle-aged but still handsome woman had appeared in the hall. Dennis gave his whole attention to the father of Rosita. He stood six feet in height, straight as an arrow, broad-shouldered and strong. Even in his scanty attire he contrived to look dignified. The cast of his face was noble and aristocratic.

'Señor, I am a runaway sailor from the brig *Mary Bligh*, now in the harbor. I was shanghaied by ruffians and have been treated worse than a dog. Tonight I escaped by swimming, but the pursuit was at my heels. I ran up this street, climbed the wall of your garden, and hid there. My enemies followed me and shot at me. To save myself I cried for help and beat upon your door. Since you are a great Spanish caballero you will not refuse me aid.' Dennis made his plea with quiet assurance.

Martínez spoke to his daughter, in Spanish, telling her to go to bed. To the uninvited guest he said, 'If your story is true, you need not be afraid. My house is yours, señor.'

Rosita was vanishing down a corridor. The older woman, her mother, came forward. A large shawl draped her as completely as a dress.

To a servant she said, 'Manuel, tell Augusta to make ready the west bedroom.' To the stranger, 'I make you welcome to our house, señor.'

Doña Maria Martínez was a handsome woman in the early forties, tall and dignified, but with a face full of kindness.

Before showing Dennis to his room, Martínez offered the young man wine. The Californian had noticed that their guest was pale. He did not know it was from loss of blood. Nor did the American tell him. For if he took his coat off and showed the wound, his host would find bound over it the handkerchief of his daughter.

## CHAPTER III

### AN HONORED GUEST

FORTUNATELY ROSITA had had time to change into her nightdress before the young American had raised his shout for help. It had been necessary only to fling a cloak over the white gown and fly down to his rescue. The suspicions of her parents had not been aroused.

But Rosita was in a most unhappy frame of mind. The wives and daughters of the Californians were chaste and decorous. It was not proper for an unmarried girl to see a man alone, even when she was engaged to him. And she had flung aside all the teachings of a lifetime, all the traditions of her race and caste. Why? Why? Because a man had kindled in her a flame of romantic passion.

She had met this scion of the Bandini family, direct he said from Guadalajara, at a *baile* where she had been taken with her sisters by her mother. He danced divinely, she thought. In his eyes was imprisoned a fire of admiration for her. He was bold and dominant, in spite of his slender grace and his delicate beauty. Moreover, he had contrived to throw about himself an air of tantalizing mystery, to suggest without saying so that, though he called himself Juan Bandini, he was someone greater and more interesting. Her inflammable heart had warmed to him at once.

The swiftness of her response to his advances frightened her. When he had kissed her passionately behind a great palm, she had given herself without denial to his lips. When he had begged her, so eagerly, for a few minutes alone with her in the garden, she had reluctantly assented, though she knew how dangerous to her reputation this would be if discovered. It amazed her to remember how far passion had carried her. No man had ever kissed her before, yet in the garden she had put her cheek against his, unsolicited, forgetting her maidenly reserve. And her wicked embrace had been for the wrong man.

Yes, she must be wicked. There was no doubt about that. She could not now understand what had driven her to such lengths. That Juan Bandini was a splendid caballero of good Spanish blood she had had no doubt until his conduct in the garden this evening had shaken her confidence. She had put her reputation in his hands, almost proudly, because he was a gentleman to be trusted. Yet if what this runaway sailor said was true, he was nothing but

a murderous bandit, an outlaw with a price on his head, to be shot down as she had once seen one of the wild dogs of Monterey after it had gone mad.

She realized now that she had taken it for granted Juan Bandini was telling the truth when he dropped hints about the magnificence of the family estates in Spain, that because he had stirred her imagination she had been eager to believe he was all that was splendid and fine. When he had told her, in a burst of passionate adoration, that he could not live without seeing her alone if only for a few minutes, she had felt that great love had come into her life.

Now she knew she had been deceived, had known it from that moment under the cypress when evil had distorted his face and leaped like a wild beast out of his eyes. Something base and horrible in him had let itself be seen, and it had made her sick. Very likely the American was right and Bandini was Juan Castro. She shuddered to think what a danger she had escaped. A profound humiliation depressed her.

Good girls did not do what she had done. Always until now she had been obedient to instruction, modest and shy as became a maiden of Castilian blood. More than once her mother had pointed her out to her sisters as an example for them to follow. But at the whisper of this graceless ruffian she had disgraced the name of Martínez. If Doña Maria knew what she had done she would be soundly whipped, locked in her room for a week with nothing to eat but tortillas and frijoles, and afterward watched with suspicion. That was what she deserved, and it was what she would get if this Dennis Gifford let out one syllable too much.

But Dennis had no intention of betraying her secret. The wound in his arm was painful, and he would have liked better care taken of it than Rosita had been able to give in her haste. Yet he did not mention it lest the girl's handkerchief be discovered.

He was conducted to a bedroom furnished in plain mahogany bought from a trading ship. On the wall was a picture of the Virgin and Child. No carpet covered the floor. The bed was a dissenting note to the general simplicity. It was elaborate with lace and silk spreads embroidered with fine drawn work.

A small pile of silver on a table warmed his heart. He knew it was 'guest money,' to be used by him after he left. His host was too tactful to suggest he might be out of funds. The silver was there for him to take if he needed it.

The pain in his arm kept him awake for a time, but after an hour or two he fell into troubled sleep, during which he dreamed that Rosita and he were pursued by ruffians always on the verge of capturing them. Whenever the

leaders of the enemy got close, he made out the cruel, grinning faces of Duff Conway and Juan Castro.

The rays of the early sun streaming through his deep adobe window awakened him. Sounds of activity in the house came to him. He rose, washed his wound and bound it with a strip torn from his blouse, made himself presentable, and dressed.

A servant who said his name was Pedro led him to breakfast. The family was about to sit down. Martínez made the introductions simple.

‘Señora Martínez you have met. I introduce my sons, señor, Guillermo, Antonio, Ramon, Ignacio, and Vicente—my daughters, Maria, Luisa, Rosita, and Natividad. Children, this is Señor Geefford.’

The young people remained standing until their parents were seated and gave a signal to sit down. Dennis had never seen such a family. All of them looked alike, yet each was an individual. They ranged in age from about twenty-three to thirteen. The sons were all black-haired, slender, sinuous, and graceful; the daughters were brunettes, amazingly good-looking, with fine soft eyes and modest, retiring manners. The girls all had claims to beauty, but Dennis thought Rosita the pick.

Breakfast consisted of chocolate, *carne asada*<sup>[2]</sup> with rich gravy, eggs, and tortillas. The family life was a little formal, but it was plain to the guest that affection and good feeling abounded. There were sly jokes and gentle repartee, in which the younger ones took little part. After breakfast Ramon and his wife smoked cigarettes, but none of the sons joined them. It was a point of etiquette that they should not smoke in the presence of their parents.

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[2] *Carne asada*—meat broiled on a spit.

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The meal finished, Martínez led his guest to a small room he used as an office. The Californian put on his head a black silk kerchief, the four corners of which were knotted back of his neck. He was dressed in an embroidered shirt with a cravat of white jaconet, a blue damask vest, short breeches of crimson velvet, a bright green cloth jacket with large silver buttons, and shoes of elaborately embroidered deerskin. He belonged to the old school, and, though many of his friends were taking on a modified form of the American dress, Don Ramon preferred to stick to that of a Spanish caballero. On occasion he even had a sword hanging by his side.



Now he chose a gold-headed cane, one that had been the symbol of authority in the days when he had been alcalde of Monterey.

‘Let us go into the garden,’ he suggested.

With much tact he led the young man to a discussion of his prospects. Gifford said frankly that he had none. Probably he would go to the Sacramento gold-fields and try his luck there.

‘You came to California to seek your fortune in the diggings?’ the older man asked.

‘To seek my fortune. I had the diggings in mind. But I am not sure now that the best opportunities are there. When I was shanghaied, I had entered into a partnership with two other young men, one of whom I knew in the East, to set out for the gold-fields. We had bought an outfit. I put five hundred dollars into my share of it, but I suppose that has been lost long ago. That was three months ago. Events move fast in San Francisco. They are probably broke. I dare say they have become discouraged and gone home. Anyhow, my investment has gone. Yet I might as well go north where work can be had in plenty. But I must be careful not to get caught again by the crimps who took me before.’

‘Your ship left the harbor last night for San Diego. You are safe from being taken back. Nobody will annoy you now,’ the Californian assured him. ‘That is, if you slip away from here quietly.’

Dennis was not so certain of that. He had made an enemy in the garden last night, one who would stick at nothing. But he did not say so. Nevertheless, he conveyed to his host some information he thought he ought to have.

‘One of the men who joined the crimps in hunting me was a man who calls himself Juan Bandini, but I heard him boast that is not his real name,’ he mentioned. ‘From what he said I gather that he has a social entrée at Monterey. He laughed at those he has fooled. His real name is Juan Castro. He claims that as a bandit he is known from one end of California to another.’

‘*Madre de Dios!*’ cried Martínez in excitement. ‘Can this be true? The scoundrel even danced with one of my daughters.’

The young man knew he had said enough. It was possible Bandini had lied, that he was not Castro. But Dennis did not think so. The fellow’s jealousy of Murrieta had seemed too genuine to doubt. In any case Ramon Martínez would see that Bandini’s social career in Monterey would be closed unless the man could show unimpeachable references.

‘Castro is a cold-blooded murderer, the head of a band of ruffians who ride to and fro on plundering raids,’ the Californian went on. ‘He talks patriotism. California for the Californians. Death to the Yankees who are stealing our beautiful country. But such talk is only an excuse for his crimes. He is a villain and should be shot down like a wolf. As for this Bandini, I never liked him. Something about him, I don’t quite know what. He has never been inside my house, but I shall take steps to see he is not allowed to come to a *baile* again. Unless he can explain. If possible, I will have him arrested.’

‘He is a dangerous man,’ Dennis warned.

‘Perhaps.’ Martínez lifted his hands in a gesture of helplessness. ‘In the old days this country was a paradise. We had no theft, or very little, and no murder. Everybody was contented, even the poor. If one needed a bullock for food, he had but to ask a *ranchero* and help himself. Nobody had money. Nobody was hungry. We hunted the bear. That was sport. On saints’ days our horses raced. We went on what you call peek-neeks, all of us on horseback except the elderly ladies in *carretas*. Guitars strummed. We sang—we danced, the *jarabe*, the *zorrita*, the *contradance*. All was gay and happy. Then gold is discovered. *Yerba Buena* becomes a great city called San Francisco. It is filled with crime and vice. One hears of nothing but gold—gold—gold. *Por Dios*, I think it is the mother of evil. In that city alone there have been, I am told, hundreds of murders committed already, and only one scoundrel has paid for his wrongdoing. My own people used to be gentle and kindly. Most of them still are so. But hundreds have joined *Murrieta* and Castro and the other leaders of *banditti*. What is to be the end, my friend? Are the good old days to vanish forever?’

Dennis knew this was a true indictment. The coming of the Americans had brought a train of evils to a simple pastoral country. To the gold-fields had come from the States many parasites to prey upon the miners—gamblers, bummers, gunmen, and prostitutes. Many convicts and ex-convicts from Australia, known as ‘*Sydney ducks*,’ swelled the number of undesirables. Native Californians operated as *banditti* in the country, small towns, and mining camps.

A strange crisis in morals had developed, due perhaps to a clash of races and of ideas against a background filled with the temptation of wealth to be acquired by lawless practices. Men of previously good reputation joined hands with criminals.

From this carnival of crime induced by the lust for gold the *caballeros* of the ranches stood aloof. They remained, as they always had been, honorable

gentlemen whose word counted for as much as a bond. Already they were becoming victims of the sharp bargaining of the new era. The rancheros were idle, negligent, and improvident, and at the same time friendly, hospitable, and generous. The combination of vices and virtues was rapidly stripping them of their lands and their cattle.

Martínez smiled, shrugging aside his misgivings. 'But, *amigo mio*, it is of your affairs we must talk,' he said. 'A complaint has been lodged against me for harboring a runaway sailor. With your permission, I will send you to one of my haciendas, the Rancho San Pablo, where my majordomo will give you employment until such time as you wish to leave. Or, if you prefer, you may stay there as my guest. In Monterey the customs-house officials may make trouble for you. If you are not here, the matter will be dropped.'

'You are too good to me, señor,' Dennis said. 'I have no claim on you. I am only a runaway deckhand, yet you treat me like an honored guest.'

'Every guest of my house is an honored guest,' the Californian said simply.

'Then I gladly accept your offer of employment for the present, until I can decide what is best to do. *Muchísimas gracias*, señor.'

It was arranged that Gifford should not set out for the rancho until after dark, and that one of the Martínez lads should guide him there. During the day he caught glimpses of Doña Maria and the young ladies now and again. He passed a room where they were busy doing embroidery work. He saw them cutting roses in the garden, and late in the afternoon from back of the lace curtains of his window saw the girls there again. One of them was playing a guitar and another was dancing. There was much gaiety and laughter. Presently Rosita was called on to join her sister Luisa in the native dance, the *jarabe*. When she shook her head she was seized and dragged forward. She shrugged her shoulders in consent. Since Rosita was to do the man's part, Natividad ran into the house and brought an old sombrero belonging to one of her brothers.

Rosita put the sombrero rakishly on one side of her brilliant glossy hair. She faced her sister, hands behind her back, while Luisa looked modestly down as became the lady in the dance. They pirouetted. Rosita recited verses, holding out her hands in appeal. Luisa circled around her, and she in turn around Luisa. They danced, swiftly, their feet moving so rapidly the eyes back of the lace curtain could scarce follow the movements. Both of them were lovely in their dusky, vivid youth, so eagerly and passionately alive. But Dennis watched Rosita chiefly. He thought he had never seen such grace. She was slender and arrow-straight, like a dancing spirit, a daughter

of the dawn. Somehow she became an incarnation of joy. All the world was summer laughter.

Abruptly he turned from the window. This dance was not meant for him. He had no right to watch it.

Late in the afternoon a maid came to his room, ostensibly to fill his water carafe. Into his hand she unexpectedly thrust a slip of folded paper. Upon it was written one word, '*Gracias.*' There was no signature. It needed none.

Dennis hoped he might get a chance to say a few words to Rosita alone. He felt it was very likely not necessary to warn her against Bandini, but he could not be sure that she entirely believed the man was Castro. She might be persuaded to give him another hearing if he denied convincingly enough that he was the outlaw. This would not do at all. The fellow was dangerous as a tiger.

He did not, however, get a chance to see her either in private or public, unless the eyes that looked down on him from a lattice as he walked across the patio to say good-bye to his host and hostess belonged to Rosita and not to one of her sisters.

He was a good-looking young man, and Doña Maria believed him an honest one. As she parted with him she said she hoped God and the saints would lead him safely by the hand.

A momentary mist of tears blinded him. They had been so good to him, these gentle Californians, for no reason at all that he could see except their native kindness of heart.

'I would like to tell you, Doña Maria,' he said impulsively, 'that I come of a good Maryland family which has lived on the same place since colonial days.'

'I do not doubt it,' she replied, smiling at him. 'I use my eyes. I see you are well taught.'

'My grandfather was an officer in the Revolutionary War, my father a colonel in the War of 1812, though he was a very young man at the time. I would like you to be sure your hospitality is not wasted on a scalawag.'

'But we are already sure of that,' Ramon Martínez said simply.

Antonio had been deputed by his father to take Dennis to the rancho. As on the previous night scudding clouds raced in front of the moon most of the time. This was just as well, Dennis felt. There was a chance that Juan Castro might be lurking in the vicinity. The darker the night the better.

They slipped out of a back gate and followed a path for a hundred yards. Here they found a peon with two saddled horses.

## CHAPTER IV

### FELIPE MAKES HIS BOW

ANTONIO had something on his mind and before they had ridden half a mile he plumped at it.

‘My sister Rosita wishes me to thank you, señor, for not betraying her secret to our parents,’ he said. ‘She was very foolish, but she is a good girl.’

‘I’m sure of it,’ Dennis said at once.

‘She did wrong in going out to the garden to meet Juan Bandini. He persuaded her against her judgment. It will not occur again.’

‘You know all about what took place, then?’

‘Yes. Rosita and I are very close. She went to meet this young man and you were there instead. Then he came too.’

‘Bandini told me he is Juan Castro the bandit. He it was who fired at me while I hammered on your door. The fellow will stick at nothing. I believe your sister is in danger unless you watch her closely. I am troubled.’

Antonio drew up his slender figure. ‘He would not dare lift a hand to a daughter of the house of Martínez,’ he said proudly. ‘If he did we would shoot him down like a wolf.’

‘True enough, if you could find him. But isn’t it true, too, that his life is forfeit a dozen times? If they could get at him a hundred men would shoot him down. He might think that since he is already condemned another count against him would not matter.’

‘It would matter if he touched my sister,’ the young Californian said stiffly. ‘He will not stay in Monterey, if he has not already gone. My father will drive him out or land him in the cuartel.’

They could hear the distant murmur of the sea. It followed them up the long hill they were climbing and mingled with the sough of the Monterey pines. The night was peaceful as old age.

They rounded a bend in the trail. A buck with branching antlers stood in the path, not fifty feet distant, shiny eyes staring at them. A moment later the deer went crashing through the underbrush.

A fog began to roll up from the ocean, grew heavier minute by minute. It came in battalions, as if sweeping to the attack. There were times when it

became a thin scarf of mist, then presently they would come to a draw where the damp white billows marched in mass isolating them completely. Though they rode close, their eyes made each other out only as vague vanishing shadows.

From the fog a voice sounded, ghostlike. Instantly the riders halted. They listened, heard a murmur of words and the jingle of a bit. Men were approaching.

Antonio caught Gifford's horse by the bridle and led the way from the path into the brush. A rockrim barred progress. The two men stopped. The sounds of travelers moving through the pass came to them—the hoof of a horse striking a stone, the scraping of a tapadera against brush, an exasperated voice raised in irritation, '*Caramba!* This fog was spewed from hell.'

In another moment or two the hidden men would have been safe, but the roan Dennis was riding betrayed them. The American saw what was coming, in time to know what that lift of the head meant, but not in time to prevent it. The horse nickered.

From the trail came a sharp summons, '*Quién es?*'

Neither of the men answered.

In Spanish a voice ordered them to come out of the brush.

Young Martínez and Gifford looked at each other.

'Better answer,' the latter said.

'Who are you? What do you want?' Antonio asked.

'Never mind who we are or what we want. Come out of there and let's have a look at you.'

Dennis eased out of its holster the revolver he had bought from Guillermo Martínez a few hours earlier. To Antonio he said, 'You'd better surrender, for even if it's the Castro gang they won't hurt you.'

'What about you?'

The voice of the Anglo-Saxon was cold and hard. 'If they want me they can come and get me.'

'I stay with you,' Antonio said quietly. 'My father put you under my protection. He will expect me to see you reach the rancho.'

'Chances are these men are harmless travelers, but they may not be. I have no claim on you. My quarrel is not yours. Better go and find out who they are.'

‘We’ll find out from here—soon,’ the Californian replied. ‘They’re coming after us.’

To them came the sound of a twig snapping. Someone was moving through the brush. In the fog a form took shape vaguely.

‘Until we know your business you’re near enough,’ Gifford warned harshly. ‘Both of us are armed.’

‘Wait a minute. I ask you who you are. Is there any harm in that?’

‘No harm. We are riding to Salinas on business,’ the native answered. ‘Antonio Martínez and a friend. Now we ask who you are and why you molest us?’

Three other shadowy forms had appeared out of the white mist. One of these moved nearer to the first man.

‘These are not the ones we have been posted to get, Felipe,’ the newcomer said. ‘Not if the boy speaks truth. We will take a better look and move on.’

Dennis held his revolver against the hip, forearm lifted. ‘A cat may look at a king, but not too closely,’ he said grimly. ‘Do your looking, my friend, and move on. We are in a hurry.’

The man who had been called Felipe lounged forward. He was a raffish young Mexican in clothes of many colors. A scar on one cheek showed where a knife had ripped its way from ear almost to mouth. He glanced at Antonio, but his eyes came to rest on the American.

They were smiling eyes, but none the less keen ones. ‘My first look at a king,’ he said gaily, not paying the least attention to the revolver that menaced him. ‘My curiosity—you will pardon it, your majesty—if I ask the name—in order that my grandchildren may boast of it?’

His manner was full of ironic grace and deference.

‘Gifford—if that means anything to you.’

‘Not much, since I am only a poor rider of the plains.’ The laughter died out of the olive face. In place of it was a sharp intentness. ‘Oh, ho! We have met before, I think, when you were in even more of a hurry.’

‘Yes,’ Dennis said quietly. ‘And when it was in your mind to stop me, as it seems to be now.’

He had recognized Felipe at once as the man who had been with Juan Castro when he had dodged past them on Alvarado Street.

‘But this is a horse of another color, as you Yankees say,’ Felipe murmured, his eyes dancing. ‘As a law-abiding citizen, your majesty, I ask a



question. I ask it of Felipe Pacheco. "What is your duty?" I say to him. A runaway sailor! Ought I to take him back to his ship?"

'Which is now halfway to San Diego?' Dennis interpolated.

'But the alcalde—what you call mayor—has an order to hold you until the return of the ship.'

'How many men have you here?'

'There are four of us.'

'Not enough. Antonio, by the way, is not in this.'

'So? You are a lone wolf. And you think four to one is not enough. You carry a high heart, King Geef-ford the First.'

'I carry also a Colt's revolver, and I am an expert shot,' Dennis said coolly. 'To be sure, the luck might break against me. I might kill only three of you before you got me down. I ask a question too, Señor Felipe Pacheco. Is it worth it? Ten dollars is ten dollars. But after all you could not take it with you to hell, where the first little crook of my forefinger would send you so swiftly.'

'A good argument, if the conclusion is true.'

'One which you will have to take on faith.'

'There is another little matter. My friend Juan Bandini has a grievance against you. I think he would like to see you for a few minutes. Just a friendly gossip. You would perhaps like to take a *pasear* with us to meet him again.' Felipe showed his white teeth in a satiric grin.

'I think not,' Gifford replied hardily. 'Let him wait. He is a bungler. When he tried to sheathe a knife in my body, he could not do it. Five or six times he sent bullets at me without a hit. Give him time to sharpen his knife and to practice shooting. I have known fifteen-year-old boys who could do better.'

Felipe laughed. 'I will tell him, and he will not like it. He will swear to cut your heart out and very likely do it. You do not know our little captain. Juan is a good shot. None better. It was dark when he sent his leaden messages at you. Next time—another story.'

'You on the right, keep back,' Dennis warned. 'If you slip forward one step more I'll start the fireworks.'

'Our cockerel crows loud, José,' jeered Felipe. 'I am wondering how deep his spurs bite.'

'This man is my father's guest,' Antonio cut in. 'If you attack him, you attack me.'

‘Brava!’ Felipe cried. ‘That is the spirit. Go your way, both of you. Tonight we have bigger fish on the fire. But I will carry King Geef-ford’s message to Juan, and he will remember it. *Hasta la vista.*’

Dennis did not answer. Eyes and mind were both busy watching Felipe and his companions. Was this farewell a trick to get him at advantage?

Antonio bowed. ‘*Adios, señor,*’ he said with dignity.

Felipe turned negligently away. As he vanished in the fog he sang, in a pleasant voice, with a refined Castilian accent, an old song. The words drifted back to the men he was leaving.

*‘Adios, adios, para siempre—adios.’*

Antonio drew a deep breath of relief. ‘They’ve gone,’ he said.

‘Looks like it,’ the American agreed.

‘They’re after the convoy from the customs-house. I heard it was going north tonight—to my Uncle Guillermo, in payment for cattle.’

‘Then we’ll have to circle round them and get back to Monterey to warn the officers.’

‘Yes—if we can.’ Antonio added: ‘The fog may hide us while we slip past.’

They did not return to the path, but kept in the woods well to the north. Antonio knew every foot of the ground and he led the way swiftly as he could, winding in and out among the pines as they descended toward the town.

For long they rode in silence, not knowing how near they might be to the enemy. It was not until the roar of the surf below them was plain that Dennis made a comment.

‘This Felipe is one of Castro’s men?’

‘His chief lieutenant.’

‘He talks and carries himself like a man of birth.’

‘He comes of a good family and was well educated. But he has always been in trouble, even from a boy, so wild and uncontrolled he is. When he was seventeen he killed two men in a gambling-house. Forced to take to the hills, he has been a bandit ever since. Not even Juan Castro is more desperate than he.’ Abruptly he drew up his horse. ‘Listen!’

To them there came the clip-clop of rapid hoofs. A Mexican dashed past at a gallop.

The two young men looked at each other.

‘Juan Castro’s messenger,’ Dennis guessed.

The other nodded. ‘To tell him the gold shipment has started.’

## CHAPTER V

### THE BATTLE IN THE ROCKS

THE customs-house was dark when Dennis and Antonio reached it. An old fisherman told them that a wagon escorted by six soldiers had left there not ten minutes earlier.

The young men consulted hurriedly. It was decided that Antonio should ride up to the Presidio and get help from the commandant while Dennis followed the convoy to warn of an impending attack.

‘If we’re lucky we’ll not only save the convoy but smash Castro’s gang,’ Gifford said. ‘Tell the officer in charge he’ll have to stir his stumps. Time is everything. As soon as the wagon gets into the hills, Castro will strike.’

The messenger of the bandits had taken a short cut to his chief through the hills, but Dennis followed the road taken by the convoy. It led through sand dunes parallel to the shore of the bay, and after a half-mile turned sharply to the right directly away from the sea. A rifle-shot beyond the turn the road forked.

Dennis had been traveling at a canter, but he pulled up abruptly at the fork. Should he take the northern or the southern branch? He swung from the saddle and tried to decide by the tracks which way the wagon had gone, but the ground was stony and he could not be sure. At a venture he tried the left fork.

Presently he began to think he had chosen wrong. The road stuck to the lowlands and skirted the dunes. Moreover, it was fading out to a path. He turned and rode back. Before he struck the fork again, he knew that he had wasted nearly half an hour.

The right branch soon began to wind up into the hills. He kept his horse at a fast gait. If he could arrive in time he could stop and perhaps turn back the convoy. Later, the reinforcements might ambush the ambushers.

Once he stopped for a moment to listen. He heard, he thought, the faint creaking of wheels in front of him. At once he gave his horse the spur.

The crack of a rifle sounded. Before the echo had died away there was a volley. A voice cried exultantly, ‘Viva Castro!’ Dennis heard shouts, oaths, a scream, the stamping of horses. There were more shots. His galloping horse had carried him into the thick of it.

The attack had been made while the wagon was in a narrow cut and could not be turned. Horses and troopers were jammed together in a huddle. From the rocks above the banditti were firing down upon the mass. The sergeant in charge, a veteran of the Mexican War, was swearing a vitriolic streak as he tried to hold his men and their mounts steady. One of the soldiers was leaning laxly against a wagon wheel. He had evidently been hit. The left wheeler was down and the other horses in harness were kicking wildly.

‘Help’s coming!’ Dennis shouted to the sergeant. ‘You can’t stay here. We’d better charge this rock slope to the left.’

The sergeant glanced at him. The non-commissioned officer did not ask him who he was or from where he had come. The advice was good. If they stayed huddled here, the outlaws would shoot them down to the last man as he had seen buffalo hunters do with a milling herd. He knew, too, that in another moment his men would break and run for it, in which case it would be devil take the hindmost.

‘This way!’ he yelled. ‘Up the hill here. Come on.’

The sergeant swung from his horse and made for the rocks. Dennis was at his heels. One of the troopers turned and bolted through the cut in the direction from which they had come. The others dismounted and swarmed up the stiff, rocky hill.

Dennis heard the whine of bullets as he clambered up, but he knew that in the fog the shooting must be wild. A flash came from the boulders just above him. Dennis did not stop. Safety lay in getting to that rockrim as soon as possible. He did not even take time to return the fire.

Out of the rocks a man scrambled hurriedly with a startled Spanish oath. In his last rush upward Dennis caromed into the outlaw. The man turned, to swing at him with the long barrel of his gun, but as he did so his foot twisted on a rock and he plunged down upon the American. Even before the fingers of Dennis closed upon the fellow’s great muscles he knew that the man was a giant. The Mexican towered above him. The wide heavy shoulders were like iron to the touch. When the immense arms grappled Dennis close, in a bearlike hug that drove the breath from his body, the boy knew he was lost unless his wits could save him.

He did not try to resist the terrible pressure on his body. Instead, he created a diversion. Drawing up both his feet back of the legs of his foe, he drove home the cruel Spanish spurs and roweled the man’s calves from knee to ankle.

The giant roared out a furious oath of pain and tore Gifford from his body. For an instant the two glared at each other. Dennis knew that the Hercules was gathering himself for another plunge at him. He saw something else, too, of which the bandit was not aware. The big man was standing on the very edge of the rockrim. If he should move one foot back a few inches he would plunge down.

Dennis did not wait for the attack. He dived, shoulder first, with all the force of his strong young body, straight at the stomach of his opponent. The shock of the attack staggered the Mexican. He stepped back, not to lose his balance, and crashed down the hill like a log, rolling over and over as he gathered momentum.

Young Gifford's struggle with the giant had lasted scarcely ten seconds. Yet during that space of time the battle for the gold shipment had taken a new turn. Having driven away the escort, the bandits had all swarmed down to the wagon, intent on taking possession of the treasure. But the soldiers were in the rocks above the cut now. It was their turn to fire down upon the huddle of moving figures below. Before Dennis got into action with his Colt's, he counted four flashes of light from the rocks.

One of the outlaws cried that he was hit.

The fog had thinned. Dennis could see a dozen men crowded around the wagon. One was standing in its bed swinging an axe. He was cutting at the lock of the trunk which held the gold.

From where Dennis sat crouched behind a rock it was a long shot with a revolver for accuracy. He rested the barrel of the weapon on a boulder, took careful aim, and fired. The man stopped chopping. He stood stupidly for a moment, as though he did not know what to do. Then the axe-haft slipped from his fingers and he sat heavily down.

Those in the rocks could almost see the wave of dismay that swept through the outlaws. They drew back from the wagon, uncertain what to do.

Lightly a graceful figure leaped into the wagon and seized the axe. Dennis recognized it as that of Castro's lieutenant, Felipe. A moment later he saw someone on horseback who reminded him of the man who had surprised him in the garden. He took a shot at the rider and missed.

The clatter of horses' hoofs came to him, carried by the wind. Troopers poured into the cut, an officer at their head. Dennis stood up and gave a yell of triumph.

Already the bandits were scuttling away, swinging to their saddles as the horses jumped to a gallop. Felipe leaped from the wagon-bed to the back of

a horse upon which another man was mounted. Bullets sang after the outlaws as they fled for their lives. One man dropped from a saddle. Two others were caught before they could reach horses. Troopers dashed through the cut in pursuit of the banditti.

Antonio caught Dennis by the hand as he came out from the rocks.

‘Viva King Geef-ford!’ he cried with an excited laugh. ‘You were in time, *amigo*.’

‘Just,’ replied Dennis. ‘I took the wrong road. The attack had begun before I reached here. The banditti were in the rocks above the road. We drove them out. They thought we were running away and they flocked down to the wagon. We fired from the rocks. Then you got here.’

Lieutenant Rogers, recently of West Point, was in a glow of delight. This was his first command in active service under fire, and he had pulled it off successfully. It was difficult for him to keep his boyish enthusiasm from breaking through the crust of curt brusquerie he had been taught at the Academy.

He counted casualties. Two of the troopers had been wounded, one seriously, the other in the hand. The banditti had been treated more roughly. The man shot from the saddle during the retreat was dead. At least one of those who had escaped was hit. A third was badly hurt, the fellow whom Dennis had brought down in the wagon. Two others were captives.

Not since Castro had begun his savage career of outlawry had such a blow been struck at him. It was not so much that his band was depleted. He could get plenty more men. But the prestige of his infamy, the legend of success and invulnerability he had built up, would be shaken by the defeat just inflicted.

Rogers told Sergeant Brunton gruffly that he had done well to take to the hill instead of trying to defend the wagon from the cut. He acknowledged graciously his debt to Antonio and Dennis.

The wounded men were put in the wagon and the cavalcade headed for Monterey. The lieutenant had decided it would be better to return with the convoy and let his superior officer determine whether it should be sent out again at once.

Antonio and Dennis rode with him in the van. He asked questions of Gifford, many of them, in order to get full information for his report. This brought out the story of the personal encounter between Dennis and the giant.

‘That must have been Pedro Soto,’ Antonio said. ‘Never was such a man for bull strength, if what they say is true. He can crush a heavy horseshoe in the palm of his hand. Pedro is of mixed Indian and Mexican blood, cruel as a wolf, devoid of fear. I saw him once at a fiesta. He stands six foot three and weighs two hundred and thirty pounds. On a wager he lifted a horse from the ground that day. You escaped, señor, by a miracle. *Madre de Dios*, they say he can kill a bullock with one blow of his fist.’

‘His muscles are like steel,’ Dennis replied. ‘When he crushed the breath out of me I knew I was gone. My spurs saved me.’

‘And your wits,’ the officer added.

The two civilians rode to the Presidio and told their story to the commandant, after which they descended the hill and turned up from Pacific Street past the soldiers’ theater which had been built by Jack Swan for a sailors’ boarding-house and saloon.

‘We’re going to my home,’ Antonio explained. ‘I must tell my father what has occurred. It is for him to say whether we go on tonight or wait until Castro and his men are out of the hills through which we must pass.’

Ramon Martínez decided immediately, as soon as he had heard the story of the young men, to postpone their journey until it would be safer.



## CHAPTER VI

### RAMON MARTINEZ IS AFFRONTED

FROM the window of his bedroom Dennis looked out upon a night at last clear of fog. A moon rode the heavens, and the waters of the bay had become a great pool of silver. The flying foam of the beating surf, by which the eye could trace the shoreline in an irregular semicircle, reminded the young man once more of the lace edge of a woman's billowing skirt.

To his mind there jumped a picture of Rosita pirouetting in the *jarabe*, a dusky, vivid sprite of grace, saucy and gay, the quenched laughter in her lovely face breaking through the decorous restraint of the lovesick cavalier she was mimicking. Something strange had happened to him as he watched her. He didn't know how to put it into words. It was as though his heart had turned over and left him weak. When he thought of her now, it was with a curious feeling that he was no longer the boy who had run away from the brig upon which he had been beaten and knocked about by brutal seamen. A chemical change had taken place in him. He was a man. The blinding revelation came to him that he was a man in love.

The booming of the breakers in that night of surpassing loveliness beat time to the billows that began to march through his blood. This was his birthday as a man. He had come into his inheritance. It would be for him Rosita, or no other woman under heaven.

Why not? He was young and strong. This was his world—this California so rich in promise—if he had the courage and the wisdom to take it. He knew that many Englishmen had married the daughters of the best families in California. The caballeros had pride of race, but they recognized and accepted the energy of the Anglo-Saxon. Some of these maidens of pure Castilian blood had wedded Americans. He had only to prove his worth—to Rosita and to her family. In that lifted moment of high resolve this seemed an easy thing.

He turned from the window at last and undressed. He bathed his wounded arm and tied another handkerchief around it, using his teeth to help him draw the knot tight. The dainty little bit of linen fringed with lace that Rosita had bound over the hurt he had safely tucked away with her one-word message in the pocket of his belt. They were souvenirs he intended

never to lose. Some day he would show them to her, if the great happiness came into his life, and they would smile at them together tenderly.

Dennis came of religious people. It was customary for the men, after they had passed through the hot, unlicensed adventures of youth, to 'become converted,' to join the church, and to live sedate and godly lives. That he would some day, in due time, follow the same path, Dennis had taken for granted. But not yet. There was so much to see and do in the world, so much throbbing life to be experienced, and the theological doctrines he knew all insisted that the pleasures of the world were dross and should be given up for the sake of immortal life after the weary woes and pains of earthly existence had been endured.

It was a puzzling business, because the world seemed to Dennis such a beautiful and delightful place. Tonight it filled him with emotions he might have thought religious if he had not been taught better. God had saved him from great danger, had brought him back to this haven of rest and love. Thankfulness flowed through his being, yet somehow it was all mixed up with thoughts of Rosita.

With so much to think about he did not expect to sleep for a long time, but his head had scarcely fitted into the pillow before his eyes had closed. He did not wake until morning.

At breakfast he saw Rosita. The rest of the family were there, and he saw them too. His words and his casual attention were for them, but all the deeper current of his thoughts flowed toward her. Once she lifted her soft dark eyes and looked at him, then the long curling lashes dropped to the olive cheeks demurely. But that long deep look sent a tingling excitement throbbing through him.

Breakfast and his cigarette finished, Ramon Martínez called his three older sons and Dennis into the garden with him. He drew from a pocket a letter which had been sent him by messenger and had arrived just before they had sat down to eat.

The tall, strong, broad-shouldered Californian looked round upon his slender sons and the guest of his household.

'I have here an insulting message,' he said. 'It is signed, "Juan Bandini, alias Juan Castro." To you, my sons, I read it because it is well you be on your guard against an impudent and murderous ruffian. To you, Señor Geeford, I read it because there is in it a reference to you it would be well for you to hear.'

There was a stir of interest among the young men, but none of them spoke. This was an absorbing business. What could this bandit Castro have to write about to Ramon Martínez, a caballero of California, honored by all who knew him?

‘For the benefit of our guest I translate as I go,’ Martínez continued. ‘This is the letter’:

Esteemed Señor, as one gentleman to another, I desire your friendship and regard. I have the honor to ask you for the hand of your daughter Rosita in marriage. For that young señorita I hold much love in my heart, and what Juan Castro wants he gets. As you know, I am engaged in a patriotic campaign to free our beloved country from the conqueror. Viva California! Viva Castro! Viva Martínez! To that end I give my life and my fortune. As one honorable caballero to another I offer myself as a suitor.

It is with much regret I learn you have harbored as a guest a scoundrelly American whom I intend to kill at the earliest opportunity. He is in my way. I shall sweep him into oblivion. The man is doomed.

As friends and relatives Juan Castro and Ramon Martínez can work to great mutual advantage. In alliance with you I would refuse to assist that vile American Benjamin Shanks to despoil you. Instead of driving the cattle from your ranches I would protect you from any thieving robbers who might wish to raid them. Together we would be invincible. *Dios guarde a Vd. muchos años.*

*Su servidor y amigo,*<sup>[3]</sup>

JUAN BANDINI, *alias* JUAN CASTRO

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[3] God preserve you many years. Your servant and friend.

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Ramon Martínez read the letter slowly, searching for the correct English words of translation as he went. Once he stopped, to clench his teeth, a fire of anger burning in his cheeks at the presumption of the bandit, but presently conquered his rage and continued to the finish.

‘To read such a letter shames me,’ he said, and tore the paper into shreds. ‘But I wish you, my sons, to let the memory of his infamous threats and pretensions remain in your minds. Therefore, I have read what he has written. His assumptions of equality are more intolerable than his threats. To

your sisters, not a word of this. Your mother already knows. You are to remember that he is dangerous, and you are to watch well the safety of your sisters.'

To this the young men pledged themselves.

'It's a strange letter,' Dennis commented. 'He is full of flourishes and courtesy, and then the threats break through. It is not all of a piece, somehow.'

Guillermo made a guess. 'Might it not be this way? He is not educated, and he asks Felipe Pacheco to write the letter. But he can't let Felipe alone. He has to crowd his threats in along with the compliments.'

'Perhaps,' his father assented. 'It does not matter. You have heard what he says. It is our duty to help trap the wolf and put an end to the menace of him. For you, young man, look well to your life. I advise you, *amigo mio*, to travel far from here, where this scoundrel's vengeance cannot reach you. You mentioned once the gold camps. There you might be safe.' The last sentences of the caballero were addressed to the guest.

'Does one run away from a mad dog? Or does one shoot it?' Dennis asked. 'This Castro makes a great gesture, as though he were God, but he is only an outlaw with a price on his head. He cannot doom me to death when he pleases. When his time comes he'll be rubbed out. After the grass is thick on his forgotten grave I may live many years.'

'That is true,' replied Martínez gravely. 'But one must not be rash. You have heard the stories they tell about him—that some of your countrymen flogged him with a rawhide whip for stealing a horse at one of the gold camps? I do not know whether it is as they say. The tale is that the five men who whipped him have died, swiftly and violently, by the knife or by the bullet, all within two or three years. Castro swore to be revenged, and he paid his debt in full.'

'So the legend has grown that Juan Castro is invincible,' Dennis said, with a smile. 'But is he? I am just a boy, a runaway from a ship officered by crimps who shanghaied me. Castro slashed me with a knife. He shot at me when I was unarmed. Antonio and I faced four of his band and they drew back without attacking. We spoiled his coup to get the gold convoy. I have been in battle with him and his men, and by the grace of God came out unhurt. He is dangerous—yes. As the mad dog I spoke of is dangerous, until it has been shot down. I think I shall not run away yet.'

