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The Girl Of The Golden West

David Belasco

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She turns and faces the Western Hills:—"California, my Golden West"

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The Girl of the Golden West

NOVELIZED FROM THE PLAY

BY

DAVID BELASCO

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY
J. N. MARCHAND

NEW YORK
DODD, MEAD AND COMPANY
1911

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Published, October, 1911

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"In those strange days, people coming from God knows where, joined forces in that far Western land, and, according to the rude custom of the camp, their very names were soon lost and unrecorded, and here they struggled, laughed, gambled, cursed, killed, loved and worked out their strange destinies in a manner incredible to us of to-day. Of one thing only are we sure — they lived!"

Early History of California.

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I

It was when coming back to the mines, after a trip to Monterey, that the Girl first met him. It happened, too, just at a time when her mind was ripe to receive a lasting impression. But of all this the boys of Cloudy Mountain Camp heard not a word, needless to say, until long afterwards.

Lolling back on the rear seat of the stage, her eyes half closed,— the sole passenger now, and with the seat in front piled high with boxes and baskets containing *rebozos,* silken souvenirs, and other finery purchased in the shops of the old town,— the Girl was mentally reviewing and dreaming of the delights of her week's visit there,— a visit that had been a revelation to one whose sole experience of the world had until now been derived from life in a rough mining camp. Before her half-closed eyes still shimmered a vista of strange, exotic scenes and people, the thronging crowds of carnivals and fêtes; the Mexican girls swaying through the movements of the fandango to the music of guitars and castanets; the great *rodeo* with its hundreds of *vaqueros,* which was held at one of the ranchos just outside the town; and, lastly, and most vividly of all, the never-to-be-forgotten thrill of her first bull-fight.

Still ringing in her ears was the piercing note of the

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bugle which instantly silenced the expectant throng; the hoarse roar that greeted the entrance of the bull, and the thunder of his hoofs when he made his first mad charge. She saw again, with marvellous fidelity, the whole colour-scheme just before the death of the big, brave beast: the huge arena in its unrivalled setting of mountain, sea and sky; the eager multitude, tense with expectancy; the silver-mounted bridles and trappings of the horses; the many-hued capes of the *capadors;* the gaily-dressed *banderilleros,* poising their beribboned barbs; the red flag and long, slender, flashing sword of the cool and ever watchful *matador;* and, most prominent of all to her eyes, the brilliant, gold-laced packets of the gentlemen-*picadors,* who, after the Mexican fashion,— so she had been told,— deemed it in nowise beneath them to enter the arena in person.

And so it happened that now, as the stage swung round a corner, and a horseman suddenly appeared at a point where two roads converged, and was evidently spurring his horse with the intent of coming up with the stage, it was only natural that, even before he was near enough to be identified, the *caballero* should already have become a part of the pageant of her mental picture.

Up to the moment of the stranger's appearance, nothing had happened to break the monotony of her long return journey towards Cloudy Mountain

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Camp. Far back in the distance now lay the Mission where the passengers of the stage had been hospitably entertained the night before; still further back the red-tiled roofs and whitewashed walls of the little pueblo of San Jose,— a veritable bower of roses; and remotest of all, the crosses of San Carlos and the great pines, oaks and cypresses, which bordered her dream-memory of the white-beach crescent formed by the waves of Monterey Bay.

The dawn of each day that swept her further from her week in wonderland had ushered in the matchless spring weather of California,— the brilliant sunshine, the fleecy clouds, the gentle wind with just a tang in it from the distant mountains; and as the stage rolled slowly northward through beautiful valleys, bright with yellow poppies and silver-white lupines, every turn of the road varied her view of the hills lying under an enchantment unlike that of any other land. Yet strange and full of interest as every mile of the river country should have been to a girl accustomed to the great forest of the Sierras, she had gazed upon it for the most part with unseeing eyes, while her thoughts turned, magnet-like, backward to the delights and the bewilderment of the old Mexican town. So now, as the pursuing horseman swept rapidly nearer, each swinging stride of the powerful horse, each rhythmic movement of the graceful rider brought nearer and more vivid the vision of a hand-

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some *picador* holding off with his lance a thoroughly maddened bull until the crowd roared forth its appreciation.

"See, Senorita," said the horseman, at last galloping close to the coach and lifting his sombrero, "A beautiful bunch of syringa," and then, with his face bent towards her and his voice full of appeal, he added in lower tone: "for you!"

For a brief second, the Girl was too much taken back to find the adequate words with which to accept the stranger's offering. Notwithstanding that in his glance she could read, as plainly as though he had spoken: "I know I am taking a liberty, but please don't be angry with me," there was something in his sweeping bow and grace of manner that, coupled with her vague sense of his social advantage, disconcerted her. A second more, however, and the embarrassment had passed, for on lifting her eyes to his again she saw that her memory had not played her false; beyond all chance of a mistake, he was the man who, ten days earlier, had peered into the stage, as she was nearing Monterey, and later, at the bull-fight, had found time to shoot admiring glances at her between his daring feats of horsemanship. Therefore, genuine admiration was in her eyes and extreme cordiality in her voice when, after a word or two of thanks, she added, with great frankness:

"But it strikes me sort o' forcible that I've seen

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you before." Then, with growing enthusiasm: "My, but that bull-fight was jest grand! You were fine! I'm right glad to know you, sir."

The *caballero's* face flushed with pleasure at her free-and-easy reception of him, while an almost inaudible "*Gracias*" fell from his lips. At once he knew that his first surmise, that the Girl was an American, had been correct. Not that his experience in life had furnished him with any parallel, for the Girl constituted a new and unique type. But he was well aware that no Spanish lady would have received the advances of a stranger in like fashion. It was inevitable, therefore, that for the moment he should contrast, and not wholly to her advantage, the Girl's unconventionality with the enforced reserve of the *dulcineas* who, custom decrees, may not be courted save in the presence of *duennas*. But the next instant he recalled that there were, in Sacramento, young women whose directness it would never do to mistake for boldness; and,— to his credit be it said,— he was quick to perceive that, however indifferent the Girl seemed to the customary formality of introduction, there was no suggestion of indelicacy about her. All that her frank and easy manner suggested was that she was a child of nature, spontaneous and untrammelled by the dictates of society, and normally and healthily at home in the company of the opposite sex.

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"And she is even more beautiful than I supposed," was the thought that went through his mind.

And yet, the Girl was not beautiful, at least if judged by Spanish or Californian standards. Unlike most of their women, she was fair, and her type purely American. Her eyes of blue were lightly but clearly browed and abundantly fringed; her hair of burnished gold was luxuriant and wavy, and framed a face of singularly frank and happy expression, even though the features lacked regularity. But it was a face, so he told himself, that any man would trust,— a face that would make a man the better for looking at it,— a face which reflected a soul that no environment could make other than pure and spotless. And so there was, perhaps, a shade more of respect and a little less assurance in his manner when he asked:

"And you like Monterey?"

"I love it! Ain't it romantic — an', my, what a fine time the girls there must have!"

The man laughed; the Girl's enthusiasm amused him.

"Have you had a fine trip so far?" he asked, for want of something better to say.

"Mercy, yes! This 'ere stage is a pokey ol' thing, but we've made not bad time, considerin'."

"I thought you were never going to get here!"

The Girl shot a coquettish glance at him.

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"How did you know I was comin' on this 'ere stage?"

"I did not know,"— the stranger broke off and thought a moment. He may have been asking himself whether it were best for him to be as frank as she had been and admit his admiration for her; at last, encouraged perhaps by a look in the Girl's blue eyes, he ventured: "But I've been riding along this road every day since I saw you. I felt that I must see you again."

"You must like me powerful well . . . ?" This remark, far from being a question, was accompanied with all the physiognomical evidences of an assertion.

The stranger shot a surprised glance at her, out of the corner of his eye. Then he admitted, in all truthfulness:

"Of course I do. Who could help . . .?"

"Have you tried not to?" questioned the Girl, smiling in his face now, and enjoying in the full this stolen intimacy.

"Ah, Senorita, why should I . . . ? All I know is that I do."

The Girl became reflective; presently she observed:

"How funny it seems, an' yet, p'r'aps not so strange after all. The boys — all my boys at the camp like me — I'm glad you do, too."

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Meanwhile the good-natured and loquaciously-inclined driver had turned his head and was subjecting the man cantering alongside of his stage to a rigid inspection. With his knowledge of the various types of men in California at that time, he had no difficulty in placing the status of this straight-limbed, broad-shouldered, young fellow as a native Californian. Moreover, it made no difference to him whether his passenger had met an old acquaintance or not; it was sufficient for him to observe that the lady, as well as himself — for the expression on her face could by no means be described as bored or scornful — liked the stranger's appearance; and so the better to take in all the points of the magnificent horse which the young Californian was riding, not to mention a commendable desire to give his only passenger a bit of pleasant diversion on the long journey, he slowed his horse down to a walk.

"But where do you live? You have a rancho near here?" the Girl was now asking.

"My father has — I live with him."

"Any sisters?"

"No,— no sisters or brothers. My mother was an American; she died a few years ago." And so saying, his glance sought and obtained an answering one full of sympathy.

"I'm downright sorry for you," said the Girl with feeling; and then in the next breath she added:

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"But I'm pleased you're — you're half American."

"And you, Señorita?"

"I'm an orphan — my family are all dead," replied the Girl in a low voice. "But I have my boys," she went on more cheerfully, "an' what more do I need?" And then before he had time to ask her to explain what she meant by the boys, she cried out: "Oh, jest look at them wonderful berries over yonder! La, how I wish I could pick 'em!"

"Perhaps you may," the stranger hastened to say, and instantly with his free hand he made a movement to assist her to alight, while with the other he checked his horse; then, with his eyes resting appealingly upon the driver, he inquired: "It is possible, is it not, Señor?"

Curiously enough, this apparently proper request was responsible for changing the whole aspect of things. For, keenly desirous to oblige him, though she was, there was something in the stranger's eyes as they now rested upon her that made her feel suddenly shy; a flood of new impressions assailed her: she wanted to evade the look and yet foster it; but the former impulse was the stronger, and for the first time she was conscious of a growing feeling of restraint. Indeed, some inner voice told her that it would not be quite right for her to leave the stage. True, she belonged to Cloudy Mountain Camp

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where the conventions were unknown and where a rough, if kind, comradery existed between the miners and herself; nevertheless, she felt that she had gone far enough with a new acquaintance, whose accent, as well as the timbre of his voice, gave ample evidence that he belonged to another order of society than her own and that of the boys. So, hard though it was not to accede to his request and, at the same time, break the monotony of her journey with a few minutes of berry-picking with him in the fields, she made no move to leave the stage but answered the questioning look of the obliging driver with a negative one. Whereupon, the latter, after declaring to the young Californian that the stage was late as it was, called to his horses to show what they could do in the way of getting over the ground after their long rest.

The young man's face clouded with disappointment. For two hundred yards or more he spoke not a word, though he spurred his horse in order to keep up with the now fast-moving stage. Then, all of a sudden, as the silence between them was beginning to grow embarrassing, the Girl made out the figure of a man on horseback a short distance ahead, and uttered an exclamation of surprise. The stranger followed the direction of the Girl's eyes and, almost instantly, it was borne in upon them that the horseman awaited their coming. The Girl

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turned to speak, but the tender, sorrowful expression that she saw on the young man's face kept her silent.

"That is one of my father's men," he said, somewhat solemnly. "His presence here may mean that I must leave you. The road to our ranch begins there. I fear that something may be wrong."

The Girl shot him a look of sympathetic inquiry, though she said nothing. To tell the truth, the first thought that entered her mind at his words was one of concern that their companionship was likely to cease abruptly. During the silence that preceded his outspoken premonition of trouble, she had been studying him closely. She found herself admiring his aquiline features, his olive-coloured skin with its healthful pallor, the lazy, black Spanish eyes behind which, however tranquil they generally were, it was easy for her to discern, when he smiled, that reckless and indomitable spirit which appeals to women all the world over.

As the stage approached the motionless horseman, the young man cried out to the *vaquero*, for such he was, and asked in Spanish whether he had a message for him; an answer came back in the same language, the meaning of which the Girl failed to comprehend. A moment later her companion turned to her and said:

"It is as I feared."

Once more a silence fell upon them. For a half

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mile or so, apparently deep in thought, he continued to canter at her side; at last he spoke what was in his mind.

"I hate to leave you, Señorita," he said.

In an instant the light went out of the Girl's eyes, and her face was as serious as his own when she replied:

"Well, I guess I ain't particularly crazy to have you go neither."

The unmistakable note of regret in the Girl's voice flattered as well as encouraged him to go further and ask:

"Will you think of me some time?"

The Girl laughed.

"What's the good o' my thinkin' o' you? I seen you talkin' with them gran' Monterey ladies an' I guess you won't be thinkin' often o' me. Like 's not by to-morrow you'll 'ave clean forgot me," she said with forced carelessness.

"I shall never forget you," declared the young man with the intense fervour that comes so easily to the men of his race.

At that a half-mistrustful, half-puzzled look crossed the Girl's face. Was this handsome stranger finding her amusing? There was almost a resentful glitter in her eyes when she cried out:

"I 'mos' think you're makin' fun o' me!"

"No, I mean every word that I say," he hastened

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to assure her, looking straight into her eyes where he could scarcely have failed to read something which the Girl had not the subtlety to conceal.

"Oh, I guess I made you say that!" she returned, making a child-like effort to appear to disbelieve him.

The stranger could not suppress a smile; but the next moment he was serious, and asked:

"And am I never going to see you again? Won't you tell me where I can find you?"

Once more the Girl was conscious of a feeling of embarrassment. Not that she was at all ashamed of being "The Girl of The Polka Saloon," for that never entered her mind; but she suddenly realised that it was one thing to converse pleasantly with a young man on the highway and another to let him come to her home on Cloudy Mountain. Only too well could she imagine the cool reception, if it stopped at that, that the boys of the camp there would accord to this stylish stranger. As a consequence, she was torn by conflicting emotions: an overwhelming desire to see him again, and a dread of what might happen to him should he descend upon Cloudy Mountain with all his fine airs and graces.

"I guess I'm queer —" she began uncertainly and then stopped in sudden surprise. Too long had she delayed her answer. Already the stage had left

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him some distance behind. Unperceived by her a shade of annoyance had passed over the Californian's face at her seeming reluctance to tell him where she lived. The quick of his Spanish pride was touched; and with a wave of his sombrero he had pulled his horse down on his haunches. Of no avail now was her resolution to let him know the whereabouts of the camp at any cost, for already his "*Adios, Señorita,*" was sounding faintly in her ears.

With a little cry of vexation, scarcely audible, the young woman flung herself back on the seat. She was only a girl with all a girl's ways, and like most of her sex, however practical her life thus far, she was not without dreams of a romance. This meeting with the handsome *caballero* was the nearest she had come to having one. True, there was scarcely a man at Cloudy but what had tried at one time or another to go beyond the stage of good comradeship; but none of them had approached the idealistic vision of the hero that was all the time lying dormant in her mind. Of course, being a girl, and almost a queen in her own little sphere, she accepted their rough homage in a manner that was befitting to such an exalted personage, and gave nothing in return. But now something was stirring within her of which she knew nothing; a feeling was creeping over her that she could not analyse; she was conscious only of the fact that with the departure of this attractive

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stranger, who had taken no pains to conceal his admiration for her, her journey had been robbed of all its joy.

A hundred yards further on, therefore, she could not resist the temptation to put her head out of the stage and look back at the place where she had last seen him.

He was still sitting quietly on his horse at the place where they had parted so unceremoniously, his face turned in her direction — horse and rider silhouetted against the western sky which showed a crimson hue below a greenish blue that was sapphire further from the horizon.

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II

Not until a turn of the road hid the stage from sight did the stranger fix his gaze elsewhere. Even then it was not easy for him, and there had been a moment when he was ready to throw everything to the winds and follow it. But when on the point of doing so there suddenly flashed through his mind the thought of the summons that he had received. And so, not unlike one who had come to the conclusion that it was indeed a farewell, he waved his hand resignedly in the direction that the stage had taken and, calling to his *vaquero*, he gave his horse a thrust of the long rowel of his spur and galloped off towards the foothills of the Sierras.

For some miles the riders travelled a road which wound through beautiful green fields; but master and man were wholly indifferent, seeing neither the wild flowers lining each side of the road nor the sycamores and live oaks which were shining overhead from the recent rains. In the case of the young man every foot of the way to his father's rancho was familiar. All hours of the day and night he had made the trip to the highway, for with the exception of the few years that had been given to his education in foreign lands, his whole life had been passed on the rancho. Scarcely less acquainted with the road than his young

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master was the *vaquero*, so neither gave a glance at the country through which they were passing, but side by side took the miles in silence.

An hour passed with the young man still wrapt in thought. The truth was, though he was scarcely ready to admit it, he had been hard hit. In more ways than one the Girl had made a deep impression on him. Not only had her appearance awakened his interest to the point of enthusiasm, but there was something irresistibly attractive to him in her lack of affectation and audacious frankness. Over and over again he thought of her happy face, her straightforward way of looking at things and, last but not least, her evident pleasure in meeting him. And when he reflected on the hopelessness of their ever meeting again, a feeling of depression seized him. But his nature — always a buoyant one — did not permit him to remain downcast very long.

By this time they were nearing the foothills. A little while longer and the road that they were travelling became nothing more than a bridle path. Indeed, so dense did the *chaparral* presently become that it would have been utterly impossible for one unacquainted with the way to keep on it. Animal life was to be seen everywhere. At the approach of the riders innumerable rabbits scurried away; quail whirred from bush to bush; and, occasionally, a deer broke from the thickets.

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At the end of another hour of hard riding they were forced to slacken their pace. In front of them the ground could be seen, in the light of a fast disappearing moon, to be gradually rising. Another mile or two and vertical walls of rock rose on each side of them; while great ravines, holding mountain torrents, necessitated their making a short detour for the purpose of finding a place where the stream could be safely forded. Even then it was not an easy task on account of the boulder-enclosing whirlpools whose waters were whipped into foam by the wind that swept through the forest.

At a point of the road where there was a break in the *chaparral,* a voice suddenly cried out in Spanish:

"Who comes?"

"Follow us!" was the quick answer without drawing rein; and, instantly, on recognition of the young master's voice, a mounted sentinel spurred his horse out from behind an overhanging rock and closed in behind them. And as they were challenged thus several times, it happened that presently there was quite a little band of men pushing ahead in the darkness that had fallen.

And so another hour passed. Then, suddenly, there sprung into view the dark outlines of a low structure which proved to be a corral, and finally they made their way through a gate and came upon

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a long adobe house, situated in a large clearing and having a kind of courtyard in front of it.

In the centre of this courtyard was what evidently had once been a fountain, though it had long since dried up. Around it squatted a group of *vaqueros*, all smoking cigarettes and some of them lazily twisting lariats out of horsehair. Close at hand a dozen or more wiry little mustangs stood saddled and bridled and ready for any emergency. In colour, one or two were of a peculiar cream and had silver white manes, but the rest were greys and chestnuts. It was evident that they had great speed and bottom. All in all, what with the fierce and savage faces of the men scattered about the courtyard, the remoteness of the adobe, and the care taken to guard against surprise, old Bartolini's *hacienda* was an establishment not unlike that of the feudal barons or a nest of banditti according to the point of view.

At the sound of the fast galloping horses, every man on the ground sprang to his feet and ran to his horse. For a second only they stood still and listened intently; then, satisfied that all was well and that the persons approaching belonged to the rancho, they returned to their former position by the fountain — all save an Indian servant, who caught the bridle thrown to him by the young man as he swung himself out of the saddle. And while this one led his horse noiselessly away, another of the same race

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preceded him along a corridor until he came to the *Maestro's* room.

Old Ramerrez Bartolini, or Ramerrez, as he was known to his followers, was dying. His hair, pure white and curly, was still as luxuriant as when he was a young man. Beneath the curls was a patrician, Spanish face, straight nose and brilliant, piercing, black eyes. His gigantic frame lay on a heap of stretched rawhides which raised him a few inches from the floor. This simple couch was not necessarily an indication of poverty, though his property had dwindled to almost nothing, for in most Spanish adobes of that time, even in some dwellings of the very rich, there were no beds. Over him, as well as under him, were blankets. On each side of his head, fixed on the wall, two candles were burning, and almost within reach of his hand there stood a rough altar, with crucifix and candles, where a padre was making preparations to administer the Last Sacraments.

In the low-studded room the only evidence remaining of prosperity were some fragments of rich and costly goods that once had been piled up there. In former times the old Spaniard had possessed these in profusion, but little was left now. Indeed, whatever property he had at the present time was wholly in cattle and horses, and even these were comparatively few.

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There had been a period, not so very long ago at that, when old Ramerrez was a power in the land. In all matters pertaining to the province of Alta California his advice was eagerly sought, and his opinion carried great weight in the councils of the Spaniards. Later, under the Mexican regime, the respect in which his name was held was scarcely less; but with the advent of the *Americanos* all this was changed. Little by little he lost his influence, and nothing could exceed the hatred which he felt for the race that he deemed to be responsible for his downfall.

It was odd, in a way, too, for he had married an American girl, the daughter of a sea captain who had visited the coast, and for many years he had held her memory sacred. And, curiously enough, it was because of this enmity, if indirectly, that much of his fortune had been wasted.

Fully resolved that England — even France or Russia, so long as Spain was out of the question — should be given an opportunity to extend a protectorate over his beloved land, he had sent emissaries to Europe and supplied them with moneys — far more than he could afford — to give a series of lavish entertainments at which the wonderful richness and fertility of California could be exploited. At one time it seemed as if his efforts in that direction would meet with success. His plan had met with such favour

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from the authorities in the City of Mexico that Governor Pico had been instructed by them to issue a grant for several million of acres. But the United States Government was quick to perceive the hidden meaning in the extravagances of these envoys in London, and in the end all that was accomplished was the hastening of the inevitable American occupation.

From that time on it is most difficult to imagine the zeal with which he endorsed the scheme of the native Californians for a republic of their own. He was a leader when the latter made their attack on the Americans in Sonoma County and were repulsed with the loss of several killed. One of these was Ramerrez' only brother, who was the last, with the exception of himself and son, of a proud, old, Spanish family. It was a terrible blow, and increased, if possible, his hatred for the Americans. Later the old man took part in the battle of San Pasquale and the Mesa. In the last engagement he was badly wounded, but even in that condition he announced his intention of fighting on and bitterly denounced his fellow-officers for agreeing to surrender. As a matter of fact, he escaped that ignominy. For, taking advantage of his great knowledge of the country, he contrived to make his way through the American lines with his few followers, and from that time may be said to have taken matters into his own hand.

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Old Ramerrez was conscious that his end was merely a matter of hours, if not minutes. Over and over again he had had himself propped up by his attendants with the expectation that his command to bring his son had been obeyed. No one knew better than he how impossible it would be to resist another spasm like that which had seized him a little while after his son had ridden off the rancho early that morning. Yet he relied once more on his iron constitution, and absolutely refused to die until he had laid upon his next of kin what he thoroughly believed to be a stern duty. Deep down in heart, it is true, he was vaguely conscious of a feeling of dread lest his cherished revenge should meet with opposition; but he refused to harbour the thought, believing, not unnaturally, that, after having imposed his will upon others for nearly seventy years, it was extremely unlikely that his dying command should be disobeyed by his son. And it was in the midst of these deathbed reflections that he heard hurried footsteps and knew that his boy had come at last.

When the latter entered the room his face wore an agonised expression, for he feared that he had arrived too late. It was a relief, therefore, to see his father, who had lain still, husbanding his little remaining strength, open his eyes and make a sign, which included the padre as well as the attendants, that he wished to be left alone with his son.

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"Art thou here at last, my son?" said the old man the moment they were alone.

"Ay, father, I came as soon as I received your message."

"Come nearer, then, I have much to say to you, and I have not long to live. Have I been a good father to you, my lad?"

The young man knelt beside the couch and kissed his father's hand, while he murmured an assent.