The caballero answered the young man's smile understandingly. He respected that valiant defiance, but doubted greatly its wisdom.

‘You are one. He and his band are many. They have spies among the vaqueros. Information is carried to them by these worthless allies. The bandits ride by night. No warning comes to the victim, until——’

Martínez did not finish his sentence. He lifted his hands, with an expressive shrug of the shoulders.

‘Yet I shall stay,’ Dennis said quietly.

‘Then God keep you safe.’

Young Ramon asked a question. ‘Is it something you do not wish us to inquire about, my father—what he means when he writes of this Benjamin Shanks?’

Ramon, senior, hesitated, apparently to select his words with care. ‘I do not know exactly, my son,’ he made reply. ‘Señor Shanks is a man of increasing substance. He owns warehouses and ferry-boats in San Francisco, and a line of boats along the coast, as you well know. I have had many dealings with him. At present he holds notes of mine against my ranchos. But it is not reasonable such a man would be in alliance with a ruffian like Castro. No, that I cannot believe.’

Yet his denial did not carry a note of conviction. There was doubt in his troubled voice. Dennis Gifford guessed that already Martínez had endured bad moments because he was financially involved with Shanks. The *Mary Bligh* was one of the Ben Shanks line, and all the sailors upon it had cursed the owner for a scoundrel and a skinflint.

Was this, Dennis asked himself, a repetition of the same story that had been enacted in California many times—the fleecing of a Californian gentleman by an unscrupulous American? To him it was a sordid and a wretched business, one that made him ashamed of his countrymen. On the one side a trusting caballero, improvident in the management of his almost feudal estates, in temporary need of money, a man quite unfitted to cope with chicanery on the part of those whose good faith he did not doubt; on the other a shrewd Yankee on the make, untroubled by principle, who had tightly tied up the simple native with legal formalities the latter did not comprehend. The sense of honor of the Californian had probably proved a liability, for no doubt he had scorned to examine too closely the papers he had signed. It would be like doubting the word of the friend with whom he was engaged in a friendly transaction.

The result of the American influx was becoming apparent all over the ranch country of California. Already many of the haciendas, held in large tracts granted by the Spanish, and later the Mexican, Government, were

passing from the hands of the owners to alien ones. The big estates were being broken up. Work could no longer be found by the vaqueros. From the ranks of these daring young riders such bandits as Murrieta and Armijo and Castro recruited their ranks. The carefree pastoral life of the old days, so simple and innocent, so full of kindness and happiness, was being destroyed by the greed for gold which was infecting all classes.

During the day Dennis thought many times of the letter from the bandit which had so affronted his host. The effrontery of it did not surprise him. The conceit and self-esteem of Castro were almost beyond belief. What his mind returned to was the reference to Shanks. The writer must have meant that he was in collusion with the American money-lender to ruin Martínez by running off herds of the ranchero's cattle. Possibly Shanks bought the cattle from the rustler. In any case the object was clear enough. Shanks wanted to impoverish Ramon Martínez to such an extent that he could not pay his debt to him. His intention must be to foreclose on the valuable ranch properties as soon as the law allowed.

Dennis went with the sons of Ramon Martínez to assist in a drive of cattle from one feeding-ground to another. When they returned, the family had already eaten supper and the young men ate alone. The American did not see Rosita again, but he was quite sure he heard her voice. She was in her room singing a hymn in a fresh clear contralto which held him motionless while he listened. That one of her sisters could sing like that he did not believe. For the thrill of it warmed him through and through.

*'Reine, Jesus, por siempre  
Reine su corazon;  
En nuestra patria, en nuestro suelo,  
Que es de Maria la nacion.  
En nuestra patria, en nuestro suelo,  
Que es de Maria la nacion.'*

He was a boy, filled with reverent adoration for this young angel to whom he had given his heart. When she sang, so naïvely religious, so innocently sure, he felt her song would rise straight to the throne of God.

## CHAPTER VII

### THE GUEST GOES NORTH

WITH the coming of night Dennis found time for reflection. He got another angle on his decision not to run away from Juan Castro's vengeance. If he stayed on one of the ranchos of Ramon Martínez, the bandit would include the Californian in his anger, and in raids would sweep away many of his cattle. Moreover, in San Francisco Dennis might be able to discover and in some way frustrate the plans of Benjamin Shanks to ruin the caballero. How he could do this was not clear to the young man. A problem in the distance, one not yet clearly envisaged, can be solved in fancy much more easily than a concrete one close at hand.

Dennis went to his host to explain his change of mind.

'You are right,' Martínez told him after he had mentioned his intention. 'It is much better for you to get far from Castro. In the newspaper account of the saving of the convoy, the writer makes it clear that you were responsible for the defeat of the banditti. Antonio's name is not mentioned. The ruffian will not stop until he has murdered you.'

Diffidently Dennis suggested his purpose of checking up on Shanks, if his host did not feel that would be taking a liberty. Martínez frowned, not in anger but in perplexity. He felt it was not becoming for him, a caballero of California, to spy upon one with whom he had business dealings. Yet he had seen several of his friends ruined by unscrupulous Americans who held liens upon their land. Unpleasant rumors about Shanks had come to him. If the man had designs upon his estates, it would be well to know it.

'That will be as you please, *amigo mio*,' he said. 'I do not see what you could find out, if indeed there is anything not honorable in the mind of Señor Shanks. Nor could I ask you to spy upon him. Yet—unless Castro lied outright in his letter——'

'Which is not reasonable. How would he know that Shanks had lent you money? I have heard strange tales of the dealings of Ben Shanks. In the fo'c'sle of the *Mary Bligh* men whispered that he had sunk his own ships, that he had hired Australian convicts to murder men for him. I think he'll bear watching. I am young, and know far less about such things than you do, but——'

'Go on,' Martínez said, when he hesitated.

‘Would it not be well, as soon as possible to—terminate your business dealings with him?’

The Californian smiled, a little grimly. ‘That would be well, no doubt, if possible.’ He went on, to make clear his position: ‘We rancheros are easy-going—not good managers. When we wanted money we used to borrow it. No note—no papers signed. The word of one gentleman to another. That was enough. Now it is different. We sign papers. Somehow, with the change in our world, we need more money. So we become involved. A note falls due. We pay it by signing over more of our land, to be redeemed later. At last we find ourselves in a tangle from which it is difficult to escape.’

‘And Mr. Shanks is always ready to lend you more?’

‘Always—if I will only sign another little paper. It is such an easy way out.’

‘Except that you do not get out,’ Dennis added.

‘For the moment at least we do—and tomorrow—tomorrow is another day.’

‘Has it not usually been a sad day for your friends?’

‘Alas, yes! But with the price of cattle good I can yet in one or two seasons clear myself.’

‘Which is what Mr. Shanks does not want,’ Dennis said. ‘So he makes a little deal with Juan Castro to raid your range and run off your stock.’

‘That is possible. I do not think it proved,’ the ranchero replied.

‘Mr. Shanks has never pressed you for payment?’

‘Never. He has been very courteous and always says to take my time, that there is no hurry.’

‘Yet he has the reputation of being a Shylock who always gets his pound of flesh. Strange—isn’t it?—unless he prefers you shouldn’t pay.’

The caballero of California did not like to face squarely unpleasant facts. It was more pleasant to hope for the best. Now Martínez said, with dignity, he thought it better not to discuss that. Instead, he took up the matter of getting his guest to San Francisco. There was a schooner in the harbor about to sail for that city. He would arrange to have the captain take him as a passenger. The man in command was a friend of his, one with whom he had had many dealings, and the young man would be quite safe with him.

The arrangements were made. Captain Jasper Brown said he would be glad to take a passenger to San Francisco on the *Hope Allen*, especially one recommended by Martínez.



Dennis left with great reluctance these kind friends who had taken him in, a stranger and a fugitive, to the generous hospitality of their home. Their simple unworldliness was beautiful because good hearts lay back of it. His regret at going was much increased because of the soft-eyed girl with whom he had fallen in love. He did not know when he would see her again, if ever. He could not tell her a word of the love speeches that marched through his mind, nor could he speak of it to her parents, since he had nothing to offer as a recommendation of himself in the rôle of a suitor for their daughter's hand. Moreover, Juan Castro's passion for the girl troubled him. He remembered the line in the letter: *What Juan Castro wants he gets.* It was a boast, of course, but that did not prove that it was an empty one. The bandit was dangerous, because he was ruthless as a wolf. He would stop at nothing. It was not likely that Felipe Pacheco would approve of any injury to a daughter of Ramon Martínez, one of his own countrymen held in high esteem throughout the countryside. Many of Castro's men might resent such a step, but there were others of the gang who would support him in any crime, no matter how ill-advised or how heinous.

Dennis did not even get a chance to say good-bye to Rosita, but for one moment—as she and her sisters filed out of the dining-room behind their father and mother—her deep lustrous eyes rested in his. A sudden pulse drummed in his throat. He knew he would come back some day to try his luck.

## CHAPTER VIII

### THE CITY OF GOLDEN DREAMS

THE *Hope Allen* beat through the Golden Gate to the harbor where lay the city that had become a magnet for all the restless souls of the world. The bay was filled with boats of all kinds—barges, gigs, whaleboats, dinghies, ferries, sloops, brigs, schooners, and the new clipper ships. All of them were engaged in supplying the needs of the swarm of men working at the diggings or living in the cities that had sprung up with the gold rush.

The trade winds of the Pacific whipped through the Heads. The promontories were bare and brown, as were also the sand hills of San Francisco. Alcatraz stood out like a Gibraltar, and as the ship rounded the jutting point of Telegraph Hill the pier could be seen extending over the shallow water.

In miniature the scene on and about the wharf epitomized the young and energetic community. Everywhere were youth and gaiety, a cheerful democracy, an air already cosmopolitan. There could be seen men in light trousers and Prince Albert coats, Mexicans with bright-colored serapes flung across their shoulders, merchants in shovel beards and wide hats, Chinese in queues and Kanakas wearing earrings, and women in rich lace shawls and flaring skirts. One lad, fresh from college, was selling New York newspapers in a clawhammer coat. He had pawned the rest of his clothes to start himself in business.

As Dennis stood beside Captain Brown while that officer was maneuvering the *Hope Allen* up to the wharf, the young man thought he could see growth in San Francisco even in the few months that he had been away. Settlement reached farther up the steep slopes of Telegraph and Rincon Hills. The hollows between the ridges were more closely packed with tents and shanties. The long business streets had begun to take on a more metropolitan air. He could see brick buildings of three or four stories in height. The town was an amazing prodigy. Three years ago Yerba Buena had been a trading-post for tallows and hides, a village of fifty residents. A few months since it had been a great camp of tents and slab shanties. Now San Francisco was a young city moving forward with giant strides.

Already the first comers were speaking of the good old days in California before the rush from all corners of the world had begun. Then a

miner could leave a tin can of gold dust unguarded in his tent for weeks. At the diggings there had been little lawlessness. A spirit of neighborliness had prevailed. If one was in hard luck, those near at hand had helped him. All that was changed. Now it was every man for himself, and the devil take the hindmost.

All the way from Monterey, Captain Brown had been deploring the new order. With the thousands of honest men who had flocked to San Francisco and Sacramento and the diggings had come swarms of bummers, gamblers, gunmen, criminals, and prostitutes. Murder and robbery were so common that no attention was paid to them. In San Francisco alone more than a hundred men had been assassinated and only one killer had been convicted. The law was in the hands of politicians, men of no character, corrupt and purchasable, who were rapidly growing rich by selling city contracts and by taking bribes from the ruffians who operated as thieves, highwaymen, and burglars. No lawbreaker need stay in jail if he had money to buy his way out or friends who would lend it to him.

Dennis had eagerly asked questions and gathered information. From the captain he had learned that most of the offenders were convicts and ex-convicts from Australia. Locally they were known as 'Sydney ducks,' though Brown had heard that the worst of them came from Van Diemen's Land.

'I know about them,' Dennis said, as he stood close to the wheel beside the captain. 'They called themselves hounds, and afterward Regulators. I've been in the quarter where they live, Sydneytown. They used to go out nights and raid the Chileños and Portuguese. But I thought they had been dispersed.'

'So they have, but more of them keep coming in,' the captain said. 'And I expect Australia is glad to get rid of these blackbirds. She never did want the transported men. Of course plenty of decent fellows come from Australia to the diggings, but on account of the convicts they all get a bad name. Fact is, my lad, these roughs get backing from some of our own citizens who ought to be ashamed of themselves.'

To Gifford this was not entirely news. It was widely known that among the lawless there had grown up a caste. A few powerful men, who had grown wealthy by doubtful means, were believed to be the real leaders of the cut-throats. Dennis had heard rumors that Benjamin Shanks was one of the wildest of these.

As the young man stepped down from the gangplank he heard one of the many versions of the goldseekers' song lifted into the air. A drunken miner

sang it from the doorway of a waterfront saloon he was leaving.

‘I’ll scrape the mountains clean, old girl,  
I’ll drain the rivers dry.  
I’m off for California, Susannah, don’t you cry.’

To his surprise Dennis recognized the man as one of the party who had come across the plains with him. At sight of him the miner gave a whoop.

‘Gifford, by jiminy! Heard you were dead. Where in Tophet you been keepin’ yourself, boy?’

Dennis explained he had been shanghaied and had just got back. He asked the man, Tully Green by name, if he knew what had become of his partners, Bronson and Peebles.

‘They’re at Humpback Slide—‘least they were. Or is it Wildcat Bar they headed for—or Red Dog? I don’t rightly remember. Might have been Gospel Swamp or Hell’s Delight. Anyhow, they’re out in the diggings somewhere, ‘far’s I know. Come an’ have a drink with me, boy.’

Dennis excused himself with some difficulty, for the man had reached the stage of obstinacy. When at last he freed himself he walked up toward the business section. In a warehouse, just beyond the end of the wharf, a ‘spieler’ was auctioning off the goods just brought over in a windjammer from the Islands, as the Hawaiian group was always called in California. The custom was to sell at once by auction the cargoes arriving at San Francisco. Another ship carrying the same kind of goods might come in at any time and break the market.

The young city was a hive of activity. Its streets were filled with men from every quarter of the globe. They were, as a local rhymester had put it,

‘Men of every nation,  
Birds of every feather,  
Honest men and rogues,  
Hustled up together.’

Turks, Chinese, Mexicans, Kanakas brushed shoulders with Englishmen, Germans, Frenchmen, Russians, and Italians. Red-shirted miners, the clay of the creeks still clinging to them, hobnobbed with elegant gentlemen of fortune ready to prey upon them. Dandies and viveurs sat at the faro tables with long-haired ragamuffins who wore their beards in plaits and wagered Moffat and Company’s fifty-dollar slugs with prodigal carelessness. Brick buildings were going up on Merchant Street side by side with the slab shacks of frontier days.

Everywhere contrasts were dramatic. Cigar boys moved among the throngs crying their expensive wares to men in rags with pockets full of

gold, and paramours of prominent politicians drove through the streets in carriages shipped from London. The captain of the *Hope Allen* had walked up town with his passenger. He met a colored man whom he had known as a roustabout and offered him a job as cook on the ship. The black man grinned.

‘Boss,’ he said, ‘I’m runnin’ a bang-up restaurant. You sure enough got a good voice. I’ll give you twenty-five dollars a day if you’ll come an’ be my spieler.’

Captain Brown and Dennis walked into the El Dorado. They had just come from the lodging-house and hotel districts, where one could find only hovels and kennels. But the El Dorado was a scene of gaudy luxury. It had mahogany bars with great gilt mirrors of French plate. Oil paintings of nude flamboyant females decorated the walls. The floor was heavily carpeted, and in lounging-rooms were heavy chandeliers and expensive easy-chairs. Upon a raised platform a negro minstrel troupe performed for the pleasure of the crowd. The bar ran entirely down one side of the room. Here expensive free lunches could be had. Down the center were the gaming-tables for faro, keno, roulette, and dice games. Hundreds of men moved to and fro, many of them neither drinking nor playing. The gambling-houses of San Francisco were its clubs where men met their friends. At Denison’s Exchange, the Parker House, the Saint Charles, the Bella Union, and the El Dorado the gay hectic life of the golden West found its nucleus.

For as yet there were no homes in any adequate sense. Young wives who had braved hardship to come with their husbands to this rainbow’s end were left in dingy boarding-houses while their spouses went out to enjoy the turbid activity that flowed up and down the streets at night. For decent women no entertainment had as yet been provided. Since the town was filled with young men ready to sympathize with neglected wives, divorce had become very common. All the standards of religion and morality which had obtained in the staid East became shaken unless they were founded upon principle.

From an alcove frequented by the more prominent citizens a husky voice called to Captain Brown. The red-faced sailor, still holding Dennis by the arm, walked into the elaborately furnished side room. A big gross man had sunk down into an easy-chair, every inch of which was filled with soft spreading flesh. The slumped figure was so immense that fat overflowed. The legs and arms were pillars, the torso a monstrosity. From that great bulk the weak, husky voice issued as a surprise.

‘What kind of a trip, Captain?’ it asked, almost in a whisper.

‘Good, Mr. Shanks. I hailed two of your brigs, the *Mary Bligh* just outside of Monterey and the *Golden Hind* off the coast above San Pedro. Business is brisk along the coast.’

‘Any news from the south?’

‘No-o. Heard some complaints of cattle-stealing by the banditti. That fellow Castro tried to hold up a gold convoy and was beaten off, but this young man with me can tell you more of that than I can. He was there at the time.’

Benjamin Shanks turned upon Dennis Gifford opaque eyes, lifeless as those of a dead cod. It was strange, but the effect of that long scrutiny was to send shivers down the spine of the young man, as though something evil and sinister had drenched him.

‘Where?’ the shipowner wheezed.

‘At Monterey,’ Dennis told him.

‘Go on. I’ll listen.’

‘I happened to be with the gold convoy when it was attacked.’

‘By Castro?’

‘By Castro.’

Captain Brown snorted. His big voice boomed dissent. ‘Happened nothing. He saved the convoy by giving warning in time. ‘Hadn’t been for him Castro would have been twenty thousand dollars richer.’

The cold, fishy eyes still rested upon Gifford.

‘How did you know of this intended attack?’ the whispering voice asked.

‘Didn’t know it, sir,’ Dennis answered. ‘Guessed at it. Some of Castro’s men held us up by mistake and let us go when they found we weren’t the ones they wanted. So we reported to the commandant at the Presidio.’

‘We?’ demanded Shanks.

‘A young Californian was with me.’

‘Reported what?’

‘That we had been stopped instead of the party with the gold.’

Not a muscle in the pallid face of the gross man in the chair moved. He watched Gifford, eyes still dead.

‘So the colonel sent soldiers out and interfered with Castro’s little party,’ Captain Brown explained.

Shanks paid not the least attention to him.

‘Hmp!’ he grunted at last. The sound was eloquent of skepticism. ‘When a gold convoy is sent out, is news of it printed in the papers first?’

The cue of Dennis was to be mild and inoffensive, to let Shanks decide he was a boy of no importance who had blundered into affairs too big for him.

‘No, sir,’ he said.

Again Brown undertook to elucidate. ‘They say Castro has spies all through that country, Mr. Shanks.’

‘And this boy—whatever his name is—does he have spies too?’

‘I don’t know what you mean, sir,’ Dennis made answer innocently.

‘I mean, how did you know about the gold shipment?’

‘I didn’t, sir, but the young man with me is a relative of the rancho who was to get the money.’

‘What’s his name?’

‘Antonio Martínez.’

Shanks digested that for a moment in silence before he asked, ‘A son of my old friend Ramon Martínez?’

‘Yes, sir. He had happened to hear his father and his uncle talking about the shipment. So when Castro’s men turned us loose we thought perhaps \_\_\_\_\_,’

‘Oh, you thought.’ The big man’s murmured words were a jeer. ‘In point of fact you have no evidence that Castro was within a hundred miles of Monterey at the time, have you?’

‘The commandant at the Presidio said it must be Castro, sir.’

‘Maybe it was. I don’t know or care.’ Shanks shot a squeaky question at him. ‘What’s your name?’

‘Dennis Gifford, sir.’

‘You are a friend of young Martínez?’

‘I worked as a vaquero for his father for a little while.’

‘And how goes everything with Señor Ramon Martínez?’ Shanks inquired. ‘Are his cattle shaping well this year?’

‘Yes, sir. They have wintered well and are fat.’

‘Good calf crop?’

‘Better than usual.’

‘Good.’ The pasty face was expressionless, the voice blank, but Dennis could have sworn there was exultant derision in the man’s dark mind.

Shanks slid his eyes back to Captain Brown. Dennis was erased from the map. He had been weighed, and dismissed.

‘See Captain Little to talk with?’ the shipowner asked.

‘No, I didn’t. The *Mary Bligh* was working its way out of the bay as I went in. But I heard in town that he had disposed of his cargo to good advantage,’ Captain Brown said.

Shanks did not need to ask more. The brig had been smuggling liquor. The instructions given Little were to land the kegs on the coast a few miles below Monterey where the buyers would be waiting. If Brown had heard no talk of seizure by the authorities, the cargo must have got safely ashore.

Dennis passed out of the alcove of the El Dorado into the main room. He moved aimlessly about, drifting from one table to another as he watched the gamblers. They were of many kinds, of a dozen nations. He saw at a roulette wheel the French bootblack who had shined his shoes half an hour earlier, a red-headed Paddy fresh from Cork, a long-queued Chinaman in native costume, and a bearded miner under a wide floppy hat, a bowie knife sticking from one boot leg and a revolver in his belt. In contrast with these were the professional gamblers, scrupulously well-dressed, pale, soft-handed, with heavy-lidded, cold, keen eyes. There were business men, Sydney coves, floaters, frock-coated Southerners, and *vaqueros* of the ranch country.

Gifford passed into the street. A blaring band was summoning people to an auction. A phrenologist and a fortune-teller were plying their trades in booths at opposite corners. With a brazen but discouraged smile an aged prostitute accosted Dennis. Drays rumbled over the stony street. The covered wagon of an emigrant from the East swayed through the throng drawn by four lumbering bullocks.

Two pistols barked. The crowd broke to right and left almost as though swept by wind. Through the open space left by frightened pedestrians a tall long-coated man with a derringer moved forward and looked down at the slack figure from which his bullet had just driven life.

This was San Francisco.



## CHAPTER IX

### BRUCE MARSHALL, KILLER, REPORTS

THE man with the smoking derringer was clean-shaved except for long mustachios and what would later have been known as an imperial. He was immaculately dressed in black broadcloth, white frilled shirt, and high silk hat.

For a long moment his eyes did not leave the prone figure. When he was sure the man was dead, he lifted them and let his gaze sweep arrogantly over the crowd.

‘I killed this low Yankee shopkeeper, gentlemen, because he insulted me, because my honor as a gentleman demanded it,’ he said curtly.

A low murmur of resentment passed through the crowd, but it died away as the killer’s fierce glance darted from one to another. He was a fine figure of a man and carried himself with broad-shouldered assurance. Dennis guessed from voice, words, and dress that he was a Southern fire-eater, one of the class of ruffians who had left home because their native States would no longer put up with them. He had seen men of this type before. They talked a great deal about honor and their reputation as Southern gentlemen, but it was well known that the best people below Mason and Dixon’s line would have nothing to do with these bullying braggarts.

Someone murmured in Gifford’s ear that the man was Bruce Marshall. Dennis had heard of him. He was one of the leaders of the turbulent ruffraff well which just now ruled San Francisco. Known as a duelist, he had a few months earlier shot down in a formal affair a man opposing the high-handed group to which he belonged.

Gifford asked a low-voiced question of the man nearest him.

In a whisper the answer came. ‘It’s John Brewer. He’s been threatening an investigation about the wharf contracts. Must have said something about Marshall.’

As though he had heard his name, the killer’s stabbing eyes swept round and rested on Dennis. ‘Has anybody got anything to say about this?’ he demanded haughtily.

Nobody ventured any criticism.

The man with the derringer showed his teeth in a thin-lipped, mirthless smile. 'Just as well,' he went on. 'This is strictly my private business. I permit no interference with it.'

He turned on his heel and walked away.

Not even when he was out of hearing did the storm of protest break. Men looked at one another furtively. They had learned to be close-mouthed. Though they might resent this cold-blooded murder, they did not care to say so publicly. Lawlessness was in the saddle. The sympathetic listener might be a spy of the scoundrels who were preying upon the public.

For some obscure reason not quite clear to himself Dennis followed the killer at a distance. Marshall turned into the El Dorado. Not fifty feet behind him, young Gifford also passed into the gambling-house. In the crowd his eyes could not pick up the killer. He sauntered past the roulette and faro tables, lingered a moment to win a dollar at chuckaluck while he looked around, and moved inconspicuously toward the rear of the house.

At the end of the bar he stopped to order a miner's tickler, and while he was being served turned toward the alcove, one heel hooked on the rail. What he saw was the thing he had hoped for but had not dared to expect. Marshall was talking to a man standing close to one of the walls, but his gaze was fixed on a great mass of flesh slumped down in a big chair. At first Shanks did not look toward the man in broadcloth, but presently the dead-cod eyes slid round to Marshall. The latter nodded, ever so slightly. Dennis could have sworn that a question had been asked and answered. Shanks had known that John Brewer was marked for a victim of the bully's derringer. Not only had he known of the intended crime; he had ordered it. His ruffian had come to report that the job was done. So young Gifford interpreted that exchange of looks.

A sudden sickness ran through Dennis. He had not lived on the turbulent frontier for years without having seen the flash of guns dragged out in swift anger. In a country where each man must be a law to himself such action had been not at all rare. But the deliberate assassination of an honest man because he had courage to stand out against wrong was quite another thing. The thought of it gave Gifford a scunner. Shanks was like a great bloated spider weaving a vast web to entrap his prey to destruction. Caught in that web was the family of the kindly, courteous gentleman who had said to him, 'My house is yours, señor.' Dennis had offered to break through, to save his friend if he could from the venomous sting of this creature. For a moment he drew back in horror. He had just seen what happened to one who had crossed the path of this reptilian bloodsucker. If he made a move he would

be obliterated just as Brewer had been. He was alone, without powerful friends, and these villains were well organized, wily, and ruthless. What chance had he against them?

To his mind a picture jumped, so vivid, with such an extraordinary sense of reality, that he seemed actually to see it. In a vast web the slender, supple body of a girl was caught. She struggled, terror in her frantic endeavors. For two immense spiders were edging toward her. The horrible insects, globose, with furry raptorial falces, had human faces, those of Castro and Shanks. The dark fear-filled eyes of the girl caught sight of Dennis. They begged him piteously to save her. Small hands reached out to his. The vision lasted while he could have counted ten. It was so real that he could see the pulse beating in her throat, the deadly pallor beneath the olive of the lovely cheeks.

Courage flowed through his veins in a wave, sweeping back the weakness that had shaken him. A steely strength infused his being. He was an instrument of Fate, sent to frustrate the malice of these spinners of evil, perhaps to destroy them. Shanks and his satellites were skulking cowards, strong only because public opinion had not moved to crush their band of parasites. After all he was in America, in San Francisco, a city filled with lusty men whose force and energy had conquered a thousand dangers. Good citizens outnumbered the rascals a hundred to one. They would not forever stand back and let their courts be made a mock of by packed juries, false witnesses, and straw bail. They would not always permit highway robbery by day as by night, bowie knife and revolver affrays on the main streets, and crookedness open and flagrant among the officials they had elected to serve them. Within the month fires started by incendiaries for the sake of loot had swept the city, one of them destroying several lives and millions of dollars' worth of property. There must be a limit to the patience of the pioneers.

That San Francisco was approaching the limit Dennis guessed by an incident which occurred while he was still pretending to be occupied with his miner's tickler.

Two well-dressed men walked into the alcove and stopped in front of Shanks.

'I'll take that cargo from the islands,' one of them said. 'At the price you named.'

'It's yours, Brannan,' the shipowner said huskily. 'When will you clear it from the wharf?'

'I'll begin today.'

It struck Dennis that the man who had been called Brannan was unusually curt in manner. An impression stuck in the young man's mind that he confined his relations with Shanks to business.

The second stranger made a remark. He did not raise his voice, but the words carried clearly to Gifford.

'Another murder just committed on our streets,' he said quietly, his steady gaze fixed on the opaque eyes of Shanks.

Bruce Marshall started, almost violently. From his position close to the wall he took a stride forward. The dead-cod eyes of his master slid round and stopped him abruptly.

'Hadn't heard of it, Ryckman,' the big man wheezed. 'In a town like this these difficulties will occur. I don't take 'em too seriously. Boys will be boys, you know, especially when they're filled with forty-rod liquor.'

'I take them seriously,' Brannan said coldly. 'It's time some of us did.'

'That's what our courts are for, Sam,' suggested Shanks. 'I've no doubt, if there's a wrong been done——'

Ryckman interrupted with an acid question. 'When did our courts ever punish crime, unless it was some pilfering by a poor devil who hadn't money to buy his freedom?'

'Come, come, that's no way to talk,' reproved the man, overflowing from the chair. 'We must respect and uphold our courts. If we don't, how can we expect criminals to do so?'

Brannan laughed, sardonically. 'Yes, let's respect our courts above all things,' he said, and turned away.

The two men walked out of the alcove. Dennis observed that Marshall's eyes glittered angrily. His thin lips were pressed closely together, as if to prevent an explosion of rage. A high color had swept into his face. He glared at Shanks. Plainly that good citizen who had such a fine opinion of the courts was ordering him to curb his passion.

It was possible, Dennis thought, that Brannan and Ryckman stood too high in the community for one like Marshall to touch without danger. Anyway, Shanks probably reflected, a man a day was enough.

Captain Brown had hinted to Dennis that only a leader was necessary to crystallize into action the resentment of honest men. That leader had to be a man well known, prominent in the life of the city, of reputation unblemished and courage unflinching. Gifford had liked the looks and quiet resolution of these two men. Unless he missed his guess, they were fearless and

determined. He had read once a fable of a mouse that had freed a lion by gnawing at the ropes which held the king of beasts fast in a net. Perhaps he might be the instrument to put the spark to the gunpowder ready to explode. He decided to find out more about Brannan and Ryckman.

## CHAPTER X

### DENNIS DRINKS A LOLA MONTEZ

BECAUSE SAN FRANCISCO was not only a city of hope but a place of amazing contrasts, it seized the imagination. The rioting frontier brushed shoulders with sophistication. As Dennis Gifford wandered through the streets the day after his arrival, he was struck anew by the diversity of its vivid life. He strolled through Sydneytown, which lay at the base of Telegraph Hill near the foot of Broadway. It was a nest of huts, tents, kennels, and low drinking-dives. Here the convicts from the antipodes held carnival. Yet scarcely five minutes later the young man passed the gates of Mlle. Zeitska's Female Academy, where two footmen with long frogged velvet coats and silk knee-breeches guarded the portal.

It was the effervescent spontaneity of social contacts that brought Dennis into a curious adventure destined to have important results.

Since reaching town he had bought a good suit of clothes and a pair of neatly fitting French boots polished until the leather reflected like a looking-glass. The renowned French chef Jacques Raphael had set up a restaurant and was serving food to the multitude in a huge corrugated iron shed. Here the dandies of town came to eat, lured by the reputation of Jacques as a culinary artist. Dennis dropped into the place for what he was in the habit of calling supper.

The big room was lit by great chandeliers with glass pendants hanging from the roof. It was crowded with diners. On the tables, as he passed back toward the rear, were bottles of champagne and other wines. Waiters hurried to and fro. A hum of talk, the ring of knives and forks, the popping of corks, filled the air.

Dennis found a small table for two near the back of the room. It was unoccupied, and he sat down. A young woman sat at the table next to him. She was alone, but the impatience of the glances which swept up the room suggested that she was expecting a companion. It was impossible for him to refrain from covert glances at his neighbor. She was past her first youth, he guessed, though the years had not touched her beauty, which was dazzlingly manifest to all men. Twenty-seven Dennis hazarded as her age, and he was too kind to her by five years. Her brown hair, exquisitely dressed, rippled out from beneath a broad hat covered with lace.

Her glances treated men disdainfully, yet by reason of her perfect figure, her indifference, some subtle aura of sex, she challenged the eyes of all. It was difficult to be near her and not stare discreetly. Dennis wondered who she could be. That she was or had been someone important there could be no doubt. But what was a lady doing alone in a public restaurant at night? That was against all precedent and convention.

The young man could not have described her dress, beyond saying that it was of blue velvet trimmed with fur which fitted her supple body like a sheath. Yet he knew it was expensive and had been made by a skillful modiste.

About her personality there was a graceful, deceptive indolence. He chose the word deceptive after he chanced to meet her eyes. They were passionately alive, wells of glowing fire. Her neighbor could guess the reason for the anger blazing in them. It was a reasonable assumption that her tardy escort, whoever he might be, would have a bad five minutes after his arrival.

Suddenly she smiled, and it was like warm sunshine after a wintry storm. Laughter rippled over her charming face. In the eyes there was a dancing mischief. She beckoned, very lightly, with her fan.

Dennis looked behind him. It seemed unlikely the invitation was for him. His glance went back to her, and the irradiating smile beamed full on him. He rose, took a step or two forward, and bowed above her.

Gayly she lifted big gray eyes to his. 'God created He them, man and woman,' she said in a voice like music. 'Shall we interfere with the plans of our Maker by sitting alone?'

Champagne bubbled in his veins. He still had no idea of what manner of woman she was. Certainly she was like none he had ever met. That she was widely experienced in the ways of the world he knew.

He bowed again. 'Not if you will be my guest, madam. I am of a religious nature. I worship God—and His most beautiful creations.'

Her glance swept his face. 'You are a nice young man. It is written in your so young and handsome countenance, but just now you think such bad things about poor Lola. And you are wrong. We shall sit here—for a little hour. We shall say good-bye. Never again shall we meet. It is not necessary you blush so hard. We shall be so discreet in our indiscretion and your reputation will still be spotless.'

If he had been blushing, her remark did not restore his composure. Her comment had put a finger on part of his straying thoughts. Now he knew he

had been wrong. She had probably asked him to join her in order to punish the other man, whoever he might be.

‘Shall we introduce ourselves?’ she said. ‘My name is Lola Montez.’

Lola Montez! He was amazed. Already she was the talk of the town, though she had been here only a few days. He had heard the story of how, while she was walking Montgomery Street in her striking costume, a drunken miner had accosted her and had been struck across the face with a riding-whip. The newspapers were full of her.

He stared at her, astounded. So he was sitting across the table from Lola Montez, than whom there was no more famous adventuress in the world. She had dazzled London with her dancing. She had bewitched old King Ludwig of Bavaria and become his mistress. As the Baronne de Rosenthal and Comtesse de Landsfeld she had really been the ruler of that kingdom until it had come toppling down about her pretty head. Now she was in San Francisco, ready for whatever turn the wheel of fortune might bring her. That she was the guest of Dennis Gifford seemed to that young man the craziest chance of his young life.

Dennis told her his name, and added that he was one of the many fortune hunters in the city. A waiter hovered near. Dennis ordered champagne for her, a Lola Montez<sup>[4]</sup> for himself.

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[4] A Lola Montez was compounded of Old Tom, lemon, ginger, and hot water.

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The young woman clapped her hands gleefully. ‘But you are a courtier, sir,’ she cried. ‘In this city which is such a desert of good manners I find one man who pays pretty compliments.’

He pleaded that San Francisco was young and still had the faults of the frontier. ‘But we are improving,’ he added. ‘Jacques Raphael has come to educate our palates, and—so much more important—lovely women who know the world, the great world the rest of us have only dreamed about, who have moved the admiration of thousands in London and Paris and——’

‘——in Bavaria,’ she broke in audaciously, mirth bubbling in her face. ‘Yes, these lovely women, please?’

Her candor was a little too much for his puritanic upbringing. The women he had known followed the straight, narrow line of virtue. If one had diverged secretly, she would have been hypocritically shocked at any



reference to unconventional conduct. But this young woman with the silvery laugh tossed her sin up gaily to be played with like a shuttlecock.

He moved to a safer subject. 'Yet you'll find good manners here too, Comtesse, if good manners consist of kindness and courtesy and old-fashioned consideration for the feelings of others, all expressed gently and sometimes in beautiful language,' he told her.

Her glance swept the garish room. She found there a reckless gaiety, an exuberance of youth, that appealed to the same qualities in herself, but of what Dennis had promised not a trace.

'Where, in heaven's name?' she asked.

'Among the Californian caballeros, madam. They are aristocrats, proud of their lineage, kindly to their peons, hospitable to strangers, honorable to the last degree.'

She nodded. 'I have met their cousins—in Spain.' Again little lights of mockery gleamed in her eyes. 'Lola Montez is a Spanish señora, you know. It was in her national dances that she swept London from its feet in storms of applause.'

'I was a boy then, but I remember reading of it in the newspaper my father took.' He did not tell her how much of the story he recalled. Her name had been Eliza Gilbert, and Limerick was her birthplace. She had taken lessons in Spanish dancing from a native teacher, had appeared on the stage as Lola Montez, and had achieved an amazing popularity until it was learned that she had hoaxed the public. From London she had drifted to the Continent, and after various adventures had appeared at Munich, to catch the eye of old King Ludwig and reach the peak of her career.

A man was moving down the room along the aisle between the tables, his glances searching the room. He was in elaborate evening dress, a cloak fastened at the neck flung over his broad shoulders. In Gifford's throat there beat the pulse of excitement danger always brought. The man was Bruce Marshall. Manifestly he was looking for a lady whom he was expecting to meet. He walked lightly, carrying himself with an easy and assured grace.

His gaze came to rest upon Dennis and his companion, and at once his step quickened.

He unfastened the cloak and let a waiter take this and his hat. 'Sorry to be late, Lola,' he said, a little too casually. 'Important business detained me.'

The dark, smoldering eyes of the woman looked directly at him. Her brows lifted a little. 'One who has the honor of an appointment with the

Baronne de Rosenthal and Comtesse de Landsfeld has no more important business than to keep it,' she said quietly.

'But I sent my friend John Harmon to carry my apologies to you, to bring you here, and to entertain you until I could myself arrive,' he expostulated.

'Your friend John Harmon left me here ten minutes ago. He too was summoned by urgent business. Here in America it is all business—business. I do not like it.' A smile touched her face, one not without malice. 'But you will be glad to learn I am not disappointed, since I am dining happily with an old friend.'

He was not sure he quite caught her meaning. The obvious interpretation was too preposterous for his vanity to accept.

'You mean——'

'Exactly, sir. I am dining with Mr. Gifford.'

A dark flush spread over his pallid face. He looked at Dennis, black eyes flaming rage. The high cheek-bones and long straight hair suggested Indian blood. He stroked the tuft of whiskers beneath his thin-lipped mouth. Plainly he was fighting for self-control. His savage desire was to strike now, once for all. But within him a voice whispered restraint. Not here, in public, under the blaze of the chandeliers, with scores of San Francisco's leading citizens as witnesses. Not openly, before John Brewer's body had been buried.

Dennis went pale to the lips, but his gaze did not shift from the contorted face glaring down into his. He knew that in this man was the furious impulse to kill, that for him life and death hung in the balance. He was unarmed. If Marshall decided to murder him, no defense was possible.

There was a way of escape. He could sing small—could apologize for his presence—could sneak away like a whipped cur. But that he would not do. It was not only that he did not care to let Lola Montez down, though he acquitted her of any intent to put him in danger. She was punishing Marshall, but with no realization of the probable consequences to her host. The more potent reason that held Dennis in his chair was pride. Men were shifting in their seats to watch eagerly the drama being played out at this table. He could not skulk off and leave the field to this bully. That would be too bitter a memory to carry with him later.

'You are—dining with this lady?' Marshall asked hoarsely.

'You heard her say so,' Dennis made husky answer from a throat dry as a lime kiln.

'Do you know who I am?'

Dennis chose to ignore the threat in the question. 'A gentleman of the old school, I am sure, who must recognize that in such a matter a lady's will is law to us both.' He managed a conciliatory smile, one that seemed to take the fire-eater into his confidence and suggest that he, too, was an unwilling victim of circumstances.

'If you are wise you will leave—now,' Marshall said harshly.

'I have asked the Comtesse to dine with me.'

Marshall snarled a command. 'Get out, boy.'

Steadily Dennis looked at him. 'That I cannot do.'

Lola knew that the eyes of many were on them. To that she did not object. Wherever she went the gaze of the multitude followed her. This was the tribute paid her charms and her reputation. The allure of her body was disturbing to men's blood, as were the tremulous notes of her throaty voice and the mystery of her luminous eyes. Now she was delighted with the situation that had developed.

'Of course he can't. Don't be absurd, Mr.—Mr. Martin.' She got the name wrong on purpose, as an additional affront. 'It's always a lady's privilege to change her mind, especially when she meets a younger and a handsomer man.'

A flash of mirth lit her dainty, provocative face. It mocked audaciously his anger.

Marshall flung his fury at Dennis, not at the woman.

'Look out,' he warned. 'No man alive can insult Bruce Marshall and live.'

The killer turned and called for the waiter who had taken his hat and cloak. There was a moment's delay, which increased the rage of Marshall. He stood pilloried before a hundred eyes, a man who had been rejected publicly by the woman of his choice in favor of another. When the waiter came with his things, he snatched them rudely away and flung the attendant to one side. As he stalked from the room, hate was stamped on his distorted countenance.

Lola laughed gaily, still quite unconscious of the dangerous fire which she had lighted. 'Exit Mr. Bruce Marshall. He looks as if he'd like to make it pistols for two,' she said.

Dennis did not meet her levity in the same spirit. There was no smile in his eyes when he spoke.

‘Don’t make a mistake, Comtesse. He’s dangerous as a rattlesnake. Yesterday I saw him kill a good citizen on the crowded street. I don’t know whether he is your friend. In any case don’t think you can play with him and \_\_\_\_\_,’

Her gray Irish eyes dilated. He could see the shock of what he had said running through her.

‘Did you say he—killed a man?’ she asked.

‘Yes. Everybody in town knows it. He killed another man a few months ago—in a duel.’

He could see the color fading in her face. ‘But this is terrible! What have I done? Believe me, I did not know. I am a stranger, arrived only four days since on a Spanish schooner. This man—what will he do to you?’

‘Nothing, if I can prevent it,’ Dennis said quietly.

‘If I could see him again—if I could explain——’

‘Too late for that. He has gone. Don’t be so disturbed, madam. I am warned. That is something.’

‘But you are a boy, and he——’

‘——back of a Colt is just the same size as I am,’ he said grimly. ‘That’s not what worries me. He belongs to a gang of desperate criminals, though he calls himself a gentleman. It’s not likely he’ll give me a fair chance. He won’t, if he can help it.’

‘A criminal! *Mon Dieu*, is it possible?’

‘I’m sure of it, though I can’t prove it legally.’

‘And you think he’ll . . . do you an injury?’

‘He’ll have me murdered—if he can.’

‘But— isn’t there any law?’ she wailed.

‘Plenty of it. He and his friends have it buttoned up in their pockets.’

‘Then what will you do?’ she asked, aghast.

His gaze had swept the restaurant and come to rest on the face of a man he recognized.

‘First, I shall borrow a pistol,’ he told his companion. ‘After that—who knows?’

She looked at the brown-faced young man with the gray eyes steady as steel. Those eyes flew no flag of flurry. They were sure of themselves. He was lean-loined and broad-shouldered. She had noticed a certain tigerish

litheness in the way he carried himself. None the less her heart died under her ribs. So near was death to him, she felt, that she could hear the ticking of eternity.

‘What have I done? What have I done?’ she murmured.

He reassured her. ‘No harm. It had to come—war between me and his gang. That’s why I came to San Francisco, though I wasn’t looking for trouble just yet. Since it’s here, it’s here.’ Dennis rose and looked down at her. ‘If you will excuse me for a minute, madam.’

She nodded, despairingly. ‘Yes, go. I am a stormy petrel. Wherever I go I bring trouble. And I never mean harm.’

Dennis walked across the room to a table where sat three men.

## CHAPTER XI

### DENNIS BORROWS AN ALLEN SIXSHOOTER

To one of the three men at the table Dennis spoke.

‘You don’t know me, Mr. Brannan, but of course everybody knows you. I have a favor to ask. May I see you alone for a moment?’

Samuel Brannan looked the young man over, not without curiosity. He had observed the scene that had just occurred between this youngster and Marshall. On the face of it, there had been a quarrel, but it might have been a stage one set for some sinister reason. Any man acquainted with Marshall well enough to have a public dispute with him might well be a foe to the community.

‘Not outside—if that’s what you mean.’

‘No, here.’

Brannan wondered what this brown-faced young fellow wanted, and his wonder was tinged with suspicion. He rose and followed Gifford a step or two from the table.

‘What do you want?’ he demanded.

‘You saw what took place a few minutes since. Marshall threatened me. I’m unarmed. If I leave here without a weapon I’m at his mercy.’

The older man looked straight into the eyes of Dennis. ‘I don’t know you,’ he said coldly. ‘Why come to me?’

‘Because you’re Samuel Brannan, the man who drove out the hounds and the regulators. Because, more than any man in the city, you’ve stood up to the ruffians who have been terrorizing it. I’m not asking you to fight my battles. All I ask is a chance for my white alley.’

Through Brannan’s mind doubt sifted. Was the quarrel between these two men merely a pretext to get him to give his weapon to this honest-looking lad? It might be his enemies were even now waiting outside to destroy him. That he was on the black list of the criminal gangs he did not doubt.

After the attack on C. J. Jansen, resulting in robbery and almost in the death of that well-respected merchant, Brannan had openly urged the execution of the two men arrested for the crime. The jury of the people’s tribunal had disagreed and neither of the men charged with the crime had

been hanged. Brannan was glad punishment had not at once been imposed, for he now had strong doubts of their guilt. But it was certain the outlaws had not forgotten his part in the affair. He was a marked man. Daily he walked the streets in danger of his life.

‘Come down to cases, young man,’ Brannan said harshly.

‘You don’t know me, but you know Bruce Marshall,’ Dennis replied. ‘I heard what you and Mr. Ryckman said at the El Dorado to Shanks. Well, I’m with you—against that gang of cut-throats. You won’t stand back and let me be murdered without a chance to save myself.’

‘Won’t I? You seem pretty sure.’ Brannan flung out a curt question. ‘What’s your name? Who are you, anyhow?’

‘You won’t know my name. It’s Dennis Gifford.’

‘No. All I know is the company you keep, and by God! I don’t like it.’

‘I came across the plains five months ago and was later shanghaied by the mate of the *Mary Bligh*, one of Shanks’s ships. When I escaped I came back here—got in yesterday. I’ve been finding out things. I know who’s back of this bully Marshall.’

Both men were speaking urgently, but low, almost in whispers.

‘I dare say you do,’ Brannan replied, with meaning.

‘No!’ Dennis cried in protest, still without raising his voice. ‘What you think isn’t true. I’m an honest man, and you can’t turn your back on me. If I were killed, you’d be responsible.’

Brannan’s eyes were like gimlets. ‘And if I were killed, would you be responsible?’

‘I’m not one of these scoundrels. Look at me. Can’t you trust your eyes?’

Again Brannan swiftly appraised his appearance. Not for a long time had he seen a more presentable youth, but if this was a plant to trap him a villainous-looking ruffian would not do for bait.

‘What do you want?’ he asked.

‘I want a weapon. If you don’t want to give me yours, you can get me one. You are known here, and I’m not.’

Brannan made a swift, characteristic decision. ‘All right. I’ll get you one. But not mine. Don’t forget that. Go back to your table. A waiter will bring you a weapon wrapped in a newspaper.’

‘Thanks. You won’t regret it, Mr. Brannan. May I call on you tomorrow? I want to tell you something.’

‘Yes. At my office. Ten o’clock.’

Brannan turned his back and walked to his table. Dennis rejoined Lola Montez.

‘What were you talking about with that man?’ Lola asked.

‘Important business—for me. He’s going to send me a weapon.’

‘Do you know about firearms? Can you shoot?’

‘A little. I’ve hunted ever since I was a small boy.’

Imperiously she leaned forward. ‘Do you know what I’m going to do? Send for the police. It can’t be as you say. They wouldn’t let a man be killed in cold blood. They’d protect him.’

‘Men are killed here, two or three a week. Nothing is ever done with the killers. If they are arrested, they are always released on straw bail.’ He smiled sardonically. ‘You’ll have to think of something else.’

‘But the police would stay with us till you reach my hotel. You could remain there tonight—with my maid and me. You’d be safe, and in the morning you could slip out of this terrible place and never come back.’

‘That would be fine, if I had any intention of leaving the city. But I haven’t. I’m going to stay here and fight.’

She threw up her beautiful hands in a gesture of despair. ‘Fight! How can you fight a band of criminals—if it’s as you say? To talk that way is silly. Of course you’ve got to leave. I won’t have it any other way than the one I say.’

He grinned at her boyishly. ‘So says the Baronne de Rosenthal and Comtesse de Landsfeld.’

‘No. It’s your friend talking—Lola Montez. Listen. I’ve had blood on my hands before—during the Bavarian revolution. I wasn’t to blame. I don’t think I was. But never again. It was my fault this man was angered at you. I’m going to save you from him.’

A waiter stopped to pass Dennis under cover of his napkin a package. Beneath the tablecloth the young man opened the paper and drew from it an Allen’s sixshooter. Swiftly he made sure it was loaded, then thrust the barrel of it beneath his belt.

‘I’ve a little friend here that may save me,’ he said cheerfully.



‘You’re as bad as he is,’ she protested hotly. ‘What kind of a place is this where men go looking for one another with guns?’

‘I’m not looking for him,’ he returned. ‘There won’t be any trouble unless he comes looking for me. He’s the one you ought to talk to, not me. I’m just the poor boy he says he’s going to kill.’

Somehow he did not look so much the helpless poor boy as his words suggested. There was an air of competence about him, of easy self-reliance that belied his description of himself. In his eyes, surprisingly, a gay smile danced. She wondered whether she was not the victim of a hoax. Her glance swept the brightly lighted restaurant filled with diners. There beat upon her ears the hum of many voices, the lively lilt of laughter. Surely it was not possible that in the shadows outside, almost within sound of the merriment, death was waiting to pounce.

‘I think you make sport of me, perhaps, because I am a stranger,’ she said.

He shook his head. ‘Ask someone else. Ask a waiter whether Bruce Marshall shot a man yesterday.’

‘I will.’ She signaled a passing waiter and in a low voice asked the question.

The man gave her a startled look. He had no desire to be drawn into possible trouble. ‘I do not know. Would madam wish to see a newspaper?’

Dennis nodded. ‘Please.’

The waiter stepped to the door and bought a paper from a newsboy on the street. He brought it back and handed it to Gifford. On the front page was the story of the Brewer killing; also there was an editorial denouncing the murderer and his associates. The head of the editorial was, ‘The Mills of God,’ and it attacked fearlessly the criminal bands that were terrifying the city. The writer must have known he took his life in his hands when he penned such an invective, but the press of San Francisco was notably fearless. He urged honest citizens to organize against the insolent and rampant crime that plagued the city.

A day of judgment is at hand [so the editor predicted]. Not much longer will such ruffians as Bruce Marshall and James Stuart murder with impunity. Not much longer will open daylight robbery obtain among us. Surely we shall not sit supinely down while incendiaries without conscience, the offscourings of humanity, set fire to and destroy our fair city.

‘ . . . the mills of God grind slowly, yet they grind exceeding small.’

Killers, highwaymen, blackjackers, and firebugs are warned to beware before it is too late. A free people is not forever mocked.

After she had read the news story and the editorial, Miss Montez looked across at her companion. ‘It’s true then, what you told me. I met Mr. Marshall through the captain of the boat on which I came. Of course I didn’t know what he was like. But that doesn’t matter. What does matter is—you. How old are you, Mr. Gifford?’

‘A grown man,’ he told her.

‘Yes. But how old, if you don’t mind?’

‘Going on twenty,’ he answered; then added, since his reply was an overstatement of fact, ‘I’ll be twenty coming grass.’

‘Coming grass?’ she repeated.

‘Next spring.’

‘That is, you’re just past nineteen.’

‘Have it your own way,’ he smiled.

‘Only a schoolboy.’

There was truth enough in her comment for it to touch him on the raw.

‘We grow up young on the frontier, Comtesse,’ he explained. ‘I’ve counted myself a man for two years and more. You can’t cross the plains and fight Indians and still be thinking about marbles and kites. I’ve seen the bodies of men who had been scalped and others who had been tortured by the red devils. Twice I’ve helped bury men shot down in difficulties. I saw a fellow run amuck with a bowie knife in a dive and get filled full of holes inside of five seconds. My vote helped to hang two others by lynch law at a mining camp.’

She stared at him in puzzled wonder. He was so young, so ingenuous. At one of her remarks earlier in the evening she had seen a blush run beneath the tan of his face. Yet he talked of these stark experiences as if they were a matter of routine.

‘*Mon Dieu*, what kind of a country is this?’

‘It will be the finest in the world, as soon as we’ve set our house in order,’ he promised.

‘And when will that be?’

‘That’s the question a thousand men are asking.’ Dennis picked up the newspaper she had dropped and found in the editorial the prediction he was

seeking. 'I'll join this writer in prophecy. Not much longer.'

'But if these men control the courts, as you say?'

'They don't own the people,' he told her grimly.

'I don't understand. What can you do?'

A waiter stood beside them with two plates of mock-turtle soup.

Dennis tossed aside her question with the insouciance of the youth of which she had accused him.

'Sufficient to the day. First, I can dine—with the loveliest lady in San Francisco.'

She was a woman of many moods. Her dark eyes danced.

'If I had had a hundred like you beside me in Munich when the storm broke!' she exclaimed. 'Tell me about yourself—your home—your family. Are all young Americans like you? If so, I'm going to love your country.'

'Heaven forbid that you judge Americans by me,' he protested.

When she questioned adroitly he began to talk of his mother and sisters, of life on the quiet plantation where he had been brought up, of Baltimore and society in that city. The picture she saw was one very different from that of the hurly-burly flood of people who had poured into California from all over the world.

'Why did you come here?' she asked him. 'You had a pleasant life all arranged for you. Why leave it for—for this?'

He smiled. 'I might ask you the same question, madam, and the answer would be the same. I left it because the excitement of this life drummed in my heart. It wasn't safety I wanted. The long trail lured me, and at the end of it——'

'——the pot of gold,' she suggested.

'Not so much that as the romance of finding it,' he corrected.

The woman nodded. She understood, since she was of the same mind. Lola Montez was an adventuress. The game intrigued her, not the stake.

## CHAPTER XII

### THE MOUSE GNAWS AT THE ROPE

DENNIS did not tempt Providence by seeing Lola Montez to her hotel. Marshall was apparently of an impatient temper and might be lying in wait to get an immediate revenge. The young man slipped through the kitchen door of the restaurant into an alley. This he followed in the darkness until he came to a lighted street. Before he emerged from the alley he scanned all those in sight to assure himself that none of them were posted to waylay him.

Presently he was an inconspicuous floater among the thousands who surged up and down the streets of the busy town. Dennis did not linger. As directly as possible he made his way to the lodging-house where he was staying. It was a tent, fifty feet long, with an aisle down the middle flanked on both sides by cots packed almost as closely as they could be set.

From his blanket roll Dennis took the revolver he had bought from Guillermo Martínez. He put the Allen sixshooter in the blankets. During the next day or two he wanted close at hand a weapon to which he was used. Since he did not know any of the fifty neighbors who would sleep in the tent that night he tucked the Colt's under his pillow. Five minutes later he was sound asleep.

After breakfast next morning Dennis walked to the little frame building at the corner of Brush and Sansome Streets where Samuel Brannan had his office. Within a few days that office was to become famous as the headquarters of the Vigilance Committee, but nobody could have guessed that then.

Brannan was a busy man and Dennis had to wait in the outer office. While he was there half a dozen callers came and went. At last he was admitted to the inner office.

The merchant looked at him and asked him to take a seat. In Brannan's mind there was still a doubt. This young man might be a spy for the ruffians who ganged the city. It would be important for them to have a confederate close to the good citizens who might be contemplating organized opposition to the criminal element.

'What do you want with me, young man?' Brannan demanded, almost roughly.

‘First, I want to tell you my story.’

‘Make it short,’ the older man advised. ‘There are others waiting in my office to see me.’

Dennis told of the kidnaping and escape from the *Mary Bligh* and of his adventures in Monterey, the latter censored in order not to include Rosita. Brannan leaned back in his chair, one leg thrown across an arm of it, and listened with inscrutable eyes that told nothing. Not until Dennis mentioned the name of Shanks did he interrupt.

‘Be careful what you say, sir,’ he advised harshly. ‘Are you telling me that this outlaw Castro claimed in his letter to Ramon Martínez that he was in alliance with Mr. Benjamin Shanks of this city?’

‘I can quote his very words, Mr. Brannan. “As friends and relatives Juan Castro and Ramon Martínez can work to great mutual advantage. In alliance with you I would refuse to assist that vile American Benjamin Shanks to despoil you. Instead of driving the cattle from your ranchos I would protect you from any thieving robbers who might wish to raid them.” That is what he wrote. They tell me the man himself is ignorant, but he has in his gang a man of good family named Felipe Pacheco who probably wrote the note.’

‘All of which I must take on trust, I suppose.’

‘I have a letter from Señor Martínez vouching for me.’

From a pocket Dennis drew a letter and presented it to Brannan. The older man read it and handed the note back to its owner.

‘He speaks highly of you, but he says he has known you only a few days,’ Brannan said.

A clerk came into the room and said that Mr. Frank Ward was outside and wanted to speak with Brannan.

‘Mr. Ward met me when I came here first,’ Dennis interrupted.

‘Show him in,’ ordered Brannan.

Ward burst into the room with an effect of charging into it. He was a small man, but he radiated energy. His eyes were quick and bright, his gestures vehement. He poured words out rapidly.

‘I was right, Sam—right all the time. This Thomas Burdue isn’t Stuart at all. Never saw such a case. Half the witnesses were sure he’s the man, the other half were sure he isn’t. But we’ve got the right man at last. Arrested him in the sand hills outside town. Remarkable likeness, but he’s two inches taller than Burdue.’

‘Hope we’ve got the right one this time,’ Brannan said, with a warning glance at him. ‘Frank, did you ever meet this young man?’

Ward’s birdlike eyes swept to the third man in the room. ‘Of course I’ve met him. He’s Dennis Gifford.’ He offered a hand. ‘Where have you been? I heard a story about your being shanghaied. Anything to it?’

‘Yes, sir. It’s true.’

‘How well do you know Mr. Gifford, Frank?’

‘Know him? Well as I do most men. Know his uncle in the East. The boy’s all right, if you’re thinking of giving him a job.’

‘A more important matter than that. Sit down, Frank. I want you to listen to Mr. Gifford’s story.’

Dennis went over again what he had to tell. Its importance to the San Franciscans lay in the fact that Shanks was mentioned in it as in alliance with Castro. For some time the shipowner had been under suspicion, but no direct evidence had been found to connect him with the lawless element. If Castro’s letter was true, Shanks’s influence extended to criminals in the State far beyond the limits of the city.

‘I’ve suspected Shanks for months—ever since Stuart slipped out of the city after robbing Jansen,’ Brannan cried with an oath. ‘Shanks engineered his escape. We guessed that then and couldn’t prove it. He’s back of all the crooked politics in the city. But the weasel keeps under cover so that nothing can be proved against him.’

‘If Stuart could be made to tell what he knows,’ Dennis suggested.

The man James Stuart was one of the notorious outlaws of the city. He had murdered a man at Foster Bar, the sheriff of Auburn, and to escape the vengeance of the miners had returned to San Francisco, where he had lived with other Sydney coves in the shanty town near the foot of Telegraph Hill. It had been a few months later that he and another ruffian had entered the store of C. J. Jansen and slugged and robbed the proprietor. Public opinion had become so incensed at him that he had since that day remained hidden.

‘Why should he talk, when he’s sure he’ll be released on a straw bail?’ asked Ward impatiently. ‘The man’s not a fool—and I’ll say this for him, he’s a hardy devil, whatever else he is.’

Dennis looked out of the window, a faraway reminiscent look in his eyes. When he spoke, his words were without stress and apparently apropos of nothing. ‘I was at Dungaree Flat when the diggers hanged two scoundrels. They were hardy devils too. About that time the riffraff moved out, I noticed.’

The other two men looked at the young man's brown, impassive face. This was not a new thought to them. It had been frequently in their minds, had been pushed aside, and recurred. But it was not a thing to be discussed openly. When the hour came, if it ever did, those who acted must be sure there were no traitors in camp. For the organizers of a people's court would take their lives and put them at stake.

'A mining camp is not San Francisco, young man,' Brannan said severely.

'That's true,' Dennis agreed. 'At the diggings these Sydney gentry could not rule the roost. They'd be strung as high as Haman. Here they do as they please, I suppose because they're backed by suave and corrupt American politicians.'

He had put his finger exactly on the pulse of the situation. Ward and Brannan had plenty of courage, energy, and public spirit. So had many others of the leading citizens. The one question was to know those who could be trusted. Hundreds of reputable men would oppose any movement which swept aside the usual judicial machinery, some by reason of timidity, others because of natural conservatism, and a small minority on account of self-interest. John McDougal, the governor, would use the forces of the State against them. Another powerful foe would be David C. Broderick, later to become United States Senator, who was building up a powerful political machine based on Tammany Hall as a model. Even Colonel Jack Hays, the gallant Texan who had served with Houston and later, at the head of the First Texans, had in the Mexican War stormed Fort Soldado and the perpendicular cliffs of Cerro del Obispado, would probably hold his office of sheriff pledged to the enforcement of formal law and order. What Dennis Gifford hinted at so casually was a course not to be undertaken lightly, since local civil war and much bloodshed might ensue from it.

Ward banged his fist down on the table. 'Right you are. Might as well face the truth. If we strike at these ruffians, we're hitting the scoundrels back of them. And that's our job. They've got to be smashed, the respectable hypocrites who grow fat on ill-gotten wealth. By God, I'm for war, Sam.'

'I'm not,' Brannan disagreed. 'If this is a job to be done—and I don't say it isn't—we've got to do it with brains in such a way as to avoid war.' Abruptly he turned to Gifford. 'Young man, if we need you, you'll be notified. Better leave your address with me.'

Dennis understood that he was dismissed. Promptly he rose. From a place where it was concealed under his coat the young man drew the Allen sixshooter Brannan had obtained for him the evening before.

‘I’ll say “Thank you” for this, sir,’ he told Brannan. ‘As it happened, I didn’t have to use it, but I might have needed it very much.’

‘Keep your eyes peeled,’ advised Brannan. ‘There was murder in Marshall’s face as he went out of the restaurant.’

Dennis had one more word to say. ‘If you need me, you won’t forget. I’ll go through with you to a finish.’

‘We won’t forget,’ Brannan answered gruffly.



## CHAPTER XIII

### DENNIS FREES HIS MIND

AS DENNIS stood at the foot of the narrow stairway leading to Brannan's office, uncertain whether to turn into Bush or Sansome Street, he caught sight of someone whose presence brought him to swift attention and set a pulse beating swiftly in his throat. Bruce Marshall was standing on the opposite corner of the junction. He was waiting for the traffic to slacken before crossing the street.

The first impulse of Dennis was to slip quietly back up the stairway. The second was to stand his ground. Some day he was bound to meet this man. It might as well be now. At any rate, he would have fair play and not be caught in a trap. Swiftly he eased the revolver in the scabbard under his armpit. In the swiftness of the draw might lie all the difference between life and death.

Marshall chose his moment and walked across the street. While he stood on the sidewalk exchanging greetings with an acquaintance, young Gifford did not once lift his eyes from the man. As usual the killer was clad in black broadcloth and white frilled shirt. His boots were highly polished. He had today discarded his high silk hat for a broad-rimmed black felt.

Dennis hoped he would disappear round the corner, but he came directly toward the young man. Not until he was about five paces away did Marshall catch sight of Gifford. Abruptly he pulled up in his stride. Into his pale face the angry color flushed. His prominent eyes bulged as he glared at his adversary.

The young man looked at him, steadily, silently, without flinching. The right arm of Dennis was lying across his body, the fingers within an inch or two of the concealed Colt's revolver.

'I—warned you,' Marshall cried hoarsely.

The chill that had run down the spine of the boy was gone. So, too, was the flutter of nerves. He felt cool, poised, ready for any turn of the cards.

'Meaning—now?' he drawled.

Marshall felt a shock of surprise. For good reasons it was not his intention to bring this matter to issue of personal combat. There was an easier way to get rid of this young fool. But the look in the youngster's eyes took him aback. In their gray depths was an icy steadiness quite unexpected.

No muscle of the face or body moved. A deadly threat lay in that tigerish stillness.

The face of the killer was venomous, his mouth a thin, cruel line. The long fingers of his right hand twitched, but the arm made no slightest movement toward a weapon. He waved a hand, as if to brush this inconsequential adversary aside.

‘Run along and get out of my way,’ he ordered.

Already fifty passers-by had sensed there was trouble afoot. They were crowding out of the line of fire.

‘Try running along yourself,’ advised Dennis, loud enough for all to hear. ‘I don’t do my running from bullies.’

The killer gasped, so unexpected was this slap in the face. He would as soon have looked for a rabbit to turn on a bulldog. His face turned almost black.

‘Do you know who I am?’ he roared.

‘Sure I do. You’re Play-it-Safe Marshall. I saw you shoot down Brewer when he wasn’t expecting it. That’s the difference now. I’m ready.’

Marshall had his instructions. They were to let this boy alone, to be dealt with in a safer, subtler way. But he was a man of swift and uncontrollable passion. From his throat there came a roar of rage.

His arm had begun to move when a voice cut in, sharp and menacing.

‘Not again, Marshall.’

It stopped him, just as it stopped Gifford, their weapons half-drawn.

Gerritt Ryckman stepped forward. ‘If you kill this boy, Marshall, I swear before God to have you hanged before night.’

Dennis spoke, his voice a jeer, eyes still fixed on the gunman.

‘He isn’t going to kill me, Mr. Ryckman. The fireworks are off now, I reckon, but I was aiming to kill him.’

Someone laughed, a high, nervous cackle. But neither Ryckman nor Marshall showed any mirth. Both looked at the speaker. His slender, lithe figure was absolutely without motion, catlike in its poised wariness. In the eyes shone a cold, fierce eagerness. A boy he might be in years, but the threat of death was implicit in his crouched energy.

‘Lucky for him you came, Mr. Ryckman,’ the killer said uneasily.

Gifford did not answer that. He spoke, at Marshall, choosing his words carefully, in a low, clear voice that all could hear. Out of the depths of his

mind he dragged a vocabulary of scabrous epithets. Coward, bully, blackleg, hired assassin for another poisonous reptile in the background, snake in the grass: these were the mildest terms the boy could find for the dangerous warrior whom he was tongue-lashing.

The man in broadcloth stood aghast. He found words at last. 'I won't stand it. By Gad, no! Never in my life—never—have I——'

'Why don't you cut loose the way you did at Brewer?' sneered Gifford. 'Maybe I'm lying. Maybe I wasn't the best pistol shot in Maryland. Cut loose—if you're such a whale of a fighter.'

'That's enough, boy,' Ryckman ordered sharply. 'You move along, Marshall. I'll take care of this young fellow.'

Marshall glared around him. He did not know what to do. His prestige was shaken, to its foundation. A boy, in his teens, had before fifty men taunted him, urged him to come on and fight. But he dared not—not with Ryckman standing there, ready to sick the citizens on him if he should destroy the youngster. Moreover, deep in his heart, for the first time, there had been planted a doubt of his own infallibility as a duelist.

The killer stood up, square-shouldered and impressive. 'I don't exchange billingsgate with gutter snipes, but if you ever cross my path again—look out,' he said, then turned and stalked away.

Ryckman dragged the boy upstairs to Brannan's office. He pushed through to the inner room, barely waiting for the answer to his knock.

'Gentlemen, let me introduce to you Jack the Giant Killer,' he said, his bright eyes gleaming.

Brannan glanced at Dennis. 'What's he been doing now?'

'Practically nothing at all,' answered Ryckman, 'except to tell that scoundrel Bruce Marshall he is a cowardly bully, a dirty blackleg, a hired murderer, and a worthless humbug imposing himself as a gentleman.'

Ward sat up in his chair, imps of delight dancing in his eyes. 'And when did he do this? And why didn't Marshall blast him off the earth?'

'That's another story,' Ryckman replied. 'But first let's find out who this young Hector is, and why Marshall has a grudge at him.'

'We know that,' Ward responded, and in five sentences told the recent history of the youth.

'The reason Marshall did not shoot it out was that Mr. Ryckman warned him he'd be hanged before night if he killed me,' Dennis said, speaking for the first time.

‘That was one reason,’ Ryckman agreed. ‘But you stood there like a young fighting cock in a pit, every crow a jeer at him. The fellow was taken by surprise. He didn’t know what to make of it. If it was bluff, young fellow, you’d better get out of town *my pronto*. Perhaps you had, anyhow. He’ll not rest until he’s settled with you.’

‘Then you and Mr. Brannan had better leave with me,’ Dennis said, with a grin. ‘You’ve both been threatened a good many times by the Sydney gentry. Where shall we go?’

‘Meaning you’re going to stay? Is that it?’ Ward asked.

‘That’s it.’

‘You haven’t answered Ryckman’s question,’ Brannan cut in. ‘Why were you trying to anger Marshall? If he’d called your bluff, would he have found a full hand or a pair of deuces?’

‘A six full,’ Gifford told him. ‘What I told Marshall is true. Last year I won the pistol championship of Maryland.’

‘Hmp!’ snorted Brannan. ‘Shooting at a target is one thing. At a man, while he’s emptying a weapon at you, that’s another.’

‘You haven’t told us yet why you were trying to devil him into drawing,’ Ward said.

‘I was hoping to get an even chance with him. Better that than to be shot down from ambush without warning.’

‘Right,’ assented Brannan. ‘The bold way is always the safe way.’

‘You mean the safer,’ Ryckman corrected. ‘I don’t think any of us four are safe here. You were shadowed for months, Sam, after your activity against the regulators. I wouldn’t have given a pinch of snuff for your life.’ He looked around quietly and gathered the eyes of the other three in the room. ‘I think the time has come, gentlemen, for the bold way. Are you ready?’

‘Two good men came to see me yesterday about that,’ Brannan said, and gave their names. ‘We all know some who can be trusted. Let’s call a meeting and organize a people’s committee of protection with a tribunal for the punishment of crime. We’ll check over the names of those of whom we’re sure and meet here tonight. If you agree, this must be absolutely secret, gentlemen.’

Each of them took an oath not to divulge what they had in mind.

## CHAPTER XIV

### DUFF CONWAY MEETS A TARTAR

SAN FRANCISCO was still a comparatively small city, and its thousands of floaters swept up and down the main streets all day and night. It was, therefore, not surprising that Dennis came face to face with Long Jim, the boatswain of the *Mary Bligh*.

‘When did you get in?’ Dennis asked.

‘Last night,’ the boatswain answered. He glanced around at the hurrying pedestrians, to make sure he knew none of them. ‘When can I see you alone, lad?’

‘In the back room of the Ivy Green—say, in ten minutes. That’s it across the way.’

Not another word was said. Each of them moved forward and neither looked back. But when Dennis walked into the back room of the Ivy Green saloon a few minutes later, Long Jim was there sipping a glass of grog.

After Gifford had sat down at the little table the boatswain leaned forward and spoke in a hoarse whisper.

‘The word’s out that you’re to be taken back to the ship, me boy. There’s an offer of a hundred dollars in gold to the man that can get ye there by hook or crook.’

‘That’s a lot of money, Jim. Why am I worth so much?’

‘You’ll have to ask someone that knows more than I do to find that out, boy. But I’ll tell you this. Old Shanks was aboard soon as we got in. He spent an hour in the cabin with the Old Man and Duff Conway. After he left, the word was passed about the reward. You’d better look sharp and keep indoors nights.’

‘Why don’t you try for the hundred yourself, Jim?’ asked Dennis.

A dark flush ran under the deep tan of the boatswain’s face. ‘Because I’m not a crimp, but an honest man,’ he said with an oath.

Dennis offered his hand impulsively. ‘Don’t I know it, Jim? It was you saved me at Monterey the night I escaped. You had your hands on me and let go. You fell down on purpose for the others to stumble over you.’

‘I’m no manhunter for Duff Conway and his likes,’ the sailor growled. On the spur of the moment he made a decision. ‘They’re a rotten bunch, from old Shanks himself down to Cap Little and Conway. I’m through with ’em—made my last voyage on the *Mary Bligh*. Me, I’ll sail on an honest boat or none at all.’

‘That’s the way to talk, Jim. I came up on the *Hope Allen*. Captain Brown told me he’s short-handed. I’ll go see him with you if you like.’

‘I’ll take that kindly of you,’ Long Jim said.

As the two men walked down to the wharf where the *Hope Allen* lay, Dennis kept his eyes wide open. If they met some of the officers or crew of the *Mary Bligh*, he did not want to be taken at disadvantage, and down along the waterfront was a likely spot to run into them. Here were the saloons and dives frequented by seamen. From one of these some of the crew of the brig might pour at any moment.

Though he was warily alert against a surprise, the deeper currents of the young man’s mind were busy searching for the answer to a question. Why had Shanks thought it worth while to put up a hundred dollars reward for his capture? No doubt he had seen Marshall after the rencontre at Jacques Raphael’s restaurant. It would be bad policy to let the killer murder another man so soon after the death of Brewer, for the shipowner was not fool enough to stir up public opinion wantonly. Since Dennis had interfered with Castro at Monterey, Shanks might think it just as well to get rid of him. He had become a nuisance. If he could be taken aboard the *Mary Bligh* as a captured deserter, there would be no more trouble with him. Of one thing Dennis was reasonably sure. By this time Shanks knew he had been in conference with Brannan and Ryckman. His spies would report that to him. Before Dennis a picture flashed. He saw a huge mass of flesh slumped in a chair and two eyes filmed like those of a dead cod resting inscrutably on him. And swiftly on the heel of it another: the deck of the brig *Mary Bligh* beating out to sea on a dark night, furtive figures flinging a dead weight overboard, the body of Dennis Gifford plunging down into the cold, rolling waters.

Captain Brown was not at the wharf nor on board the *Hope Allen*. One of the mates, supervising the unloading of the vessel, suggested he might be found at the offices of the company. Long Jim and Dennis walked along the waterfront toward the headquarters of the West Coast Trading Company, Limited.

‘There she lies, the dirty trollop,’ Long Jim said, with a hitch of the thumb toward a brig lying at anchor in the bay.

A glance told Dennis it was the *Mary Bligh*. He was still looking at her when he heard voices. Three men walked out of a saloon, apparently making for a rowboat tied to a post at the end of a pier. The men were Captain Little, Duff Conway, and Reb Simon, first mate of the brig.

Conway was the first to catch sight of the two men.

‘Long Jim’s got him, by God!’ he roared.

Out of the corner of his mouth Long Jim spat a word at Gifford. ‘Run.’

It was too late for that. The officers of the *Mary Bligh* had spread to cut off a retreat.

Dennis backed a few steps to the land end of the pier. ‘I’m all right, Jim, if you’ll stand by me and do as I say,’ he said quietly.

‘I’ll take orders, mate,’ Long Jim said. He could see no way of escape, but he was not going to desert the boy.

Dennis spoke to Little, his voice as cool and edged as the singing of a whiplash. ‘I’m armed, Captain, and I’m a dead shot. Remember that, and you’ll save yourself trouble.’

Captain Little stopped Duff Conway as the second mate was about to charge forward.

‘Steady does it, Duff.’ To Dennis he said, ‘Now, my lad, we’ve got you, no two ways about that; it’s for you to say whether you want to go aboard with a broken head or without one.’

‘Neither, thank you, Captain. I don’t like your ship nor its officers. I’ll stay ashore.’ Drawing his revolver, Dennis added quietly: ‘I’ll shoot down any one or all of you with the greatest pleasure in the world.’

Like a bull elephant Conway trumpeted his defiance and charged.

Dennis fired twice. The mate crashed down with an impact that shook the wharf.

‘The damned scut’s killed me!’ he screamed.

The young man knew better than that. He had aimed at the fellow’s legs. But he did not think it necessary to correct misinformation.

‘You still want to take me aboard, Captain?’ he asked.

Little did not answer. He was legging it to a point of safety as fast as his two hundred and twenty pounds would let him go. The first mate was well ahead of his chief.

Long Jim looked at Dennis, respect and awe in his troubled face. ‘My God, boy, what have you done?’

‘I haven’t killed him, if that’s what is worrying you. One in each leg. Come on, Jim. I’ve got to give myself up before Little sets the law on me.’

‘To the sheriff?’ Long Jim asked.

‘No. To the men who are going to be the law in this town from today.’ Dennis gave instructions to one of the men who had appeared from nowhere at the beginning of the row. ‘Get a doctor and have him look after this man.’

‘Yes, sir. I’ll do that.’

Dennis took the names and addresses of all those who had seen any part of the affray. ‘They were trying to shanghai me,’ he explained. ‘I’ll probably need your evidence.’

This done, he walked with Long Jim to a frame building at the corner of Bush and Sansome Streets.



## CHAPTER XV

### ‘GENTLEMEN, WE’RE HERE TO HANG SOMEBODY’

‘IMPORTANT business with Mr. Brannan,’ Dennis said to the clerk.

To Brannan, three minutes later, he opened with a remark that brought the older man to sharp attention. ‘First case for the Committee of Safety, sir.’

‘What do you mean?’ demanded Brannan.

‘I’ve had to shoot a man—second mate of the *Mary Bligh*. He’s not dead, but I let him have it in both legs.’

‘What for?’ Brannan wanted to know sharply.

‘There’s a man in the outer office can tell the story, sir. May I bring him in?’

‘Yes.’

Long Jim made an awkward scrape of a bow in the direction of Brannan when Dennis introduced him as the boatswain of the brig *Mary Bligh*. He hitched up his trousers and told his story.

Brannan passed verdict, one subject to revision. ‘Can’t see you were to blame, Gifford, but I will say you are the damndest fool for getting into trouble. Don’t you ever take a day off and live like an ordinary peaceable citizen?’

‘Every day,’ Dennis replied cheerfully. ‘It’s the other fellows who get on the warpath. They pick on me because I’m so inoffensive.’

‘Then all I’ve got to say is that they’re bigger fools than you are.’ Brannan turned to Long Jim. ‘Can you be here tomorrow night at nine o’clock and bring with you any other witnesses to what took place on the wharf? I want you to fetch anybody you know who can testify to the original kidnaping of Gifford. You say half a dozen of the sailors of the *Mary Bligh* can swear he was knocked out and taken aboard still unconscious. Get as many of them to come as you can. And don’t do any outside talking.’

The boatswain rubbed his lank bristly chin doubtfully. ‘I can get one or two of ’em if I’m lucky. Most of ’em won’t want to mix in it. Beggin’ your pardon, sir, but they’d be too leery.’

‘Of what?’ Brannan asked.

Long Jim continued to massage his chin. He considered a moment, then blurted out what was in his mind.

‘Of Duff Conway first off—and a damn sight more of the big man back of him.’

‘Meaning?’

‘You know who I mean, sir. No need to name him—the one who runs this town.’

‘There’s no such person,’ Brannan snapped. ‘I know the man you mean, and you’re vastly exaggerating his power.’

‘Maybe so,’ the sailor conceded. ‘All I know is the talk along the waterfront, sir.’

‘Merely gossip.’

‘If any of the lads came they wouldn’t dare sign on a Shanks ship again. It would be as much as their lives are worth,’ Long Jim explained.

Dennis nodded agreement. ‘They’d be hazed and knocked about a lot, if the rest of Shanks’s ships are officered like the *Mary Bligh*.’

‘Plenty of other ships short-handed, since so many seamen have gone to the gold-fields.’ Brannan passed to consideration of another angle of the matter. ‘Go to my house, Gifford. I’ll give you the address. Stay there until you see me. You may consider yourself under arrest. Don’t on any account appear on the streets. D’you understand?’

‘I’ll do exactly as you say,’ Dennis promised.

He kept his word. While young Gifford lay concealed from the officers of the law who had warrants for his arrest, a few stern, determined men took action that was to result in the redemption of San Francisco from the rule of thugs, scoundrels, and unscrupulous politicians.

A dozen citizens met in Brannan’s office and formed the nucleus of an organization to be known as the Committee of Vigilance. A constitution and by-laws were adopted. It was decided that an executive committee should be the active force, and of this Samuel Brannan was chosen the first president. In co-operation with it a much larger general committee was to function. As the symbol of the people’s movement an open eye was selected, a warning to wrongdoers that the Vigilantes never slept. The signal for calling together citizens when an emergency occurred was to be three taps on one of the fire company bells, an interlude, three more taps, another pause, the tolling to be continued for several minutes. No man in the group guessed that within twenty-four hours the fateful bell was to sound.

The executive committee met in Brannan's office the evening after organization. Certain important details were discussed, then those present listened to the evidence for and against Gifford.