At the touch of his son's lips a chill struck the old man's heart. It tortured him to think how little the boy guessed of the recent history of the man he was bending over with loving concern; how little he divined of the revelation that must presently be made to him. For a moment the dying man felt that, after all, perhaps it were better to renounce his vengeance, for it had been suddenly borne in upon him that the boy might suffer acutely in the life that he intended him to live; but in another moment he had taken himself to task for a weakness that he considered must have been induced by his dying condition, and he sternly banished the thought from his mind.

"My lad," he began, "you promise to carry out my wishes after I am gone?"

"Ay, father, you know that I will. What do you wish me to do?"

The old man pointed to the crucifix.

"You swear it?"

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"I swear it."

No sooner had the son uttered the wished-for words than his father fell back on the couch and closed his eyes. The effort and excitement left him as white as a sheet. It seemed to the boy as if his father might be sinking into the last stupor, but after a while he opened his eyes and called for a glass of *aguardiente*.

With difficulty he gulped it down; then he said feebly:

"My boy, the only American that ever was good was your mother. She was an angel. All the rest of these cursed gringos are pigs;" and his voice growing stronger, he repeated: "Ay, pigs, hogs, swine!"

The son made no reply; his father went on:

"What have not these devils done to our country ever since they came here? At first we received them most hospitably; everything they wanted was gladly supplied to them. And what did they do in return for our kindness? Where now are our extensive ranchos — our large herds of cattle? They have managed to rob us of our lands through clever laws that we of California cannot understand; they have stolen from our people thousands and thousands of cattle! There is no infamy that —"

The young man hastened to interrupt him.

"You must not excite yourself, father," he said

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with solicitude. "They are unscrupulous — many of them, but all are not so."

"Bah!" ejaculated the old man; "the gringos are all alike. I hate them all, I —" The old man was unable to finish. He gasped for breath. But despite his son's entreaties to be calm, he presently cried out:

"Do you know who you are?" And not waiting for a reply he went on with: "Our name is one of the proudest in Spain — none better! The curse of a long line of ancestors will be upon you if you tamely submit — not make these Americans suffer for their seizure of this, our rightful land — our beautiful California!"

More anxiously than ever now the son regarded his father. His inspection left no doubt in his mind that the end could not be far off. With great earnestness he implored him to lie down; but the dying man shook his head and continued to grow more and more excited.

"Do you know who I am?" he demanded. "No — you think you do, but you don't. There was a time when I had plenty of money. It pleased me greatly to pay all your expenses — to see that you received the best education possible both at home and abroad. Then the gringos came. Little by little these cursed Americanos have taken all that I had from me. But as they have sown so shall they reap.

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I have taken my revenge, and you shall take more!" He paused to get his breath; then in a terrible voice he cried: "Yes, I have robbed — robbed! For the last three years, almost, your father has been a bandit!"

The son sprang to his feet.

"A bandit? You, father, a Ramerrez, a bandit?"

"Ay, a bandit, an outlaw, as you also will be when I am no more, and rob, rob, rob, these *Americanos*. It is my command and — you — have — sworn . . ."

The son's eyes were rivetted upon his father's face as the old man fell back, completely exhausted, upon his couch of rawhides. With a strange conflict of emotions, the young man remained standing in silence for a few brief seconds that seemed like hours, while the pallor of death crept over the face before him, leaving no doubt that, in the solemnity of the moment his father had spoken nothing but the literal truth. It was a hideous avowal to hear from the dying lips of one whom from earliest childhood he had been taught to revere as the pattern of Spanish honour and nobility. And yet the thought now uppermost in young Ramerrez's mind was that oddly enough he had not been taken by surprise. Never by a single word had any one of his father's followers given him a hint of the truth. So absolute, so feudal was the old man's mastery over his men that

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not a whisper of his occupation had ever reached his son's ears. Nevertheless, he now told himself that in some curious, instinctive way, he had *known*,— or rather, had refused to know, putting off the hour of open avowal, shutting his eyes to the accumulating facts that day by day had silently spoken of lawlessness and peril. Three years, his father had just said; well, that explained how it was that no suspicions had ever awakened until after he had completed his education and returned home from his travels. But since then a child must have noted that something was wrong: the grim, sinister faces of the men, constantly on guard, as though the old *hacienda* were in a state of siege; the altered disposition of his father, always given to gloomy moods, but lately doubly silent and saturnine, full of strange savagery and smouldering fire. Yes, somewhere in the back of his mind he had known the whole, shameful truth; had known the purpose of those silent, stealthy excursions, and equally silent returns,— and more than once the broken heads and bandaged arms that coincided so oddly with some new tale of a daring hold-up that he was sure to hear of, the next time that he chanced to ride into Monterey. For three years, young Ramerrez had known that sooner or later he would be facing such a moment as this, called upon to make the choice that should make or mar him for life. And now, for the first time he realised why

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he had never voiced his suspicions, never questioned, never hastened the time of decision,— it was because even now he did not know which way he wished to decide! He knew only that he was torn and racked by terrible emotions, that on one side was a mighty impulse to disregard the oath he had blindly taken and refuse to do his father's bidding; and on the other, some new and unguessed craving for excitement and danger, some inherited lawlessness in his blood, something akin to the intoxication of the arena, when the thunder of the bull's hoofs rang in his ears. And so, when the old man's lips opened once more, and shaped, almost inaudibly, the solemn words:

"You have sworn,—" the scales were turned and the son bowed his head in silence.

A moment later and the room was filled with men who fell on their knees. On every face, save one, there was an expression of overwhelming grief and despair; but on that one, ashen grey as it was with the agony of approaching death, there was a look of contentment as he made a sign to the padre that he was now ready for him to administer the last rites of his church.

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III

THE Polka Saloon!

How the name stirs the blood and rouses the imagination!

No need to be a Forty-Niner to picture it all as if there that night: the great high and square room lighted by candles and the warm, yellow light of kerosene lamps; the fireplace with its huge logs blazing and roaring; the faro tables with the little rings of miners around them; and the long, pine bar behind which a typical barkeeper of the period was busily engaged in passing the bottle to the men clamorous for whisky in which to drink the health of the Girl.

And the spirit of the place! When and where was there ever such a fine fellowship — transforming as it unquestionably did an ordinary saloon into a veritable haven of good cheer for miners weary after a long and often discouraging day in the gulches?

In a word, the Polka was a marvellous tribute to its girl-proprietor's sense of domesticity. Nothing that could insure the comfort for her patrons was omitted. Nothing, it would seem, could occur that would disturb the harmonious aspect of the scene.

But alas! the night was yet young.

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Now the moment for which not a few of that good-humoured and musically-inclined company were waiting arrived. Clear above the babel of voices sounded a chord, and the poor old concertina player began singing in a voice that was as wheezy as his instrument:

"Camp town ladies sing this song
Dooda! Dooda!
Camp town race track five miles long
Dooda! Dooda! Day!"

Throughout the solo nothing more nerve-racking or explosive than an occasional hilarious whoop punctuated the melody. For once, at any rate, it seemed likely to go the distance; but no sooner did the chorus, which had been taken up, to a man, by the motley crowd and was rip-roaring along at a great rate, reach the second line than there sounded the reports of a fusillade of gun-shots from the direction of the street. The effect was magical: every voice trailed off into uncertainty and then ceased.

Instantly the atmosphere became charged with tension; a hush fell upon the room, the joyous light of battle in every eye, if nothing else, attesting the approach of the foe; while all present, after listening contemptuously to a series of wild and unearthly yells which announced an immediate arrival, sprang

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to their feet and concentrated their glances on the entrance of the saloon through which there presently burst a party of lively boys from The Ridge.

A psychological moment followed, during which the occupants of The Polka Saloon glared fiercely at the newcomers, who, needless to say, returned their hostile stares. The chances of war, judging from past performances, far outnumbered those of peace. But as often happens in affairs of this kind when neither side is unprepared, the desire for gun-play gave way to mirthless laughter, and, presently, the hilarious crowd from the rival camp, turning abruptly on their heels, betook themselves en masse into the dance-hall.

For the briefest of periods, there was a look of keen disappointment on the faces of the Cloudy Mountain boys as they gazed upon the receding figures of their sworn enemies; but almost in as little time as it takes to tell it there was a tumultuous lining up at the bar, the flat surface of which soon resounded with the heavy blows dealt it by the fists of the men desirous of accentuating the rhythm when roaring out:

"Gwine to run all night,
Gwine to run all day,
Bet my money on a bob-tail nag,
Somebody bet on the bay!"

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Among those standing at the bar, and looking out of bleared eyes at a flashy lithograph tacked upon the wall which pictured a Spanish woman in short skirts and advertised "Espaniola Cigaroos," were two miners: one with curly hair and a pink-and-white complexion; the other, tall, loose-limbed and good-natured looking. They were known respectively as Handsome Charlie and Happy Halliday, and had been arguing in a maudlin fashion over the relative merits of Spanish and American beauties. The moment the song was concluded they banged their glasses significantly on the bar; but since it was an unbroken rule of the house that at the close of the musician's performance he should be rewarded by a drink, which was always passed up to him, they needs must wait. The little barkeeper paid no attention to their demands until he had satisfied the thirst of the old concertina player who, presently, could be seen drawing aside the bear-pelt curtain and passing through the small, square opening of the partition which separated the Polka Saloon from its dance-hall.

"Not goin', old Dooda Day, are you?" The question, almost a bellow, which, needless to say, was unanswered, came from Sonora Slim who, with his great pal Trinidad Joe, was playing faro at a table on one side of the room. Apparently, both were losing steadily to the dealer whose chair, placed

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up against the pine-boarded wall, was slightly raised above the floor. This last individual was as fat and unctuous looking as his confederate, the Look-out, was thin and sneaky; moreover, he bore the sobriquet of The Sidney Duck and, obviously, was from Australia.

"Say, what did the last eight do?" Sonora now asked, turning to the case-keeper.

"Lose."

"Well, let the tail go with the hide," returned Sonora, resignedly.

"And the ace — how many times did it win?" inquired Trinidad.

"Four times," was the case-keeper's answer.

All this time a full-blooded Indian with long, blue-black hair, very thick and oily, had been watching the game with excited eyes. His dress was part Indian and part American, and he wore all kinds of imitation jewelry including a huge scarf-pin which flashed from his vivid red tie. Furthermore, he possessed a watch,— a large, brassy-looking article,— which he brought out on every possible occasion. When not engaged in helping himself to the dregs that remained in the glasses carelessly left about the room, he was generally to be found squatted down on the floor and playing a solitaire of his own devising. But now he reached over Sonora's shoul-

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der and put some coins on the table in front of the dealer.

"Give Billy Jackrabbit fer two dolla' Mexican chip," he demanded in a guttural voice.

The Sidney Duck did as requested. While he was shuffling the cards for a new deal, the players beat time with their feet to the music that floated in from the dance-hall. The tune seemed to have an unusually exhilarating effect on Happy Halliday, for letting out a series of whoops he staggered off towards the adjoining room with the evident intention of getting his fill of the music, not forgetting to yell back just before he disappeared:

"Root hog or die, boys!"

Happy's boisterous exit caused a peculiar expression to appear immediately on Handsome's face, which might be interpreted as one of envy at his friend's exuberant condition; at all events, he proceeded forthwith to order several drinks, gulping them down in rapid succession.

Meanwhile, at the faro table, the luck was going decidedly against the boys. In fact, so much so, that there was a dangerous note in Sonora's voice when, presently, he blurted out:

"See here, gambolier Sid, you're too lucky!"

"You bet!" approved Trinidad, and then added:

"More chips, Australier!"

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But Trinidad's comment, as well as his request, only brought forth the oily smile that The Sidney Duck always smiled when any reference was made to his game. It was his policy to fawn upon all and never permit himself to think that an insult was intended. So he gathered in Trinidad's money and gave him chips in return. For some seconds the men played on without anything disturbing the game except the loud voice of the caller of the wheel-of-fortune in the dance-hall. But the boys were to hear something more from there besides, "Round goes the wheel!" For, all at once there came to their ears the sounds of an altercation in which it was not difficult to recognise the penetrating voice of Happy Halliday.