Although Dennis felt sure the charge against him was only a formal one that would not be sustained, he looked round on the grave, silent men watching him as he entered under guard, and was awed by the atmosphere. If he had been a criminal he could not have faced them without fear. He was relieved to see not only Long Jim and two sailors of the *Mary Bligh*, but two of the men who had been on the wharf when he shot Duff Conway. Among the judges were Ryckman, Frank and George Ward, William A. Howard, and William T. Coleman, who was to be the leader a few years later of the city's second Vigilance Committee. Brannan presided.

Dennis told his story. Every detail of it was backed by the evidence of the witnesses. Frank Ward told what he knew of the young man's character and antecedents. Without a dissenting vote the prisoner was acquitted. Indirectly, though not in official language, he was commended.

'If that is all the business coming before the Committee tonight——'

Brannan had got so far when there came the sound of many footsteps trampling up the stairs and a knock on the door.

Already news of the existence of a people's tribunal had spread. One of the newspapers had carried a story about it. A dozen citizens were dragging before it a thief caught in the act.

The Committee decided to hear the case at once, but the room was so crowded that an adjournment was taken to the engine house of the California Fire Company at the corner of Market and Bush.

Dennis was named as one of the guards of the prisoner. As they passed through the streets, he learned the story of the crime. The arrested man, John Jenkins, had broken into the shipping office of one Virgil on Long Wharf, carried a small safe to the end of the pier, and put it in a boat. Almost at once the theft had been detected. Half a dozen boats had pushed off after his and overhauled him before he reached the island for which he was making. He had tossed the safe overboard. At the point of a dozen revolvers he had surrendered.

Jenkins was a tall, strong fellow dressed in clothes of English cut. He had a sinister look, and his restless eyes were bold and derisive.

At the trial in the engine room it developed that many knew him. He was a convict from Australia, a murderer, a hardened criminal implicated in many outrageous robberies and holdups. As the evidence piled up against

him, it became clear to those present that this was a test case. The Committee could not commit the man to prison, for he would promptly be released by due process of law. To banish him would be ineffective, since he would return as had the regulators banished some months earlier. Only by drastic action would the evil element be intimidated.

The robber jeered at his judges. He knew that when he got into the hands of the law he would be safe. Once he told Brannan to go ahead and enjoy himself as long as he could. No man in the room seemed cooler or less disturbed than this Englishman of fine physique and steady nerves.

Outside the building a great crowd had gathered. Its noise beat into the room where the trial was being held. The Committee had posted an armed guard of a hundred men, but it was well known that the criminal element or the law might make an attempt to rescue the prisoner.

When the time came to reach a verdict, some of the jury added to the decision of 'Guilty' a rider that, since this was a case of robbery, the extreme penalty had perhaps better not be enforced.

William A. Howard rose, laid his revolver on the table, looked coolly over the assembled men, and said, slowly and clearly, 'Gentlemen, as I understand it, we are here to hang somebody.'

That one crisp sentence was enough. It sealed the fate of the prisoner.

Jenkins did not turn a hair. He said 'Bosh!' contemptuously, asked for a cigar, and smoked it nonchalantly.

The roar of voices outside had become deafening. More than seven thousand people, the newspapers later estimated, were crowded in the street.

Coleman suggested that Brannan had better go out and talk to the crowd. Instantly the president of the Committee jumped to his feet. 'I'll do it,' he said.

Brannan walked out upon a small balcony and raised a hand to ask for silence. The shouting died away. No speaker could have been found more suited for this rôle than Brannan. He had a strong voice. He was rough, profane, abusive, and hearty. His facts and his invective he flung at the upturned faces almost with the impact of a fist. He stormed at the people for their supineness, at the courts and the public officials for their corruption, at the politicians for encouraging crime.

Up and down the small platform he walked, shaking his fist at those below. 'How long do you expect to let bullies knock you out with slungshots, gouge you with knives, and shoot you down with pistols?' he roared. 'Every hour of the day some crime is committed. At night robbers

and firebugs roam the city. No honest man is safe. By God, last month a shipload of convicts from Australia, some of 'em still with shaven heads, was unloaded at one of our wharves. We welcome this scum of England's slums and lump them off with decent Englishmen and thrifty Scotch and brawny Irishmen who came to help build up our great California. Shame on you! Shame on me!

'But the hour has struck at last. A people's tribunal has been formed and tonight we're going to hang one of these ruffians who have terrorized the city. Take warning, all you criminals who are sifted in among the honest men here. Your day is done. From tonight the people of San Francisco rule—not the rotten courts, not the corrupt officials who sell contracts and get rich doing it, not the criminals who murder good citizens. But you and I—the people. We're going to clean up this city and do it right. All of you who favor a Committee of Vigilance to restore order to our streets and justice to our courts and fair play in our government, lift up your heads and yell "Aye."'

The roar that was lifted could have been heard a mile.

'By Heaven, there's some hope for you yet. Stand up on your hind legs and show this riffraff California stands for the rule of the people.'

A voice was lifted from the mob. 'Cuss me, when do we hang this fellow?'

'Soon enough,' Brannan replied. 'A parson is with him now. We'll take him to the old plaza for execution. All criminals are hereby warned that any attempt at a rescue will result in bloodshed, as the Committee has at its service hundreds of armed guards.'

The bell of the California Fire Company was tolling the Vigilantes' signal. Jenkins was a hardy ruffian. He walked with firm tread, head up, to the place of execution. An attempt to get out of him a confession of his crimes, implicating others, he waved aside scornfully.

'You've got me. That'll have to be enough for tonight. Let's get this business done with, gentlemen.'

To the railing of the south porch of the old adobe customs-house a pulley had been attached. The loop at the end of a rope was dropped over the head of the condemned man and tightened.

From the outskirts of the crowd came cries of execration, protests against the action of the Vigilance Committee. No attention was paid to these.

'Every lover of liberty and good order lay hold,' Brannan cried.

A score of hands seized the rope and pulled.

Thousands of citizens, awestruck by the thing that had been done, watched in silence the dangling body.

The bell of the Monumental Fire Company began to toll.

## CHAPTER XVI

### ON SECRET SERVICE

THE drastic action of the Committee of Vigilance precipitated stormy protests from the opposition. Governor McDougal issued a proclamation urging that a true citizen must hold the constitution and laws of his country inviolably sacred and must scrupulously respect the forms of legal procedure whereby life, liberty, or property is to be affected.

Supported by Broderick, a coroner's jury brought in a verdict against Brannan, Ryckman, and others of the Committee. The answer of the Vigilantes was to publish a statement signed by one hundred and eighty of the most prominent citizens of San Francisco admitting they were as much involved as the ones named.

Since most of the newspapers supported the movement of the Vigilantes, handbills got out by the Law and Order Party, as the faction against the Committee called itself, were distributed through the streets of the town.

‘At any time good citizens may be seized on a dark night, hurried to a lonely spot in Happy Valley and murdered by the Stranglers,’ one of these protested.

Another, signed ‘Many Citizens,’ asked: ‘Shall we tolerate in this enlightened age a Danton, a Robespierre, or a Fouché, and all the paraphernalia of a secret inquisition for the suppression of our laws and criminal courts?’

A third made reference to the case of Dennis Gifford: ‘The pets of the Stranglers are safe. A young ruffian, fresh from crime, with the blood of an honest seaman still wet on his hands, is acquitted by this self-constituted tribunal. A man who takes a cash-box is blotted out of existence.’

The Committee was not intimidated by the outcry against it. Money was needed to investigate the records of criminals, and this was pledged by thousands of residents. Secret-service men were sent to Sacramento, Santa Barbara, Los Angeles, and various mining camps to gather evidence. When this was obtained, the Vigilantes acted. Criminals were whipped publicly. If the rogue was a minor one, he might be served with a notice to leave the city within five days, signed

By Order of the Committee of Vigilance,  
No. 67, Secretary.

Many were seized, put on shipboard, and sent back to the country from which they had come, the expenses of transportation being paid by organization funds if necessary.

Several of the ruffians whose names were known to be on the list of the Committee lost no time in vanishing from town. Among these was Bruce Marshall. His murder of John Brewer had been so flagrant that he felt sure he would be one of the first called to account. Until the energy of the Vigilantes had spent itself, he deemed it wise to disappear. The rumor was that he had gone south.

In defiance of the Vigilantes, outlaws continued to rob, kill, and set fire to the city. A reward of five thousand dollars was offered for the arrest and conviction of incendiaries.

Clearly the outlaws were not yet sufficiently awed. The Foster Bar murderer, James Stuart, was tried and convicted. An intelligent man, of fluent speech and easy manner, he met his fate without flinching, but before his execution he wrote a confession implicating Sam Whittaker, Jimmie-from-Town, and others. None of the higher-ups wanted by the Committee were named by him. If these well-to-do citizens were involved in obvious lawbreaking with the Sydney coves, they had covered their tracks so well it was difficult to trace a connection.

Brannan sent for Dennis.

‘I have a job for you,’ he said. ‘You are acquainted with the Monterey country and know Ramon Martínez. This fellow Whittaker named in Stuart’s confession went south last week. Decided to make himself scarce. We want to make an example of him. He’s one of the leaders of these convicts. The man was transported from England to Sydney in 1836. We find that out there he had great influence with the other lags who were sent out for their country’s good. Now we have reason to believe he is around Monterey, or at least that he was. He may have moved on down to Santa Barbara or Los Angeles. We’re making you out a commission to go down south, find him, and bring him back. Can you do it?’

‘I can try. What does he look like?’

‘Medium size—well-built—broad-shouldered. Blue eyes, keen and sharp. Pleasant smile—excellent manners. Weighs about one hundred and sixty pounds. Dresses well, in an English-cut suit of clothes. Trousers corduroy. Top boots usually well polished. Handsome face, with hair iron-



gray at the temples. A fine set of teeth. Looks to be about forty—maybe a little more. A good deal of the gentleman about him, but don't let that fool you. He's a desperate character, and if it was necessary to escape, he'd shoot you down as he would a coyote.'

'He'll be passing under another name, of course.'

'Yes. It may take you some time to find him. If you get him under a month, I'd say you were lucky. I'm giving you letters to the sheriffs at Monterey and Santa Barbara. Call on them for help, if you need any. Here's money for your expenses. You're to go first to Monterey—on the *Hope Allen*. She leaves at noon tomorrow.'

The eyes of Dennis were dancing with excited delight. He was going back to Monterey. He would see Rosita again. Perhaps her father would invite him to stay at his house. What luck—what golden luck!

'I'll be on board,' he promised fervently.

'I'm not sure I ought to send you,' Brannan continued. 'But I want someone who won't be suspected—someone who looks inoffensive and can make inquiries without being suspected. This Whittaker is a slippery bird. He has brains. We heard he was at Stockton and sent a man there. Whittaker slipped away to Chinese Camp. Our man followed, missed him there, and later actually saw him at Shaw Flat, but was bluffed out of an arrest. Whittaker was seen at Sonora. So we heard. He wasn't there when we looked for him. He has been living with a Mrs. Hogan. That may be worth remembering. Boy, whatever you do, don't make any mistakes. If this Sydney cove suspects you, I wouldn't give a pinch of snuff for your life.'

'I won't throw down on myself,' Dennis promised with a grin.

'We've talked this over among ourselves,' Brannan went on. 'You're only a boy. We realize that. But you have a level head on your shoulders. We think it well to get you out of San Francisco for a time, too. You're none too safe here. The Law and Order Party might stage a counter-hanging, before we could stop it, with you in the rôle of victim. But if you don't want to undertake this job, say so. There's no obligation on you.'

'Wouldn't miss it if you offered me a bonanza claim for it,' Dennis told him gaily.

'Don't get any idea it's a picnic. Whittaker has friends down there—plenty of them. To get him is a man's job. After you've got him, it may be a bigger one to hold him and bring him north.'

Dennis said, 'I'll do the best I can.'

‘We’ve made arrangements with Captain Brown of the *Hope Allen*. You’re to go aboard late tonight dressed as a Mexican vaquero. We’ll arrange to have your own clothes delivered on the ship some time before she sails.’

‘Is all that secrecy necessary?’ Dennis asked. ‘I’m not a very important person. Not many people care where I go or when.’

‘All our friends are watched nowadays,’ Brannan replied. ‘We don’t want word sent to Monterey to look out for you. Fact is, the Vigilance Committee is riding none too firm in the saddle. We have kept our seats only because of the swiftness and secrecy of our moves. Our enemies don’t know where to attack us. But the least carelessness might upset us. Given a chance, the bad elements of this town might wipe us out. I never walk the streets without knowing an assassin’s bullet may put an end to me. The point, boy, is that we can’t protect you at Monterey. You’ll have to play your own hand.’

‘*Con gusto*,’ Dennis answered smilingly.

‘Hmp! With pleasure? Hope you’re right, young fellow. Those of us on the executive committee get precious little out of it, I can tell you.’

Dennis did not doubt that. It could not be pleasant to live with the shadow of assassination hanging over one. He knew that all the leaders of the Committee had been threatened many times. Only the previous day he had seen Ryckman turn on a man who had been following him, walk up to the fellow, and order him to get out of town within six hours. Young Gifford had a feeling that it was their courage alone that saved Howard and Brannan and Ryckman and the other leaders of this movement. To falter, to show any sign of fear, would be to court destruction.

## CHAPTER XVII

### DENNIS LEARNS HE IS IN BONANZA

DENNIS was still boy enough to get excited at masquerading as a vaquero. The costume provided him by Brannan fitted his slender body as a glove does a hand. As he looked at himself in a glass, Dennis wished it were a little gayer, but he knew the purpose of it was not to attract attention to him, but the reverse. Juan Castro would never have worn colors so somber, but one of the sons of Ramon Martínez might have done so while at work.

The blue pantaloons were open at the bottom on the outside of the legs. Above this was a round jacket braided with silver, but a bit dingy from use. The long sash, tied with the ends falling over the hip, was actually faded. Dennis decided to buy a new one to wear on special occasions. A black serape without ornament served for a cloak. A wide-rimmed sombrero set at a rakish tilt was a redeeming feature. Young Gifford liked himself in it.

He stained his face and hands to an olive shade. While he waited for night, he put himself through his paces as a Spanish linguist, though he had no intention of trying to deceive any native. If necessary he would have to play deaf and dumb. Meanwhile he entered into the part so thoroughly that he felt it imperative to jabber all the phrases he knew.

When he left the house to go down to the waterfront he was singing softly to himself,

*'Adios, adios, para siempre—adios.'*

So secure did he feel that he sauntered down the main streets instead of taking a roundabout way to the wharf. Nobody in the world, he felt sure, would take him for anything but a vaquero on a holiday.

In front of the Bella Union he stopped with an exclamation of surprise. A young man was walking into the gambling-house, one with whom he had flown kites and played leap-frog as a boy. The name of the man was Frank Peebles. The two had come across the plains together and become partners in the same claims on Whisky Bar. Since returning to San Francisco, Dennis had made a flying trip to the Bar, but had learned that Bronson and Peebles had sold out and vanished.

Dennis followed Peebles into the Bella Union. He maneuvered to a position close to his friend, who had stopped to watch a keno game. Into Peebles's ear a young vaquero dropped a sentence of rapid Spanish. The

miner did not know how defective its grammar was. All he caught was the word *embarcadero*. Probably the Californian wanted to know in what direction lay the wharves. He glanced at the young fellow, led him to the door, and pointed down the street.

‘*Gracias, señor,*’ murmured Dennis; then drawled in English, ‘What do you hear from the family in Baltimore, Frank?’

Peebles stared at him, long enough to have counted ten. ‘My God, it’s Dennis!’ he cried.

‘Not quite so loud, Frank,’ warned Gifford. ‘Let’s move out of this crowd and get alone before we talk.’

They passed out of the business district.

‘You were shanghaied, weren’t you?’ Peebles asked. ‘That’s the story Jim and I heard.’

‘Yes—on board the *Mary Bligh*, and held a prisoner there for months. I escaped at Monterey and came back. Couldn’t find any trace of you or Jim. They told me at Whisky Bar you’d sold out and gone.’

‘True enough. I’ve good news for you, Denny. We cleaned up about twenty thousand at the Bar, counting the sale price. We’re at Red Dog now—got in among the early ones. Our claims are rich. Already we’ve taken out a small fortune, and we think we haven’t done more than skin it yet.’

‘Good!’ Dennis told him. ‘You and Jim deserve it, if anyone ever did. I’m more glad than I can tell you. Hope you clean up a million each.’

‘Don’t forget you’re in on it, Denny. We were partners in the first claims. We sold them to buy this. That makes you still a partner.’

‘After you and Jim have done all the work. That would be great for me, wouldn’t it? If you want to give me back my share of the twenty thousand, that would be fair, though.’

‘Why would it, when we took your money and invested it in Red Dog claims? No, sir, it’s share and share alike. Jim and I have agreed on that.’

‘I haven’t,’ Dennis differed. ‘I know how hard it is to work a bench claim. You boys can’t do all the sweating and give me the gravy. Even now I can’t join you—not for a month or two. I’m leaving town. Can’t tell you why. But if you want to give me a share—say a fifth or even a tenth—I’ll come as soon as I can and say “Thank you” to the best chums ever a man had.’

‘We’ll say a fifth, then, Denny,’ his friend decided.

Peebles was a big raw-boned young fellow with deep blue eyes and the friendliest of smiles. He hesitated on the edge of a question, then plumped it out.

‘You’re pretty mysterious, young chap, my lad. Are you in trouble? Is this something Jim and I can help you settle? Do you need money? If you do, we can let you have it.’

‘I’m in no trouble, and I don’t need money.’ Dennis felt that he was ungenerous not to tell his friend more. ‘This is strictly confidential, Frank. I’m tied up with the Vigilantes, and I’ve been given a job to do. How long it will take I don’t know.’

The big miner beamed on him. ‘Oh, jiminy, let me help you with it, if there’s any way I can. I’ve been hearing about these jobs for the Strangers. I’m tired of working a long tom. Give a fellow a bite of your apple.’

‘I’ll let you know if I need you. That’s a promise, Frank.’ Dennis added a caution. ‘We don’t call ourselves strangers. The other fellows do that.’

‘I know. The word sorta slipped out. You’re doing a good job, and I’m with you every foot of the way. Let’s make this an honest man’s country.’

The friends walked down toward the waterfront together. On the way Peebles told about their claims on Red Dog. They were dry placers and hard to work, but they had struck rich dirt almost at the grass roots. He mentioned a sum already deposited in a San Francisco bank that made the eyes of Dennis open wide. They were rich men, or at least were on the way to become so. The amount already saved would have seemed to them a fortune some months earlier. But in the atmosphere of San Francisco, where vast sums were made and lost so casually, money had come to be regarded almost as poker chips.

In the darkness near the wharf where the *Hope Allen* was tied, the two young men parted. Dennis asked a sailor lounging on the pier if Captain Brown was on board yet. He spoke in broken English.

The sailor took a dirty clay pipe out of his mouth. ‘He is that, me boy. Would you be the new cook?’

‘I’m a—what you call—passengair, señor.’

‘The hell you are!’ The sailor looked the Mexican lad over frankly. ‘Have ye paid for your passage?’

‘Sí, señor.’

The sailor jerked a thumb over his shoulder. ‘The old man’s aboard if you want to see him.’

Dennis knocked on the door of Captain Brown's cabin and opened it after a gruff 'Come in' invited him. The master of the ship stared at the young Mexican.

'And what the devil do *you* want?' he asked.

The captain's visitor answered with a pour of liquid Spanish vowels.

The master threw up a protesting hand. 'If you know any English, my lad, heave to and start again.'

'I know a little, Captain,' Dennis said with a grin.

Brown jumped to his feet and clapped him on the back. 'If it isn't my little cock of the walk, Dennis Gifford. Lad, you should be an actor.'

'I'm traveling incog,' the young man explained. 'Perhaps you know what I'm going south to do—or to try to do.'

'Not I—except that you're going for the Vigilantes. That's enough for me. I don't need to know any more.'

'We don't want word spread around that I'm out of San Francisco.'

'I'm a clam,' Brown promised. 'How would you like a noggin of rum to keep the cold out?'

The captain began to get busy.

## CHAPTER XVIII

### AT CUTTHROAT DAVE'S

DENNIS had not been in Monterey five minutes before he met Rosita and her brother Guillermo. They were riding down Alvarado Street. The girl's slender, erect figure, so supple and so undulant, looked as though it had been fashioned for the saddle. She had ridden since she had been three years old, and a good seat was second nature to her.

Her dark eyes swept casually past Dennis, then returned to his face, drawn perhaps by some subtle magnetism. Abruptly she pulled up her horse. Dennis saw her lips open to call his name, but the words died before they were uttered. Not knowing who was within hearing, he had shaken his head in swift warning. Men were lounging in the doorway of a *tendejón* and others were passing along the street.

Gifford swept off his sombrero in a bow and moved toward the riders. In his bad Spanish he spoke to Guillermo.

‘Señor, I am Jesus Pesquiera, with a message for Don Ramon Martínez. Can you tell me if he is at home?’

Guillermo frowned at him. This did not ring true. No Californian ever spoke such Spanish as that.

Rosita replied for her brother. She spoke in Spanish. ‘He is at home. If you go there now, I am sure you will find him.’

The surprise of Guillermo was deflected toward his sister. It was not customary for women of his race and class to take the word from the males of their families in addressing strange men.

A blush ran beneath the olive of Rosita's cheeks. ‘He is the American sailor, Mr. Gifford,’ she murmured. ‘He does not want to be recognized. I do not know why.’

As Guillermo looked at Dennis, his white teeth flashed in a smile. ‘It is true, Rosita, and I did not know him.’ In a louder voice, he added: ‘My father will be glad to see you, Jesus. He has been looking for a message from Santiago. Are the cattle in the hills still fat?’

‘They are very fat. The grass is good, señor.’

No more was said. The riders went on their way, the vaquero on his. But Guillermo and Rosita changed their plans. They decided it would be well to

prepare their father for the coming of Gifford. Otherwise in his surprise he might betray the young man to some servant.

They turned off Alvarado Street, crossed to Van Buren, and rode at a canter for home.

When Dennis reached there a few minutes later, Ramon Martínez came forward to greet him with a smile. 'Ah, Jesus! I have been looking for you. Is all well at the Rancho Carmelo?'

He led the young man to the room he used as a library and office. The door closed, he said the hospitable words of greeting so natural to him. 'I am glad to see you, *amigo mio*. My house is yours. I hope that God has been good to you.'

'Beyond my deserts, señor. I have found my partners. They tell me we have bonanza claims. And you? All is well with you? That villain Castro has not annoyed you?'

Martínez shrugged. 'He has annoyed me, yes. Fifty of my fat cattle have been run off. By Castro, very likely. *Quién sabe?* One of my vaqueros, a good boy, was killed by the thieves. The cows I could spare. But for the mother of the boy my heart bleeds.'

The Californian did not ask the young man why he had returned, though he knew there must be a reason of importance. A courteous host did not concern himself with the plans of a guest. If the latter desired to make a confidence, well and good.

Presently Dennis opened his mind. He told all that had occurred in San Francisco during his stay.

'You have come south, then, to find this man Whittaker and to take him back with you?' Martínez asked.

'Yes.'

The caballero thought for a moment. 'It would be well while you are here to stay concealed in my house. I will make inquiries. If this man is here—in Monterey—be sure I shall find it out.'

'Neither he nor his friends must learn we are making inquiries about him,' Dennis explained. 'He will be very wary, since he knows he is wanted. A suspicion, and he would be off.'

'You do not know who his friends are?'

'No. But I have thought he may, through Shanks, make contact with Juan Castro. That is just a guess.'



‘Castro has not been here since you left. Of that I am pretty sure. Our officers are on the lookout for him. Today I shall find out if any stranger in town might be Whittaker.’

In the evening there was dancing at the Martínez home. Except for Dennis, nobody was present but the family. One of the young people twanged a guitar while the others danced *el jarabe* or the contradance. Luisa led Dennis through the contradance, but it was Rosita who showed him how to do the *jarabe*.

The soft dark eyes of Rosita raised demurely to his. He was entranced by the line of her lifted throat. ‘If you are going to be a Spanish caballero, señor, it is necessary you know our native dances,’ she told the American.

Dennis thought he had never seen anyone so lovely as this slender, dusky girl who faced him, long lashes sweeping the smooth olive cheeks as her big eyes were modestly downcast. She pirouetted, and he tried to do the same. Guillermo recited ardent love verses for him. Dennis held his hands out in invitation. Rosita shook her head, flashed a roguish look at him, and circled him in time with the music. Her pupil moved around her. Again they faced each other. Rosita danced, her twinkling feet moving faster and faster. The young man attempted to do the same, but at last threw up his hands in token of defeat. He could not match her grace or her swiftness.

‘*Brava!*’ cried Ramon. ‘But you do well, my friend, for the first attempt. Soon our young men will have to look to their laurels.’

These California women, in their gay colorful costumes, great dark eyes filled with fire, were natural patricians. They were tall and graceful. They moved with a native elegance the young man thought admirable, always with modesty but always with assurance. No wonder the English and Americans who came to the country fell in love with and married them.

Antonio came into the room and spoke with his father. Presently Ramon signaled the guest to join them.

‘Antonio says there are two strangers in town. They are at a low drinking-dive known as Cutthroat Dave’s. He calls his place—the owner, I mean—The Seamen’s Rest. It is back of the customs-house. One of the strangers is dressed well, in a broadcloth suit and high silk hat. Isn’t that what you said, Antonio?’

‘Yes, my father. He is a tall man with a long mustache and a little beard. The other is a rough sailor, unshaven and dirty. There are four others, just landed from a fishing smack, but these are Portuguese and not Americanos.’

‘I’d like to see those two strangers,’ Dennis said. ‘Think I’ll slip down to this dive and have a look at them.’

‘Not very safe,’ Martínez demurred. ‘If someone should speak to you in our language?’

‘I would point to my mouth to let them know I am deaf and dumb.’

Ramon shook his head dubiously, but he could not move the young man in his resolution to go and to go alone.

‘If you are going to Cutthroat Dave’s you’d better look like a ruffian,’ Antonio suggested. ‘Guillermo and I will help you dress the part.’

When Dennis looked at himself in the glass, after he had been made up for the occasion, he had to admit that he had the appearance of a dirty and ragged ne’er-do-well. If he had not known better he would have been sure that he was a Mexican of the peon class. The Martínez boys had given him instructions even as to the way to smoke the inevitable cigarette.

Fifteen minutes later a young Mexican slouched into The Seamen’s Rest. He went to the bar and put some gold dust in a sack upon the counter, then pointed to a bottle and to his throat. The bartender flung a stream of rapid Spanish at him. He shook his head, touched his ears and then his tongue.

‘Means he’s deaf and dumb,’ explained Cutthroat Dave. ‘Give him what he wants.’

The peon lounged at one end of the bar. In the room, not counting the bartender and the proprietor of the dive, were only two other men besides Dennis. The young man apparently paid no attention to them, though his gaze wandered over them casually. One was a sailor, rough and unshaven, the other immaculately clad in the manner Antonio had described. Both of the men were looking at Dennis. He felt a pulse of excitement beating in his throat. For the well-dressed one was Bruce Marshall. The sailor he did not know.

Dennis rolled a cigarette and lit it.

‘What’s your name, fellow?’ demanded Marshall harshly.

At the moment Dennis was looking at the bartender, who was trying to talk with him on his fingers. He paid not the least notice to Marshall’s question.

‘He can’t hear you,’ the sailor said. ‘Deaf and dumb.’

Dennis was listening intently. The sailor spoke in an English voice.

‘So he claims. I like to be sure. You know him, Dave?’

Cutthroat shook his head. ‘Me, no. I don’t know half the greasers who come in here.’ He moved to the side of the young man, cupped his mouth with his hands, and shouted in his ear.

‘What’s your name, you son of a gun?’

That was not exactly the epithet he used, but it might have been so far as the effect upon the other went. Dennis smiled amiably at him and shook his head.

‘He’s deaf all right, no two ways about that,’ Cutthroat said. ‘I’ll kick him out if you say so, gents, but I’d rather not. The vaqueros bring in a good deal of trade an’ there’s no sense in throwing it into the gutter.’

‘Let him stay,’ the sailor said. ‘He’s doing no harm.’

The door opened and Felipe Pacheco walked into the *tendejón*.

## CHAPTER XIX

### DENNIS FINDS HIS VOICE

AS FELIPE walked across the room to join the two strangers, his keen eyes picked up the other three in the *tendejón*. For him the price of life was unending vigilance. He nodded to Cutthroat Dave and the bartender. Upon Dennis his gaze lingered for a fraction of a second and no longer. The town was full of such happy-go-lucky vagrants, out of money and out at elbows, but cheerful and carefree none the less.

Felipe spoke pleasantly to the two at the table. He said, '*Beberia con gusto.*' The sailor replied in English, 'The sun shines hot down here.' The outlaw removed his sombrero, bowed, and took a chair at the table with the strangers.

The eyes of Dennis were admiring a crude painting of a Spanish dancing-girl which hung on one wall of the dive, but his ears and brain were concentrated upon the meeting of these three birds of a feather. For Felipe to remark that he could drink with pleasure and get as an answer that it was hot in Monterey seemed a curious opening to a conversation, unless the words were an arranged signal by which the men might know one another.

But though Dennis listened intently, he could make out no more of what was said, at least for a time. The heads of the three drew close, their voices fell to a whisper.

The young Mexican at the bar killed time indolently. Like many of his race he did not appear to have the American habit of hurry. Placidly he sipped at his drink.

The voice of Marshall lifted to an unexpected oath. His fist struck the table. 'The cursed Stranglers ride over the law of the land!' he cried. 'Courts and elected officers mean nothing to them. They are a pack of bandits.'

Felipe showed his white teeth in a sardonic smile. 'Let's have law and order above everything, señor.'

The back door of The Seamen's Rest opened, to let in two customers, both Californians. One of them Dennis did not recognize, but at sight of the other a breathless excitement stirred in the young American. The man was Pedro Soto, the giant with whom he had struggled the night of the attack on the gold convoy.

Pedro slouched to the bar, a heavy muscle-bound roll to his gait. His satellite followed him. They ordered grog. Soto stood close to Dennis, his heavy forearms on the counter. In his own tongue he invited Gifford to drink with him.

Dennis shook his head as an equivalent of the usual 'No sabe.' He touched his lips.

The big outlaw understood only that his offer had not been accepted. He reached forward and caught the other's throat between the thumb and forefinger of his huge hand, then dragged the boy toward him.

Gifford did not reach for his gun, though the tremendous pressure strangled him. He waited for outside intervention. It came, in a burst of explanation from the bartender.

Pedro flung his victim aside. 'Why didn't he say he was deaf?' he demanded roughly in Spanish.

Felipe grinned. 'You're a rough little playfellow, Pedro,' he said. 'It will be a long time until that throat is as good as new.'

'I hadn't started on him,' Pedro boasted.

'This is Pedro Soto, gentlemen,' Felipe said in English. 'He is the strongest man in California. I've seen him burst open a sack of oats by the pressure of his knees. He can twist a horseshoe into a knot with his fingers. Our young friend is lucky he's not fit for a coffin.'

Felipe tossed a silver dollar to Dennis, who was leaning against the counter gasping for breath. The young man retrieved the dollar and massaged gently his gullet until the acuteness of the pain had passed.

The Californian who had come into the room with Soto was a wry-faced little man with bright black gimlet eyes set close together. He looked intently at Dennis.

'Deaf but not dumb. Is that it?' he asked the bartender in his own language.

'Both, Roderigo.'

'No,' retorted Roderigo. 'Not unless he has been struck dumb today. I saw him talking with Guillermo Martínez and his sister this afternoon.'

'Oho! Is that the game?' Felipe asked, rising from his seat. The laughter had left his eyes. They narrowed upon Dennis warily. 'Are you sure, Roderigo?'

Roderigo burst into a spate of words, out of which Dennis caught one sentence. '*Madre de Dios*, I saw him—myself.'

The revolver of Felipe was out. He moved, catlike, between Dennis and the front door.

‘What’s the matter?’ Marshall demanded. ‘What does this Roderigo say?’

‘He says that this young man is not dumb. Therefore he is a spy.’ Felipe smiled cruelly. ‘All is well—for us. Yet not so well for him. Since he can talk, I wait an explanation. But I do not wait long.’

Marshall jumped to his feet, followed by the sailor. Both of them drew weapons, one a derringer, the other a sixshooter.

Dennis wasted no words trying to explain what could not be explained. His weapon, too, was in the open. Slowly he backed toward the rear door. He knew the only way to get out of the room alive would be to fight his way from the *tendejón*. He was facing a roomful of enemies, each one dangerous in himself. The chances were fifty to one against him.

‘Keep your shirts on, gentlemen,’ he advised in a cool drawl. ‘Don’t get excited and make mistakes. I came in for a drink. I’ve had it. Now——’

The man in broadcloth recognized the voice. ‘By God, it’s that vigilante cur Gifford!’ he cried.

‘Oho! Again my friend King Geef-ford,’ Felipe called out. ‘And always in such a hurry to be gone.’

Marshall fired first, but before the sound died away there came the flash and roar of many guns. The rest occurred so quickly that a clock could not have ticked ten before the battle was over. Dennis was flinging bullets as he ducked, behind a chair, behind an overturned table. Felipe was firing. So was the sailor. Marshall hung on to the back of a chair, swaying, then crashed to the floor.

Pedro gave a roar and rushed at Gifford. Before he had taken two steps a wild shot shattered the lamp hanging from a rafter and left the room in darkness except for the stabbing lances of light from the guns.

Instantly Dennis changed his plan. They would be expecting him to make for the back door, so he would try for the front one. He followed the wall, groping with his left hand. Crashing into a chair, he went down, but was up again at once.

Smoke filled the room, and the roar of the weapons. He heard a furious ‘*Caramba!*’ a groan, an order to light a candle. A hideous, distorted face loomed up, vanished. There were shouts and oaths. The arms of someone closed on him. With the barrel of his gun he wiped the head of the man and

felt the grip loosen. Still following the wall, as the slack arms of his assailant slid from his body, Gifford reached and turned the corner.

The noise of the guns died down. He came to the second corner. A match flickered and shakily lit the wick of a candle. Dennis pushed aside a table that was in the way and reached the front door. By the flicker of the candle he saw a room filled with smoke, some vague, shifting figures, a man leaning across the bar and clinging to it.

A body plunged at the door and crashed into Dennis. The impact flung the young man into the street and threw him from his feet. He was up again at once, shaken and breathless, the weapon still in his hand. The man did not even turn round to look at whom he had struck. He kept going, on a dead run. He had hurry-up business anywhere but here.

So had Dennis. He legged it up the street, dodged around the customs-house, and sprinted up Alvarado. His luck had stood up fine, if it was luck and not Providence. With at least five men shooting at him he had escaped unscratched. Such a result would have been impossible if it had not been for the dim light from one hanging lamp and for the suddenness with which the crisis had leaped upon them and prevented co-ordination of action. His enemies had got in one another's way. Crowding forward, they had jostled against each other. And the lamp had crashed in time to save him.

He could hear voices behind him—shouts of excitement. But he knew that if he was being followed, it was on a blind hunt. If he kept going, they would not catch him—not at present.

After the lamp went out, Dennis had not fired a shot. He had hit Bruce Marshall. Of that he was sure, for he had seen the man's tall figure slumping to the ground. Another unlucky interfeerer had been wiped on the head by the barrel of his gun. Outside of that he had not injured anybody. Young Gifford was moderately sure of that, though the roar of the revolvers had been almost like a fusillade while the battle lasted. But at least one other had been wounded—the man he had seen clinging to the bar as the candle flickered up. In the darkness no doubt the fellow had been hit by a bullet from some of his friends. There might be others hurt, caught in the intersecting lanes of flame. For in that small room death had leaped hungrily—and leaped—and leaped.

A voice called to him, by name. Somebody—more than one—followed at his heels. That the pursuit had become organized so quickly surprised him. He dodged into a side street.

The voice overtook him. 'We are friends—Antonio—Guillermo.'

It was Antonio calling. He was almost sure of that, and he answered cautiously, crouched against a wall, the revolver resting on his hip. Out of the night the brothers appeared.

‘Are you hurt?’ Antonio asked.

‘No. Where did you come from?’

‘My father sent us,’ the older brother explained. ‘He was not satisfied to let you go alone, though you insisted. He sent us as what you call—reserves—is it not?’

‘I never heard so many guns at once. It was like an army. Then you were catapulted out of the house—and ran like a rabbit. *Por Dios*, I do not see how you escaped, if they were all firing at you.’ Antonio looked at his friend anxiously.

‘The light went out,’ Dennis explained. ‘I kept close to the wall and slipped past them. Nobody thought to hold the door. It was all so quick.’

‘I know,’ Guillermo said. ‘First, silence—then the guns.’

‘What shall I do now? Where shall I go?’ asked Dennis. ‘I shot a man. It is sure they will hunt for me. Perhaps they will go to the law.’

‘*Quién sabe?*’ Antonio shrugged. ‘We will go first to my father and ask him.’

‘That is good,’ agreed Gifford.

But he had already decided not to stay at the Martínez home and bring upon it the vengeance of his enemies.



## CHAPTER XX

### NIGHT RIDERS

RAMON MARTÍNEZ protested vigorously. 'But that is absurd, *amigo mio*. You shall stay in my house while you are in Monterey. Are you not like one of my own boys? If it is necessary for you to leave on account of the law, that is another thing. But do you think I shall let riffraff like these scoundrels tell me who shall and who shall not be my guests? *Madre de Dios*, no!'

'It does not do to despise the enemy, Don Ramon,' insisted Dennis. 'You have your family to consider. Through Felipe Pacheco his chief Juan Castro comes into this. Already you are under a threat from that villain. If I stay here, he will consider that a defiance from you.'

'So? That is good. Am I afraid of this murdering ruffian—I, Ramon Martínez? A hundred men employed by me will fight if I snap my fingers. A coyote leaps on an unprotected lamb, but it lets alone a four-year-old bull of the range.'

'A coyote sneaks up and watches its chance,' Dennis said. 'Your hundred men are not with you always. This afternoon Señorita Rosita rode with Guillermo alone. He is brave as a lion. That I know. But if Castro and his gang swooped down on them——'

'He dare not!' the alcalde cried. 'For his life he dare not. All the country within a day's ride would rise against him. No, no. He is not a fool, this Castro.'

'No, but his life is forfeit. He can be hanged or shot but once. I am fixed in my mind, sir, though I am deeply in your debt for your courtesy. I cannot stay with you. That is final.'

'Very well. You have a proverb, you Americans, about a willful man. Since you will not stay here, and since you will not go to one of my ranchos, I will send you to the house of a good man who will not talk if I say so. His name is Porfirio Pico. His father worked for my father, and he worked for me. You may trust him.'

During the night Dennis moved his belongings to the house of Pico after an arrangement had been made by Martínez to that effect. The house of Pico was an adobe one of five rooms. It was not pretentious. Some of the furniture was home-made. The bedstead consisted of a bullock's hide stretched across a frame. Stools served for chairs. But the place was

scrupulously clean. Pico was a vaquero who had grown too old for service in the saddle. His wife Ysela was fat and smiling and motherly. She made her guest immediately at home.

For a long time Dennis did not sleep. During the fight at Cutthroat Dave's *tendejón* he had not been conscious of any fear or even any excitement after he was exposed by the little man with the black gimlet eyes. But the reaction was on him now. He lay in bed and shook as with an ague. This was silly, he told himself. He was not afraid, yet he could not exorcise this strange quaking. That it was a natural physical revulsion due to intense repression he did not realize. Gradually the chill subsided. He lay lax and spent, and presently sank into sleep.

He was awakened next morning by his host knocking on the door.

'Someone to see you, señor,' Pico called to him.

'Who?' asked Dennis.

'Vicente Martínez, with a letter from his father.'

'I'll be out in five minutes,' Dennis promised.

Little Vicente, the youngest of the brothers, was only fourteen. He stared at Dennis with awe while that young man read the note. The story of the fight in the *tendejón* was all over town. This Americano had fought six or seven men, had killed two, and had wounded two more. He had come out unharmed from this Homeric combat. It was unbelievable, yet Vicente did not doubt its truth. Had he not, only a little while ago, defeated the gigantic Pedro Soto in personal combat? Had he not dared Felipe Pacheco and three of his men to come on and fight? Truly he was a hero.

Fortunately, Dennis did not know the thoughts running through the mind of the lad, and was thereby saved some embarrassment. In his own mind Dennis was no hero, but a boy who had been flung into desperate circumstance and by the grace of God emerged alive.

The content of the letter was disturbing. Bruce Marshall was dead. Gifford had killed a man, cut him off in the prime of life. That the man was an evil influence and had forced the battle upon him did not entirely lift the weight from his heart. Dennis had fought Indians. It was possible he had killed one. But that was different. For he had accepted the simple verdict of the trapper and the plainsman that Indians were natural enemies to be destroyed. He had helped deal out vigilante law to offenders, but here he had been sustained by mass opinion. If there was guilt in rubbing-out Bruce Marshall, he had to bear it alone.

For the other casualties in the *tendejón* he felt no responsibility. Roderigo, too, was dead, but Dennis was convinced he had been slain by a chance bullet from one of his allies. A finger had been shot from the right hand of Felipe Pacheco. Perhaps the revolver of Gifford had fired that shot, perhaps not. Fifteen stitches had been sewn in the scalp of Cutthroat Dave. Well, the man ought not to have got in his way.

The amazing thing was that Dennis had escaped alive and uninjured after being the target of so many marksmen.

To Ramon Martínez's letter there was a postscript. Word had just come to him that another bunch of prime bullocks had been driven from the Rancho San Pablo. The vaqueros had followed the tracks for a distance. The cattle were being driven toward the coast. A ship, believed to be one of the Shanks line, was standing off the northern point of the bay. Ramon believed the cattle were now hidden in the sand dunes and that an attempt would be made to transfer them to the ship that night. It was his intention to try to block this. His hope was to raid the raiders, to recapture his stock, if possible to punish the rustlers. He did not mention that he would be glad to have Dennis join the party of night riders, but that young man decided at once he would be of the posse.

In this resolution duty marched with inclination. Dennis had no doubt that the sailor he had seen at the *tendejón* was the man Whittaker whom he had been commissioned to arrest. The appearance fitted, the voice was English. But it was sure the fellow would not stay in Monterey now that his suspicions were aroused. He might leave at once for Santa Barbara, Los Angeles, or San Diego. Or he might think it safer to join Castro's band of outlaws and take a chance with them until the hue and cry was spent. Dennis could think of no better way to make contact with the bandits and perhaps with the man he wanted than to ride with Martínez.

By Vicente he sent a message to the boy's father asking for a place in the party. The lad returned an hour later. If Dennis would be just back of Father Serra's San Carlos Church at eight o'clock that evening he would be provided with a mount for the expedition, Martínez sent word.

After dark Dennis slipped from the house, passed through a grove of pines to Fremont Street, and followed it to the church. A man with a musket in his hands started up and ordered him in soft liquid Spanish to halt. He did so at once, and gave the sentry his name, which was passed back to someone in authority. Presently Guillermo came out of the darkness, identified Dennis, and led him to a group of mounted men among whom was Ramon Martínez. Antonio lifted a hand in greeting to the newcomer. The rest of the

men, almost a dozen in number, were unknown to Gifford. He judged from their slouch hats, blanket coats, and leather leggings that they were vaqueros in the service of Ramon. All of them carried rifles of one kind or another, though many were of antique make. Guillermo handed to Dennis a long-barreled muzzle-loader of the type trappers had used twenty years earlier.

Martínez rode at the head of his posse, a tall broad-shouldered caballero who carried himself with straight-backed erectness. He led the way across a field of mustard and through a tule swamp. The dunes lay beyond.

## CHAPTER XXI

### TRAPPED

A BUNCH of fat bullocks guarded by eight or nine riders moved leisurely through the sand dunes along the line of least resistance. A full moon rode between two of the hill prongs to the right. From the left came the roar of breakers. The Pacific was sounding its eternal drumbeat upon the shingle.

Those in charge of the herd did not push the leaders. There was no hurry. The night was young, and it still lacked an hour of the time set for the transfer of the stock. The raid upon the Rancho San Pablo had been entirely successful. The cattle had been rounded up and run off during the previous night, cached in a lonely cañon before daybreak, and driven after dark by unfrequented trails to the rendezvous. Within a few hours the *Mary Bligh* would be nosing back along the coast toward San Francisco with the fat steers of Ramon Martínez under hatches.

One young man, coffee-brown, in the fancy costume of a vaquero dressed for a holiday, sang melodiously a Spanish love lilt. Nobody reproved him. If he felt sentimental, that was his own affair. Except the rustlers themselves probably not a soul was within miles, and in any case the roar of the long procession of breakers would drown the song.

Two men rode side by side at the head of the cavalcade. They were both young and of Spanish blood. Their slender bodies they carried with erect and easy grace.

What conversation they had was in their native tongue. It missed friendliness by a good deal.

‘If I’d been there it wouldn’t have been that way,’ one of them said with an insulting laugh. ‘*Por Dios*, no! Six to one, and the Gringo gets away without a scratch.’

The other looked at the speaker, a caballero dressed in the height of fashion, yet armed with a rifle, revolvers, and a long knife. Felipe Pacheco thought he had never seen a man more viciously handsome than Juan Castro. His black curling hair, his olive skin, his bold, predatory eyes, the catlike grace of his movements, had taken the fancy of many a girl. The impression they made on Felipe was very different. He had come to dislike intensely the soft, sleek good looks of his chief, the arrogance of his manner, the assumption of superiority. Felipe counted himself a better man than Juan

any day. He was educated and Juan ignorant; of good family, whereas Castro's father had been a peon. Pacheco too had a way with women. Moreover, he was convinced that his courage burned with a fiercer flame than that of the other outlaw. Finally, he was a Californian and Juan Castro a Chihuahuan.

'You would have rubbed the Gringo out?' Felipe asked gently.

'Never would he have left the room alive.'

'The great Juan Castro shoots better indoors than out, then?' the lieutenant inquired, a touch of derision in his voice. 'Was it six times you shot at him in the garden of Martínez?'

Angrily, Castro flushed. 'It was dark, as you very well know.'

'Did I not mention that it was black as Egypt's midnight within the *tendejón*?' Pacheco murmured.

'But light enough for the Gringo to see to kill the Americano Marshall and to do other damage,' jeered Castro, with a glance at the other's bound hand.

'Long ago I learned to shoot with my left hand as well as with my right,' Felipe mentioned, so softly that the liquid Spanish vowels fell almost in a whisper.

His eyes rested hardily on those of his chief. If it was a challenge, Castro did not take it up, though his dark gaze met the look of the other without flinching.

'Still I say it was bad shooting,' he insisted irritably.

'In the *tendejón* or in the garden?' asked Felipe insolently.

Castro slammed a fist down on the pommel of his saddle. He flung out an oath. '*Caramba!* Is it that you wish to infuriate me—me, Juan Castro?' the outlaw demanded.

Felipe's glittering eyes did not lift from the man. He was riding on the left side. That was good, if Juan decided to push the issue. They had been moving knee to knee, but he contrived to drop back a foot or two.

'Who am I that I should annoy the great Castro, a scion of the famous Bandini family?' asked Felipe with mock deference.

The other bandit dragged his horse back and glared at his insubordinate subordinate. '*Sangre de Cristo!* You laugh at me—at me.'

No more wild and reckless young devil than Pacheco had ever flung a leg across a horse in California. He knew how dangerous his chief could be, what a cold-blooded, murderous villain he was, but he did not give a peso

for his rage. To take chances was as necessary to Felipe as the breath of his nostrils. The closeness of danger gave a delicious fillip to his blood.

‘I laugh—when I please, at whom I please. Must I ask permission of Juan Castro?’

The white teeth of Felipe flashed in a smile that taunted.

Castro had pulled up his mount so savagely that the Spanish bit was hurting the mouth of the animal. It danced to and fro so nervously that the rider could not give free and undivided attention to the challenge his lieutenant had flung out debonairly. Furiously, he jerked again at the bridle and started the sorrel gelding to bucking. By the time he had the horse subdued, the moment for action was past. But in those few seconds Castro decided he would at a fitting time get rid of Pacheco. The fellow was disputing his leadership. That Juan would not have.

‘I give you advice, Felipe,’ he said. ‘To anger me is not safe.’

‘*Gracias, caro amigo mio,*’ Pacheco replied lightly, ironically. ‘Advice I never would take. Alas, my waywardness has brought me here.’

Abruptly, both men forgot their quarrel. From behind a sand dune a voice called a sharp order to throw up their hands.

Neither of them obeyed. Both whirled their horses, intent on joining their men. That they had fallen into an ambush was clear. The first urgent need was to escape from it, the second to gather their forces for battle.

The cattle had not been bunched and were trailing loosely. The riders directing them were strung out for a distance of a hundred and fifty yards or more. As the leaders of the outlaws turned, a rattle of musketry stopped them. The flash of the guns showed that they were cut off from their followers.

Felipe swung his horse half-round, dug in his spurs, and set the animal straight at the hill of sand which trapped him. The bronco took the climb like a cat, the muscles of the hind legs standing out as it fought for a footing in the loose rubble. The front hoofs pawed a way up, though once the cowpony went to its knees. Horse and rider reached the top. Pacheco flung a shot defiantly at the dunes where the ambushers lay and vanished in a fusillade directed toward him.

The mental reaction of Castro was a fraction of a second slower. His first impulse had been to follow the hollow, the next to take the hill as his lieutenant had done. In a hail of bullets he started up, but before he was halfway to the top the sorrel stopped, quivered violently, and collapsed. The man and the gelding slid down the loose sand together.

Castro flung his left foot out of the stirrup and dragged the other from beneath the struggling horse. He staggered to his feet. The rifle had been flung out of his hands, but he reached for a revolver just as a man launched himself at him. The weapon jerked free from the holster, but at the same instant fingers closed on the wrist above the hand that held it.

Juan tried to break the hold by sheer force, then by flinging his body to one side. He was active as a wildcat and his smooth muscles firm as steel. But his furious efforts did not break the grip. Another arm closed around his wiry body and drew it close. He fought, with savage energy, against a strength much greater than his own. Realization came to him that he was beaten unless he could counter-attack successfully. His hand snatched at the hilt of the knife in his belt, and at the same moment he was flung heavily into the sand with another body pressing him down. The hand with the knife was underneath him, pinned so securely he could not move it. Against his head a hard shoulder crushed, pushing mouth and nose into the sand in such a way as to prevent breathing. Except for a futile beating of his feet, he could not move an inch.

The voice of the man on top of him called to someone else. 'I've got him, Guillermo. Come get his guns.'

Castro felt hands groping for the weapons and removing them.

'Look out for his knife. It's in his hand beneath him,' the same voice warned.

The outlaw clung to the knife, even after his arm was dragged from beneath him. His wrist was twisted till he gave a yelp of pain. The knife dropped.

'Better tie him up while we've got him down,' his conqueror advised. 'He's tricky as a fox.'

'Right you are, Dennis,' Guillermo said in English.

He called to someone to bring him tie-ropes. Within an incredibly short time Castro was tied hand and foot, and every moment he cursed and flung maledictions at his captors.

The weight lifted from him. He looked up, into the eyes of Dennis Gifford.

'We've made a real catch,' the American said. 'It's Castro himself.'

Ramon Martínez came forward. 'Are you sure?'

'That's what he called himself just before he potted at me in your garden.'



The eyes of the outlaw were filled with baffled hate. He spat in the face of his enemy.

## CHAPTER XXII

### 'A BIRD IN THE BUSH IS WORTH TWO IN THE HAND'

'ACTS like a trapped wolf,' Dennis said. 'Pity we can't treat him like one and save the expense of a trial.'

'We'll turn him over to the commandant at the Presidio,' Martínez said. 'Along with the other scamp we captured.'

'You caught another, did you?' Dennis asked.

'One killed, one captured so far,' Ramon replied. 'All of my boys are not back yet. There's a shot now. The outlaws scattered like a covey of quail and there was no holding back my lads. I hope none of them get into trouble.'

Dennis had a word aside with Ramon. The adventure was not complete. He proposed to follow it through to a finish.

Ramon listened doubtfully, but presently nodded his head with energy. '*Sí*, my friend, that is a good idea. But it is dangerous. For once you will stay here with me and let others run the risk. You have sailed in a Shanks vessel and might be recognized. That would make trouble and defeat our purpose. I shall send Antonio in charge of a party.'

'I might go along and stay with those in the background,' Dennis urged.

'No, you will return to Monterey with the prisoners and the cattle,' Martínez decided. He called Antonio and explained the plan. 'If we are right in our guess, my son—and I am sure we are—a ship must be lying at the pier of Los Pinos waiting to load the cattle. You will take six men with you and ride fast. These you will leave in the pines, all ready to help you in case of need. To the captain you will say that you are a messenger from Castro to tell him the bullocks will soon arrive. You are to find out, not by direct question, if this is a Shanks ship. If you can get from the captain an admission that Shanks has arranged for the delivery tonight of a bunch of my cattle, that will be very good. You will use your brains, and you will not stay more than a very few minutes. For it is likely that Pacheco or some of the outlaws will hurry to the ship with the news. If you find that any of these have got there before you, turn your horse and gallop like the wind back to your men. There is to be no fighting. That you must understand.'

'Yes, my father,' Antonio answered.

He chose his men and led them into the darkness at a hand gallop.

Those who had been hunting in the dunes presently returned. None of them had been injured. Ramon set them to rounding up the cattle. The noise of the shots had sent them on a mild stampede.

Within half an hour the rancharo's party, his captives, and his cattle were moving back toward Monterey. The dead bandit they had buried in the sand.

Castro rode between Dennis and Guillermo, his hands tied behind his back. He had fallen into a sullen silence, after pouring out a volley of threats at Gifford. To these Dennis had paid not the least attention. His hope was that they were taking the man in to be hanged.

'Too bad we didn't get Felipe Pacheco too,' Guillermo said. 'He must have been the one who went over the sand hill with three or four of us firing at him. He's a brave scoundrel. I'll say that. Pulled up to take a shot at us before he vanished.'

The vanity of Castro was touched. Felipe had escaped and he had been taken. Praise of his lieutenant was more than he could stand without protest.

'Brave because he deserted me?' Juan snarled.

Dennis glanced at the man's venomous face and it occurred to him that he might do worse than play upon this villain's thin-skinned conceit and jealousy. If these were stung sufficiently he might be led to turn on Felipe, since apparently no love was lost between them.

'Pacheco will be chief now,' Gifford said indifferently to Guillermo. 'From what I know of him he'll be a good one. He is wise as a fox, and has courage, as you say. Yes, he will not make the mistake of falling into a trap, of blundering into an ambush.'

Guillermo caught the point at once. 'They say he is the brains of the gang, that he has always been the real leader.'

'That is a lie!' Castro burst out. 'He is nothing—nothing. I, Juan Castro, am the chief. When I say go, he goes. My word—it is the law with those who follow me.'

'*Was* the law,' Dennis corrected suavely. 'Not now. Your day is done. Felipe Pacheco will say go. Soto and the other ruffians will cry "Viva Pacheco." Benjamin Shanks will deal with him when he wants the next bunch of cattle run off. A few will remember for a time that one Juan Castro ran his head into a trap and was hanged. Well, every dog has his day.'

'Felipe does not even know Shanks, who will ruin Ramon Martínez before the colds of winter come,' Castro cried. 'And as for you, poor fool, I tell you that the rope has never been woven that will hang Juan Castro. I make you a promise, you who have interfered with me not once but twice

and three times. Some day I will cut your heart out with great pleasure. I swear it. Ah, *qué dicha!*’ Once more he poured forth a stream of furious oaths.

Dennis did not let the thread of his purpose become entangled. He spoke, as though ruminating aloud: ‘Pacheco has the manner of a gentleman, not a boor. I think he will become better known than even Murrieta. No doubt he will be glad to get rid of this man who is in his way. This is his lucky day. Already he is laughing at Castro’s plight. Have you ever heard him laugh, Guillermo? There is much mockery in the sound of it. Often he will laugh tonight and tomorrow and on the day of the hanging.’

‘You think he will laugh,’ the outlaw flung out fiercely. ‘We shall see. *Dios mio!* If I say one little word, he will be caught in his hole. But I will not say it. Juan Castro is no traitor.’

Gifford smiled, with incredulous disdain. ‘No, better not say it, for it would do no good. Felipe is a fox with more than one den. He would never let himself be caught so, now he is chief of his own gang of banditti.’

‘He is not chief, as long as I am alive,’ raged Castro.

‘But that will be so short a time, and a bird in the bush is worth two in the hand,’ Dennis suggested. ‘No, no. Felipe is now the great man. We shall see how long he can play hide-and-seek with the law.’

‘When I get you at the end of a gun——’

Dennis interrupted the violent outburst of the bandit.

‘If, not when,’ he amended. ‘Soon you will dangle from a gallows, for you are nothing but a cowardly thief and murderer at the end of his crooked trail.’

The party traveled slowly, not to run the tallow from the bullocks. Ramon kept a sharp lookout, though he was convinced the outlaws had been too thoroughly frightened to make a counter-attack so soon a probability. Felipe Pacheco was audacious enough for anything, but it was very unlikely he could gather his men before they dribbled in one or two at a time to the rendezvous where they holed up.

Before the cattle drive reached Monterey, Antonio and his men rejoined those of Ramon. The boy was flushed with success.

‘We reached there before any of the rustlers,’ he reported. ‘I left the men in the grove as you ordered, my father, and went forward alone. The ship is the *Mary Bligh*. I talked with the captain. He said he hoped to get the bullocks aboard before the turn of the tide. Then I said I hoped Don Benjamin Shanks would be satisfied with our drive, that we had gathered all

we could. When I told him how many we had, he said that was good, and that Shanks would be pleased because it was cattle of Ramon Martínez he wanted. Since I was in a hurry, I made my apologies and said *Adios*. I am sure he did not suspect me at all.'

'That is well done, Antonio,' his father complimented. 'I am glad you found out what you did and got back in safety.'

Lieutenant Rogers received the prisoners with enthusiasm, though it was plain he regretted not having been told of the expedition in time to take a part in it.

He said to Gifford enviously: 'I am a soldier, and I sit in the Presidio and play cards while you go out and capture this villain. You must have been born, my friend, under a lucky star.'

'It was nothing,' Dennis replied. 'His horse was shot, and they rolled down a sand dune. I happened to be nearest and ran forward before he had his gun out. Guillermo and I together were too many for him. A piece of luck, as you say.'

'The reward for him is only five thousand dollars,' the ex-West-Pointer mentioned dryly.

'That can be divided among our party in the way that seems best to our leader, Señor Martínez. I did no more than the rest, except that I was nearer than the others.'

'You seem to have a knack of getting into the thick of things,' Rogers answered. 'For me, I am always too late or too soon. If I had your good fortune I should be a general by the time I am forty.'

As it chanced, Lieutenant Rogers became a brigadier-general at the age of thirty-four. It was impossible for him to guess that a long and bloody civil war would within a decade give hundreds of young soldiers chances for rapid and spectacular promotion.

## CHAPTER XXIII

### FELIPE TAKES AN EVENING STROLL

At the edge of the Presidio, where cypresses had grown like twisted gnomes in the rock crevices, a man lay hidden in the furze. It had been hours since he had climbed the precipitous bluff on the seaward side of the military reservation, but haste was no factor in his purpose. What he had to do must be done without attracting attention.

He crept forward, slowly, toward the dark bulk of the buildings in front of him. The prison lay well to the left. He knew that. Cautiously he worked toward it.

It was a night of stars, obscured at times by scudding clouds which swept in battalions across the sky. The man made the most of the darker intervals, flitting like a shadow from one point of cover to another.

A sentry trod his beat, and every few minutes the hidden watcher could see him as he came to the end of it beside the adobe guard-house. An Indian could not have taken advantage of the lie of the ground, the broken intermittent darkness, more skillfully than the patient stalker moving slowly toward his goal.

While the sentry's back was toward him, he slid across a stretch of starlit mesa to a little ditch near enough the jail to see the small iron-barred windows. At one of these there was the face of a man. The concealed intruder slipped along the ditch, drawing closer to his objective. When the soldier turned, he lay motionless in the bottom of the trench. Not until the picket had gone did he lift his head from the hollow.

His eyes swept the scene before he made a dash across the open to the window where he had seen the face of a prisoner. Ten feet to the left of the window grew a pine. The keen black eyes of the running man made note of this. In the foliage of the evergreen he could conceal himself when the guard returned.

Below the window, he called in a low voice to the one within. 'Juan! It is I—Felipe.'

The face reappeared at the window. Castro looked down. The sight of the scarred countenance of his lieutenant gave the heart of the imprisoned man a lift, but he did not let this show in his greeting.

‘You’ve been long enough coming,’ he growled.

‘But not so long as I should have waited for you,’ Pacheco retorted, with shrewd divination of the other’s character. He knew that if their positions had been reversed, Castro would not have made a move to free him.

‘Be careful you’re not seen,’ Castro warned. ‘The sentry would shoot you down like a dog.’

‘Perhaps I’d better *vamos* then,’ Felipe said, to torment him.

‘No, no! What is the plan? When do you get me out of this hellhole? Talk business. Be swift.’

Pacheco drew from his pocket a file. ‘Catch,’ he said, and tossed it to his chief. ‘Tomorrow night I will have horses in the grove near the customs-house—at eleven o’clock. Pst! He comes.’

The man below the window ran to the pine tree and swiftly drew himself to the branches above. His heart lost a beat, for the guard drew close to the window and called to the prisoner.

‘Ho, Castro! Are you asleep, my dickey bird? Wake up! Wake up! After a week or so you will have a hundred years to sleep soundly in a narrow bed. While you are still alive, don’t waste your hours. Let us talk.’

‘What do you want to talk about?’ Castro asked, his face again at the window. ‘Shall I tell you I would like to slit your throat from ear to ear and that some day I may do it?’

‘Too late. Never will you cut another throat. Today I heard the colonel give orders to a carpenter for a gallows. Think of that, you murdering dog.’

‘I have not yet been tried.’

‘A formality,’ the soldier said, shrugging his shoulders. ‘“Shall we hang this ruffian, gentlemen, and get to our game of whist?” And the votes, “Aye,” “Aye,” “Aye.” Then, before you can say “Jack Robinson,” it is all done.’

‘I do not know what you mean, Jack Robinson. Nor do I care. Listen. I will yet sweep all you Yanquis into the sea. You are *cholos* and *rateros*,<sup>[5]</sup> all of you. I spit on you.’

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[5] *Cholos* and *rateros*—rascals and scamps.

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‘It will be very interesting,’ the sentry replied cheerfully. ‘I have never seen one of you bandits hanged, but I hope this will be the first of many. I must leave you for a time. Duty first, you know.’

The soldier turned away, walked to the end of his beat, returned, and waved a hand at the window as he passed.

Presently Pacheco slid down from the tree.

‘To nest in pine cones is a prickly pleasure,’ he complained, with a sardonic grin. ‘That I do it is evidence of how much I am devoted to my chief, the great Juan Castro, who is unfortunately just now behind a grated window for Yankees to laugh at as they pass.’

‘They will laugh, yes, but on the other side of the mouth, as they say,’ Castro boasted. ‘I told them they could not keep me prisoner. They will see.’

Felipe’s smile was ironic. ‘Ah! The great Juan Castro. Of course you will escape—all by yourself. I need not have concerned myself. Throw the file down to me and I will be gone.’

‘I did not say all by myself. Does it matter, so I escape? Tomorrow night at eleven I will be in the grove beside the customs-house. I, Juan Castro, tell you so. My men will have their leader once more. Tell them to be of good cheer.’

‘I will tell them. And may I say you will not let some Yankee boy sit on you again and then drag you off to the calaboose?’

‘My horse was shot, and my leg pinned down. *Caramba!* You talk as a fool does,’ Castro exploded, though in a low voice.

‘I *am* a fool,’ Felipe admitted, with his sardonic grin. ‘If I were not I should have left you here to be hanged. You have neither gratitude nor decency. My reward for saving you will be to win your hatred, and if I am not careful some day you will shoot me in the back. But I will be very, very careful. I promise myself that.’

The footsteps of the sentry could be heard. Felipe scuttled for the tree a second time and swarmed up it.

Below the window the soldier stopped. ‘Are you still there, my little dickey bird? You have not flown away through the window and left the cage where you are so safe?’ the sentinel jeered.

‘I promise not to go without taking a peck at you,’ Castro replied. ‘Did you ever feel a knife in your back between the shoulder blades? You do not even have time to scream. You open your mouth, but you only gasp. *Madre de Dios!* It is sudden.’



The sentry spit tobacco juice against the adobe wall. 'Hanging is not like that. Your breath is cut off and you strangle, kicking the air with your feet. Ten minutes, they say, is the usual time. A rope around the gullet cannot be pleasant.'

The man resumed his beat and passed once more on his way back.

To Felipe, back from roosting in the tree, Castro said savagely:

'Did you bring me a revolver?'

'No.'

'Then give me yours.'

'I think not,' Felipe said coolly. 'I might need it myself. No, you are better off without one. They might search your cell.'

'Then a knife. *Dios mio!* I must have a knife.'

Felipe tossed him one. 'Your business is to escape, not to enjoy the childish pleasure of killing this sentry. He has a gun. He might shoot you. Certainly he would call for help and you would be retaken. We cannot rescue you twice. Remember that. *Hasta luego.*'

Pacheco slipped away into the night.

## CHAPTER XXIV

### THE FIESTA AT THE RANCHO SAN PABLO

SINCE DENNIS was of opinion that Whittaker had for the present taken to the hills with the banditti, he did not think it well to leave the vicinity of Monterey. His guess might be wrong. Therefore, he sent letters of inquiry to Sheriff Hearne of Santa Barbara and to the authorities at Los Angeles and San Diego.

Meanwhile, he accepted the invitation of Ramon Martínez to be a guest at the San Pablo Rancho barbecue, given once a year after the calf rodeo for those who lived upon the rancho and for any others who might care to attend.

Accompanied by Guillermo and Antonio the young man left Monterey for the rancho the evening before the day set for the beginning of the festivities. From the pine-clad hills they looked down upon the red-tiled adobes of the town and beyond them to the white-fringed bay which looked in the moonlight like a lake of silver.

By the time the three riders reached San Pablo, it was late. But the rancho hummed with activity. Preparations were in evidence for the great day. The trenches in which the food would be cooked had been dug and huge piles of fagots were heaped along them. Three bullocks had been butchered and hung suspended from the limbs of live-oaks. Men and women were busy getting ready dishes, spits, huge kettles, and food.

Many vaqueros had already arrived. Their horses were picketed out on the plain near the spot where they expected to sleep out in their blankets beneath the stars. Just now the riders were watching with keen interest a cock-fight. Recklessly they backed the prowess of the birds of their choice.

Three vaqueros had roped a grizzly bear in the hills and dragged the animal to the rancho. It was now in a corral, tied fast to a heavy post. Tomorrow a great bull would be driven into the corral and the two would fight to the death. The battle would be held in the morning, before the arrival of Ramon Martínez and his family, because it was known he did not approve of such fierce and bloody combats, though he had not specifically forbidden them.

Dennis was awakened next morning by the sound of voices shouting orders. He dressed and walked out to the picnic ground, a grove of fine

pinos. Hundreds of steaks were spitted, ready for the fire already aglow in the trenches. Near at hand were dozens of pails of tamales and salsa, a sauce composed of chiles, tomatoes, and onions.

He saw Antonio breakfasting and joined his friend. A fat good-natured Mexican woman offered him a steak, coffee, and tortillas. After he had eaten, he strolled with Antonio to the corral where the bear was held captive.

To make the fight more even, the grizzly was fastened by its left hind leg to a post, its activities being thus somewhat hampered. The bull had just been turned into the arena. With his forefeet he pawed the ground, snorting defiance at the enemy, but making no move to attack. The rage of the longhorn was tempered by well-founded fear of this formidable foe.

The bear lumbered forward, the gray hair along its spine a long brush of bristles. Down went the horns to meet the enemy. The bull charged. As the grizzly rose and plunged, regardless of the rope, it tripped and was flung heavily to the ground. At the same instant the sharp horns gored savagely into the body of bruin.

With a roar of fury and pain the grizzly scrambled to its feet, blood streaming from the wounds. Again the bull charged. But this time the bear was ready. Its great paw whirled round in one tremendous clout and caught the longhorn in the neck. Heels over head went the bull, driving into the dust with all the weight of his charge back of him. The bull lay still, except for a momentary quivering of the great bulk of flesh. The fight was over. The grizzly had broken the neck of its antagonist.

‘Brava! Brava!’

The excited cries of the vaqueros filled the air.

Since the grizzly had won its freedom, the great bear was dragged a safe distance from the hacienda and turned loose to lumber back into the hills and lick its wounds.

Parties of guests from neighboring ranchos were already arriving and were being made welcome by Guillermo, Antonio, and Ignacio in the courteous and elaborate Spanish manner. Dozens of little boys and girls, children of those employed at the San Pablo, were hanging around the picnic grounds and getting in the way of their elders. Their clothes were sketchy, but happiness beamed on their dark faces.

A large and well-guarded cavalcade appeared on the Monterey road. One of the outriders reported to Guillermo, who rode to meet it, that his father, mother, and sisters were arriving. From a distance he could hear the squeaking of the California cart in which Señora Martínez rode, though he

had himself greased the axles with soap. Its wheels were a foot thick and consisted only of round sawed logs. The vehicle was drawn by oxen, the yoke lashed with rawhide ropes to their horns. Doña Maria had ridden most of the way, but had been picked up by the cart inside the rancho in order that she might not become saddle-sore. The rest of the family were all on horseback. The slender black-haired daughters rode their fine mounts with the easy grace of long practice.

The arrival of Martínez and his party was the signal for the sports of the day to begin. All of these were characteristic of the country. There was much horseracing, but never more than two ran at a time. Slim, erect riders, who had cast aside sombrero and serape, rode their thin-flanked steeds barebacked while hundreds of voices urged them to victory.

Dennis had never been present at a scene like this. It was patriarchal, wholly typical of the California that was vanishing with the tread of Anglo-Saxon feet. Here were a dozen caballeros, owners of vast estates slipping from their fingers, with large families of strong sons and charming daughters. There were representatives of the Vallejos, the Picos, the Peraltas, and the Escobars, as well as many others. They were dressed in their finest. The vivid coloring gave as much life to the gathering as did the gay laughter of young women, the click of castanets, and the twang of guitars. For after the racing always there was dancing in the open air both for the lords of the ranchos and their dependents.

Among those present were scores of strangers, most of them vaqueros who had ridden from afar to be at the fiesta. The custom of the country was that any stranger was a welcome guest at such barbecues. Two of these attracted the attention of Antonio. They were mounted on splendid horses, well-groomed animals with great depth of girth, long and big-boned. The riders wore sombreros pulled well down over their heads. When young Martínez approached to bid them welcome, he observed that their serapes covered the entire lower part of their faces. They were dark-skinned as Indians. Moreover, they carried rifles.

Antonio took occasion to whisper in his father's ear a suspicion that these strangers were not honest men, since they remained in the background and did not expose their faces. Ramon shrugged his shoulders.

‘Our rancho belongs to the world today, my son,’ he said. ‘Any guest is welcome. We do not ask who he is, so only he comes in peace.’

Antonio had no more to say. He left to prepare for the next event, in which he and his brother Guillermo were the actors.

A young bull was released from a corral. After him dashed Antonio and Guillermo, one on each side of the animal. Guillermo rode close at a headlong gallop, seized the tail of the bull, and with a pressure of the knee turned his horse slightly outward. Down went the longhorn in a cloud of dust, and down at the same instant Antonio flung himself from the saddle. In his hand was a long strip of rawhide known as the *pella*. Before the bull could rise, he closed with him. His hands moved with amazing rapidity. He stepped back, in a storm of cheers. The feet of the animal were securely tied.

Antonio stepped in again and deftly untied the *pella*. The bull scrambled to his feet and shook himself. A few yards distant Antonio stood and waved a crimson kerchief. The body of the young man swayed away, but his feet did not move. As the brute dashed past, his horns ripped at the waving flag. Again he charged. Antonio laughed and turned to run. At the same moment Guillermo's reata snaked out and caught the bull by one of the hind feet. Over and over he rolled into the dust.

The feat was hailed with loud acclaim, as was the one that succeeded it. Young Ramon Martínez was the hero of this.

From the house he dashed toward the picnic grounds on horseback at full speed. Upon one hand he held a tray of wine-glasses. He dragged his mount to a halt, leaped from the saddle, and bowed in front of his mother and Doña Vallejo. To them he offered wine from the glasses, which were still almost full.

Other remarkable exhibitions of horsemanship were shown. Dennis had never seen such riding. He did not believe that anywhere else in the world there could be such riders. What fascinated him was not only the things they did, but the ease and grace with which they were done. The bodies of those in the saddles undulated in perfect rhythm with the motions of the animals.

Though there had been intermittent dancing all day, it did not begin in earnest until the sports were finished in the late afternoon. Only one dancing-floor was used, but it was an unwritten law that the employees of the rancho and visiting vaqueros should remain at the lower end of it and the family with its guests at the other. There were formal variations of the rule, as when the majordomo danced with Doña Maria and the housekeeper with Ramon, but the exceptions served only to emphasize the custom.

Dennis did not dance much. The steps were not familiar to him, and he found much entertainment watching the spectacle. The slight, elegant figures, both men and women, danced the native *jarabe* and *zorrita* with a grace and energy fascinating to watch. They spoke the pure Castilian with soft voices and refined accents delightful to the ear. Young Gifford knew he

was observing a phase of life that within ten years would have completely vanished. The civilization of the rushing world was already sweeping away this pastoral feudal existence, with its generous hospitality, its friendly courtesy, its caste system, its gaiety, and its safety. The rancheros were too improvident and too kindly to endure.

Again and again the eyes of Dennis came back to Rosita. She was in every dance. The young caballeros vied with one another for the chance to take her upon the floor.

It was during one of the rare moments when she was at leisure that Dennis saw a man bowing before her to ask for the privilege. The cavalier was gay with silk, satin, and gold, but from his very dark complexion he looked like an Indian. Gifford moved closer. He felt a vague apprehension, yet he did not know why. The figure seemed familiar, but his mind did not place it.

Dennis heard Doña Maria speaking, gravely, considerately, but with decision. 'Señor, I mean no offense. We are much pleased to have you with us. Our rancho is yours. But my daughter does not dance with strangers.'

The man's hat came down to his eyes. He held his serape in such a way as to hide most of his face.

When he spoke again, it was to Rosita, not to her mother.

'So I am a stranger now,' he murmured.

The eyes of the girl dilated. She gave a strangled little cry. At the same moment Dennis recognized the man. He was Juan Castro, whom he had supposed to be in a cell at the Presidio waiting to be tried and hanged.

Castro's smile was a threat. 'But not for long, *niñita*. I swear it.'

Swiftly Dennis moved forward. He was unarmed, but that could not now be helped. His square shoulders pushed into the picture.

When Castro caught sight of him, the bandit's face was convulsed with demoniac rage. He snatched out a revolver and fired point-blank at Gifford, then turned and ran for a grove where a man waited with horses.

## CHAPTER XXV

### DENNIS LEAPS A BARRIER

DENNIS staggered back against Doña Maria. He might have fallen if her arm had not slipped round his waist and supported him. Abruptly the music stopped. Among the dancers there was confusion. Few of them knew what had occurred, but the sinister crack of the revolver had startled them. Young women screamed. Their dancing partners spoke words of reassurance, though all most of them saw was a man with a smoking weapon in his hand flying for the grove.

A second man was waiting there on horseback, the bridle of a second mount in his hand. Without touching the stirrup the runner vaulted into the empty saddle, whirled the animal, and dashed toward the dancing-floor at a gallop. He pulled up sharply and flung up a hand in derisive greeting.

‘Viva Castro!’ he cried jubilantly. ‘Soon he will come for his bride. Adios, my friends. *Hasta luego.*’

He laughed, mockingly, spun his horse as on a coin, and was gone in a cloud of dust. As he turned, a bullet sang past his ear.

All the weapons of the guests and of the dependents of Martínez had been laid aside during the fiesta. It had not occurred to them that Castro would be so mad as to appear at a place where hundreds were gathered. Antonio was the sole exception. The sinister appearance of the two dark strangers had stirred in him a vague alarm. He had gone into the house for his revolver, and a bullet from it had answered the jeering challenge of the bandit.

Antonio ran to the nearest horse, pulled the slip knot, and flung himself into the saddle. He lifted his mount to a gallop and was off instantly in pursuit of the outlaws. Others armed themselves and followed.

Doña Maria gave orders that a bedroom should be made ready for Dennis and that he should be carried into the house. This last the young man himself vetoed. He was not badly hurt, he said, and could very well walk.

He did walk, supported by Ramon Martínez. An odd gaiety bubbled up in him, as it is likely to do in one who has come through an ordeal safely. He was both light-headed and light-hearted.

‘Only winged me,’ Dennis said. ‘I dodged just as he fired.’

‘Yes, I saw you dodge,’ Ramon answered gravely. ‘What you did was to sweep Rosita away with your arm so that she might be out of the line of fire. *Madre de Dios*, you are a man.’

‘I was getting away myself at the same time,’ Dennis explained. ‘A little flesh wound in my arm. That is all the damage. He is a bold devil to come here. How did he get out of prison, I wonder?’

‘That we shall find out. Do not tire yourself talking, *amigo mio*. Shall we not carry you up these steps?’

‘No, no. It is nothing—nothing.’ The young man had seen the alarm in Rosita’s tender eyes when her gaze had plunged into his. A dozen señoritas and their cavaliers were hovering about him with concern in their manner. He felt a little ashamed that so much fuss was being made over nothing. Once he had seen an Indian arrow being cut from the shoulder of a trapper. The man’s comrade had put his foot against the shoulder and tugged with his whole strength and not a groan had come from the lips of the wounded man. In comparison the surface wound in his arm was a scratch.

Among the guests was a doctor, a Californian who had had much experience in the treatment of wounds. One or another of the vaqueros was always breaking a bone. It was part of the price they paid for being the most expert horsemen in the world. Doctor de Rivas dressed the arm of Dennis with skill, promising him that in a few days he would be good as new unless the unforeseen should occur.

Doña Maria was a famous nurse. Her patient was very apologetic for imposing upon her kindness. It distressed him that a señora of her class, a patrician, so well-poised in her tall grace, should devote all her time to him. Though she had grown sons and daughters, she was still a beautiful brunette, with oval olive face and magnificent dark gray eyes.

At his protests she smiled. ‘Not more than two or three hours a day am I with you,’ she told him. ‘I look after my other guests and I enjoy the fiesta. What will you? It is possible you saved my daughter’s life. We do not know. This Castro is a wolf. You did not hesitate to interfere, knowing how he felt toward you, and that he was armed and you not. Shall I turn you over to servants? Is it so your mother would do to one of my sons in like case?’

He knew he had found favor in the eyes of this Californian lady and his heart filled with warmth. It was golden luck that he had been near when Juan Castro had confronted Rosita and made his impudent proposal. What could be more fortunate than to get a trifling wound in championing the cause of the girl he loved? Even before that they had made a friend of him, out of the kindness of their hearts, these fine hospitable Californians, but



now he had been given a chance to justify their generosity. He was very happy. Rosita would be compelled to think of him, a little at least. Out of all the men she knew he would stand out, for a day or a week anyhow. Perhaps his dreams were not so hopeless as they had once seemed.

For two days he did not catch a glimpse of Rosita. Once he saw Luisa flitting along the hall, and little Natividad came into his room twice with messages for her mother. Doña Maria was a busy woman. There were a hundred claims upon her time. It was on the third day, while she was getting water, soap, and towel for Dennis to wash his face and hands, that Rosita knocked on the door and came in to say that some guests were leaving.

Doña Maria was a sensible woman who did not carry conventions to absurd extremes. Perhaps she wanted her daughter to have a chance to thank the young American in person. At any rate, she said briskly, after a hesitation not perceptible, that she would leave Rosita to look after the wants of Dennis until she returned.

Rosita was astonished. Embarrassment flamed in a dark red wave beneath the olive of her cheeks. When she brought the bowl and the towel her downcast eyes did not lift to those of the man sitting up in bed. Her hand trembled as she poured the warm water from the pitcher.

‘It is not too hot?’ she asked in a low, soft voice.

‘Just right,’ he told her. ‘I am a nuisance. It is too bad you have to wait on me. I could get up if Doña Maria would let me.’

She flamed into sudden speech, a swift pour of Spanish vowels. ‘When you say you are a nuisance you make little of me, since it was for me you were hurt. You do right, since you know how bad a girl I am—how I forgot my modesty to encourage this villain who had bewitched me. But I am still the daughter of my father and my mother. Even if they knew my folly, they would try to repay with kindness what you did for me.’

Contrition swept through him. He had not thought of her taking his apology in that way. Trying to explain, he stumbled over words.

‘But you are not. If I could tell you—if I knew how, señorita—to say—to——’

His chagrin restored her composure. She lifted her deep, dark eyes to his. No doubt she understood, and a contrary spirit, gaily malicious, informed her next words.

‘To scold me properly, you mean,’ she said demurely.

‘To tell you—what I think—how much——’

‘Can I help you to begin, señor? I am a bold bad girl who played with fire and did not know. I should have been whipped and sent to bed. Would you perhaps like to swing the *disciplina*<sup>[6]</sup> across my back because—because \_\_\_\_\_,’

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[6] The *disciplina* was the whip which hung on schoolroom walls for lazy and refractory pupils.