"Now, git, you loafer!" he was saying in tones that left no doubt in the minds of his friends that Happy was hot under the collar over something.

A shot followed.

"Missed, by the Lord Harry!" ejaculated Happy, deeply humiliated at his failure to increase the mortuary record of the camp.

The incident, however, passed unnoticed by the faro players; not a man within sound of the shot, for that matter, inquired what the trouble was about; and even Nick, picking up his tray filled with glasses and a bottle, walked straightway into the dance-hall

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looking as if the matter were not worth a moment's thought.

At Nick's going the Indian's face brightened; it gave him the opportunity for which he had been waiting. Nobly he maintained his reputation as a thief by quietly going behind the bar and lifting from a box four cigars which he stowed away in his pockets. But even that, apparently did not satisfy him, for when he espied the butt of a cigar, flung into the sawdust on the floor by a man who had just come in, he picked it up before squatting down again to resume his card playing.

The newcomer, a man of, say, forty years, came slowly into the room without a word of salutation to anyone. In common with his fellow-miners, he wore a flannel shirt and boots. The latter gave every evidence of age as did his clothes which, nevertheless, were neat. His face wore a mild, gentle look and would have said that he was companionable enough; yet it was impossible not to see that he was not willingly seeking the cheer of the saloon but came there solely because he had no other place to go. In a word, he had every appearance of a man down on his luck.

Men were continually coming in and going out, but no one paid the slightest attention to him, even though a succession of audible sighs escaped his lips.

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At length he went over to the counter and took a sheet or two of the paper,— which was kept there for the few who desired to write home,— a quill-pen and ink; and picking up a small wooden box he seated himself upon it before a desk — which had been built from a rude packing-case — and began wearily and laboriously to write.

"The lone star now rises!"

It was the stentorian voice of the caller of the wheel-of-fortune. One would have thought that the sound would have had the effect of a thunder-clap upon the figure at the desk; but he gave no sign whatever of having heard it; nor did he see the suspicious glance which Nick, entering at that moment, shot at Billy Jackrabbit who was stealing noiselessly towards the dance-hall where the whoops were becoming so frequent and evincing such exuberance of spirits that the ubiquitous, if generally unconcerned, Nick felt it incumbent to give an explanation of them.

"Boys from The Ridge cuttin' up a bit," he tendered apologetically, and took up a position at the end of the bar where he could command a view of both rooms.

As a partial acknowledgment that he had heard Nick's communication, Sonora turned round slightly in his seat at the faro table and shot a glance towards the dance-hall. Contempt showed on his rugged

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features when he turned round again and addressed the stocky, little man sitting at his elbow.

"Well, I don't dance with men for partners! When I shassay, Trin, I want a feminine piece of flesh an' blood"—he sneered, and then went on to amplify—"with garters on."

"You bet!" agreed his faithful, if laconic pal, on feeling the other's playful dig in his ribs.

The subject of men dancing together was a never-ceasing topic of conversation between these two cronies. But whatever the attitude of others Sonora knew that Trinidad would never fail him when it came to nice discriminations of this sort. His reference to an article of feminine apparel, however, was responsible for his recalling the fact that he had not as yet received his daily assurance from the presiding genius of the bar that he stood well in the estimation of the only lady in the camp. Therefore, leaving the table, he went over to Nick and whispered:

"Has the Girl said anythin' about me to-day, Nick?"

Now the rôle of confidential adviser to the boys was not a new one to the barkeeper, nor was any-one in the camp more familiar than he with their good qualities as well as their failings. Every morning before going to work in the placers it was their custom to stop in at The Polka for their first

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drink — which was, generally, "on the house." Invariably, Nick received them in his shirt-sleeves,— for that matter he was the proud possessor of the sole "biled shirt" in the camp,— and what with his red flannel undershirt that extended far below the line of his cuffs, his brilliantly-coloured waistcoat and tie, and his hair combed down very low in a cowlick over his forehead, he was indeed an odd little figure of a man as he listened patiently to the boys' grievances and doled out sympathy to them. On the other hand, absolutely devoted to the fair proprietress of the saloon,— though solely in the character of a good comrade,— he never ceased trying to advance her interests; and since one and all of her customers believed themselves to be in love with her, one of his most successful methods was to flatter each one in turn into thinking that he had made a tremendous impression upon her. It was not a difficult thing to do inasmuch as long custom and repetition had made him an adept at highly-coloured lying.

"Well, you got the first chance," asseverated Nick, dropping his voice to a whisper.

Sonora grinned from ear to ear; he expanded his broad chest and held his head proudly; and waving his hand in lordly fashion he sung out:

"Cigars for all hands and drinks, too, Nick!"

The genial prevaricator could scarcely restrain

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himself from laughing outright as he watched the other return to his place at the faro table; and when, in due course, he served the concoctions and passed around the high-priced cigars, there was a smile on his face which said as plainly as if spoken that Sonora was not the only person present that had reason to be pleased with himself.

Then occurred one of those terpsichorean performances which never failed to shock old Sonora's sense of the fitness of things. For the next moment two Ridge boys, dancing together, waltzed through the opening between the two rooms and, letting out ear-piercing whoops with every rotation, whirled round and round the room until they brought up against the bar where they, breathlessly, called for drinks.

An angry lull fell upon the room; the card game stopped. However, before anyone seated there could give vent to his resentment at this boisterous intrusion of the men from the rival camp, the smooth, oily and inviting voice of the unprincipled Sidney Duck, scenting easy prey because of their inebriated condition, called out in its cockney accent:

"'Ello, boys — 'ow's things at The Ridge?"

"Wipes this camp off the earth!" returned a voice that was provocative in the extreme — a reply that instantly brought every man at the faro table to his feet. For a time, at least, it seemed as if the

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boys from The Ridge would get the trouble they were looking for.

A murmur of angry amazement arose, while Sonora, his watery blue eyes glinting, followed up his explosive, "What!" with a suggestive movement towards his hip. But quick as he was Nick was still quicker and had The Ridge boy, as well as Sonora, covered before their hands had even reached their guns.

"You . . .!" the little barkeeper's sentence was bristled out and contained along with the expletives some comparatively mild words which gave the would-be combatants to understand that any such foolishness would not be tolerated in The Polka unless he himself "'lowed it to be ne'ssary."

Not unnaturally The Ridge boys failed to see anything offensive in language that had a gun behind it; and realising the futility of any further attempt to get away with a successful disturbance they wisely yielded to superior quickness at the draw. With a whoop of resignation they rushed back to the dance-hall where the voice of the caller was exhorting the gents — whose partners were mostly big, husky, hairy-faced men clumsily enacting parts generally assigned to members of the gentler sex — to swing:

"With the right-hand gent, first partner swing with the left-hand gent, first partner swing with the

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right-hand gent; first partner swing with the left-hand gent, and the partner in the centre, and gents all around!"

Back at the faro table now,— the incident having passed quickly into oblivion,— Sonora called to the dealer for "a slug's worth of chips"— a request that was promptly acceded to. But they had played only a few minutes when a thin but somewhat sweet tenor voice was heard singing:

"*Wait for the waggon,*
Wait for the waggon,
Wait for the waggon,
And we'll all take a ride.
Wait for the waggon —"

"Here he is, gentlemen, just back from his triumphs of The Ridge!" broke in Nick, whose province it was to act as master of ceremonies; and coming forward as the singer emerged from the dance-hall he introduced him to the assembled company in the most approved music-hall manner: "Allow me to present to you, Jake Wallace the Camp favour-ite!" he said with an exaggeratedly low bow.

"How-dy, Jake! Hello, Jake, old man! How be you, Jake!" were some of the greetings that were hurled at the Minstrel who, robed in a long

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linen duster, his face half-blacked, and banjo in hand, acknowledged the words of welcome with a broad grin as he stood bowing in the centre of the room.

That Jake Wallace was a typical camp minstrel from the top of his dusty stove-pipe hat to the sole of his flapping negro shoes, one could see with half an eye as he made his way to a small platform — a musician's stand — at one end of the bar; nor could there be any question about his being a prudent one, for the musician did not seat himself until he had carefully examined the sheet-iron shield inside the railing, which was attached in such a way that it could be sprung up by working a spring in the floor and render him fairly safe from a chance shot during a fracas.

"My first selection, friends, will be 'The Little —' announced the Minstrel with a smile as he begun to tune his instrument.

"Aw, give us 'Old Dog Tray,'" cut in Sonora, impatiently from his seat at the card table.

Jake bowed his ready acquiescence to the request and kept right on tuning up.

"I say, Nick, have you saw the Girl?" asked Trinidad in a low voice, taking advantage of the interval to stroll over to the bar.

Mysteriously, Nick's eyes wandered about the room to see if anyone was listening; at length, with marvellous insincerity, he said:

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"You've got the first chance, Trin; I gave 'er your message."

Trinidad Joe fairly beamed upon him.

"Whisky for everybody, Nick!" he ordered bumptuously; and as before the little barkeeper's face wore an expression of pleasure not a whit less than that of the man whom, presently, he followed to the faro table with a bottle and four glasses.

As soon as Trinidad had seated himself the Minstrel struck a chord and announced impressively: "'Old Dog Tray,' gents, 'or Echoes from Home'!" He cleared his throat, and the next instant in quavering tones he warbled:

"How of-ten do I pic-ture
The old folks down at home,
And of-ten wonder if they think of me,
Would an-gel mother know me,
If back there I did roam,
Would old dog Tray re-member me."

At the first few words of his song the man at the desk who, up to this time, had been wholly oblivious to what was taking place, arose from his seat, put the ink-bottle back on the bar, opened a cigar-box there and took from it a stamp, which he put on his letter. This he carried to a mail-box attached to the door; then, returning, he threw himself dejectedly down in

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a chair and put his head in his hands, where it remained throughout the song.

At the conclusion of his solo, the Minstrel's emotions were seemingly deeply stirred by his own melodious voice and he gasped audibly; whereupon, Nick came to his relief with a stiff drink which, apparently, went to the right spot, for presently the singer's voice rang out vigorously: "Now, boys!"

No second invitation was needed, and the chorus was taken up by all, the singers beating time with their feet and chips.

ALL.

"Oh, mother, an-gel mother, are you waitin'
there beside the lit-tle cottage on the
lea —"

JAKE.

"On the lea —"

ALL.

"How of-ten would she bless me in all them
days so fair —
Would old dog Tray re-member me —"

SONORA.

"Re-member me."

All the while the miners had been singing, the sad and morose-looking individual had been steadily growing more and more disconsolate; and when

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Sonora rumbled out the last deep note in his big, bass voice, he heaved a great sob and broke down completely.

In surprised consternation everyone turned in the direction from whence had come the sound. But it was Sonora who, affected both by the pathos of the song and the sight of the pathetic figure before them, quietly went over and laid a hand upon the other's arm.

"Why, Larkins — Jim — what's the trouble — what's the matter?" he asked, a thousand thoughts fluttering within his breast. "I wouldn't feel so bad."

With a desperate effort Larkins, his face twitching perceptibly, the lines about his eyes deepening, struggled to control himself. At last, after taking in the astonished faces about him, he plunged into his tale of woe.

"Say, boys, I'm homesick — I'm broke — and what's more, I don't care who knows it." He paused, his fingers opening and closing spasmodically, and for a moment it seemed as if he could not continue — a moment of silence in which the Minstrel began to pick gently on his banjo the air of Old Dog Tray.

"I want to go home!" suddenly burst from the unfortunate man's lips. "I'm tired o' drillin' rocks; I want to be in the fields again; I want to see the grain growin'; I want the dirt in the furrows at home;

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I want old Pensylvanny; I want my folks; I'm done, boys, I'm done, I'm done. . . .!" And with these words he buried his face in his hands.

"Oh, mother, an-gel mother, are you waitin'—"

sang the Minstrel, dolefully.

Men looked at one another and were distressingly affected; The Polka had never witnessed a more painful episode. Throwing a coin at the Minstrel, Sonora stopped him with an impatient gesture; the latter nodded understandingly at the same time that Nick, apparently indifferent to Larkin's collapse, began to dance a jig behind the bar. A look of scowling reproach instantly appeared on Sonora's face. It was uncalled-for since, far from being heartless and indifferent to the man's misfortunes, the little barkeeper had taken this means to distract the miner's attention from the pitiful sight.