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He blurted out, driven by her willful misunderstanding. ‘I think you are the loveliest and sweetest thing under heaven.’

The blush that swept her face was something beautiful to see. Her shy eyes, tender, a little fearful, clung to his while she stood an instant with suspended breath before the lids fluttered down to the hot, dusky cheeks and concealed any message that might betray her. She had asked for a compliment, but the deep earnestness with which he had cried out what was in his heart drove laughter from her face and set pulses throbbing with emotion. There was a touch of the coquette in Rosita, and flattery in the slightly stilted Californian manner would not have shaken her aplomb. But there was no smile in his eyes to suggest that what he had said was a little less than truth. Confusion flooded her. In her bosom was a kind of breathless excitement. An urgent impulse was in her to escape from this delicious agitation back to the safety of the commonplace.

‘The towel, señor,’ she murmured. ‘Will you have it now?’

He dared not look into her face. Had his blunt words, which had been so far from his intention to express, so wholly unpremeditated, given offense to her delicacy? The Spanish fashion of wooing was formal. He must speak to her father and later to the mother. Their approval must be gained. Then he must meet the girl of his choice in the presence of her parents and talk about the weather and the next *baile* and the state of the crops, about anything in fact except the thing in all their minds. All of this he had overleaped in one stride. Probably she thought he was merely a Yankee boor.

‘If you please,’ he answered. ‘*Muchísimas gracias*, señorita.’

When she turned to carry away the washbowl his eyes followed her supple, slender body. Music, it seemed to him, moved in her light-footed, undulant grace, in the spirited lift of her head, in the motion of her long lovely limbs. He saw her veiled in mystery, through rose glasses, and, as

lovers will till the end of time, felt she was too good for human nature's daily food.

Rosita busied herself at the other end of the room, her back to him. She was disposing of the towel and the water in which he had washed. After a long time she turned and spoke primly.

‘Can I do anything else for you, señor?’

‘Nothing, except—forgive me,’ he said, once more leaping the barriers.

The tide of color was still warm in her cheeks. She did not look at him. All her attention was given to straightening a piece of lacework on a little table.

‘There is . . . nothing . . . to forgive.’ Hurriedly, she pushed to safer ground. ‘I hope your wound does not pain you much. Doctor de Rivas says it is healing. We are glad.’ Even that communal pronoun gave her a touch of panic. ‘My father and my mother have been disturbed.’

‘It was nothing—a scratch.’

There was something else she wanted to say—words she had rehearsed at night in the darkness of her room while she lay curled up in bed. She spoke them, in a stilted little voice, as a child repeats a lesson learned by rote.

‘I have wished to thank you, señor, for your kindness—your great kindness—in coming to my rescue. I . . . shall never forget.’

He did not tell her, as he longed to do, that he was a thousand times in debt for the chance. He said, in a voice as formal as her own, that the pleasure had been his.

Each of them felt a chill of disappointment. For a moment they had been close, heart speaking to heart. There was a wall between them now. Had that moment of emotional crisis really not existed in the other, each asked? Was it after all not real, but only a figment of fancy?

## CHAPTER XXVI

### IN THE SPIDER'S WEB

THE trail of Juan Castro and his companion had led into the hills and vanished. None of their pursuers had come within firing distance. Antonio had swung to the back of the first horse he could reach, and the animal had neither the stamina nor the speed of the two ridden by the outlaws. Every stride left a greater distance between him and those he followed.

Presently he dropped out of the race. One or two of the other riders passed him, still going strong. But before night all of the avengers returned to the rancho. Castro had made good his escape.

Word came to Ramon Martínez next day from the commandant at Monterey telling him the bandit had cut his way through the window bars of his cell and escaped. Someone had smuggled in to the prisoner a file, and in the darkness of the night he had vanished. But before going he had thrust the blade of a knife into the heart of the sentry.

Dennis was up in a few days, sitting on the porch in the sunlight. His appetite was good, and already he was beginning to feel strong on his feet. Except for some soreness in the wounded arm he was off the invalid list, though not yet quite ready for riding or vigorous exercise.

Ramon Martínez dropped into a seat beside him one morning. In the Californian's hand was a letter.

'From Benjamin Shanks,' he explained. 'A little reminder. The claws behind the velvet pad at last. He hopes I can pay on the first of the month, when due, as it is not convenient for him to renew the loan.'

Dennis looked at his friend, but Martínez for the moment apparently had no more to say. The young man felt obliged to ask a question.

'And—can you pay?' he said gently. Then he added quickly: 'Please do not tell me if you do not wish me to know.'

Martínez looked at without seeing one of his vaqueros breaking a colt. A frown of worry furrowed his forehead.

'I do not see how I can. My herds are vast. They graze over hundreds of miles. But they are not easily turned into money.'

'Does he say he will foreclose if immediate payment is not made?'

‘Not in so many words. But he says quite plainly he must have his money when due. The reason he gives is that he has large bills which must be met.’

‘If the question is fair, señor—how much do you owe him?’

The rancho reflected. ‘I do not know. Our dealings have become involved. I have bought goods from him and he has taken in exchange cattle and tallow. Then there have been more loans—and interest—and new notes signed. I fear I am not a business man, my friend.’

That was quite apparent. He was no match for a shrewd, unscrupulous trader like Shanks. Dennis was young, but he had come of stock accustomed to cautious business habits.

‘I do not want to intrude,’ the young man said, ‘but I can do accounts and should be glad to assist with yours if you would care to have me.’

Martínez accepted the offer gladly. He was, he feared, too deep in to escape, but it would do no harm to know as nearly as possible where he stood.

For a day and a half Gifford looked over bills, receipts, statements, and haphazard data jotted down by his host from time to time. The Californian was paying interest—if the receipts from Shanks were all here—upon notes for fifty-two thousand dollars secured by mortgages upon the San Pablo, the Carmelo, and the Soledad ranchos and the cattle ranging on them. Ramon thought this was the total amount of the notes, but he was not sure whether the one for the last five thousand advanced by Shanks was included in this sum or not. He had borrowed money as he needed it, improvidently, expecting to pay at his leisure.

Dennis tried to find out how many cattle he had on each rancho. Martínez did not know. He could guess, but his estimates were vague. No accurate tally had been kept of the calves branded at the last rodeos. Ramon’s majordomo had put down the figures on a piece of paper, but the paper had been misplaced.

It was not surprising, Dennis thought, that with a small empire at his disposal the Californian was heading for bankruptcy as rapidly as possible.

To his host he made suggestions. ‘Don’t you think you should go to San Francisco and see Shanks? It will do no harm to ask for an extension of time. By doing so you’ll find just where he stands. If he is stiff for payment, you can get from him a statement of the exact amount he claims, itemized.’

Martínez assented, with no enthusiasm. ‘That would be good, no doubt, but—he is like a twisting eel. He does not say “Yes” or “No” and stick to it.

He has what the Indians call a forked tongue.'

'But you can find out from the way he talks whether you can deal with him,' Dennis urged. 'Ask him a plain question: Will he on reasonable terms extend the time? If he will not sign an extension, his purpose is clear. He means to get the ranchos. Ask him for a detailed statement of your debts. Insist upon it. He will not refuse. I speak with deference to you, señor, but I feel sure I am right.'

Ramon smiled, wryly. 'Would it do me any good to know how much I owe this usurer if I cannot pay it?'

That he was a child in financial affairs Dennis knew. The young man explained patiently that no steps could be taken to straighten the tangle until it was known how much was due. Ramon asked what steps he had in mind.

'Why not have a roundup of all your beef cattle and sell the bullocks for what they would bring? After that it may be possible for you to shift the mortgage to another creditor.'

'To another Shylock. Would that help me any?'

'Perhaps not to a Shylock,' Dennis demurred. 'I have something in my mind. It may come to nothing or to a good deal. If it works out, it will be a pleasure to me to prove to you that all Americans are not cheats and scoundrels.'

What Dennis was thinking of he did not go into more explicitly because he was not sure he could put it through. His idea was to take over the mortgage himself, or, in case he was not able to carry it, to get his partners Peebles and Bronson to go into it jointly with him. Invested so, their money would be safer than it would be in a San Francisco bank, provided the ranchos had a financial manager who would not permit them to be bled by improvident handling. Dennis intended to be that manager himself if he could get the consent of Ramon Martínez. His imagination leaped farther. As the son-in-law of the owner, it would be natural for him to look after the interests of his father-in-law and curb his improvidences. He believed that Ramon was sensible enough not to resent a more strict administration.

His plan was still in the air. The claims at Red Dog might have pinched out. Peebles and Bronson might already have invested their profits and not be able to put their hands on a sum sufficient to buy the mortgage. It might be impossible to interest them in the idea. His own one-fifth share of the claims and their proceeds he could dispose of, but he was not sure this would be enough to swing the deal.

To his partners he wrote a letter telling them of his adventures since leaving San Francisco. He asked one of them to join him at Monterey, since he had on hand an enterprise in which he felt they would wish to share. He mentioned danger as more than possible. This was a bait they would be sure to swallow, he felt sure. As an added incentive, he gave an entire paragraph to the beautiful daughters of Ramon Martínez. If that didn't fetch Frank Peebles, he did not know what would.

Smiling to himself, Dennis read over the letter. He had drawn an alluring picture of the carefree life on a rancho. He had let a hint appear of strumming guitars, dancing señoritas, and Spanish love lilt. His opinion was that Jim Bronson, too, would feel the urge to leave for a time the hard, sordid life of a mining camp for a week or two of play. Since their arrival in California the two young men had met no women except the dance-hall girls of mining towns. They were hungry for the smiles of nice pretty girls, for a romantic interlude in the harsh and ugly existence at Red Dog. From experience Dennis knew the luxury of clean clothes, of a bath in a cold mountain stream, of a razor upon a face matted with a dusty, scrubby beard. The only question was whether both his friends could leave the claims at the same time. If they found it feasible, he expected to see Jim as well as Frank within a few days. The letter he had written Dennis sent north with Martínez to be mailed in San Francisco. From there it should reach Red Dog within twenty-four hours.

Meanwhile, Dennis lazed in the pleasant Californian sunshine. Doña Maria and her daughters had returned to Monterey, but Antonio was still at the rancho. His brother Guillermo had ridden to the Carmelo Hacienda, young Ramon to the Soledad. All hands were busy rounding up the beef stock for a forced sale.

There would be a heavy loss in throwing upon the market such a large supply, but to save the land and the 'she stock' some holdings had to be sacrificed. Gifford hoped that before the herds were disposed of, he might be able to raise enough to make the sale unnecessary, but he said nothing about this. There was no use in arousing hopes that might prove futile. Moreover, he knew that Ramon Martínez, like most of the caballeros, was a snatcher at rainbows. He did not believe in doing today what could be put off until tomorrow. If there was a chance to escape from his difficulties without the trouble of rounding up his bullocks, why not wait and see? So he would reason. Dennis held another view. He meant, if it was humanly possible, to be ready for any emergency that might occur.

That was why, while he sat on the porch studying a Spanish grammar or wandered about the corrals watching the activities of the rancho, he always carried both a rifle and a revolver. Once he had been caught napping; but if he could help it, not again.



## CHAPTER XXVII

### WHEN THIEVES FALL OUT

JUAN CASTRO was facing a possible chance of loss of leadership among his men. The star of Felipe Pacheco was in the ascendant, his own shone less brightly. His capture had been a blow to his prestige, and Felipe had gained by making his escape possible. It was something to have knifed the sentry, but he could not help seeing that some of the men were beginning to look to Felipe rather than to him. Nominally he was still chief, but he was not sure how far his authority would carry in the event of a dispute.

That was one reason why he had made the audacious visit to the Rancho San Pablo during the fiesta, to impress the banditti with his luck and boldness. He had reported to them the rubbing-out of the Gringo Gifford. This was an impressive coup, but it more than lost its effect when the news came that the victim was not dead, but very much alive.

‘You should try a silver bullet on him, Juan,’ jeered Felipe. ‘That fellow will walk on your grave some day if you don’t look out. It’s all very well to stick a knife in a Gringo soldier when his back is turned, but this young devil is a horse of another color. He makes of you a child—snaps his fingers at you, *Sangre de Cristo*.’

They were sitting by the campfire, ten or a dozen of their men lounging within hearing.

The eyes of Castro grew venomous as he looked at his lieutenant. ‘I will cut the Yankee’s heart out,’ he boasted furiously.

Pacheco shrugged his shoulders. ‘*Mañana*,’ he derided. ‘Always *mañana*’

The men said nothing, but they listened. It was better not to take sides— not yet at least. There was not room in camp for both Castro and Pacheco. Some day they would fight it out. Then there would be only one of them. A month ago Juan had been chief without doubt. Now they were not so sure.

‘This Gringo Gifford is still at the Rancho San Pablo,’ snarled Castro. ‘Tomorrow we seize the ranch and kill the fool.’

‘Why?’ asked Felipe.

‘What do you mean—why?’ demanded Castro.

‘I mean why. No doubt it would be to your advantage to dispose of him. But how would it help the rest of us? If you want to fire some more of your bullets at him, good.’ Felipe waved his hand. ‘The road is open. May you have luck.’

Castro frowned at him. ‘I don’t understand. Are you telling me——?’

‘——that this is private vengeance,’ Felipe interrupted hardily. ‘Yours, Juan, not ours. Why run our noses into trouble for no profit?’

Soto ripped out a savage oath. ‘I’ll go with you!’ he cried. ‘I have a crow to pick with that young cockerel myself. If I get hold of his throat again \_\_\_\_\_,’

He did not finish the sentence, but his hairy fingers closed in an expressive gesture.

‘You have no quarrel with him, Pacheco,’ jeered Castro. ‘Who shot off your finger? Who fought a roomful of you and escaped?’

Felipe swept off his hat in a bow. ‘King Geef-ford! I salute him. *Dios*, he is a man. Why should I want to kill him? If he shot off my finger, it was in fair fight. Am I not also a man? Then why whine? Some day perhaps we meet again. Good. Until then, “Viva King Geef-ford.” So says Felipe Pacheco.’

‘And I, Juan Castro, I say, to hell with him *muy pronto*.’

Pacheco smiled at him, maliciously. ‘*Caro amigo mio*, you will need better luck than you have had. He has, I think, a charmed life. Pedro and I have emptied revolvers at him. You, Juan, have spilt a pint of lead or more. Come, I will be a prophet. Next time you meet he will send plunk! plunk! two—or maybe three—bullets into you, and alas! you will turn up your toes to the daisies. I give you advice. It is free as air—no cost. Let the young devil alone. At the proper time I will take care of him.’

Castro almost foamed at the mouth. ‘You! You will take care of him! Bah! I will sweep him away. Tomorrow. I swear it.’

‘So? I shall ride with you and see how well you sweep. Do you sweep alone, Juan? Or are all of us to help you put away this Yankee boy who has not even a beard upon his face yet?’

‘I need no help. When I see him, I shall strike,’ boasted Castro. ‘You would like to see him destroy me. Do I not know your black heart? But you will be disappointed. Tomorrow I kill him.’

Felipe shook his head with mock grief. ‘How can you say so, my chief? Did I not bring you the file when the Yankee soldiers had you fattening in a

cage for a gala day? I will make you a promise. After his bullets have plunk! plunked! into you I will show my sorrow by drinking no aguardiente for a week.'

Someone laughed. It was well known that Felipe never touched that particular liquor. He took only light native wines.

That laughter jarred Castro's vanity. He looked, with hatred in his eyes, at his lieutenant. In spite of discretion, passion flamed out of him. 'And I will make you a promise,' he said, 'that if you do not mend your ways some day I will lose patience—and that will be the end of impudent Felipe Pacheco.'

The lazy, narrowed eyes of Pacheco rested on the other. 'And when your so great patience is exhausted, will you look at me and tell me so or will you shoot me in the back?'

Castro slammed a fist down against the seat of the saddle upon which he had been leaning. 'I am not afraid of you—or any man. When you are at the end of your rope, I will let you know, *por Dios*.'

'I wonder,' murmured Felipe audibly. 'At any rate, I have a reprieve, since you are still General Mañana.'

The other did not take up the challenge. He jumped to his feet in a fury of rage and strode away. He was not afraid of his subordinate, but he had no desire to be killed while punishing the other. There were safer ways to get rid of him. As he strode from the campfire, one of them leaped to his mind. He could make dumb Pedro Soto the instrument of his vengeance, and neither Pedro nor anybody else would ever guess it. Already the giant had a dislike of Felipe. He resented that young man's ironic tongue. His dull brain suspected there was underlying mockery even in the praise Pacheco bestowed on him, and he was exceedingly sensitive to ridicule. Pedro had taken particular umbrage at Felipe's public sympathy for his discomfiture the night of the attack on the gold convoy. Pacheco's murmured condolences were like a whip across the sore back of a slave. It had been Pedro's boast that never had he been bested in a hand-to-hand fight, yet this whipper-snapper of an American had with his sharp spurs torn the flesh of his legs to ribbons and then flung him down the mountain-side so that for weeks he had nursed a bruised body black and blue in a dozen spots.

Juan had always made much of Pedro. It would not be hard to inspire in him a passion of hatred for Felipe. The latter's gay and casual insolence was never curbed. Pacheco took a pleasure in seeing the big gorilla man writhe at his silken comments, just as he did in stirring up Castro himself. Prudence

had been as much left out of his nature as had fear. Yes, it would be easy to drop a few hints that would bring Pedro Soto to the boiling point.

## CHAPTER XXVIII

### FELIPE ASKS A QUESTION

JUAN CASTRO rode beside Soto at the rear of the column of night riders. To his men he had justified the expedition by a promise. Young Antonio Martínez was at the ranch. They would take him back with them to the hills and hold him for ransom. Without doubt his father would pay a good price for the return of the boy. It would be necessary only to threaten. No harm would come to Antonio.

As they moved over the desert, the talk of Castro to his companion had nothing to do with money gain. He was sowing seeds of hate.

‘Why does Felipe jeer at you, my Pedro, as if you were some *cholo* or *peon* of no importance? Are you not the strongest man in California—in all the world? Can you not twist horseshoes and tie iron bars into knots? With one turn of your thumb and forefinger you could break his neck. Is it not so?’

‘It is so,’ growled Pedro. ‘And if he angers me I will do it.’

‘I have spoken to him. I have said, “Pedro is one of our best men, indeed the very best, and some day he will be my lieutenant.” Then he laughs scornfully. You know how he laughs. He says, “That big ape is fit for nothing but to take orders.” When I tell him Pedro is a great man with a heart of gold, he shows his teeth in that mocking grin. He thinks you are afraid of him, so he makes light of you before the others.’

Pedro gave a roar of rage. ‘I afraid of him? *Caramba!* I will tear out his heart and eat it.’

‘I have said to him that he ought not to anger you. Why should he shrug his shoulders and say it does not matter? I am your friend. I do not like it. I tell him so. Some day I shall punish him.’

The big man gnashed his teeth. ‘I will take care of him. He thinks I am afraid of him, eh? And it does not matter what he says to me because I am a fool of a pig? Oho! I will break into pieces the little jackanapes. He will not make a mouthful for me.’

‘Take care, Pedro,’ his chief advised. ‘He is dangerous both with a gun and with a knife. You know how he moves—swift as forked lightning, and as deadly.’

‘Do I care how dangerous he is?’ Pedro boasted. ‘*Por Dios*, no. I will take him apart as I would that gold watch he carries and see how he ticks. With my naked hands I will do it.’

Under the stars they rode down into the valley and crossed a field of mustard. The clip-clop of the horses’ hoofs rang out sharply as the party moved forward.

Castro rode to the head of the column and halted his party. ‘We are on the Rancho San Pablo now,’ he said. ‘There can’t be many at the hacienda with this rodeo on. But we won’t take chances. No talking. If we can surprise them—good.’

‘Much better,’ agreed Felipe. ‘If that young devil Geef-ford should be awake, he might decide to sit on some of us and take us to the *calabozo*. Eh, Juan?’

‘Awake or asleep, I’ll drag him out and cut his throat,’ Castro snarled.

‘Viva Castro!’ cheered Felipe.

His chief did not raise the question as to whether the cheer was genuine or ironical. He said sharply, ‘Be quiet, Felipe.’ Then he added directions: ‘We shall travel slowly, to make as little noise as possible. *No se apure*.’<sup>[7]</sup>

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<sup>[7]</sup> *No se apure*—Don’t be in a hurry.

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A shadowy blur rose in the moonlight presently and resolved itself into a grove of trees. Here Castro and his men dismounted. Juan appointed two of his men to stay and guard the remuda. The others moved cautiously forward toward the houses on foot.

A dog began to bark. Half a dozen others joined in as chorus. Castro broke into a run, the others at his heels. They heard a hoarse voice shouting to the dogs to keep quiet. Someone, in bare feet and without a hat, appeared at the door of a small adobe building. He opened his mouth to yawn—and caught sight of the running brigands.

‘*Madre de Dios!*’ he screamed, then turned and bolted back into the room from which he had emerged.

Castro detailed two of his men to look after him. It was important that nobody should escape from the ranch and give the alarm. Most of Juan’s coups were the result of surprise. He swooped down on his prey, held all

those present prisoner until he had obtained what he wanted, and then vanished into the night, sometimes leaving dead and dying in his wake.

The bandits surrounded the bunkhouse of the vaqueros and the main building. They crashed the doors and poured inside. Some of the captives were taken still in bed, others before they had found time to dress except very sketchily. Men, women, and children were rounded up in a rope corral.

‘Is the majordomo here?’ demanded Castro.

A large man, middle-aged but still black-headed, with a pockmarked face, stepped forward as boldly as he could. He was shaking, partly from fright and partly from the chill night air on his naked shanks.

‘*Sí*, señor. I am he. Luis Pasco, at your service.’

‘Where is that Americano, the one they call—Geef-ford, or whatever it is?’

‘He is not here, señor. Today he rode to Monterey. Tomorrow he returns, with some friends of his.’

Castro glared angrily at Pasco. ‘Not here, you say. Pig of a *rotoro*, if you lie to me, I will have you skinned alive.’

‘But I do not lie, señor. It is true. He left with Señor Antonio. In the afternoon. Ask anyone else.’

‘This Yankee—the friends that return with him, who are they?’

‘They are two Americanos. I do not know who they are.’

‘And Antonio—does he come back with them?’

‘So it is planned. And Señor Martínez, with perhaps some of the señoritas. Of that I am not sure, but we are to have rooms ready.’

In the evil eyes of Castro a light burned. ‘Oho! Some of the señoritas. Which of them?’

Pasco shook his head. ‘That I do not know. It was a thought of the young Señor Antonio, but perhaps they will not come.’

‘If they come, we shall give them a royal welcome—all of them, the so beautiful señoritas, Ramon and his son, both of whom have joined with the Gringos against us, and most of all to that young devil the Americano. Eh, my men? Is it not so—a welcome none of them will forget?’

As he spoke Castro showed his teeth in a grin of anticipation. He had waited long for it, but it looked as if his hour was close at hand.

Soto let out a whoop from his hairy throat. ‘Pedro will welcome the so lovely señoritas and the dog of a Gringo Geef-ford. The rest of them—I will

make you a present of all the others.’

Felipe’s sardonic gaze slid from Pedro to the face of his chief. He did not make any comment.

The majordomo voiced timidly a request. ‘We have children. They are not clothed, and they shiver in the night air. May we not send them to bed, señor? And the women too?’

Before Castro could answer, Felipe spoke up lightly. ‘Of course. We are Californians like yourselves. We are not heartless ruffians. I speak for Juan Castro, I am sure. To bed with all of you, women and children. No harm will come to you. Sleep without fear, little ones. We will guard you from evil ones. But it would not be well for any to try to escape. No, it would be very bad. Am I not right, Juan?’

Castro assented sulkily. He objected to having his orders anticipated, especially when he was not sure whether they were those he would have given. Felipe was always cutting the ground from under his feet, sometimes suavely as now and sometimes with scarcely veiled insolence. He saved face by ordering all the men into the bunkhouse of the vaqueros and having the doors and windows nailed up. Guards were posted at strategic points to prevent the escape of any of the prisoners.

Felipe sauntered across the patio to the room where Castro, Pedro, and two more of the men were drinking the best wine from the cellar. He helped himself to a glass, half-sat on the table with one leg swinging, and sipped the wine.

‘Ramon is good to his guests,’ he said, with a smile. ‘He bids us welcome with his best. Eh, Pedro?’

The giant lowered at him. ‘I take what I want,’ he growled.

‘A fortunate man who can do that,’ Pacheco commented easily. ‘Am I not right, Juan? In this world we want so much and get so little. Let us hope it will be better in that other one which is so close to some of us.’

‘What do you mean?’ Castro snarled.

‘That we brigands do not live long, unless we are very wise and very careful.’ Felipe showed his white teeth in a smile, turned first on his chief and then on Pedro. ‘For me, I am careful even though not wise.’

‘If you have something to say, spit it out from your mouth,’ Castro ordered.

Felipe continued to dangle one leg while he rolled and lit a cigarette. ‘Thoughts occur to me,’ he murmured indolently. ‘To begin with—my neck.



It is the only one I have, and I should not like to have it stretched by a rope as yours so nearly was, dear Juan. Yet this is what I see in front of me, unless we change our ways. Not my neck alone. Does not yours begin to ache, my Pedro?’

Soto swore violently, by way of answer.

‘And yours, Juan. *Por Dios*, I see a rope dangling just back of you. It is dropping over your head.’ Felipe stretched out a hand. His eyes dilated as he leaned forward.

So realistic was his manner that Castro started and looked round hurriedly.

The laughter of Felipe rang out. ‘I speak figuratively, *amigo*. Do not be afraid. They will not hang you tonight—but soon, I fear.’

‘I am not afraid, of anyone here or in hell,’ Castro cried. ‘What are you croaking for? If you have something to say, can you not say it?’

‘What I have to say is this,’ Felipe answered smoothly. ‘We live by the sufferance of our friends. They feel we are patriotic because we pillage the Yankees. So they let us alone. They do not betray us. But do you think we can do violence to the family of Don Ramon Martínez, one of the most popular caballeros in the country, without stirring up a hate that will wipe us from the earth? If you think so, you are a fool. We take his cattle. That is one thing, and dangerous enough, but a small wrong compared to that of touching his family. I tell you it will not do, Juan.’

‘You are afraid,’ sneered Castro.

‘Very much, since I at least am not completely a fool,’ Pacheco replied promptly. ‘To fight is one thing, to commit suicide another. I say again, that to strike at the heart of Ramon Martínez is to strike at your own—and what interests me much more, at mine.’

‘You grow dramatic, Felipe,’ his chief answered, with a curl of the lip. ‘And timid. Like an old woman.’

‘Perhaps,’ said Pacheco coolly. ‘That is as may be. But I ask a question. You spoke of a royal welcome for Don Ramon, his son, *and his daughters*, one none of them will forget. What is in your mind, Juan?’

‘That is my business,’ Castro responded harshly.

‘And mine,’ added the lieutenant quietly. ‘And the business of Manuel here and Francisco and Pedro, since all of them too will be hanged or shot if you make a mistake.’

‘I will not make a mistake. I will look after them. Must I ask your advice about what I must do?’

‘It is not more than two weeks since I saw your face behind the bars of the Presidio *calabozo*,’ mentioned Felipe. ‘If you cannot look after yourself, how do we know you can look after us?’

‘Did I not escape and drive a knife into the heart of the Yankee guard?’ broke out Castro angrily.

Felipe stroked his black mustache, without concealing a satiric smile. ‘So you did—with a little help. But let that pass. I ask what are your plans.’

‘I answer that if you wait you will find out. Am I not chief of this band?’

‘If you are chief you will lead us wisely and safely for the good of all. I know what you mean to do if you are let alone. Listen to me, Juan. I will not let you hurt a hair of the head of one of the daughters of Ramon Martínez. I am not such a fool.’

Beneath the olive of Castro’s cheeks a flush of anger ran. ‘Who are you, to say what I may or may not do? If you wish, you can leave us—while there is still time. But if you stay, you will obey. I will have no more of your whinings. Am I not right, Pedro?’

With another furious oath Pedro burst into speech. ‘Say the word, master, and I will tear the long tongue from his throat.’

Felipe slowly puffed out a ring of smoke, then tossed away his cigarette. As he looked at the giant, his teeth flashed in a smile. His body did not shift its lounging position, but the eyes were wary.

‘Oho, my little Pedro! And when will you start that trifling performance? Shall we say now? Or will it be *mañana*, after the fashion of dear Juan?’

‘I will cut a gash in your other cheek to match the one you already have,’ Soto roared.

The man on the table caressed his scarred cheek with the tips of his fingers. He was still smiling at his huge opponent, gaily, contemptuously.

‘Before you do that, *muchacho*’ he said lightly, ‘I advise you to visit the graveyard at Monterey, where you will find buried one Tony Perez, whose knife gave me this loving souvenir.’

Pacheco slipped from the table, looked with cool derision first at Soto and then at Castro, and sauntered from the room.

Behind him he left two men boiling with rage—and two others filled with doubt. Before morning the story of what had occurred in the room would be whispered from one bandit to another. That was what Felipe

wanted. The men would range themselves on one side or another. Most of them would go with Castro and Soto, but Pacheco hoped there would be a sprinkling of them side with him. At least three of the band had worked for the Martínez family. There must be others who had respect for the caballeros of California, even though they themselves were thorough villains. At any rate he had thrown down the gauntlet.

Reckless though he was, Felipe did not trust entirely to chance. Three or four of the band he believed to be partisans of his rather than of Castro. There was José Damietta, with whom he had gone to school as a boy, a wild and devil-may-care young scamp who had once been forced to take a merciless beating from Pedro Soto. There was Joaquín Feliz, formerly a vaquero of Martínez. He could perhaps be counted upon for support. Three-Fingered Panoche was still another vaquero who had ridden for Don Ramon. He had left after a quarrel with one of the rancho majordomos, but there might be some roots of loyalty still in him to the family, murderer and outlaw though he was.

During the next hour or two Felipe felt them out and found that his judgment had been sound. They would support a revolt if any assurance could be given them it would be successful. But they knew the price of failure. Defeat would mean for them extermination.

The weakness of Felipe's position lay in the ruthlessness of Castro and Soto. In different ways both of them inspired fear. Juan was merciless. Upon that he had built his reputation. The men had once seen Pedro kill a man with his bare hands as a huge ape might have done, and the thing had been horrible to behold. The berserk rages of the giant, combined with his amazing physical strength, filled his companions with awe. The two men together made a combination that daunted those who would have liked to oppose them.

Something of this José Damietta confided to Felipe as they talked under the stars. Felipe laughed at his fears with gay insouciance.

'Ah! But that is one thing this Americano, Colonel Colt, has done for us. With one of his revolvers in our hands we are strong as a lion. Pedro is big and wide, a giant—the easier to hit. He is heavy and strong as a bullock. He will fall the harder. Come. You shall carry a challenge to him for me. I will fight him in a locked room, each of us with a knife, and we shall see who comes out alive. The man is muscle-bound, slow as an ox. Before that slow brain of his can get started, I will make mincemeat of him. Pouf! You shall see.'

Hastily Damietta declined to be a messenger for such a purpose. He would have nothing to do with such a mad business.

‘As you please,’ Felipe continued. ‘But do not forget he is only a brute, to be got rid of when he becomes too much of a nuisance. I tell you, José, that if we let him and Juan harm these daughters of Ramon Martínez we had better be shriven and say our last prayers, for we shall be hunted down like wolves. That is sure. *Madre de Dios*, I would rather take my chance in a stiff fight with these ruffians. If I have to take the long journey, it would be good to send them both to hell before I go.’

‘If there were enough of us,’ Damietta pleaded.

‘You and I alone would be enough,’ Felipe demurred. ‘We shoot down Castro and Soto—and the little affair is over.’

But he could get no definite pledge from Damietta, Feliz, or Three-Fingered Panoche. If there was to be a rebellion, he would have to start it alone.

## CHAPTER XXIX

### ‘AT YOUR FEET, SEÑORITA ROSITA’

THE cavalcade moving toward the Rancho San Pablo was a large one. It consisted of Ramon Martínez, his daughters Luisa and Rosita, his son Antonio, Dennis Gifford, two armed attendants, and Benjamin Shanks.

The San Francisco capitalist had returned with Ramon ostensibly to look over the ranchos with a view to an extension of the time for the loan, provided he found the security ample. His real reason was quite different. He held a chattel mortgage on a large number of the cattle of Martínez. He did not intend to permit a sale of any stock if he could help it. Though he permitted his host to think so, he had not the slightest intention of giving his debtor more time.

At Monterey Dennis had found a letter from Frank Peebles. In it Frank said that he and Jim would take the next boat down. It had been necessary to stay a day or two at the claims while they made arrangements for someone to take charge of the work.

Dennis was in high feather. He rode beside Rosita, who was to him an alluring and seductive marvel. The girl rode beautifully, her slender supple body erect, yet gracefully lithe. She laughed at him a great deal, coquettishly, but when the dark eyes met his, they softened the mockery. For in them he caught glimpses of gleaming fires, mysterious and unexplainable. He did not know, however, that she was beneath her gay sophistication primitive woman, eager to be captured by the right man; and that the question whether he was that man was now never very long absent from her mind.

She asked him about his friends. ‘Are they good-looking—handsome? Will they learn to dance well? Can they talk Spanish? Will they like us poor Californian girls?’

He answered her questions in order, with a laugh. ‘No. No. A little. Yes.’ Then, in more detail: ‘I am the pick of the flock. You must not expect them to be as handsome as I am, or to dance as well. They know enough Spanish to say “*Qué mujer tan hermosa!*”<sup>[8]</sup> when they see you. I do not really need to answer the last question, because you know very well whether they will like you.’

She turned in the saddle and called to Luisa. ‘I have bad news. The young men who are coming from the north are very ugly and they will dance like bears.’

Luisa understood her sister. ‘But I have heard one can teach a bear to dance very well. And it is true, is it not, that if a man is ugly enough he is fascinating?’

Antonio was so slim, so graceful, so engaging in manner, and yet so manly, that he could afford to deprecate beauty in a man. ‘That is true. What are good looks to a man, unless he is a dancer on the stage? There is Juan Castro, who looks as pretty as a girl, with his black curling hair and his perfect features. But to look at him sends a shiver through me. He is as evil as Satan. That other rogue Felipe is not handsome—and I dare say he is as bad as Juan—but there is something about him I like, even though I should be glad to see him hanged.’

‘There is something in your civilization that is lacking in ours,’ Dennis admitted. ‘Good looks may not be important, but good manners are charming. All of us Argonauts seem to have discarded any we may have once had. I met a famous lady in San Francisco, Miss Lola Montez, and she said that we are blunt even to rudeness. Now you Californians——’

‘You met Miss Montez?’ Luisa cried, her eyes sparkling with eagerness. ‘Tell us about her. What is she like? What did she wear? Did you see her to speak with?’

‘I had dinner with her. She is beautiful—and friendly—but I don’t know what she wore. What I’m trying to say is that every humble Californian in blanket coat, soiled leather leggings, unwashed and unshaven, speaks soft liquid Spanish, has gracious manners, and knows how to give pleasant compliments with ease. For us—we see a lovely woman, our hearts are lifted by her charm, but our tongues are dumb.’

Dennis looked at Luisa while he spoke and not at her sister.

Luisa clapped her hands. ‘*Brava!* Not so dumb, my friend. At a pinch, when our own caballeros are not here, I think you will do very well. Is it not so, Rosita?’

‘It is the fate of woman that she must put up with what she gets,’ Rosita answered demurely. ‘When your friends come, even if they are as ugly and as awkward as you say they are——’

‘I didn’t say that,’ Dennis corrected. ‘They are good-looking boys, both of them, but they haven’t met any ladies since they left home a year ago. You know the song about you girls of California?’

“They’re dreadful shy of forty-niners,  
Turn their noses up at miners.”

You must be kind and encourage them.’

Luisa laughed. ‘I feel myself growing kind already.’

The young people rode in pairs when the road was narrow and four abreast when there was room. Behind them were Ramon, a fine horseman used to the saddle from his youth, and Benjamin Shanks, who slumped down like a great fat sack of meal.

To his guest Ramon was courtesy itself, though he entirely distrusted the man. There was something reptilian about the monstrous bulk of the fellow. The shapeless flesh so hid the bones as to suggest the order of invertebrates. His eyes, so like those of a dead cod, had in them no human emotion. One looked into them and saw only opaque and chilly depths devoid of expression.

At the first sight of Dennis on the wharf at Monterey, he had recognized him and called to mind a summary of his activities. Escaped sailor, vigilante, gunman who had wounded Duff Conway and killed Bruce Marshall, capturer of Juan Castro, inveterate meddler with affairs which were no concern of his. It would be well to get rid of this young man as soon as possible. Not only was he a nuisance; he was getting to be a menace. Shanks was used to respect. He was an important man in San Francisco, so powerful that even the executive committee of the Vigilantes were careful not to offend him unnecessarily. But this young whipper-snapper Gifford had smiled at him impudently, as he stepped from the boat, and told him he was too late for the funeral of his jackal Marshall, if that was why he had come. Yes, he would get Juan Castro to rub him out.

Shanks did not know that the manner and the words of Dennis had been a bluff. As the fat, gross man waddled down the gangplank the heart of the boy had died within him. He had come to weave his web around those whom Dennis had grown to love, the friends who had given him the largesse of their generous hospitality and confidence. The reference he had made to Bruce Marshall did not reflect his true state of mind. There were times when he went cold inside at the thought that he had sent this man to meet his God. Gifford had none of the psychology of a killer. He was only a warm-hearted lad who had been flung by circumstance into stark and desperate situations, out of which by the hand of Providence he had so far safely escaped.

Riding down into the valley, the men of the party kept a sharp lookout against attack. They did not expect anything of the sort, but Castro's threat that he would soon come for his bride was not one to be ignored. The man was a boaster, but he was also a dangerous villain. Not until they drew close to the ranch and Luis Pasco came out to meet them did their precautions relax.

Ramon called out to his majordomo a cheerful greeting. '*Buenos dias, como esta V., Luis?*'<sup>[9]</sup>

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[9] Good morning, how are you?

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There was something the matter with Pasco. His lips were dry and ashen. His hands trembled. Before he could speak, another voice answered the salutation, with mocking derision.

'Good-morning, my dear father-in-law. I welcome you with gratitude, for I see you have brought my bride. At your feet, Señorita Rosita, *mi muy querida.*'

Juan Castro had stepped from the doorway of the main house and was bowing ironically. He had spoken in his own language.

The surprise was complete. From every building, from back of the windmill, from behind trees, men armed with rifles had stepped out and covered the party. To attempt resistance would be madness, and was not to be thought of since there were women in the party.

The leader of the banditti gave orders, the high note of triumph riding his voice. 'Manuel, Pedro, Feliz, you will collect the arms of our guests, after which they will dismount and come into the house out of the heat of the sun. The best we have is theirs. As caballero to caballero, Don Ramon, I swear no guests were ever more welcome. We shall kill for you the fatted calf.'

'One with your own brand on it, señor,' Felipe added with a smile.

The three outlaws named by Castro stepped forward and disarmed the men of the Martínez party. Pedro Soto reached up and dragged Dennis from the saddle. He glared into the face of the young American ferociously. For the moment it was in his mind to kill his victim with no further delay, but he had been given instructions and managed to restrain his fury.

With a foul oath he tore the weapons from Gifford. '*Muy pronto!*' he cried. 'I will tear you to pieces and cut your heart out. I, Pedro Soto, with



my own hands.'

Rosita went pale to the lips. She swayed in the saddle and would have fallen if Antonio had not steadied her with an arm.

'Not so impetuous, my little Pedro,' Felipe suggested. 'We have ladies with us. Let us not alarm them when there is no need. Am I not right, Juan?'

Castro ignored the question of his lieutenant. He came forward to assist Rosita to dismount, but Antonio was too quick for him. Young Martínez had slipped to the ground and lifted first Rosita and then Luisa from their saddles.

Once more the bandit chief bowed from the waist, the man's right hand crossing his heart. 'My house is yours,' he jeered. 'Will you come into the sala? There a glass of angelica will refresh after your long journey.'

Ramon Martínez spoke, his voice firm, almost harsh. 'What are you doing here? If you have come to rob my hacienda, take what you want and be gone.'

In Castro's bold eyes there was an evil smile. 'I shall take what I want, Don Ramon, at my convenience. Make no mistake about that. We understand each other. Very well you know what it is I want.'

'Very well I know you are a villain, but even you dare not lift a hand against Ramon Martínez or his family. If it is cattle you want, take them and leave my rancho.'

'Not cattle this time, señor.' He added, with a grin: 'Let us have no family quarrels. We shall go into the house and talk as gentlemen should. Since I am your host, you and all your party first, Don Ramon. Your vaqueros will remain outside. Felipe, you—and Pedro—and Junipero will accompany us.'

Castro was in a dark red serape fringed with gold. His short jacket was of black velvet trimmed with lace of a fine quality, his trousers of dark blue laced also with gold, flaring at the bottom. He made a handsome and graceful figure, but as Rosita passed him on the way into the house her knees were ready to give way and the blood in her veins felt thin as water. She was afraid, to the marrow of her bones. This villain had come to take her away with him—and to destroy the man she loved, Dennis Gifford. Yes, she loved him ardently—passionately. No longer did she need to ask herself whether he was the mate she wanted. She knew. The terror that shook her soul had made the truth clear to her in a blinding flash. It was this man, who stood in deadly peril of his life, with whom all her hopes of happiness were closely knitted.

## CHAPTER XXX

### ROSITA BEGS FOR MERCY

CASTRO made a great show of courtesy in seating his guests. He was deferential to the young women and full of triumphant suavity to their father and brother. Toward Shanks he manifested a pleased surprise at his presence. Only when he faced Gifford did his manner of genial insolence fail. All the evil of him showed in his venomous face.

‘So, I have you here at last, dog of a Yankee,’ he spat out. ‘I will pay you for all you have done—once for all. Did you think you could interfere with Juan Castro and not pay the price? Then you are a fool. I stamp you out, as I would a rattlesnake.’

Dennis looked at him, without a word, from impassive eyes which did not betray the fear flooding his being.

‘Take care what you do,’ warned Ramon Martínez. ‘This young man is my guest. I shall hold you to account for any harm that comes to him as I would if he were one of my own family.’

Castro turned swiftly on the caballero. ‘He is a murderer. He killed with no provocation an innocent man at The Seamen’s Rest. For that I shall execute him.’

‘He killed in self-defense a bully wanted for murder in San Francisco,’ Ramon replied.

‘His story has deceived you, señor. I have witnesses. Two of them in this room.’ Castro swung round to Soto. ‘Pedro, is it not true this ruffian murdered the Americano Marshall for no good reason at all?’

Pedro Soto swore a scurrilous oath. ‘True, Juan, and for that and private reasons of my own I will twist his neck until it cracks.’

The leader of the banditti called upon Felipe for confirmation.

Pacheco showed his fine teeth in a grin. ‘What need of lies, Juan? He came to Cutthroat Dave’s as a spy. When he was discovered, he had to fight his way out. By luck he did it. Since you have him, hang him if you will. But be honest. You hate him because he is a better man than you are. That is cause enough for you to do away with him. No need of reasons to bolster up what you mean to do. He is a brave boy, and I take my hat off to him.’

Rosita moved a step or two in his direction, her hands outstretched to him. 'You will save him!' she cried. 'You, too, are brave, and you will not let him be—be harmed when he has done no wrong.'

Felipe looked into the lovely face tortured by fear. He decided at once that she was in love with the American, since she had forgotten her own danger and was remembering only his. He shook his head.

'No, señorita,' he said. 'This is private business between him and Juan. They have a feud, it seems. I keep myself out of it.' In spite of which he could not refrain from a rider meant to irritate his chief. 'But Juan is brave as a lion. He will perhaps wish to fight King Geef-ford man to man—what your Yankee friends call even-steven. A caballero of good family will not, of course, wish to take advantage.'

'If anybody fights him I will be the man,' Pedro broke in savagely. 'I have sworn that I alone will kill him.'

The cold dead eyes of Shanks moved from one to another. This was working out exactly as he would have wished. Gifford would be destroyed, and he would not be even slightly implicated in the affair.

'Enough of him,' Juan said, with a gesture of the hand that swept Gifford out of existence. 'He has come to the end of his trail. Good. We shall talk of more important affairs—and more privately. A word with you alone, Don Ramon—with you and with your lovely daughter, the charming Señorita Rosita.'

'No,' Martínez cried sharply. He stood with squared shoulders facing the outlaw. 'If you wish I will see you alone. My daughter has nothing to do with what you wish to say to me.'

'As you will, señor. Alone be it then. In the patio, shall we say?'

'In the patio,' Ramon assented, the lines of his face drawn, his eyes fierce with anxiety.

Castro turned to his lieutenant. 'You will watch my other guests, Felipe, and the prisoner Gifford,' he ordered.

Felipe lit a cigarette. 'With your permission,' he said, bowing to Rosita and Luisa. Then, to Castro: 'I shall watch—and protect them. With Pedro's strong right arm to assist. Eh, Pedro, my little *muchacho*, ever loyal and true?'

From Soto's throat came a snarl. He knew Pacheco was mocking him again.

The dark eyes of Castro, treacherous as those of a cat, met those of Felipe. He understood that the scar-faced man was reserving the right to challenge any decision his chief might come to if he disapproved of it.

‘You do not need to tell Pedro he is loyal, Felipe,’ said Castro acidly. ‘That we know already.’

Juan followed Ramon Martínez to the patio.

That he was doomed to death by the leader of the banditti Dennis knew. It was possible that Rosita might be saved from him, but his own chances were very slight. Both Castro and Soto hated him and were determined to have his life. Yet there was in the heart of the young man a current of hope that fought with despair. Rosita had begged for his life, regardless of what a roomful of men might think. He watched now the gleam of her throat, the movements of her swift hands, as she talked with Antonio, urging upon him with passionate energy some course of action.

Antonio nodded agreement, then stepped forward and spoke to Pacheco, but clearly enough for all to hear.

‘You are a Californian as we are, señor,’ he said. ‘I recall that for a short time we were at school together, though I was a very small boy and you were older. It was then you plunged into the bay to save the life of a little one who was drowning.’

Felipe shrugged his shoulders and smiled. ‘There was some such incident. I do not remember you at school, since I must be five or six years older than you. Your brother Guillermo I knew.’

The outlaw was aware that this opening of young Martínez was by way of introducing some request. He waited to find out what it was, a cynical grin on his face.

‘You are not a butcher,’ Antonio said boldly. ‘Surely you will not permit Castro to injure this friend of ours, the young Americano. Take what cattle you can find—any money we may have—and do not leave a trail of blood behind you. It cannot be that you want us and all our friends for your enemies. That would be madness.’

‘Why come to me with your plea?’ Felipe asked. ‘I do not want the life of this young fighting cock, though one of his bullets snipped off a finger of mine. For me, he may live to be as old as Methusaleh. It is none of my business. You must speak to Juan—and to Pedro here.’

‘Soon I will wring his neck for him,’ Pedro cried harshly.

‘I will buy his life from you at a fair price,’ Antonio said to Soto. ‘Come. He fought fairly with you. How much shall it be?’

‘I will not sell him to you for every *real* you have,’ the giant answered brutally. ‘But you can have him for nothing after I am through with him—what is left of the Gringo.’

Rosita walked across the room to the huge man, her legs trembling as she moved. ‘You can’t do this dreadful thing,’ she begged, and caught her hands together in an agony of fear. ‘He has not harmed you. If he has, forgive him—and I—I shall pray for you all my life and if you die before I do burn a candle to the Virgin for your soul.’

Ruffian though he was, Pedro felt the delicate fragrance of her charm wafted to him. His black pig eyes narrowed covetously. First Gifford and what pickings they could get at the rancho, then into the hills with these beauties who thought themselves too fine to wipe their feet on him and his like.

‘Save your breath, *cariña*, and do not waste it on this dog of a Gringo,’ he told her hoarsely. ‘I will have talk with you—oh, yes, much of it—but not about this Yankee who is already as good as dead, my pretty one. We will talk of kisses—and love. Not so, *chatita*?’

The girl’s heart died within her. It was no use. She might as well beg mercy of a tiger.

She turned from him, the room a wavering fog before her eyes. Blindly she moved forward.

Dennis ran to her and caught her in his arms as she fell.

## CHAPTER XXXI

### ‘QUIÉN SABE?’

RAMON MARTÍNEZ interrupted Castro by flinging out an arm in sweeping refusal. ‘No, I will have none of it. I will not listen. Are you a fool that you propose such a thing? If that is what you have to say, there need be no more talk between us. I shall leave you.’

With a gesture Castro stopped him. ‘A moment, if you please. I have told you what I want and what I am going to have. So it will be.’

‘Have you gone mad, Castro?’ the caballero demanded harshly. ‘The whole country would rise against you. While I am in your power you can kill me, but you cannot kill all my sons, my brothers, my friends, the hundreds of vaqueros who would hunt you down like a wolf. Touch a hair of her head and you are lost. Unless you have lost your senses you know this.’

‘My name is known from one end of California to the other,’ Castro said. ‘Americanos on the long overland trail speak it and tremble. I am the avenger of our country. I make war upon the Gringos while the rest of you fold your hands and let them take the land which is ours. The day will come when you will be proud to have your daughter married to the great Juan Castro.’

‘That day will never come. You are a bandit, outside the law. My daughter is not for you. I do not care to discuss it,’ Martínez replied haughtily.

Anger flared into the dark eyes of the ruffian. ‘I have made a fair offer. *Qué infierno!* You may take or leave it. What you wish does not matter. The girl is mine and I shall take her.’

‘No. Not while I’m alive, if I have to throttle you with my bare hands. Your own men would rise against you if you tried to do so devilish a thing. There are women of your own rank who will have you gladly, many of them. Be content with what is within your reach.’

Martínez turned and walked from the patio back into the sala. The bandit leader followed, his sultry eyes blazing with rage.

Ramon did not hesitate an instant. To the other outlaws in the room he said bluntly what was in his mind.

‘This man has made an infamous proposal to me, that I permit him to marry one of my daughters. *Madre de Dios!* I would far rather see her in her grave. I tell you what I told him. If he or if any of you lift a hand to injure her, all of you will be hunted down like a pack of wolves until not one is left. You may kill me—and my son here; but I have other sons, brothers, friends, neighbors. The whole country will rise against you. The hunt will never die down until you are all shot to death. This you know, unless you too have gone mad.’

Felipe clapped his hands. ‘Brava, señor! What you say so well I too have said in my less forceful way. I say it again. For me, I do not war with women. While I am alive, your daughters are safe, Don Ramon. I have no fancy for putting my head into a noose to please dear Juan.’

‘You’re turning traitor, eh?’ Castro cried with a snarl. ‘Trying to curry favor before you betray us—— Is that it?’

‘What I have just said, I told you in this house before your prisoners arrived, as you know very well,’ Felipe answered. ‘I am not fool enough to draw your chestnuts out of the fire for you. When you call me traitor, I throw it in your teeth that you are a liar. If that is a word you do not like, we will talk of it outside.’

‘And I—am I a liar if I call you traitor?’ roared Pedro.

Felipe smiled at him, derisively. ‘You are an echo, my little Pedro.’

Soto slammed a hamlike fist down on a table and made it jump. ‘Do not call me your little Pedro. Am I not the strongest man in the world? Can I not break you in two with my hands? *Por Dios*, I will choke your laugh in your throat.’

‘Perhaps,’ admitted Felipe lightly. ‘*Quién sabe?*’

He turned his back negligently upon both Castro and Soto and strolled from the room. Back to the two angry men came the insolent lilt of his favorite song,

*‘Adios, adios, para siempre—adios.’*

Felipe had suggested a talk outside. The words, flung contemptuously at Castro, had been a challenge, to be picked up or let alone. With a berserk bellow of rage Pedro started to follow him from the room. His chief had turned pale with passion, but he checked the giant with a murmured warning.

‘Not just now, my Pedro, but soon, *por la Virgen de Guadalupe.*’

Castro called in some of his men and gave orders for the disposal of the prisoners. They were to be taken to rooms designated by him, locked up, and later fed. A special guard was to remain at the door of Gifford and a second to patrol beneath his window.

Before Ramon Martínez left the sala, he hung on his heel for one last warning to Castro.

‘Remember, none of your devil tricks, if your life is of value to you,’ he said, looking steadily into the venomous eyes of the outlaw.

To Dennis both Antonio and Luisa spoke a word as they were leaving the room. The young man said, ‘Be of good cheer, all is not yet lost’; and Luisa, ‘We shall pray to the Blessed Virgin for you.’ Rosita said nothing. Her dark, mournful eyes were fixed on the man she loved. Though the shadow of death was reaching out for the young American, his heart leaped exultantly. Only to one man in the world did a woman give a look like that. It told him she was his, sealed for time and eternity.

‘There is hope while there is life,’ he said to Rosita. ‘He dares not hurt you. His own men will not permit it. And I shall live to see the grave of this villain. Together—you and I—we shall come to happy days.’

Rosita caught sight of Castro’s cruel smile and an icy wave drenched her.

‘In heaven or hell, not here,’ the outlaw jeered.

The guards hustled the prisoners to their rooms.



## CHAPTER XXXII

### ROSITA MAKES A BARGAIN

ROSITA and Luisa found themselves in the same room they were used to occupying on their visits to the rancho. As soon as the door had closed behind them, Rosita gave way to the despair which flooded her whole being. She paced up and down the room wringing her hands in a transport of agony.

‘I’ll never see him again—never—never,’ she wailed. ‘They will take him out—those two devils from hell—and they will—will——’

The girl did not finish the sentence. She could not put into words the picture that jumped to her mind—of a boy standing before Castro and his huge satellite, of the roar of guns, of a slack and lifeless body crumpling to the ground.

‘*Madre de Dios!*’ she cried. ‘Is there nothing we can do to save him—nothing at all?’

Rosita had forgotten that she, too, stood in danger of a worse fate than that of her lover. At this very moment they might be murdering him. She could think of nothing else. Never in her sheltered young life had she come so close to red tragedy sweeping forward to engulf her happiness. It was incredible, that out of the sunshine this bleak disaster should leap at her so unexpectedly. One moment life all gay laughter; the next all joy banished forever.

Luisa tried to comfort her sister. ‘Our father will find a way to save him. You heard what he said to this bandit, that if he hurt even one of our friends he would be hunted down. They are scoundrels, these outlaws, but they are not all heartless. The one they call Felipe promised no harm would come to us. He is not afraid of Castro or of that great ape who is his shadow. Did you not hear what he told our father, that we are safe from them while he lives? This Castro will not have everything his own way.’

‘If harm comes to Dennis, I think I cannot live,’ Rosita sobbed, swept away by the intensity of the Latin temperament. ‘This man they call Felipe will not lift a hand for him. He said so. He will let Castro murder him to satisfy his grudge.’

She huddled down on the edge of the bed, face in hands, and her slender body shook as emotion overpowered her.

Luisa put her arm around Rosita and wept with her. In her heart she felt that Dennis Gifford was doomed. Even if Castro was forced to give up his plan to force a marriage with Rosita, he would insist on revenge upon the young American for the humiliation that had been put on him in being sent to prison.

Rosita leaped to her feet. 'I must do something—now. I shall see this ruffian. If I beg for the life of Dennis, he may give it me.'

The other sister shook her head. 'I am sorry, but I do not think so. He will not give you something for nothing. There is no generosity in him. To talk with him will do no good.'

But Rosita could not sit still and do nothing. She walked to the window and called a sentry who was doing a beat in the garden. Would he get his master, Juan Castro, and bring him to her? She must see him at once, she said.

The man below looked up, grinned, and called to another outlaw. 'Ho, Manuel,' he cried. 'One of the pretty little birds in the cage would talk with Juan. Will you tell him she is hungry for a sight of his so beautiful eyes?'

Not five minutes later a knock sounded upon the door of the room. Rosita choked down the terror that tightened her throat and said to come in. A key turned.

Juan Castro stood in the doorway bowing raffishly. He looked at Rosita, ignoring her sister.

'At your feet, señorita,' he said, his sombrero sweeping the floor.

Rosita moistened her lips with her tongue. She could not keep a great dry lump from filling her throat. The heart beating against her ribs was like some trapped wild bird trying to escape.

'I sent for you—to beg mercy from you,' she cried.

He closed the door behind him and came into the room. His eyes were filled with jubilant triumph. 'But it is I, little one, who must beg mercy of you,' he answered. 'Do you not hold my heart in the hollow of your hand? Have I not been your devoted servant and lover from the first time our eyes met at the *baile*?'

A tremor passed through the slender figure so beautifully poised. She was afraid of him. All the high courage of her youth was quenched. He saw the throbbing beat of the pulse in her olive throat. It delighted him to see the dark silken lashes fall to the cheeks before his possessive gaze. He wanted his women afraid of him. That went with the pleasure of the chase, to break their spirits as he would the resistance of a young, untamed horse.

With a catch of the breath, she found words to put her prayer. 'This Americano—will you not spare him?'

He smiled, lifting an eyebrow derisively. 'But, of course. I did not know you were interested in him. He is in God's pocket, *carísima*.'

Luisa's sloe eyes watched the man. She distrusted that grin. There was a devilish malice in it.

'The young man Dennis Gifford—you promise not to hurt him?' she said.

For a moment he turned his mirth on Luisa. 'No, no! It is the Gringo Shanks from San Francisco your sister means. I will see the fat pig is left alone. The one you name is a dangerous ruffian. *Qué carrajo!* I will see he kills no more.'

Rosita dropped to her knees before him and lifted her laced fingers. 'I beg of you—save him—save him. And all my life I will thank you.'

He looked down at her, fire in his dark eyes.

'You love him then—this *cabrón*?'

'He is my father's guest, my brother's friend.'

'Oho! Shanks also is your father's guest. I will give you him instead.'

'He is so young, this boy. I am sure he did not mean to harm you. I will promise——'

'What will you promise?'

'That he will never get in your way again. I shall send him far, far away.'

His mouth was a thin, cruel line. 'I promise for myself that he will never again interfere, and I shall send him farther than you can, *chatita*.'

'My father will give you anything you ask. Name your price. I am sure \_\_\_\_\_,'

'I have already asked your father for what I want, and his manner is insulting to me,' he said harshly. 'But, *por diablo!* I will not take "No" for an answer. It is you I want, and it is you I will have.'

'No!' Luisa cried sharply.

He caught Rosita by the arms close to the shoulders and raised her to her feet. 'Come. I will make a bargain with you, since you are so mad about this fool of an Americano. One of my men will ride for a priest, and when he has made you Señora Castro we will ride away, you and I, and this dog of a Yankee can go to hell his own way for all of me.'

Luisa came forward swiftly, her eyes blazing. 'My sister will not make such a bargain with you. What is your word worth? Do you think we are fools? A promise is nothing to you. And more—not for the lives of ten men would she do this thing you ask.'

His eyes were fixed on those of Rosita. Without even glancing at her sister, he lifted an arm and swept Luisa out of the way.

'My offer is to you,' he told Rosita. 'What Juan Castro says he will do, he will do. You asked me to name my price. I have spoken. It is my last word. Never before have I sworn to destroy an enemy and permitted him to live. But for you I will do it. The life of this Gringo is in your hands. You alone will give the order to let him go or to kill him. I no longer have anything to do with it. Does he live—or does he die?'

He held her dark, lustrous eyes fascinated, much as a snake does those of a bird under its spell. What answer was there to make save one? She could not possibly send to death the man she loved. Anything but that.

Luisa cried out a passionate refusal. 'No, it is a plan hatched by the devil in hell. We will have nothing to do with it.'

For a moment Castro's predatory eyes turned on Luisa. 'Do not be jealous, my little one,' he jeered. 'You shall not be deserted. You, too, will have a husband, the strongest man in California. We shall all be happy together.'

'I would rather be in my grave,' Luisa flung back. 'Never would I even look at that great ape if I could help it. I would as soon marry Lucifer.'

'Well—well, so be it,' the bandit laughed. 'Pedro is not so hot for marriage. For all I know he may be married two or three times already. If you do not want the priest, it will be all right with Pedro.'

'Not Luisa,' protested Rosita. 'She is out of it. I shall not bargain with you unless you promise she shall be let alone.'

'*Sangre de Cristo*, I will promise anything!' the outlaw cried.

'And break your word when it suits you,' Luisa broke out, with a flare of feminine ferocity. 'Do you not see, Rosita? Are you besotted? One might as well bargain with a rattlesnake or a wolf.'

'Not so. I am a gentleman. You have to depend upon the honor of Juan Castro. To these Yankees I am an avenging curse, but if I give my word to you, I keep it. Do not be afraid, *muchacha*.'

'If you will let me pay all of it—if I could be sure of that—and if all the others can go free, Luisa, the Americano boy, all your other prisoners——'

‘They can go free as air, just as soon as we start for the hills. Have I not said it?’

‘Then I take your offer,’ Rosita cried. ‘All the others are to go unharmed, all of them.’

‘It shall be so.’

Castro caught the girl close in his arms and kissed her cold lips, not once but half a dozen times, then held her from him and looked into her eyes.

‘If you try to make a fool of me—if you do not stick to your bargain—I promise you that this Yankee Gifford shall die in a thousand torments,’ he threatened savagely.

With that he wheeled and walked out of the room. They heard the key turn in the door.

‘What have you done?’ Luisa wailed. ‘You can’t marry this villain on any conditions. I will not have it. My father will not. You are mad to think of it.’

Wan-eyed, Rosita looked at her sister. ‘I’ve saved his life. That is something.’

‘How do you know you have saved his life? The word of this brigand counts for nothing—nothing.’

‘Then our hope must be in Heaven,’ Rosita answered.

She knelt and prayed, this time to the Blessed Virgin.

## CHAPTER XXXIII

### IN ANSWER TO PRAYER

FELIPE wondered where Cortina was riding in such a hurry after receiving whispered instructions from Castro. He made it his business to find out. This did not take him long, for Juan was so elated that he told his good news to Pedro Soto, who told it to Manuel, who repeated it to José Damietta, by whom it was relayed to Pacheco.

‘Cortina goes to bring Father Sebastian,’ José whispered. ‘The señorita has consented to marry Juan.’

‘That is strange, since she is in love with this young Americano,’ Felipe reflected aloud. ‘I, too, will have a talk with this young daughter of Ramon. It may be she will tell me what arguments Juan used that were so persuasive.’

‘Have a care, Felipe,’ warned José. ‘If Juan finds you are interfering \_\_\_\_\_,’

‘You think he will then no longer be Captain Mañana,’ replied Pacheco, with a smile. ‘We shall see what we shall see. I have warned him I shall not permit harm to these señoritas. It would be well for him to get rid of me, would it not?’

‘You know him, my friend. Do not laugh at him, I beg of you. He is dangerous.’

‘All my life I have laughed at danger, José, and I am still here,’ said Felipe lightly. ‘My father used to say that a brave man dies but once, a coward many times.’

Three-Fingered Panoche was on guard in the corridor. He demurred at letting Felipe pass.

‘Juan said nobody was to be allowed to see the prisoners,’ he explained.

Pacheco smiled. ‘So? He did not mean me. I come with a message for one of the señoritas. Let me whisper in your ear, *amigo*. Our captain is going to marry one of these daughters of Martínez. We are getting up in the world, eh? Cortina has gone for the priest.’

‘Oho! And Juan has sent you to tell the señorita to prepare. Pass, my friend. Juan is a devil for the women. It will undo him some day, I am afraid.’

‘Perhaps. *Quién sabe?*’

Felipe walked down the corridor, knocked on a door, unlocked it, and passed into a room.

He saw two young women on their knees by the bedside praying.

One of them turned her head, rose swiftly, and faced him. She said, ‘I prayed to the Mother of Jesus for deliverance—and She has sent us a man. You will save us. Is it not so?’

Luisa spoke bravely. For the moment, at least, she was sure he had come in answer to prayer. She was a lovely young creature, with a delicate, sensitive face. Her dark eyes were informed with high spirit. Beneath the long lower lashes a fine carbon smudged the cheeks.

Felipe said, at once, ‘At your service, señorita.’

Swiftly Luisa continued: ‘That bandit Juan Castro has made my sister promise to marry him if he will spare the life of the young Americano and will free the rest of us. He is a devil, and I will have no such bargain. Moreover, he will not keep his promise. Am I not right?’

It did not seem strange to Felipe that this innocent girl, with the soft, dusky cheeks and eyes so quick with eager life, should turn to him impulsively as if he were an honest man and not an outlaw comrade of the man she denounced. Nor did it seem strange to her. Had she not seen him defy Castro and mock the terrible giant Pedro Soto?

‘You are right,’ he confirmed. ‘He is a devil and would break a promise made to his dying mother.’

Rosita had risen. She wrung her hands. ‘Then what shall we do? How can we save Dennis Gifford?’

To Felipe the business of saving Dennis Gifford was not the most important in the world. That young man had taken his sporting chance and the dice had fallen against him. But, after all, it was probable that if he saved these young women from Castro and Soto, he might incidentally do the same for Gifford. It occurred to him that he might even have to use the American as a fighting ally if the pressure on him grew too great.

‘I shall have a little talk with Juan,’ said Felipe, with a curious smile. ‘He is such a good friend of mine that perhaps I can persuade him to change his mind.’

‘And if you cannot?’ asked Luisa. ‘His mind is set. He will do as he pleases. Why should he listen to you?’

Felipe stroked the scar on his cheek, still smiling. 'I think he will listen when I talk. Do not be afraid. I have made a promise to your father that while I am alive no harm shall come to you. I, too, am a devil, but unlike Juan I do not break my word. Each one of us has some little pet vanity. That is mine.'

'What are you going to do?' cried Rosita. 'If you cannot convince him when you talk, as I am sure you cannot?'

'I have a little plan,' he said, 'but it is much better you should not know what it is.' A sardonic smile rested on his swarthy face. 'I am a little tired with dear Juan and his big shadow Pedro. I think——'

Instead of finishing the sentence he shrugged his shoulders.

'If you will help us, my father will do anything for you that he can,' Luisa promised. 'Perhaps he can get you a pardon from the governor. All our friends will join him in trying.'

Felipe shook his head. 'No, señorita. I would not sell Juan for all the pardons in California. But I have a little private matter to settle with him. That is all. You will owe me nothing—if I am fortunate enough to be of aid to you. Now I must go. I tell you not to be afraid. All will be well. You will do your part if you will pray to the saints that my enterprise is successful. *Adios.*'

He opened the door and walked from the room.

'What did the little lady say?' asked Three-Fingered Panoche eagerly. 'Did she weep and tear her hair?'

'No. She prayed to the Holy Virgin, and the Virgin gave her a sign. Juan is not to have her.'

'What sign?' demanded the superstitious bandit.

Pacheco's smile had a touch of irony. 'An angel appeared and promised to deliver them from peril.'

The three-fingered outlaw crossed himself reverently. He had a simple religious nature even though he was a ruffianly outlaw.

'You had better tell Juan, so that a bolt from heaven will not strike him,' he said.

'You are right,' Felipe said dryly. 'I shall be careful to tell him.'

'He might bring all of us under the vengeance of God,' Panoche said.

'He will, if he persists. Now, *amigo mio*, I must see this young Americano. I am to tell him how short his time is.'



‘Well, I shall lose no sleep about that. He is a pest. For spies I have no use.’

‘Nor I,’ said Felipe, as he turned away.

He vanished into a room farther down the corridor.

## CHAPTER XXXIV

### A LITTLE REBELLION OF HIS OWN

DENNIS looked up, to see Felipe Pacheco smiling in the doorway. He did not speak. His steady eyes did not lift from the outlaw. Had the man come to tell him the hour of his execution was at hand? No expression of the American's face, no movement of his body, betrayed the fact that the muscles beneath his heart had collapsed at the opening of the door. He had schooled himself to impassivity. Whatever befell him he was not going to show the white feather before that devil Castro.

Felipe closed the door and came forward. He glanced at the bound hands, then into the grim young eyes waiting for the sentence of death.

'You get—what is the word?—a reprieve. For a short time. Juan has made a promise to a lady. He will not keep it, but he cannot break it until she has kept her side of the bargain.'

'What bargain?' asked Dennis. He had a premonition of evil and braced himself for a shock.

'You are to go free. So are all Señorita Rosita's other friends—on condition that she marry Juan. But do not expect the tricky fox to do as he has promised. When the hour comes he will destroy you. *Sí, sí por cierto.*'

'Rosita has promised to marry Castro—to save my life!' Dennis cried in a low voice. 'No! No! I will not have it. What is she thinking of? It would be madness. Will you take a message to her for me? Tell her this villain will murder me just the same. She can't save me. She will only ruin herself.'

'I have told her so,' said Felipe. 'There is a saying that a woman hears only what she wants to hear. Meanwhile, a rider has gone to bring a priest. Perhaps you may be at the wedding. Who knows?'

'You must tell her father. Something must be done to save her.'

Felipe grinned. 'And the hour she is saved you will die.'

'That does not matter. I will die, anyhow. You have said so yourself.' Dennis spoke with abandon, wildly.

'Brava! You are a game young cockerel. Much good may it do you.'

'I heard you give your word to Ramon Martínez to protect his daughters, even with your life,' Dennis told the bandit. 'Were you boasting? Or are you merely a liar like Castro?'

‘What would you have me do?’ asked Pacheco, a sardonic smile twitching at his lips. ‘I am one of Juan’s men, with a price on my head. Why should I concern myself with a fool of a girl?’

‘For your own safety if for no other reason. If you let Juan have his way, you know what will happen to you. The country will rise and hunt you down.’

‘And if I do not let him have his way, it will be very safe for me, will it not? Juan is as gentle as a jungle tiger, and then there is Pedro Soto who is full of kindness as a mad gorilla. Am I to face them alone?’

‘Lend me a gun and I will go out with you against them. We shall be two to two,’ Dennis said.

‘But we should not be two to two,’ Felipe corrected. ‘If I joined with you, we should be two to fifteen. All of our men would think I had betrayed them. Think of something better than that, my young cock o’ the walk.’

‘Let me go out alone, then.’

‘No, no. You are our prisoner. I am on the other side of the fence from you.’ Felipe rolled and lit a cigarette. ‘What is wrong with my going out alone against them—one at a time if possible?’

Dennis stared at him. ‘Do you mean it?’

‘Very much. I am tired of both of them. So I am going out from this room to start a little rebellion all my own. It is possible I may be waiting for you in hell when you arrive.’

Felipe smiled at the American gaily, as though he had said he might be waiting for him in the next room.

‘Just what do you mean to do?’ asked Dennis.

‘I do not know exactly. It will be as chance will have it. But inside of an hour either I or Pedro Soto will be dead.’

‘Why Soto and not Castro?’ Gifford wanted to know.

The Californian shrugged. ‘I will take the big bite first.’

‘Will they let you fight him alone?’

‘That is my job, to bring it about that they will.’ Felipe tapped the side of his head. ‘The brains in my head are to be used. I must set the stage so that both Pedro and Castro will have to play fair on account of the rest of the men.’

Dennis looked at his shackled wrists and ankles.

‘Let me go free,’ he begged. ‘Give me a gun and let me go out to meet these men. This is my fight more than yours. If I fail, then it will be for you to kill them.’

‘Why are you so anxious to leave this world?’ asked Felipe. ‘Do you not see that, even if you killed them both, you would at once be filled with lead by their followers? Whereas I, if I succeed, by getting rid of them in battle, will have fought my way to the top and will be leader of the banditti. Then I will give orders which will be obeyed. But I will give you a sporting chance, my cockerel. If I am beaten and rubbed out, I shall send you a message that may be of use to you. It will be for you to make the most of it.’

‘What do you mean—a message?’

‘Never mind what I mean.’ Felipe’s gay laugh rang out. ‘Let us hope you will never need to know what the message is. Viva Pacheco!’

As Dennis looked at him, hope stirred in his heart. The swarthy scamp, so tigerishly light of movement, so insolently daring, was afraid of neither Castro nor Soto. It was just possible he might carry through successfully what was in his mind. The dancing light in his eyes was at the other end of the pole from fear. He was actually looking forward eagerly to the encounter in front of him.

Dennis clapped the hands below his bound wrists softly.

‘Viva Pacheco!’ he cried, almost in a whisper.

The outlaw nodded cheerfully, turned on his heel, and sauntered out of the room.

He left behind him a prisoner whose pulses strummed with excitement. Dennis would have given anything he had to be out there, armed and unshackled, where the drama was to be played. Before the arrival of Felipe he had been quite hopeless, unable to see an out either for himself or for Rosita. Now he knew there was a chance.

But how much of a chance he could not guess. Felipe was cool, careless, and debonair. In a duel with revolvers he might drop the giant opposed to him. But would they fight with revolvers? Just what was in the mind of Felipe? Had he a plan pretty well developed, or as he had said was he trusting merely to the luck of the moment?

About Pacheco was a casualness amounting almost to indolence. He had a body of catlike litheness. His voice was quiet, almost gentle. Often there was gay mockery in his eyes, though Dennis had seen them steely. That he had courage there was no doubt, even though there was a spectacular quality in him that usually went with bravado. He had killed, not once but several

times; yet he was going to fight for the honor of a girl. The fellow was in truth a bundle of contradictions.

Would he go through to a fighting finish? Dennis thought he would.

## CHAPTER XXXV

### PEDRO CHOOSES THE KNIFE

JUAN CASTRO leaned against the corral fence talking with Shanks, who was ostensibly a prisoner with the rest of the Martínez party.

‘You’re right to get rid of him, Juan,’ the fat man said, looking out of cold dead eyes at the outlaw. ‘He’s not only an interfering fool, but a dangerous one. I watched him while he was in San Francisco. The fellow was thick as three in a bed with the Stranglers.’

‘He made the mistake of getting in my way two or three times,’ Castro said; then viperishly, he added: ‘Caramba! He’ll make no more. As soon as the priest has married me to this girl, I’ll make an end of him.’

Shanks made no comment about the marriage. It was something he wanted to have nothing to do with. He meant to fall back upon his rôle of prisoner to protect him against any troublesome consequences. In order to reinforce his position, he had had Castro publicly treat him as a captive. He had to sustain his reputation as an honest business man.

‘Safer,’ the big man said. ‘No need of letting him get back to the Stranglers to set them on your trail. You are wise, my friend.’

Pedro came shambling from the house at a rapid pace. He called to Castro, ‘That fox Felipe has been in talking with the daughters of Ramon Martínez.’

The leader of the bandits turned a furious face on Soto. ‘Did I not give orders that nobody was to be admitted to their room—nobody?’

‘Felipe told Panoche he was carrying a message from you,’ Pedro shouted. ‘I know what he wants, but *por Dios!* he shall not have her. The other daughter is mine. I will cut his heart out if he interferes.’

Half a dozen of the banditti were within hearing. The huge ruffian was shrieking curses at the top of his voice.

Out of the house strolled Felipe Pacheco. It was not five minutes since he had left Gifford, but during that time he had wrapped a package and given it to José Damietta to be delivered to the young American secretly under certain conditions.

Felipe heard the raucous oaths of Pedro. His own name was being lifted in imprecation to high heaven. He glanced toward the corral and saw in one

picture all he needed to see. That the hour had come he knew.

It was in his plan that the clash between him and his two enemies should be as public as possible, and also that it should be as dramatic as he could make it. He had to establish his leadership, and this could be done only by the most daring and insolent defiance followed by victory incontestable. He was ready for the test.

Carelessly he strolled toward the raging giant, or so it seemed to those who watched him and did not know the blood in his veins was racing with excitement. There was jaunty insouciance in his step, in the deliberation he took to roll and light a cigarette, in the leisurely way he advanced without even one fleeting look at Soto. For all the evidence of interest he showed, Felipe might have been taking a little walk for his health.

Yet no vital detail missed him. Castro and Shanks had their eyes glued to him. Joaquín Feliz and Bartolomé Mora had been roping mounts from a remuda racing around the corral, but their loops had fallen to the ground neglected. They, too, could see only the graceful figure moving lightly forward into the danger zone. Manuel and Francisco still sat on their heels in the sun, back to the wall of an adobe stable. The conversation between them was suspended. More important business was afoot. Ignacio Megares, a pockmarked ruffian who had escaped from a Santa Barbara prison the night before he was to have been executed, had been but was no longer mending with strips of rawhide a broken bridle. He was interested only in the cursing giant and the scar-faced man. No, Felipe decided, he would never have a better opportunity. It must be now.

‘*Qué infierno!*’ roared Pedro. ‘He laughs always. Let us see how he laughs when I break his body into pieces with my hands.’

Felipe took the cigarette from his mouth and sent out a smoke wreath slowly. ‘Who is it, my little Pedro, that laughs and annoys you so much? We must ask him to be more serious when he is near you.’

At the derisive words of Pacheco the giant whirled. He alone had been unaware that the object of his rage was approaching.

‘You!’ he yelled. ‘I do not like the way you laugh or talk. I do not like anything about you. Nothing. Nothing at all, *por diablo!*’

‘But you make me so unhappy,’ purred Felipe in dulcet tones. ‘It is sad not to be liked by the gentle Pedro Soto. What am I to do about it?’

He spread his hands with a helpless gesture of resignation.

‘Why did you go into the room of the daughters of Ramon Martínez?’ demanded Pedro. ‘Why, I ask you. Why?’

‘Because I wanted to see them,’ Felipe replied. ‘I’m sure that must have been the reason.’

‘I gave orders nobody was to go there,’ snapped Castro. His narrowed eyes watched Pacheco closely. He, too, knew the hour was at hand.

‘And then you went yourself, Juan. Come. You are not the only ladies’ man among us. Turn about, I say.’ Felipe laughed, with insolent mockery.

‘Oho! I knew it!’ cried Pedro. ‘You think you can do as you please. I am very tired of you. Now I will show you.’

Felipe lifted a hand to stop him as he started to plunge forward. ‘Just a moment, *caro amigo mio*. Then you shall tear me to pieces—if you can. First, I want to tell Juan why I went to the room of the señoritas. It was to find out why one of them promised to marry him. He has given his word to spare the young Americano Gifford and to free all our prisoners if she will become Señora Castro. Let us be frank. We are all villains, and because he is the worst one Juan is our chief. But this young señorita is innocent. If we let Juan take her with us, the country will rise to wipe us out. Not Juan alone, but all of us—me, and you Ignacio, and Joaquín and Bartolomé and Francisco.’

‘That is true,’ Ignacio muttered. ‘I do not like it.’

‘Nor do I,’ Felipe went on. ‘Nor will I permit it, *por Dios*. We are free banditti, not jackals of our captain. When we do not like what he does, we say “No.” Is it not so, my friends?’

‘What I do is done for the good of all of us,’ Castro broke out. ‘Have I not led you well—always—to great success? I ask you.’

Felipe turned smilingly upon Soto. ‘Now, what is it you would like, my little Pedro? To tear me to pieces? But I am afraid that would not be pleasant for me. You want to destroy me. If it must be, it must be. But not with naked hands, since we are not savages. Shall it be with the pistol or with the knife, little fellow? Because I am so much bigger than you are I give you your choice.’

Somebody smothered a nervous laugh. Pedro glared at his slender enemy, his thick hairy fingers clenching and unclenching as he stood there ready to pounce, but still undecided in what way. His ideas came slowly.

Juan stepped forward and whispered in the ear of his huge follower. ‘Not with revolvers, my Pedro. He is so sure and fast. Choose the knife. Close with him and pin his arms to his sides, then drive home through the throat.’

Pedro nodded. ‘The knife, you *cabrón!*’ he cried to Felipe.



‘*Bueno!*’ answered Pacheco. ‘Shall it be here, before our friends who shall see fair play? Or shall we go into an empty room and settle our little difficulty, behind a bolted door, after which one of us but not both will come out to tell the story?’

‘Here!’ shouted Pedro. ‘Now. Before you get a chance to slip out of it.’

‘But I do not want to slip out of it,’ Felipe said, smiling at his huge opponent. ‘You are going to die, Pedro—very soon. It is fair that I tell you, so that you may say a prayer if you wish.’

‘Oho! I am going to die, am I? You are a fool, for I am the strongest man in all California. I will carve you to ribbons.’

José Damietta had arrived on the scene and now made a suggestion. ‘Let it be in the small corral. That will give them room enough to move about. The rest of us will sit on the fence and watch. We shall see nobody interferes. The first man who goes into the corral while they are still fighting will be shot down by us. That will be fair to both, will it not?’

One after another of the outlaws said that it was fair. Pedro growled assent. He did not know Damietta had proposed this at the request of Felipe, who very much distrusted Castro and did not want a knife in his back during the affray. Pacheco tossed his sombrero to Ignacio. It was a new and expensive one trimmed with gold braid.

‘Hold it for me, my friend,’ he said gaily. ‘If I do not need it again, accept it as a present from one who can no longer use it. But do not be too covetous, Ignacio, for very soon I expect to be wearing it.’

Pedro stripped to the waist. Great knots of muscles stood out on his arms and back. His immense barrel chest was covered with thick black hair. At sight of him those who favored Felipe lost heart. Surely nobody could stand against that tremendous bulk of bone and sinew. He gave his revolvers to Castro and drew from its sheath a wicked hunting-knife, then passed into the corral with a heavy lumbering step like that of a grizzly.

‘Come on,’ he cried to Pacheco, with a savage oath.

‘Do not be in such a hurry, my little man,’ Felipe said cheerfully. ‘Remember that there are hours before the sun sets, though that will not interest you, since you will not be here to see it.’