"Boys, Jim Larkins 'lows he's goin' back East," announced Sonora. "Chip in every mother's son o' you."

Immediately every man at the faro table demanded cash from The Sidney Duck; a moment later they, as well as the men who were not playing cards, threw their money into the hat which Sonora passed around. It was indeed a well-filled hat that Sonora held out to the weeping man.

"Here you are, Jim," he said simply.

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The sudden transition from poverty to comparative affluence was too much for Larkins! Looking through tear-dimmed eyes at Sonora he struggled for words with which to express his gratitude, but they refused to come; and at last with a sob he turned away. At the door, however, he stopped and choked out: "Thank you, boys, thank you."

The next moment he was gone.

At once a wave of relief swept over the room. Indeed, the incident was forgotten before the unfortunate man had gone ten paces from The Polka, for then it was that Trinidad suddenly rose in his seat, lunged across the table for The Sidney Duck's card-box, and cried out angrily:

"You're cheatin'! That ain't a square deal! You're a cheat!"

In a moment the place was in an uproar. Every man at the table sprung to his feet; chairs were kicked over; chips flew in every direction; guns came from every belt; and so occupied were the men in watching The Sidney Duck that no one perceived the Lookout sneak out through the door save Nick, who was returning from the dance-hall with a tray of empty glasses. But whether or not he was aware that the Australian's confederate was bent upon running away he made no attempt to stop him, for in common with every man present, including Sonora and Trinidad, who had seized the gambler and brought

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him out in front of his card-table, Nick's eyes were fastened upon another man whom none had seen enter, but whose remarkable personality, now as often, made itself felt even though he spoke not a word.

"Lift his hand!" cried Sonora, looking as if for sanction at the newcomer, who stood in the centre of the room, calmly smoking a huge cigar.

Forcing up The Sidney Duck's arms, Trinidad threw upon the table a deck of cards which he had found concealed about the other's person, bursting out with:

"There! Look at that, the infernal, good-for-nothin' cheat!"

"String 'im up!" suggested Sonora, and as before he shot a questioning look at the man, who was regarding the scene with bored interest.

"You bet!" shouted Trinidad, pulling at the Australian's arm.

"For 'eaven's sake, don't, don't, don't!" wailed The Sidney Duck, terror-stricken.

The Sheriff of Manzaneta County, for such was the newcomer's office, raised his steely grey eyes inquisitorially to Nick's who, with a hostile stare at the Australian, emitted:

"Chicken lifter!"

"String 'im! String 'im!" insisted Trinidad, at the same time dragging the culprit towards the door.

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"No, boys, no!" cried the unfortunate wretch, struggling uselessly to break away from his captors.

At this stage the Sheriff of Manzaneta County took a hand in the proceedings, and drawled out:

"Well, gentlemen —" He stopped short and seemingly became reflective.

Instantly, as was their wont whenever the Sheriff spoke, all eyes fixed themselves upon him. Indeed, it needed but a second glance at this cool, deliberate individual to see how great was his influence upon them. He was tall,— fully six feet one,— thin, and angular; his hair and moustache were black enough to bring out strongly the unhealthy pallor of his face; his eyes were steel grey and were heavily fringed and arched; his nose straight and his mouth hard, determined, but just, the lips of which were thin and drawn tightly over brilliantly-white teeth; and his soft, pale hands were almost feminine looking except for the unusual length of his fingers. On his head was a black beaver hat with a straight brim; a black broadcloth suit — cut after the "'Frisco" fashion of the day — gave every evidence that its owner paid not a little attention to it. From the bosom of his white, puffed shirt an enormous diamond, held in place by side gold chains, flashed forth; while glittering on his fingers was another stone almost as large. Below his trousers could plainly be seen the highly-polished boots; the

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heels and instep being higher than those generally in use. In a word, it was impossible not to get the impression that he was scrupulously immaculate and careful about his attire. And his voice — the voice that tells character as nothing else does — was smooth and drawling, though fearlessness and sincerity could easily be detected in it. Such was Mr. Jack Rance, Gambler and Sheriff of Manzaneta County.

"This is a case for you, Jack Rance," suddenly spoke up Sonora.

"Yes," chimed in Trinidad; and then as he gave the Australian a rough shake, he added: "Here's the Sheriff to take charge of you."

But Mr. Jack Rance, the Sheriff of Manzaneta County, was never known to move otherwise than slowly, deliberately. Taking from his pocket a smoothly-creased handkerchief he proceeded to dust languidly first one and then the other of his boots; and not until he had succeeded in flicking the last grain of dust from them did he take up the business in hand.

"Gentlemen, what's wrong with the cyards?" he now began in his peculiar drawling voice.

Sonora pointed to the faro table.

"The Sidney Duck's cheated!" he said — an accusation which was responsible for a renewal of outcries and caused a number of men to pounce upon the faro dealer.

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Trinidad ran a significant hand around his collar.

"String 'im! Come on, you —!" once more he cried. But on seeing the Sheriff raise a restraining hand he desisted from pulling the Australian along.

"Wait a minute!" commanded the Sheriff.

The miners with the prisoner in their midst stood stock-still. Now the Sheriff's features lost some of their usual inscrutability and for a moment became hard and stern. Slowly he let his eyes wander comprehensively about the saloon: first, they travelled to a small balcony — reached by a ladder drawn down or up at will — decorated with red calico curtains, garlands of cedar and bittersweet, while the railing was ornamented with a wildcat's skin and a stuffed fawn's head; from the ceiling with its strings of red peppers, onions and apples they fell on a stuffed grizzly bear, which stood at the entrance to the dance-hall, with a little green parasol in its paw and an old silk hat upon its head; from it they shifted to the gaudy bar with its paraphernalia of fancy glasses, show-cases of coloured liquors and its pair of scales for weighing the gold dust; and from that to a keg, the top of which could be withdrawn without engendering the slightest suspicion that it represented other than an ordinary receptacle for liquor. Two notices tacked upon the wall also caught and held his glance, his eyes dwelling most affectionately on the one reading: "A Real Home For The Boys."

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That there was such a thing as sentiment in the make-up of the Sheriff of Manzaneta County few people, perhaps, would have believed. Nevertheless, at the thought that this placard inspired, he dismissed whatever inclination he might have had to deal leniently with the culprit, and calmly observed:

"There is no reason, gentlemen, of being in a hurry. I've got something to say about this. I don't forget, although I am the Sheriff of Manzaneta County, that I'm running four games. But it's men like The Sidney Duck here that casts reflections on square-minded, sporting men like myself. And worse — far worse, gentlemen, he casts reflections on The Polka, the establishment of the one decent woman in Cloudy."

"You bet!" affirmed Nick, indignantly.

"Yes, a lady, d'you hear me?" stormed Sonora, addressing the prisoner; then: "You lily-livered skunk!"

"Oh, let's string 'im up!" urged Trinidad.

"Yes, come on, you . . .!" was Handsome's ejaculation, contriving, at last, to get his hands on the faro dealer.

But again the Sheriff would have none of it.

"Hold on, hold on —" he began and paused to philosophise: "After all, gents, what's death? A kick and you're off;" and then went on: "I've thought of a worse punishment. Give him his coat."

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Surprised and perplexed at this order, Handsome, reluctantly, assisted the culprit into his coat.

"Put him over there," the Sheriff now ordered.

Whereupon, obedient to the instructions of that personage, The Sidney Duck was roughly put down into a chair; and while he was firmly held into it, Rance strolled nonchalantly over to the faro table and picked out a card from the deck there. Returning, he quickly plucked a stick-pin from the prisoner's scarf, saying, while he suited his action to his words:

"See, now I place the deuce of spades over his heart as a warning. He can't leave the camp, and he never plays cyards again — see?" And while the men, awed to silence, stood looking at one another, he instructed Handsome to pass the word through the camp.

"Ow, now, don't si that! Don't si that!" bawled out the card sharp.

The sentence met with universal approval. Rance waved an authoritative hand towards the door; and the incident, a few seconds later, passed into its place in the camp records. Albeit, in those seconds, and while the men were engrossed in the agreeable task of ejecting The Sidney Duck, The Polka harboured another guest, no less unwelcome, who made his way unobserved through the saloon to become an unobtrusive spectator of the doings in the dance-hall.

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IV

In the space of six months one can do little or much harm. The young bandit,— for he had kept his oath to his father,— flattered himself that he had done much. In all the mining camps of the Sierras the mere mention of the name of Ramerrez brought forth execrations. Not a stage started out with its precious golden freight without its passengers having misgivings that they would be held up before reaching Sacramento. Messengers armed with shotguns were always to be found at their post beside the drivers; yet, despite all precautions, not a week passed without a report that the stage out of this or that camp, had been attacked and the passengers forced to surrender their money and valuables. Under no circumstances, however, were any of Ramerrez's own countrymen molested. If, by any chance, the road agent made a mistake and stopped a party of native Californians or Mexicans, they were at once permitted to proceed on their way with the bandit-leader's profuse apologies.

But it was altogether different with Americans. The men of that race were compelled to surrender their gold; although so far as he was concerned, their women were exempt from robbery. As a matter of fact, he had few chances to show his chivalry,

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since few women were living, at that time, in the Sierras. Nevertheless, it happened in rare instances that a stage was held up which contained one or two of them, and they were never known to complain of his treatment. And so far, at least, he had contrived to avoid any serious bloodshed. Two or three messengers, it is true, had been slightly wounded; but that was the most that his worst enemies could charge against him.

As for Ramerrez's own attitude towards the life he was leading, it must be confessed that, the plunge once taken, his days and nights were too full of excitement and adventure to leave him time to brood. Somewhat to his own surprise, he had inherited his father's power of iron domination. Young as he was, not one of his father's seasoned band of cutthroats ever questioned his right or his ability to command. At first, no doubt, they followed him through a rude spirit of loyalty; but after a short time it was because they had found in him all the qualities of a leader of men, one whose plans never miscarried. Fully two-thirds of the present band were vassals, as it were, in his family, while all were of Spanish or Mexican descent. In truth, Ramerrez himself was the only one among them who had any gringo blood in his veins. And hence not a tale of the outlaw's doings was complete without the narrator insisting upon it that the leader of the band — the road agent

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himself — closely resembled an American. One and all of his victims agreed that he spoke with an American accent, while the few who had been able to see his features on a certain occasion when the red bandanna, which he wore about his face, had fallen, never failed to maintain that he looked like an American.

As a matter of fact, Ramerrez not only bore the imprint of his mother's race in features and in speech, but the more he made war upon them, the more he realised that it was without any real feeling of hostility. In spite of his early training and in spite of his oath, he could not share his father's bitterness. True, the gringos had wrecked the fortunes of his house; it was due to them that his sole inheritance was an outlaw's name and an outlaw's leadership. And yet, despite it all, there was another fact that he could not forget,— the fact that he himself was one half gringo, one half the same race as that of the unforgotten Girl whom he had met on the road to Sacramento. Indeed, it had been impossible to forget her, for she had stirred some depth in him, the existence of which he had never before suspected. He was haunted by the thought of her attractive face, her blue eyes and merry, contagious laugh. For the hundredth time he recalled his feelings on that glorious day when he had intercepted her on the great highway. And with this memory would come

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a sudden shame of himself and occupation,— a realisation of the barrier which he had deliberately put between the present and the past. Up to the hour when he had parted from her, and had remained spellbound, seated on his horse at the fork of the roads, watching the vanishing coach up to the last minute, he was still a Spanish gentleman, still worthy in himself,— whatever his father had done,— to offer his love and his devotion to a pure and honest girl. But now he was an outlaw, a road agent going from one robbery to another, likely at any time to stain his hand with the life-blood of a fellow man. And this pretence that he was stealing in a righteous cause, that he was avenging the wrongs that had been done to his countrymen,— why, it was the rankest hypocrisy! He knew in his heart that vengeance and race hatred had nothing whatever to do with it. It was because he loved it like a game, a game of unforeseen, unguessed danger. The fever of it was in his blood, like strong drink,— and with every day's adventure, the thirst for it grew stronger.

Yet, however personally daring, Ramerrez was the last person in the world to trust to chance for his operations, more than was absolutely necessary. He handled his men with shrewd judgment and strict discipline. Furthermore, never was an attack made that was not the outcome of a carefully matured plan. A prime factor in Ramerrez' success had from the

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first been the information which he was able to obtain from the Mexicans, not connected with his band, concerning the places that the miners used as temporary depositories for their gold; and it was information of this sort that led Ramerrez and his men to choose a certain Mexican settlement in the mountains as a base of operations: namely, the tempting fact that a large amount of gold was stored nightly in the Polka Saloon, at the neighbouring camp on Cloudy Mountain.

And there was still another reason.

Despite the fact that his heart had been genuinely touched by the many and unusual attractions of the Girl, it is not intended to convey the idea that he was austere or incapable of passion for anyone else. For that was not so. Although, to give the bandit his due, he had remained quite exemplary, when one considers his natural charm as well as the fascination which his adventurous life had for his countrywomen. Unfortunately, however, in one of his weak moments, he had foolishly permitted himself to become entangled with a Mexican woman — Nina Micheltoreña, by name — whose jealous nature now threatened to prove a serious handicap to him. It was a particularly awkward situation in which he found himself placed, inasmuch as this woman had furnished him with much valuable information. In fact, it was she who had called his attention to the

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probable spoils to be had in the American camp near by. It can readily be imagined, therefore, that it was not without a premonition of trouble to come that he sought the Mexican settlement with the intention of paying her a hundred-fold for her valuable assistance in the past and then be through with her for good and all.

The Mexican or greaser settlements had little in them that resembled their American neighbours. In the latter there were few women, for the long distance that the American pioneers had to travel before reaching the gold-fields of California, the hardships that they knew had to be encountered, deterred them from bringing their wives and daughters. But with the Mexicans it was wholly different. The number of women in their camps almost equalled that of the men, and the former could always be seen, whenever the weather permitted, strolling about or sitting in the doorways chatting with their neighbours, while children were everywhere. In fact, everything about the Mexican settlements conveyed the impression that they had come to stay — a decided contrast to the transient appearance of the camps of the Americans.

It was one evening late in the fall that Ramerrez and his band halted just outside of this particular Mexican settlement. And after instructing his men

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where they should meet him the following day, he sent them off to enjoy themselves for the night with their friends. For, Ramerrez, although exercising restraint over his band, never failed to see to it that they had their pleasures as well as their duties — a trait in his character that had not a little to do with his great influence over his men. And so it happened that he made his way alone up the main street to the hall where a dance was going on.

The scene that met his eyes on entering the long, low room was a gay one. It was a motley crowd gathered there in which the Mexicans, not unnaturally, predominated. Here and there, however, were native Californians, Frenchmen, Germans and a few Americans, the latter conspicuous by the absence of colour in their dress; for with the exception of an occasional coatless man in a red or blue shirt, they wore faded, old, black coats,— frequently frock-coats, at that,— which certainly contrasted unfavourably, at least so far as heightening the gaiety of the scene was concerned, with the green velvet jackets, brilliant waistcoats with gold filigree and silver buttons and red sashes of the Mexicans. That there was not a man present but what was togged out in his best and was armed, it goes without saying, even if the weapons of the Mexicans were in the form of murderous knives concealed somewhere about their

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persons instead of belts with guns and knives openly displayed, as was the case with the Americans.

At the time of the outlaw's entrance into the dance-hall the fandango was over. But presently the fiddles, accompanied by guitars, struck up a waltz, and almost instantly some twenty or more men and women took the floor; those not engaged in dancing surrounding the dancers, clapping their hands and shouting their applause. In order to see if the woman he sought was present, it was necessary for Ramerrez to push to the very front of the crowd of lookers-on, where he was not long in observing that nearly all the women present were of striking appearance and danced well; likewise, he noted, that none compared either in looks or grace with Nina Micheltoreña who, he had to acknowledge, even if his feelings for her were dead, was a superb specimen of a woman.

Good blood ran in the veins of Nina Micheltoreña. It is not in the province of this story to tell how it was that a favourite in the best circles of Monterey came to be living in a Mexican camp in the Sierras. Suffice it to say that her fall from grace had been rapid, though her dissolute career had in no way diminished her beauty. Indeed, her features were well-nigh perfect, her skin transparently clear, if dark, and her form was suppleness itself as she

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danced. And that she was the undisputed belle of the evening was made apparent by the number of men who watched her with eyes that marvelled at her grace when dancing, and surrounded her whenever she stopped, each pleading with her to accept him as a partner.

Almost every colour of the rainbow had a place in her costume for the occasion: The bodice was of light blue silk; the skirt orange; encircling her small waist was a green sash; while her jet-black hair was fastened with a crimson ribbon. Diamonds flashed from the earrings in her ears as well as from the rings on her fingers. All in all, it was scarcely to be wondered at that her charms stirred to the very depths the fierce passion of the desperate characters about her.

That Ramerrez dreaded the interview which he had determined to have with his confederate can easily be understood by anyone who has ever tried to sever his relations with an enamoured woman. In fact the outlaw dreaded it so much that he decided to postpone it as long as he could. And so, after sauntering aimlessly about the room, and coming, unexpectedly, across a woman of his acquaintance, he began to converse with her, supposing, all the time, that Nina Micheltoreña was too occupied with the worshippers at her shrine to perceive that he was in the dance-hall. But it was decidedly a case

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of the wish being father to the thought: Not a movement had he made since he entered that she was not cognisant of it and, although she hated to acknowledge it to herself, deep down in her heart she was conscious that he was not as thoroughly under the sway of her dark eyes as she would have wished. Something had happened in the last few weeks that had brought about a change in him, but just what it was she was unable to determine. There were moments when she saw plainly that he was much more occupied with his daring plans than he was with thoughts of her. So far, it was true, there had been no evidences on his part of any hesitation in confiding his schemes to her. Of that she was positive. But, on the other hand, she had undoubtedly lost some of her influence over him. It did not lessen her nervousness to realise that he had been in the hall for some time without making any effort to see her. Besides, the appointment had been of his own making, inasmuch as he had sent word by one of his band that she should meet him to-night in this place. Furthermore, she knew that he had in mind one of the boldest projects he had yet attempted and needed, to insure success, every scrap of knowledge that she possessed. In the meantime, while she waited for him to seek her out, she resolved to show him the extent of her power to fascinate others; and from that moment never had she seemed more

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attractive and alluring to her admirers, in all of whom she appeared to excite the fiercest of passions. In fact, one word whispered in an ear by those voluptuous lips and marvellously sweet, musical voice, and the recipient would have done her bidding, even had she demanded a man's life as the price of her favour.

It is necessary, however, to single out one man as proving an exception to this sweeping assertion, although this particular person seemed no less devoted than the other men present. He was plainly an American and apparently a stranger to his countrymen as well as to the Mexicans. His hair was white and closely cropped, the eyebrows heavy and very black, the lips nervous and thin but denoting great determination, and the face was tanned to the colour of old leather, sufficiently so as to be noticeable even in a country where all faces were tanned, swarthy, and dark. One would have thought that this big, heavy, but extremely-active man whose clothes, notwithstanding the wear and tear of the road, were plainly cut on "'Frisco" patterns, was precisely the person calculated to make an impression upon a woman like Nina Micheltoreña; and, yet, oddly enough, he was the only man in the room whose attentions seemed distasteful to her. It could not be accounted for on the ground of his nationality, for she danced gladly with others of his race. Nor did

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it look like caprice on her part. On the contrary, there was an expression on her face that resembled something like fear when she refused to be cajoled into dancing with him. At length, finding her adamant, the man left the room.

But as time went by and still Ramerrez kept aloof, Nina Micheltoreña's excitement began to increase immeasureably. To such a woman the outlaw's neglect could mean but one thing — another woman. And, finally, unable to control herself any longer, she made her way to where the woman with whom Ramerrez had been conversing was standing alone.

"What has the Señor been saying to you?" she demanded, jealousy and ungovernable passion blazing forth from her eyes.

"Nothing of interest to you," replied the other with a shrug of her shoulders.

"It's a lie!" burst from Nina's lips. "I heard him making love to you! I was standing near and heard every tone, every inflection of his voice! I saw how he looked at you!" And so crazed was she by jealousy that her face became distorted and almost ugly, if such a thing were possible, and her great eyes filled with hatred.

The other woman laughed scornfully.

"Make your man stay away from me then — if you can," she retorted.

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At that the infuriated Nina drew a knife and cried:

"Swear to me that you'll not see him to-night, or —"

The sentence was never finished. Quick as lightning Ramerrez stepped in and caught Nina's upraised arm. For one instant her eyes flashed fire at him; another, and submissive to his will, she slipped the knife somewhere in the folds of her dress and the attention that she had succeeded in attracting was diverted elsewhere. Those who had rushed up expecting a tragedy returned, once more, to their dancing.

"I have been looking for you, Nina," he said, taking her to one side. "I want to speak with you."

Nina laughed airily, but only another woman would have been able to detect the danger lurking in that laugh.

"Have you just come in?" she inquired casually. "It is generally not difficult to find me when there is dancing." And then with a significant smile: "But perhaps there were so many men about me that I was completely hidden from the view of the Señor."

Ramerrez bowed politely his belief in the truth of her words; then he said somewhat seriously:

"I see a vacant table over in the corner where we can talk without danger of being overheard. Come!" He led the way, the woman following

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him, to a rough table of pine at the farther end of the room where, immediately, a bottle and two glasses were placed before them. When they had pledged each other, Ramerrez went on to say, in a low voice, that he had made the appointment in order to deliver to her her share for the information that led to his successful holdup of the stage at a place known as "The Forks," a few miles back; and taking from his pocket a sack of gold he placed it on the table before her.

There was a silence in which Nina made no movement to pick up the gold; whereupon, Ramerrez repeated a little harshly:

"Your share."

Slowly the woman rose, picking up the sack as she did so, and with a request that he await her, she made her way over to the bar where she handed it to the Mexican in charge with a few words of instruction. In another moment she was again seated at the table with him.

"Why did you send for me to meet you here?" she now asked. "Why did you not come to my room — surely you knew that there was danger here?"

Carelessly, Ramerrez let his eyes wander about the room; no one was paying the slightest attention to them and, apparently, there being nothing to fear, he answered:

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"From whom?"

For a brief space of time the woman looked at him as if she would ferret out his innermost thoughts; at length, she said with a shrug of the shoulders:

"Few here are to be thoroughly trusted. The woman you were with — she knows you?"

"I never met her but once before," was his laconic rejoinder.

Nina eyed him suspiciously; at last she was satisfied that he spoke the truth, but there was still that cold, abstracted manner of his to be explained. However, cleverly taking her cue from him she inquired in business-like tones:

"And how about The Polka Saloon — the raid on Cloudy Mountain Camp?"

A shade of annoyance crossed Ramerrez' face.

"I have decided to give that up — at least for a time."

Again Nina regarded him curiously; when she spoke there was a suspicious gleam in her eyes, though she said lightly:

"Perhaps you're right — it will not be an easy job."

"Far from it," quickly agreed the man. "But the real reason is, that I have planned to go below for a while."

The woman's eyes narrowed.

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"You are going away then?"

"Yes."

"And what about me? Do I go with you?"

Ramerrez laughed uneasily.

"It is impossible. The fact is, it is best that this should be our last meeting." And seeing the change that came over her face he went on in more conciliatory tones: "Now, Nina, be reasonable. It is time that we understood each other. This interview must be final."

"And you came here to tell me this?" blazed the woman, scowling darkly upon him. And for the moment she looked all that she was reputed to be — a dangerous woman!

Receiving no answer, she spoke again.

"But you said that you would love me always?"

The man flushed.

"Did I say that once? What a memory you have!"

"And you never meant it?"

"I suppose so — at the time."

"Then you don't love me any more?"

Ramerrez made no answer.

For some moments Nina sat perfectly still. Her mind was busy trying to determine upon the best course to pursue. At length she decided to make one more attempt to see whether he was really in earnest. And if not . . .