Felipe did not remove his jacket, but buttoned it so that his movements would not be impeded. As he followed his foe into the corral, he hummed lightly a verse of his favorite song,

*‘Adios, adios, para siempre—adios.’*

These outlaws were used to battle and sudden death. They had fought, nearly all of them, both with knife and gun. But in this duel they were about to see was unusual drama that tautened their nerves. The physical contrast between the antagonists was amazing: one a giant, strong as a horse, with bulging rounded shoulders broad as a door; the other slender and graceful but beautifully proportioned in body and limbs. The mental difference was even more noteworthy: the red pig eyes of Pedro blazed with anger, and his manner suggested that of a bull pawing the ground before a charge; Felipe was still smiling, with the debonair insolence that so infuriated his foe.

From the corral fence Francisco dropped a handkerchief as a signal that the battle was on.

## CHAPTER XXXVI

### TO A FIGHTING FINISH

BEFORE entering the corral, Felipe had examined it carefully. He knew just where the watering-trough was situated, the exact location of the snubbing-posts, the slope of the ground, the position of the sun. He intended to take no unnecessary chances. There might come a moment when it would be fatal to stumble against an obstruction or to have the sun in the eyes. If so, he wanted the fatality to count against his foe rather than against himself. Every possible advantage had to be used, for Pedro Soto had in his favor size, strength, and reach.

He meant to keep Pedro infuriated by taunting him. The man was sensitive about his ugliness. That was one weapon to use.

‘Why do you hang back, you big ape?’ Felipe asked, as the handkerchief dropped from the hand of Francisco. ‘Are you afraid that I will treat you the way the Americano Gifford did when he ripped up your legs and flung you down the mountain? Am I a child to be frightened by the horrible gorilla faces you make?’

From Pedro’s throat there burst a roar of rage. He made a rush, slashing furiously at his enemy. Felipe side-stepped and ducked, but as he slipped away an arm straightened. From the back of the giant’s left hand blood spurted.

‘Oho!’ cried Felipe. ‘Little Pedro bleeds. I shall tell the young Americano he is not the only one with a sting.’

Awkward as a bear, Pedro plunged at him again. Felipe danced out of danger. His footwork was perfect. The undulations of his body were pantherish in the smoothness with which the muscles co-ordinated.

Soto stopped for a moment, to gain breath. ‘Come and fight, you dog!’ he cried. ‘This is not a footrace.’ He piled curses one on top of another in his rage.

Felipe laughed. ‘He is a great man, the strongest in the world, but I shall carve him into strips. Already he is winded. He puffs like a bellows. Hell gapes for him.’

‘Liar! *Cabrón!*’ shrieked Pedro.

He charged once more. Felipe drew back from the sweep of the knife so that the blade missed his breast no more than three inches, then leaped for his enemy's throat with the swiftness of a tiger. His weapon did not reach the mark, since the giant's body had followed through, but it drove deep into Soto's shoulder. Before Pedro could clinch with him he was out of range.

Felipe never lifted his eyes from his opponent, but he could hear the shouts of the outlaws perched on the fence. Some were encouraging him, some the giant. From the window of a bedroom in the house he heard a cheer, 'Viva Felipe Pacheco!' That, he guessed, had come from Dennis Gifford.

'Close with him, Pedro,' cried Castro. 'Don't let him keep away. Crush him to you and cut his throat.'

The body of the big man looked like that of a butcher who had worked at close quarters to the bullocks he had killed. From his wounds blood poured. But he was still strong, still furiously determined to get his man.

He followed Felipe as the younger man retreated. Time and again he struck without effect, but still pressed forward. He shifted his knife and lunged with it. Pacheco tripped as he side-stepped, and the blade ripped a deep gash in his forearm.

Pedro gave a cry of triumph and plunged at him. His victim was not there. Felipe had slid away to safety again.

Pacheco changed the knife to his left hand.

'A scratch,' he taunted. 'Is that the best you can do, little Pedro the ape-man?'

'Now, Pedro,' adjured Juan Castro. 'Now! You've got him.'

Soto lifted his head and gave a bellow like a wild bull of the range. He drove forward at his foe, seeing nothing but the scarred face with the jeering grin on it.

Felipe saw more, a great deal more, even though his wary gaze never strayed from the great animal bulk pounding toward him. Out of the corner of an eye he had become aware of a snubbing-post almost directly behind him. What occurred took only a fraction of a second to enact.

With his heel he felt for the post, while he was timing exactly the rush of the giant. Even then he had found it possible to deceive Soto. He was staggering drunkenly, and when he lurched sharply aside it seemed to be by chance rather than design. Pedro crashed into the post, not even knowing it was there. He lay helpless for an instant, his neck against the post, his knife clawing into space.

Felipe struck, with force and precision, a backhand blow that severed the jugular as a razor would have done. The black bushy head of his foe clung for a moment to its support, then slid down the post into the dust. Pedro was dead before his face reached the ground.

Once Felipe looked at the huge bulk. That was enough. He shrugged his shoulders, turned away, and tried to saunter toward the gate of the corral. His insouciance was an affectation. He had lost a lot of blood and might pitch down in a faint. He mustn't do that, he told himself, not until he had settled with Juan Castro.

He heard the cheers of the outlaws. Three or four of them slid down from the fence and ran to meet him. They crowded around him, vocative with excitement. None of them had liked Pedro. Most of them had been afraid of him. He had been the bully of the camp. They were glad to be rid of him.

Felipe steadied himself and stepped out from the others to confront Castro.

'Congratulate me, dear Juan,' he said, with his thin, sardonic smile. 'I heard you cheering me during the little affair, did I not?'

The look of the outlaw chief was venomous. 'You had luck,' he said.

'*Por diablo!* He made his own luck,' Ignacio said bluntly. 'Never have I seen a better fight. For me, I do not deny it, that I was afraid of that great devil of a gorilla. So were the rest of us. But not our little Felipe, who would not have made a mouthful for that elephant of a man. Viva Pacheco!'

'I said you would not get the sombrero,' Felipe said jauntily.

'*Qué carrajo!* I can buy a dozen sombreros. But where could I find such a man?'

José Damietta took a silken kerchief from his neck. 'Let me tie up your arm until we can get a doctor, Felipe,' he said.

Felipe looked at his bleeding arm. '*Muchísimas gracias,* José,' he said lightly. 'It is nothing—nothing at all—a scratch.'

Then the sky began to tilt for him and the earth jumped up to meet it. He staggered. Ignacio caught him as he was falling.

'Carry him into the house and put him to bed,' Castro ordered sullenly.

The outlaws did so.

## CHAPTER XXXVII

### A VISIT OF CONDOLENCE

FELIPE opened his eyes and looked around. For a moment he wondered where he was, then remembered the circumstances that had brought him here. José was washing his bleeding arm while Ignacio held a basin of water.

‘Sorry to be so much trouble,’ he said in Spanish with an apologetic smile.

‘No trouble,’ said José. ‘Francisco has gone for a doctor. We are glad, *amigo mio*, it is no worse, and that you made an end of Pedro.’

‘All of you?’ Felipe asked, with a whimsical lift of an eyebrow. ‘Is Juan glad?’

‘Not Juan, I think. He would have liked to see the big ruffian make an end of you,’ Ignacio answered. ‘He would like to do it himself.’

‘I think he would,’ Felipe agreed. ‘While I am in bed I shall lie with a revolver by my side. It is lucky I learned to shoot with my left hand.’

‘One of us whom you can trust will be here day and night,’ José explained. ‘Either I or Ignacio or Joaquín Feliz. We shall not leave you until you are able to take care of yourself. I do not believe Juan would try to hurt you before anyone else, because he knows we would settle with him for it. After you are well we shall take a vote whether you or Juan will be chief.’

‘Which will be wasted trouble, since Juan and I will have to decide that man to man. Juan is not a coward. He will fight to hold what he has.’

‘That is true,’ assented José.

Ignacio was called from the room. To José the wounded man spoke quickly.

‘Get the package to the young Americano Geef-ford. In it is a note I have written.’

Damietta frowned, uncertain what to do. ‘I do not understand what dealings you have with him, Felipe. Before I do this I would like to know.’

Felipe put his left hand on the palm of his friend. ‘José, it is life and death with us to see that Juan does not force this señorita into a marriage. He is mad for her, and he will sacrifice us all. At the end he might slip across the line to Mexico and be safe himself. But he is our chief, and though you

grumble you will let him have his way. I cannot stop him now. Let the young Americano have his chance. You will stand in the plaza outside his window just as the wedding begins and you will draw a handkerchief from your pocket as a signal. The rest is his affair. He and Juan will fight it out. None of the rest of you will be injured.'

'If he kills Juan he would be shot down at once,' José said.

Pacheco shrugged his shoulders. 'That is a chance he is willing to take, but at any rate the señorita would be safe and we could ride away knowing that our necks were not in so tight a halter.'

'I do not like it,' Damietta said bluntly. 'Perhaps we could persuade Juan. After all he is our chief.'

'And is betraying us for his own selfish pleasure. If I were strong enough I would meet Juan myself, and I will do it if you do not take the package to Geef-ford. It is folly to talk of persuading Juan. He will do what he wants to do, as you very well know.'

'How do I know this Americano will not shoot others as well as Juan?'

'He will shoot no others unless he is attacked. Those who fire on him must take their fighting chance. Is that not fair?'

'If there were any other way——'

'What other way is there? Juan has friends among our men. If you killed him, you might be shot. So with Ignacio or any of the others. Better let this Yankee do it and pay the price. I might try it, as I have said, but wounded as I am and using my left hand the odds are heavy that Juan would kill me. No, no. Let the Yankee pull our chestnut out of the fire for us. It is best.'

José finished tying a strip of linen round the wounded arm. He rose and looked proudly at his work.

'That will do until the doctor comes,' he said. 'Now you must rest, Felipe, and not excite yourself.'

'Good. But first you must get my revolver and bring it to me so that I will be ready for Juan if he comes here. Then you must get the package to the Yankee. When you have done those two things I shall rest with a contented heart.'

Ignacio returned and José went to do the two errands. He brought to Felipe his weapon. The outlaw took it, with a grim smile.

'If Juan comes to pay me a visit of sympathy, I am ready for my dear friend,' he said. 'I can enjoy our little talk with my mind more at rest.'

After José had left, Castro came into the room. He asked his lieutenant how he was getting along.

‘*Bueno, muchas gracias,*’ Felipe told him cheerfully. ‘It is good of you to come so soon to wish me a swift recovery, my chief.’

Castro turned to Ignacio. ‘You had better relieve Three-Fingered Panoche,’ he said.

‘I am Felipe’s nurse,’ Ignacio told him bluntly.

‘But I do not need a nurse, Ignacio,’ the wounded man made answer. ‘What I needed for a few minutes was a guard, and now I do not need one any longer, especially since Juan is here to look out for me.’

‘A guard,’ cut in Castro harshly. ‘Against what?’

‘Against our prisoners,’ Felipe explained suavely. ‘I was afraid some of them might escape and take their revenge on me. So I had my little friend brought to me, and now I am quite happy.’

He drew the revolver from under the blanket and showed it to Castro. ‘It is well that I have practiced for so many years firing with my left hand,’ he went on confidentially. ‘I am never sure whether I am better with my right or my left, so my little accident does not leave me helpless. If one of our prisoners broke in, ready to slay me, and he was standing where you are now, dear Juan, I could so easily drill him through the heart.’ Felipe raised the revolver and took aim. ‘Just above that gold button on your jacket, Juan. I mean, of course, if he happened to be wearing your jacket, which is absurd.’

Pacheco lowered the weapon to the blanket and smiled with benevolent surprise at his chief. ‘Why are you so pale, *caro amigo mio*? I hope you do not think me such a bungler as to let my gun go off by mistake at a friend who has come out of kindness to visit me. Did you think I might forget and imagine my weapon was pointed at the young Yankee?’

For a moment Castro had thought his hour was come. Slowly the color beat back into his swarthy face.

‘Do not point your gun at me,’ he ordered sharply.

‘No, no. I was thinking of the Yankee—that he had escaped. I am sorry I frightened you.’

‘You did not frighten me,’ Juan told him harshly. ‘It is you who are afraid.’

‘Of the Yankee?’



‘The Yankee is already as good as dead,’ Castro said irritably. ‘He will never leave alive the room in which he is now.’

‘But I thought you promised his life to the señorita.’

‘Bah! To a woman I promise anything. After the priest has done his work, I shall make an end of him very quickly.’

‘So you are to be married, Juan, to a beautiful young señorita,’ Felipe murmured silkily. ‘May I offer congratulations and wishes for a long and happy married life? Have you decided where to live? In Monterey, perhaps? There is a fine site for a house just back of the Presidio. No doubt you will mend your bachelor ways, you rogue, and live to be alcalde some day.’

‘You are very funny,’ Castro said sourly. ‘Because you killed that big pig of a Pedro you think you are a wonder. He was a fool. Let me tell you that if I had been in his place it would have been different.’

‘I am sure of it,’ agreed Felipe.

Castro turned angrily upon Ignacio. ‘Did I not tell you to go take the place of Panoche?’

‘Ignacio is sometimes a little hard of hearing, Juan,’ the man in the bed explained. ‘But I have no doubt he understands now what you have said. Ignacio, my friend, I no longer need a nurse. You and José have made me very comfortable. I think you had better go to relieve Panoche.’

Ignacio gathered that Felipe felt able to take care of himself without help. He left to obey the order of his chief.

Juan was furious. ‘He does not go when I tell him, but he goes when you give the word. Am I chief of this band? Or are you? I will no longer put up with it. For half a *real* I would send you where Pedro has gone.’

They looked hard at each other, the rapier thrust in their eyes.

‘Since we should take the journey together, our little company would have to select a new captain. Would it be José Damietta, do you think? Or perhaps Francisco?’

Felipe asked his speculative questions with jaunty defiance.

‘Soon you will drive me to rub you out of my way. I have already warned you. Again I tell you so.’ Juan lifted his hand in a gesture filled with fury.

‘That is true, Captain Mañana,’ the wounded man scoffed. ‘You promise, but you do not perform.’

Castro turned and rushed from the room.

Felipe dropped back on the bed exhausted. He was weak from loss of blood and the fever was mounting in him. By good luck he had been able to carry off the scene without collapsing. He was glad Castro had made it short.

## CHAPTER XXXVIII

### FELIPE KEEPS A PROMISE

NEVER had time dragged for Dennis as it did during the first few minutes after Felipe had left him. At any moment Castro might be up to his devil tricks with Rosita. Gifford had the word of Felipe that he would not let his chief's plan go through, but after all Pacheco was a murderer and an outlaw. He might have been laughing up his sleeve at Dennis when he gave the pledge. The fellow was always mocking somebody.

It was terrible to have to sit in a chair, wrists and ankles bound, and be unable to lift a hand to help. He had a profound sense of despair. In her hour of need he had failed Rosita. That her father and brother had walked into the trap with him was no consolation. He had felt that to him her safety had been confided. For all the good he had done her he might as well have been in San Francisco.

He hitched his chair to the window by a series of jerks. There at least he could look out and see if there were any unusual signs of activity. Four or five of the outlaws were in sight. Two were sitting in the sun against the adobe wall of the stable. Two more were moving toward the large corral with ropes in their hands. Then he caught sight of Castro and Shanks deep in talk. After that events moved swiftly. Pedro joined his chief, gesticulating violently. Felipe strolled in the direction of the group. Dennis could not hear what was said, but he knew the giant was in a furious rage and Pacheco was taunting him. The others were watching, intently, silently, their whole attention caught and held by what was going forward.

Suddenly the heart of Dennis began to drum. They were going to fight, Felipe and Pedro. The huge outlaw was slouching into the corral brandishing a knife, and Pacheco was following him. The two faced each other. In the picture was something that set the pulses of Gifford beating fast. He had never seen a fight to the death with knives. It seemed so much more savage and elemental than one with pistols.

His sinking spirits found little hope that the slim boyish Pacheco could stand up to the physical prodigy opposed to him. Soto was powerful as a bull and as full of fiery anger. But after the first rush of the big man Dennis could see his opponent was amazingly cool and skillful. Felipe appeared to know in advance exactly what his foe meant to do. Very likely Pedro

signaled his intentions by the slowness of his movements. To see his immense force neutralized by such tigerish litheness and such a swift counter-attack was surprising.

The duel was a breathless business. It moved so quickly, was so filled with moments of high suspense, ended with such dramatic suddenness.

When Dennis saw Felipe carried into the house his heart chilled. Evidently he was badly wounded and would not be able to check Castro.

Again time dragged. Felipe had promised to send him a message. What had he meant? Would he keep his word? If so, when?

Hours of waiting that were in reality only minutes. An eternity of suspense. Then softly the door opened and a man came into the room. He shut the door quietly but swiftly behind him. He came forward. Upon a table he laid a package he was carrying. He drew a knife from its sheath.

Had he been sent to murder him? Dennis wondered, a hammer beating against his ribs.

The man stooped and with the sharp knife blade cut the rawhide thongs around the ankles of the young man. He severed those which bound his wrists.

‘Felipe Pacheco sent me,’ the man said. ‘You are to read what he has written and do exactly as he says. I will see you get the signal at the right time.’

That was all. The man turned and walked out of the room, before Dennis had finished asking whether Felipe was badly hurt.

The ankles and wrists of the prisoner were chafed, but he paid no attention to these now. He moved to the table and tore open the paper around the package. He found his own revolver and a note. First, he examined the weapon. It was loaded. Dennis drew a deep breath of relief. He picked up the note and read it, translating as he went.

You see I keep my word, Señor the King. (So ran the message.) If the big gorilla had not made an end of me, you would not receive this. I wish you better luck than I had.

Since I am writing this before settling accounts with Pedro, I do not know whether you will have to reckon with him or not. Perhaps when you read this he, too, may be dead.

This is what you must do. Wait until the wedding is about to begin. A friend will come into the plaza, where you can see him from your

window, and he will take a handkerchief from his pocket as a signal. That is the time to act.

Your door will not be bolted. The guard in the corridor will be withdrawn. Slip downstairs into the sala. It will be you or Juan, perhaps both. For if you kill him, I think you will be shot down at once. But the señorita will be saved if you get Juan. The others will not hurt any of your friends, unless it is done by accident while they are making an end of you.

Why do I do this? I do not know. Some things I do not like. This business that Castro has started was hatched in hell, to which place, by the way, I am just now traveling.

FELIPE PACHECO

Felipe was dead, then. Apparently he must be, or the note would not have been delivered. But he had friends among the bandits, loyal to him even after he had passed away. Perhaps they were ready to see an outsider kill the chief who had become a menace to them, though they would no doubt send a dozen bullets crashing into the body of the one who did it. This would be an easy way to get rid of a leader whom they both feared and distrusted.

Though Felipe had written that the note would not be delivered except in case of his death, Dennis did not accept it as certain that the gay bandit was no longer alive. Since he was wounded, the direction of affairs might have passed from his hands. The messenger had said he came from Felipe. That would seem to mean that Pacheco had not been killed.

In spite of the fact that the man was a desperado, Gifford liked Felipe. He had the redeeming qualities of courage, gaiety, grace, and nonchalance. Moreover, in his casual devil-may-care fashion, he had been a friend to the friends of Dennis. The young American hoped he was still in the land of the living.

But in any case it was clear that from this point Dennis had to carry on without his help. He had a job to do, and there must be no failure in doing it. Soon, perhaps within a few minutes, perhaps not for some hours, he had to kill a man. About that he had no compunction whatever. His only anxiety was lest he fail. There was no doubt that the death of this villain Castro would be the signal for his own. That was the price he had to pay.

Dennis sat at the window and watched the courtyard below. He massaged his wrists, especially the right one, to make sure it had its usual

flexibility. He did not want any stiffness to interfere with the accuracy of his aim.

Far down the road the dust of riders could be seen. A little yellow cloud traveled with them, though for a minute or more Dennis was not sure whether it was coming or going. Presently he decided it was approaching. The figures grew larger. Ten minutes later he saw that one of them was a priest.

In front of the house the priest descended stiffly from the saddle.

## CHAPTER XXXIX

‘IF ANYONE HERE KNOWS A REASON——’

CASTRO welcomed Father Sebastian effusively. He took him into the house and offered him wine and food. He was solicitous about his health and hoped he had not been inconvenienced by the ride.

Father Sebastian had arrived from San Diego only the week before. The name Castro meant nothing to him. No doubt he had heard about the bandit, but he did not connect this young man with him. All he saw was a youth with a seraphic face, apparently very much in love and in a great hurry to be married. The name of the bride, it appeared, was Rosita Martínez.

‘Related to Ramon Martínez?’ the priest said.

He was a plump, rosy-cheeked man with a genuine interest in good food and wine. It was very thoughtful of this young man, he felt, to have had prepared so good a meal to refresh him after his ride. Father Sebastian was not of the ascetic or intellectual type. Religion was a simple and comforting joy to him. One had faith. God and the saints did the rest. Of his fellowmen he was not disposed to be critical.

‘Distantly,’ Juan told him. ‘The young lady is very shy, but of course devoted to me. Unfortunately, she has no near relatives to be present at the wedding. She wishes it to be very simple and brief.’

‘So be it, my son,’ the father said.

Juan took care not to arouse the suspicion of Father Sebastian. None of Rosita’s relatives were to be present, for it was certain they would cry out against the marriage, in which case the priest would probably refuse to perform the ceremony. He picked three of his men to be witnesses, Cortina, Francisco, and Mora. It would not be well to have the sala filled with rough-looking armed men. The wife of the majordomo Luis Pasco he had bullied into standing beside the bride. She would probably break down and weep, but since women often wept at weddings there would be nothing remarkable about that.

With or without benefit of clergy, Juan intended to take Rosita to the hills. Yet for many reasons it would be better to go through the form of a marriage. She would go then as his wife, apparently with her own consent. His men would be far better satisfied, since the sting of an abduction would be drawn from the affair. The affair could perhaps be made to take on a

romantic color which would pacify hundreds of people who otherwise would feel outraged.

‘If you are ready, Father, we may now begin,’ Juan said courteously. ‘I do not wish to hurry you, but my impatience runs away with me.’

The priest answered his smile with another. ‘I will not keep you waiting, my son,’ he said amiably. ‘When you and the bride are ready, I am.’

Juan excused himself to Father Sebastian and went to the room where Rosita was confined. Both sisters turned toward him as he entered.

‘I have come for my bride,’ he said, with one of his deep bows from the hips.

‘No! Never!’ Luisa cried, her dark, lustrous eyes flashing. ‘You are mad to think of it. My sister cannot marry such a man. I will cry out. I will call my father and my brother.’

He turned on Luisa a look of savage malice. ‘If you do, not only the Yankee but your father and brother will die. Do you think I am a fool? *No, por diablo!* I have made my arrangements.’

‘Felipe Pacheco will not let you do this,’ cried Luisa.

‘Felipe could not stop me, even if he were alive,’ the bandit answered with a grin. ‘I am master, and Felipe took orders.’

‘Is he . . . dead?’ Luisa asked.

‘Unfortunately, yes. He attacked my good friend Pedro and was cut down.’

Rosita was white to the lips. ‘There is no other way, Luisa. This is not a man, but a wild beast. It is my duty to save all of you. This has been put upon me as a penance for ever forgetting myself enough to listen to him.’

‘It will be a pleasant penance, I promise you,’ Castro said.

Luisa replied to her sister, as though he had not spoken. ‘You have said it. He is a wild beast and not a man. Does a tiger ever show mercy? Could you trust a wolf to keep a promise? You are mad to expect it, Rosita. After he is sure of you he will destroy Dennis Gifford. Be certain of that.’

‘I will make him swear on the crucifix to keep his word,’ Rosita told her sister.

Juan swore, his brilliant eyes fixed on those of Rosita, that he would do as he had promised. He added the strongest oaths of which he could think. One of them was a hope that he might be flung into hell and burn forever if he betrayed his pledge.



‘Now let us go, *carísima*,’ he said. ‘Your sister must stay here.’

‘Why? Why must I stay here?’ demanded Luisa.

‘Because you will break down or interfere,’ he said.

‘I want my sister with me,’ Rosita pleaded.

‘No!’ Juan insisted.

Rosita turned to her sister. ‘You will not make a disturbance, Luisa? You will promise that, will you not?’

Reluctantly, Luisa promised.

A few minutes later, Juan was introducing the young women to the priest.

‘I thought you said the young lady had no near relatives,’ Father Sebastian mentioned.

‘I meant no male relatives, Father.’

‘She has a father, four brothers, five uncles, and dozens of cousins,’ Luisa corrected.

Father Sebastian looked at her and then at Juan. ‘I don’t understand. You told me——’

Juan touched his head, smiling at the priest, and whispered in his ear. ‘She is not all there, alas!—kicked by a horse when she was a child. We are all here. Let us begin.’

The padre looked around the sala. Three men had come into the room. Castro waved a hand. ‘Friends of ours,’ he explained.

The wife of Luis Pasco slipped in quietly and stood beside the sisters.

‘Let us get it over with,’ Rosita said in a low voice filled with sadness. ‘As soon as we can, Father.’

The priest looked at her. He thought he had never seen one with such a wan, unhappy face. The eyes of the girl startled him. He read in them both fear and despair.

Gently he asked a question. ‘My daughter, are you unhappy? Do you not wish to marry this man? There is something here I do not understand.’

‘She does not want to marry him because he is a villain,’ Luisa cried.

‘Is that the truth?’ Father Sebastian asked. He lifted a hand to stop Castro from interrupting. ‘Be quiet, my son. I must know the truth.’

Rosita answered, as if the words were being dragged from her.

‘I . . . wish it.’

‘If not—if you have any doubts—if there is any reason, my child, why you should not be joined to this man in holy wedlock—I beg you to tell me.’

The wan eyes of Rosita met the bold black ones of Juan. In them a deadly threat was lurking.

‘I wish . . . to marry him,’ she said, in a voice so low it was almost a whisper.

The priest turned to the others. ‘If anyone here knows a reason——’

From the doorway a voice answered. ‘He is the bandit Juan Castro. This marriage must not take place, Father.’

A man was standing just inside the room. He held a revolver in his hand.

## CHAPTER XL

### LUISA EMBARRASSES

WHILE DENNIS waited for the signal he was restless as a caged panther. Forecasts of failure pushed into his mind one after another. Perhaps the marriage was already taking place . . . Since Felipe's death, if he was dead, the other man might not give the signal . . . The guard might come to his room for some purpose and find that he was no longer bound. The young man paced the floor, softly, in order not to be heard, though he was never far enough from the window not to see the courtyard below.

A man passed through the little plaza. He did not look up, but when almost under the window he drew a kerchief from his pocket and wiped his hands with it. In four noiseless strides Dennis was across the room. He opened the door and walked into the corridor. Along it he moved to the little hall at the top of the stairway. Nobody appeared to be on guard. Quietly but swiftly he went down the treads. A man sat on the porch, but did not turn to look at him. Dennis turned to the right and stepped into the sala.

Three of the outlaws were in the room, standing awkwardly with their hats in hand. At the other end of the room was the marriage party. Rosita was speaking to the priest.

She said, in a lifeless murmur, 'I wish . . . to marry him.'

The priest seemed doubtful. He started to voice his reluctance in a question. Castro looked up, his face a map of snarling anger.

Then Dennis told the priest the bridegroom was the bandit Castro.

But he did not look at Father Sebastian. His eyes were on his enemy.

The outlaw had the advantage. He was surrounded by those whom Dennis did not want to hurt. Swiftly he reached for his weapon. At the same moment Luisa caught Rosita by the arm and snatched her from the side of the bandit. The wife of the majordomo threw up her hands, screamed, and bolted through a side door. Father Sebastian did not move. He stood amazed, his mouth open, staring at the man who had forbidden the marriage.

Castro's figure weaved slightly from side to side as he moved forward, crouched, like a cat making ready for its pounce. His mouth was a thin, cruel line, and his eyes blazed with fury. Dennis did not shoot. He wanted to be sure the women and the priest were out of the line of fire.

‘Pig of a Yankee!’ Castro spat out. ‘Now I will kill you.’

He fired from the hip—once, twice, three times, before the revolver of Dennis answered. The room filled with films of smoke as the bullets crossed the lane of death between the two. There were screams, oaths, a shriek of pain and rage, the gasp of a desperately wounded man.

The roar of guns died.

Through the shredding smoke films Dennis saw Castro on the ground, doubled up against the wall, his head low, the revolver fallen from his slack grip. He saw the three startled bandits wake to life. Their weapons were flashing to the light.

Into that split second before the guns got into action a crisp voice fell sharply.

‘Hands from your guns. All of you. All of you.’

Felipe Pacheco stood in the doorway through which the wife of the majordomo had vanished. Behind him were José, Three-Fingered Panoche, and Ignacio, all of them with guns in their hands.

Cortina dropped his weapon. ‘Have you betrayed us?’ he asked Felipe sullenly.

‘No,’ answered Pacheco firmly. ‘Pick up your gun, Cortina, and put it back into your holster. You, my Yankee friend, give yours to José . . . That is good. Now we shall talk.’

‘He has killed Juan—this Yankee here,’ Francisco protested. ‘We can talk just as well after he is dead.’

‘Do not forget one thing, Francisco,’ mentioned Felipe. ‘This Americano has saved your life—and that of Bartolomé—and mine—by getting rid of Juan, who was bent on ruining us all to get this girl. Did I not warn Castro, again and again, that if we did any harm to any of the family of Ramon Martínez, we should be doomed? That was why I killed Pedro Soto. You know what the bull-headed fool wanted, and what he would have seen us all destroyed to get. He had to die, to save the rest of us. So had Juan. I came here, wounded though I am, to fight this out with him. And now you say—let us kill the Yankee, then we can talk comfortably. But I—I say, why kill him, since he did only what I came to do? He saved me the trouble—and the risk. I say to him, “*Muchísimas gracias, señor.*” Juan fired first—two or three times. Then the Yankee let him have it. That is fair enough. This young man is going to be the son-in-law of Ramon Martínez. Shall we start in making friends with the caballeros by killing the young men their daughters are to marry?’

‘He killed our chief,’ Francisco insisted. ‘Do you want him to go free?’

Felipe was pale from loss of blood. He leaned against the side of the doorway to support himself. But he smiled gaily.

‘You have now another chief—a better one. I shall not cry about that. Come, Francisco. They were enemies, this Americano and Juan. They fought, and the Americano won. I will not take the responsibility of having him killed. It would be folly, and there is no need of it.’

Bartolomé Mora spoke up. ‘Felipe is right. Let us clean the slate. We shall free all of our prisoners.’

‘All but one,’ Felipe corrected, with a grin. ‘We have with us a big fat Yankee who is no friend of Ramon Martínez, but is trying to steal his land from him. The man is rich. Let us take him with us and fry a good fat ransom out of him.’

‘Oho! That is the way to talk, Felipe!’ cried Francisco. ‘Let us get something out of this raid. For me, I care nothing about Juan and less than nothing about Pedro. They were not thinking of the rest of us, but only of what they wanted for themselves. We will take the fat pig along and roast him till he drops yellow gold.’

Felipe spoke to Mora. ‘Carry the body of this man out of here and have it buried. We shall leave in an hour. Let the men know.’

Rosita moved forward. She said simply, ‘You are very good to us,’ but her dark, lustrous eyes thanked him more than the words.

The bandit answered, gently: ‘You have been under a great strain, señorita, but that is past, thanks to your friend the young Americano. He is a brave young man. He expected to be shot down as soon as he had killed Castro. But did he hesitate? Not he. Well, I promise no harm will come to him. For that you have my word. Your father and brother will be freed at once. As I have said, we shall leave very soon.’

‘I shall speak to my father,’ Rosita replied, her lips still trembling from the shock of what she had seen. ‘He will never forget it. Nor I—nor Luisa—as long as we live. If there is anything we can do for you—any of us of the name of Martínez—you may count on us, señor.’

‘Some day I may remind you of that, if the gallows looms too close,’ the outlaw said, with a sardonic smile.

Luisa added her swift, impulsive word. ‘He is brave—the young Americano—yes. But I know another just as brave. He fought and killed a cruel giant for us. We heard he was dead. We thank the good God he is alive

and pray his wound will heal quickly. Until then I am sure my father would wish you to rest here as his guest.'

The smile of the bandit chief held a touch of irony. 'That is kind of you, señorita, but I am a bird of passage. If I stay too long in one place, I am likely to find myself beating my wings against the bars of a cage. No. I and my men will go, as I have said, and with us the fat money-lender from San Francisco.'

Dennis made a suggestion to Felipe. 'The young ladies must be—shaken—with what they have been through. Would it not be well to let them retire to their room and have their father sent to them?'

'Well spoken.' Felipe grinned at Gifford, not without friendly malice. 'May I appoint you, señor, to escort them to their room?'

Dennis accompanied the two young women to their quarters. Before he left he asked if there was anything he could do for them.

'Perhaps you would come in for a moment and answer a question,' Luisa told him. She was in a state of nervous exultation, following the tension of the past hours.

The young man stepped into the room.

With a sobbing catch of the breath, Rosita broke into words. 'We owe every thing to you—everything. If you had not come when you did I—I—'

'And if you hadn't done what you did,' Luisa added. 'I shook with terror, but you were as steady as the great rocks off Point Lobos.'

To escape from embarrassment Dennis shifted to another subject.

'You spoke of a question, Señorita Luisa,' he said.

'Yes, so I did.' Her bright eyes sparkled to mirth. 'The bandit says you are to be a son-in-law of my father. I am interested, and hopeful. Which of his daughters have you decided to marry?'

Young Gifford flushed to the roots of his hair. 'He—Felipe—was talking—just to save my life—I—'

'Maria is the oldest of us,' Luisa explained. 'She is a dear girl, affectionate, quiet, and plays the guitar divinely. I think she would make an almost perfect wife. Don't you, Rosita?'

'Luisa!' One reproachful look Rosita flashed at her, then dropped her long lashes to the dusky cheeks.

Luisa curtsied. 'I come next. I am as God made me, señor. A madcap, I fear. Yet if I could find favor in your sight——'

She waited, looking at Dennis with mock eagerness, as though she hung on his decision.

The young man said nothing. He was taken aback by the audacity of her demure impudence.

‘I lose.’ Luisa shook her head with a manner of resigned grief. ‘Natividad is very young, but growing older every day. I am not sure she is not the prize of the flock. What! Not Natividad either? That leaves Rosita. Since you have just deprived her of a husband you really owe the poor girl something. She is not much to look at, but she has a heart of gold. Except for her bad temper——’

‘Luisa!’ implored Rosita, who was flooded with shy distress.

But Dennis had come out of his embarrassment. He spoke quietly but firmly.

‘I shall answer your question, señorita, if you will give me a chance,’ he said. ‘It is customary among your race to speak first to the father of a girl one loves. I shall speak to him at the first chance I get to find him alone.’

Luisa clapped her hands. ‘Brava! But don’t keep us in suspense. Which one of us is it? Am I to be the happy woman?’

‘You know very well which one I have loved with all my heart from the moment I first saw her,’ he made answer. ‘All I hope is that she will care enough to—travel with me the rest of my life.’

Dennis flashed one look at Rosita before he turned and left the room.

## CHAPTER XLI

### IN A WORLD WONDERFUL

WHILE riding back to Monterey, Dennis made a formal request to Ramon Martínez for permission to marry Rosita if he could win the assent of the girl. Ramon told him frankly he had never met a man to whom he would more gladly give one of his daughters, that he had all the qualities he would ask in a son-in-law.

Watching the two men riding side by side, in serious talk, Rosita guessed that Dennis was speaking to her father about her. A snatch of song lifted itself in her bosom. She knew that Ramon liked the boy. There would be no objection there. She was happy, as she had not been since the shadow of Juan Castro had come between her and the sun.

At Monterey Dennis found his partners Peebles and Bronson. They had just got in on a windjammer from San Francisco. He talked business with them for half an hour, then took them to the home of Ramon Martínez, who insisted they should stay with him while in Monterey. The two miners spent the evening with the family, and found it difficult to keep their eyes from these dusky young beauties, so vividly and passionately alive, so graceful and so arrow-straight.

After breakfast next day the three American youths had a conference with Ramon. They offered to take over the mortgages held by Shanks. They had money lying in the bank and would be glad to put it to use.

The heart of the Californian lifted. These lads would be a different type of creditor from Benjamin Shanks.

‘You haven’t seen the ranchos or the cattle,’ he told them.

‘Dennis has,’ said Bronson, a heavy-set young man with a merry eye. ‘We’ll ride over the places, but from what he says there’s no doubt we’ll be satisfied. But we want this to be a business affair, Don Ramon. So we suggest that Dennis have a sort of financial supervision of the ranchos until the mortgage has been satisfied.’

‘*Quedo agradecidísimo,*’<sup>[10]</sup> Ramon replied. ‘That would be very pleasing to me. Moreover, I should be grateful for the help of Dennis, since I am not a business man and he is soon, I hope, to become a member of my family.’

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[10] I feel much indebted to you.

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This last was news to both Peebles and Bronson. They swarmed over their partner and beat him cheerfully with their fists, the while Ramon smiled at their exuberance. Not so long ago he had been young himself.

Dennis fought them off, his face the color of a beet. 'It isn't settled yet. That is, it's settled as far as I'm concerned, but——'

'But the señorita isn't so sure,' Peebles concluded for him. 'Can we blame her?'

'I haven't had a chance to speak with her alone,' Dennis explained, much embarrassed.

'But I have,' Ramon said. 'I understand her answer will be "Yes," unless she was trying to deceive me, and I don't think she was.'

Peebles scratched his head. 'How a beautiful young lady can marry a coot like him beats me,' he commented, shaking his head. 'When there are lads like you and me around, Jim.'

From Sheriff Hearne of Santa Barbara came word that Sam Whittaker had been arrested and that he was taking his prisoner back to San Francisco in irons on board the steamer *Ohio*, which would stop at Monterey for an hour or two en route.

Dennis decided he ought to go north and make sure Whittaker was put into the hands of the Committee of Vigilance. That was a job he had been given to do, and he felt he ought to finish it in person. He had other business in San Francisco. His partners had arranged for him to draw a check to meet the notes due Shanks from Martínez. That would have to be taken care of by deputy as far as Shanks was concerned, since the fat man was a guest of Felipe Pacheco somewhere in the hills.

Shanks, a much frightened man, had protested violently against going with the bandits.

'But why?' Felipe had asked, with his sardonic grin. 'Just a little pleasure trip into the mountains for you with hosts who are so fond of you they won't part with you for less than thirty thousand dollars, señor.'

'Thirty thousand dollars! I couldn't raise that much if my life depended on it.'

'As it does,' the bandit chief said cheerfully. 'Come. What is a trifle like thirty thousand to the great Señor Shanks? Nothing. A bagatelle. A basket of oyster shells.'

‘But I am a poor man. If you were to say five thousand, perhaps——’

‘I do not say five but thirty thousand. It will be too bad if you have not that much, but let us look on the bright side. A poor man has very little happiness in this world. What is the use of dragging out a few more poverty-stricken years of wretchedness? We shall be doing you a service by sending you to heaven as soon as possible.’

Ashen-lipped, Shanks looked at the debonair villain. What had taken place at the San Pablo Rancho had shown the fat man how little these outlaws valued human life. He had seen this Pacheco kill a man with a knife coolly and ruthlessly. There was nothing else for it but to pay the ransom demanded.

He had written a letter to his chief clerk telling him to raise the money and get it to Monterey on a fast steamer. If the ransom were not paid, he would surely be murdered, he explained. This letter he had given to Ramon Martínez to send to San Francisco, who in turn had turned it over to Dennis.

Before the *Ohio* reached Monterey, Dennis found opportunity to have a short talk with Rosita in the presence of her mother. Doña Maria was a considerate dueña, and though she remained in the sala where the young people met, she made a pretense of examining lace at the farther end of the room.

When Dennis came into the room he saw Rosita with her head downcast, very shy and lovely, filled with the allure of mystery. There was a moon outside, and it shone into the dimly lighted sala. Dennis thought he had never seen anyone so exquisitely charming as this girl.

The boy’s heart went down like a plummet. This gracious creature could not be for him.

He moved toward her, slowly, bashful as a hobbledehoy, and stood before her silent. She did not look up.

At last he said, hoarsely, from a dry throat. ‘Señorita—Rosita—I love you.’

She lifted her dark, luminous eyes to his, and in them he read the world-old answer Eve has been giving Adam since the days of the Garden.

His hands went out and caught her fingers. He drew her warm, slender body to him. She gave a little sigh and nestled closer, her motions like music in their graceful rhythm.

Doña Maria spoke a minute later, without looking up from the lace. ‘I think Natividad wishes to see you, Rosita.’

Without a word Rosita disengaged herself from the arms of her lover. She walked to the door, then turned and gave him one radiant smile before she vanished.

THE END

## TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

[The end of *The Trail of Danger* by William MacLeod Raine]