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"But to-night," she hazarded, leaning far over the table and putting her face close to his, her eyes the while flooded with voluptuousness, "you will come with me to my room?"

Ramerrez shook his head.

"No, Nina, all that is over."

The woman bit her lips with vexation.

"Are you made of stone? What is the matter with you to-night? Is there anything wrong with my beauty? Have you seen anyone handsomer than I am?"

"No . . ."

"Then why not come? You don't hate?"

"I don't hate you in the least, but I won't go to your room."

"So!"

There was a world of meaning in that one word. For a while she seemed to be reflecting; suddenly with great earnestness she said:

"Once for all, Ramerrez, listen to me. Rather than give you up to any other woman I will give you up to death. Now do you still refuse me?"

"Yes. . . ." answered Ramerrez not unkindly and wholly unmoved by her threat. "We've been good pals, Nina, but it's best for both that we should part."

In the silence that ensued the woman did some hard thinking. That a man could ever tire of her

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without some other woman coming into his life never once entered into her mind. Something told her, nevertheless, that the woman with whom he had been conversing was not the woman that she sought; and at a loss to discover the person to whom he had transferred his affections, her mind reverted to his avowed purpose of withdrawing from the proposed Cloudy Mountain expedition. The more Nina reflected on that subject the more convinced she became that, for some reason or other, Ramerrez had been deceiving her. It was made all the more clear to her when she recalled that when Ramerrez' messenger had brought his master's message that she was to meet him, she had asked where the band's next rendezvous was to be, and that he, knowing full well that his countrywoman had ever been cognizant of his master's plans, had freely given the desired information. Like a flash it came to her now that no such meeting-place would have been selected for any undertaking other than a descent upon Cloudy Mountain Camp. Nor was her intuition or reasoning at fault: Ramerrez had not given up his intention of getting the miners' gold that he knew from her to be packed away somewhere in The Polka Saloon; but what she did not suspect, despite his peculiar behaviour, was that he had taken advantage of the proximity of the two camps to sever his relation, business and otherwise, with her. And yet, did he

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but know it, she was destined to play no small part in his life for the next few weeks!

Nina Micheltoreña had now decided upon her future course of action: She would let him think that his desire to break off all relations with her would not be opposed. Ever a keen judge of men and their ways, she was well aware that any effort to reclaim him to-night would meet with disaster. And so when Ramerrez, surprised at her long silence, looked up, he was met with a smiling face and the words:

"So be it, Ramerrez. But if anything happens, remember you have only yourself to blame."

Ramerrez was astounded at her cool dismissal of the subject. To judge by the expression on his face he had indeed obtained his release far easier than he had deemed it possible. As a matter of fact, her indifference so piqued him that before he was conscious of his words he had asked somewhat lamely:

"You wish me well? We part as friends?"

Nina regarded him with well-simulated surprise, and replied:

"Why, of course — the best of friends. Good luck, *amigo!*" And with that she rose and left him.

And so it was that later that evening after assuring herself that neither Ramerrez nor any of his band remained in the dance-hall, Nina, her face set and pale, exchanged a few whispered words with that

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same big man towards whom, earlier in the evening, she had shown such animosity.

The effect of these words was magical; the man could not suppress a grunt of intense satisfaction.

"She says I'm to meet her to-morrow night at the Palmetto Restaurant," said Ashby to himself after the woman had lost herself in a crowd of her own countrymen. "She will tell where I can put my hands on this Ramerrez. Bah! It's too good to be true. Nevertheless, I'll be on hand, my lady, for if anyone knows of this fellow's movements I'll wager you do."

At that moment Ashby, the Wells Fargo Agent, was nearer than ever before to the most brilliant capture of all his career.

Late the following afternoon, some five miles from the Mexican settlement, on a small tableland high above a black ravine which was thickly timbered with the giant trees of the Sierras, Ramerrez' band was awaiting the coming of the *Maestro*. It was not to be a long wait and they stood around smoking and talking in low tones. Suddenly, the sound of horses climbing was heard, and soon a horseman came in sight whose appearance had the effect of throwing them instantly into a state of excitement, one and all drawing their guns and making a dash for their horses, which were tied to trees. A moment later,

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however, another horseman appeared, and laughing boisterously at themselves they slid their guns back into their belts and retied their horses, for the man whom they recognised so quickly, the individual who saved the situation, as it were, was none other than Jose Castro, an ex-*padrona* of the bull-fights and the second in command to Ramerrez. He was a wiry, hard-faced and shifty-eyed Mexican, but was as thoroughly devoted to Ramerrez as he had been to the young leader's father. On the other hand, the man who had caused them to fear that a stranger had surprised them, and that they had been trapped, was Ramerrez or Johnson — the name that he had assumed for the dangerous work he was about to engage in — and they had failed to know him, dressed as he was in the very latest fashion prevailing among the Americans in Sacramento in '49. Nor was it to be wondered at, for on his head was a soft, brown hat — large, but not nearly the proportions of a sombrero; a plain, rough tweed coat and a waistcoat of a darker tan, which showed a blue flannel shirt beneath it; and his legs were encased in boots topped by dark brown leggings. In a word, his get-up resembled closely the type of American referred to disdainfully by the miners of that time as a Sacramento guy; whereas, the night before he had taken great pains to attire himself as gaudily as any of the Mexicans at the dance, and he had worn a short black

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jacket of a velvety material that was not unlike corduroy and covered with braid; his breeches were of the same stuff; above his boots were leather gaiters; and around his waist was a red sash.

It was now close to four o'clock in the afternoon and the band began their preparations for the raid. To the rear of the small, open space where they had been waiting was a fairly good-sized cave, in the opening of which they deposited various articles unnecessary for the expedition. It took only a short time to do this, and within half an hour from the time that their leader had so startled them by his strange appearance, the outlaws were ready to take the trail for Cloudy Mountain. One comprehensive glance the psuedo-American — and he certainly looked the part — shot at his picturesque, if rough-looking followers, not a few of whom showed red bandannas under their sombreros or around their necks — and then with a satisfied expression on his face — for he had a leader's pride in his men — he gave the signal and led the way along and down the steep trail from the tableland. And as from time to time he glanced back over his shoulders to where the men were coming along in single file, he could see that in every eye was a glint of exultation at the prospect of booty.

After they had gone about three miles they crossed the black ravine, and from there they began

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to ascend. Up and up they went, the path very hard on the horses, until finally they came to the top of a pass where it had been arranged that the band should await further instructions, none going on further save the two leaders. Here, saddle-girths and guns were inspected, the last orders given, and with a wave of the hand in response to the muttered wishes of good luck, Johnson,— for as such he will be known from this time on,— followed by Castro, made his way through the forest towards Cloudy Mountain.

For an hour or so Johnson rode along in that direction, checking the speed of his horse every time the sun came into view and showed that there was yet some time before sunset. Presently, he made a sign to Castro to take the lead, for he had never been in this locality before, and was relying on his subordinate to find a spot from which he could reconnoitre the scene of the proposed raid without the slightest danger of meeting any of the miners.

At a very sharp turn of the road to the left Castro struck off through the forest to the right and, within a few minutes, reached a place where the trees had thinned out and were replaced by the few scrubs that grew in a spot almost barren. A minute or so more and the two men, their horses tied, were able to get an uninterrupted view of Cloudy Mountain.

The scene before them was one of grandeur. Day was giving place to night, fall to winter, and yet at

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this hour all the winds were stilled. In the distance gleamed the snow-capped Sierras, range after range as far as the eye could see to the northwest; in the opposite direction there stood out against the steel-blue of the sky a succession of wooded peaks ever rising higher and higher until culminating in the far-away white mountains of the south; and below, they looked upon a ravine that was brownish-green until the rays of the departing orb touched the leaves with opal tints.

Now the fast-falling sun flung its banner of gorgeous colours across the western sky. Immediately a wonderful light played upon the fleecy cumuli gathered in the upper heavens of the east and changed them from pearl to brilliant scarlet. For a moment, also, the purple hills became wonderful piles of dull gold and copper; a moment more and the magic hand of the King of Day was withdrawn.

In front of them now, dark, gloomy and threatening rose Cloudy Mountain, from which the Mining Camp took its name; and on a plateau near its base the camp itself could plainly be seen. It consisted of a group of miners' cabins set among pines, firs and manzaneta bushes with two larger pine-slab buildings, and scattered around in various places were shafts, whose crude timber-hoists appeared merely as vague outlines in the fast-fading light. The distance to the camp from where they stood

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was not over three miles as the crow flies, but it appeared much less in the rarefied atmosphere.

As the two bandits stood on the edge of the precipice looking across and beyond the intervening gulch or ravine, here and there a light twinkled out from the cabins and, presently, a much stronger illumination shot forth from one of the larger and more pretentious buildings. Castro was quick to call his master's attention to it.

"There — that place with the light is The Palmetto Hotel!" he exclaimed. "And over there — the one with the larger light is The Polka Saloon!" For even as he spoke the powerful kerosene lamp of The Polka Saloon, flanked by a composition metal reflector, flashed out its light into the gloom enveloping the desolate, ominous-looking mountains.

Johnson regarded this building long and thoughtfully. Then his eyes made out a steep trail which zigzagged from The Polka Saloon up the barren slopes of the mountain until it reached a cabin perched on the very top, the steps and porch of which were held up by poles made of trees. There, also, a light could be seen, but dimly. It was a strange place for anyone to erect a dwelling-place, and he found himself wondering what manner of person dwelt there. Of one thing he was certain: whoever it was the mountains were loved for themselves, for no mere digger of gold would think of

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erecting a habitation in view of those strange, vast, and silent heights!

And as he meditated thus, he perceived that the far off Sierras were forming a background for a sinuous coil of smoke from the cabin. For some time he watched it curling up into the great arch of sky. It was as if he were hypnotised by it and, in a vague, shadowy way, he had a sense of being connected, somehow, with the little cabin and its recluse. Was this feeling that he had a premonition of danger? Was this a moment of foreboding and distrust of the situation yet to be revealed? For like most venturesome men he always had a moment before every one of his undertakings in which his instinct either urged him forward or held him back.

Suddenly he became conscious that his eyes no longer saw the smoke. He stared hard to glimpse it, but it was gone. And with a supreme effort he wrenched himself free from a sort of paralysis which was stealing away his senses.

Now the light in the cabin disappeared, and since the shades of night, for which he had been waiting, had fallen, he called to the impatient and wondering Castro, and together they went back to the trail.

But even as they crossed the gulch and reached the outskirts of the camp a great white moon rose from behind the Sierras. To Castro, hidden now

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in the pines, it meant nothing so long as it did not interfere with his purpose. As a matter of fact he was already listening intently to the bursts of song and shouts of revelry that came every now and then from the nearby saloon. But his master, unaccountably under the spell of the moon's mystery and romance, watched it until it shed its silvery and magic light upon the lone cabin on the top of Cloudy Mountain, which Fate had chosen for the decisive scene of his dramatic life.

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V

INSIDE The Polka, not a bit more, and not a bit less sardonic — it was this imperturbability which made him so resistless to most people — than he was prior to the banishment of The Sidney Duck, the Sheriff of Manzaneta County waited patiently until the returning puppets of his will had had time to compose themselves. It took them merely the briefest of periods, but it served to increase visibly the long ash at the end of Rance's cigar. At length he shot a hawk-like glance at Sonora and proposed a little game of poker.

"This time, gentlemen —" he said, with a significant pause and accent —"just for social recreation. What do you say?"

"I'm your Injun!" acquiesced Sonora, rubbing his hands together gleefully at the prospect of winning from the Sheriff, whom he liked none too well.

"That's me, too!" concurred Trinidad.

"Chips, then, Nick!" called out the Sheriff, quietly taking a seat at the table; while Sonora, bubbling over with spirits, hitched up his trousers in sailor fashion and executed an impromptu hornpipe, bellowing in his deep, base voice:

"I shipped aboard of a liner, boys —"

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"*Renzo, boys, renzo,*" finished Trinidad, falling in place at the table.

At this point the outside door was unexpectedly pushed open, inward, and the Deputy-Sheriff came into their midst.

"Ashby just rode in with his posse," he announced huskily to his superior.

The Sheriff flashed a look of annoyance and inquired of the gaunt, hollow-cheeked, muscular Deputy, whose beaver overcoat was thrown open so that his gun and powder-flask showed plainly in his belt:

"Why, what's he doing here?"

"He's after Ramerrez," answered the Deputy, eyeing him intently.

Rance received this information in silence and went on with his shuffling of the cards; presently, unconcernedly, he remarked:

"Ramerrez — Oh, that's the polite road agent who has been visiting the other camps?"

"Yes; he's just turned into your county," declared the Deputy, meaningly.

"What?" Sonora looked dumbfounded.

The Deputy nodded and proceeded to the bar. And while he drained the contents of his glass, the Minstrel played on his banjo, much to the amusement of the men, who showed their appreciation by laughing heartily, the last bars of, "Pop Goes the Weasel."

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"Hello, Sheriff!" greeted Ashby, coming in just as the merriment over the Minstrel's little joke had died away. Ashby's voice — quick, sharp and decisive — was that of a man accustomed to ordering men, but his manner was suave, if a trifle gruff. Moreover, he was a man of whom it could be said, paradoxical as it may seem, that he was never known to be drunk nor ever known to be sober. It was plain from his appearance that he had been some time on the road.

Rance rose and politely extended his hand. And, although the greeting between the two men was none too cordial, yet in their look, as they eyed each other, was the respect which men have for others engaged more or less in the same business and in whom they recognise certain qualities which they have in common. In point of age Ashby was, perhaps, the senior. As far as reputation was concerned, both men were accounted nervy and square. Rance introduced him to Sonora and the others, saying:

"Boys, Mr. Ashby of Wells Fargo."

The latter had a pleasant word or two for the men; then, turning to the Deputy, he said:

"And how are you these days?"

"Fit. And yourself?"

"Same here." Turning now to the barkeeper, Ashby, with easy familiarity, added: "Say, Nick, give us a drink."

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"Sure!" came promptly from the little barkeeper.

"Everybody 'll have the same?" inquired Ashby, turning once more to the men.

"The same!" returned the men in chorus.

Thereupon, Nick briskly slapped down a bottle and four glasses before the Sheriff, and leaving him to do the honours, disappeared into the dance-hall.

"Well, I trust the Girl who runs The Polka is well?" inquired Ashby, pushing his glass near the bottle.

"Fine as silk," vouched Sonora, adding in the next breath: "But, say, Mr. Ashby, how long you been chasin' up this road agent?"

"Oh, he only took to the road a few months ago," was Ashby's answer. "Wells Fargo have had me and a posse busy ever since. He's a wonder!"

"Must be to evade you," complimented Sonora, much to the discomfort of the Sheriff.

"Yes, I can smell a road agent in the wind," declared Ashby somewhat boastfully. "But, Rance, I expect to get that fellow right here in your county."

The Sheriff looked as if he scouted the idea, and was about to speak, but checked the word on his tongue. Then followed a short silence in which the Deputy, smiling a trifle derisively, went out of the saloon.

"Is this fellow a Spaniard?" questioned the

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Sheriff, drawling as usual, but at the same time jerking his thumb over his shoulder towards a placard on the wall, which read:

"FIVE THOUSAND DOLLARS REWARD FOR THE ROAD AGENT RAMERREZ, OR INFORMATION LEADING TO HIS CAPTURE.
(SIGNED) WELLS FARGO."

"No — can't prove it. The fact of his leading a crew of greasers and Spaniards signifies nothing. His name is assumed, I suppose."

"They say he robs you like a gentleman," remarked Rance with some show of interest.

"Well, look out for the greasers up the road!" was Ashby's warning as he emptied his glass and put it down before him.

"We don't let them pass through here," shrugged Rance, likewise putting down his glass on the table.

Ashby now picked up the whisky bottle and carried it over to the deserted faro table before which he settled himself comfortably in a chair.

"Well, boys, I've had a long ride — wake me up when The Pony Express goes through!" he called over his shoulder as he put his coat over him.

But no sooner was he comfortably ensconced for a snooze than Nick came bustling in with a kettle of boiling water and several glasses half-filled with

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whisky and lemon. Stopping before Ashby he said in his best professional manner:

"Re-gards of the Girl — hot whisky straight with lemming extract."

Ashby took up his glass, as did, in turn, the men at the other table. But it was Rance who, with arm uplifted, toasted:

"The Girl, gentlemen, the only Girl in Camp, the Girl I mean to make Mrs. Jack Rance!"

Confident that neither would catch him in the act, Nick winked first at Sonora and then at Trinidad. That the little barkeeper was successful in making the former, at least, believe that he possessed the Girl's affections was manifested by the big miner's next remark.

"That's a joke, Rance. She makes you look like a Chinaman."

Rance sprang to his feet, white with rage.

"You prove that!" he shouted.

"In what particular spot will you have it?" taunted Sonora, as his hand crept for his gun.

Simultaneously every man in the room made a dash for cover. Nick ducked behind the bar, for, as he told himself when safely settled there, he was too old a bird to get anywhere near the line of fire when two old stagers got to making lead fly about. Nor was Trinidad slow in arriving at the other end of the bar where he caromed against Jake, who had

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dropped his banjo and was frantically trying to kick the spring of the iron shield in an endeavour to protect himself — a feat which, at last, he succeeded in performing. But, fortunately, for all concerned, as the two men stood eyeing each other, their hands on their hips ready to draw, Nick, from his position behind the bar, glimpsed through the window the Girl on the point of entering the saloon.

"Here comes the Girl!" he cried excitedly. "Aw, leave your guns alone — take your drinks, quick!"

For a fraction of a second the men looked sheepishly at one another, even Nick appearing a trifle uncomfortable, as he picked up the kettle and went off with it.

"Once more we're friends, eh, boys?" said Rance, with a forced laugh; and then as he lifted his glass high in the air, he gave the toast:

"The Girl!"

"The Girl!" repeated all — all save Ashby, whose snores by this time could be heard throughout the big room — and drained their glasses.

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VI

THERE was a general movement towards the bar when the fair proprietress of The Polka, who had lingered longer than usual in her little cabin on top of the mountain, breezily entered the place by the main door. In a coarse, blue skirt, and rough, white flannel blouse, cut away and held in place at the throat by a crimson ribbon, the Girl made a pretty picture; it was not difficult to see why the boys of Cloudy Mountain Camp had a feeling which fell little short of adoration for this sun-browned maid, with the spirit of the mountain in her eyes. That each in his own way had given her to understand that he was desperately smitten with her, goes without saying. But, although she accepted their rough homage as a matter of course, such a thought as falling in love with anyone of them had never entered her mind.

As far back, almost, as she could remember, the Girl had lived among them and had ever been a true comrade, sharing their disappointments and thrilling with their successes. Of a nature pure and simple, she was, nevertheless, frank and outspoken. Moreover, she knew to a dot what was meant when someone — bolder than his mates — stretched out his arms to her. One such exhibition on a man's

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part she was likely to forgive and forget, but the wrath and scorn that had blazed forth from her blue eyes on such an occasion had been sufficient to prevent a repetition of the offence. In short, unspoiled by their coarse flattery, and, to all appearances, happy and care-free, she attended to the running of The Polka wholly unsmirched by her environment.

But a keen observer would not have failed to detect that the Girl took a little less pleasure in her surroundings than she had taken in them before she had made the trip to Monterey. Downright glad, to use her own expression, as she had been on her return to see the boys of the camp and hear their boisterous shouts of welcome when the stage drew up in front of The Polka, she had to acknowledge that her home-coming was not quite what she expected. It was as if she had suddenly been startled out of a beautiful dream wherein she had been listening to the soft music of her lover's voice and brought face to face with the actualities of life, which, in her case, to say the least, were very real.

For hours after leaving her admirer sitting motionless on his horse on the great highway between Monterey and Sacramento, the Girl had indulged in some pertinent thoughts which, if the truth were known, were anything but complimentary to her behaviour. And, however successful she was later on in persuading herself that he would eventually seek

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her out, there was no question that at first she felt that the chances of her ever setting eyes on him again were almost negligible. All the more bitterly, therefore, did she regret her folly in not having told him where she lived; particularly so since she assured herself that not only was he the handsomest man that she had ever seen, but that he was the only one who had ever succeeded in chaining her attention. That he had been making love to her with his eyes, if not with words, she knew only too well — a fact that had been anything but displeasing to her. Indeed, far from having felt sorry that she had encouraged him, she, unblushingly, acknowledged to herself that, if she had the thing to do over again, she would encourage him still more.

Was she then a flirt? Not at all, in the common acceptation of the word. All her knowledge of the ways of the world had been derived from Mother Nature, who had supplied her with a quick and ready wit to turn aside, with a smile, the protestations of the boys; had taught her how to live on intimate terms with them and yet not be intimate; but when it came to playing at love, which every city maid of the same age is an adept at, she was strangely ignorant. Of a truth, then, it was something far broader and deeper that had entered into her heart — love. Not infrequently love comes as suddenly

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as this to young women who live in small mining camps or out-of-the-way places where the men are practically of a type; it is their unfamiliarity with the class which a stranger represents when he makes his appearance in their midst that is responsible, fully as much as his own personality, for their being attracted to him. It is not impossible, of course, that if the Girl had met him in Cloudy,— say as a miner there,— the result would have been precisely the same. But it is much more likely that the attendant conditions of their meeting aided him in appealing to her imagination, and in touching a chord in her nature which, under other circumstances, would not have responded in as many months as there were minutes on that eventful day.

Little wonder then, that as each succeeding mile travelled by the stage took her further and further away from him, something which, as yet, she did not dare to name, kept tugging at her heartstrings and which she endeavoured to overcome by listening to the stage driver's long-winded reminiscences and anecdotes concerning the country through which they were passing. But, although she made a brave effort to appear interested, it did not take him long to realise that something was on his passenger's mind and, being a wise man, he gradually relapsed into silence, with the result that, before the long journey

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ended at Cloudy Mountain, she had deceived herself into believing that she was certain to see her admirer again.

But as the days grew into weeks, the weeks into months, and the Girl neither saw nor heard anything of him, it was inevitable that the picture that he had left on her mind should begin to grow dim. Nevertheless, it was surprising what a knack his figure had of appearing before her at various times of the day and night, when she never failed to compare him with the miners in the camp, and, needless to say, unflatteringly to them. There came a time, it is true, when she was sorely tempted to tell one of them something of this new-found friend of hers; but rightly surmising the effect that her praising of her paragon would have upon the recipient of her confidences, she wisely resolved to lock up his image in her heart.

Of course, there were moments, too, when the Girl regretted that there was no other woman — some friend of her own sex in the camp — to whom she could confide her little romance. But since that boon was denied her, she took to seeking out the most solitary places to dream of him. In such moods she would climb to a high crag, a few feet from her cabin, and with a reminiscent and far-away look in her eyes she would sit for hours gazing at the great canyons and gorges, the broad forests and wooded

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hillsides, the waterfalls flashing silver in the distance, and, above all, at the wonderously-grand and snow-capped peaks of the main range.

At other times she would take the trail leading from the camp to the country below, and after wandering about aimlessly in the beautiful and mysterious forests, she would select some little glen through which a brook trickled and murmured underneath the ferns into a pool, and seating herself on a clump of velvet moss, the great sugar pines and firs forming a canopy over her head, she would whisper her secret thoughts and wild hopes to the gorgeously-plumed birds and saucy squirrels scampering all about her. The hours spent thus were as oases in her otherwise practical existence, and after a while she would return laden down with great bunches of ferns and wild flowers which, eventually, found a place on the walls of The Polka.

. . . . . .

Glancing at the bar to see that everything was to her satisfaction, the Girl greeted the boys warmly, almost rapturously with:

"Hello, boys! How's everythin'? Gettin' taken care of?"

"Hello, Girl!" sang out Sonora in what he considered was his most fetching manner. He had been the first to reach the coveted position opposite the Girl, although Handsome, who had followed her in,

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was leaning at the end of the bar nearest to the dance-hall.

"Hello, Sonora!" returned the Girl with an amused smile, for it was impossible with her keen sense of humour not to see Sonora's attempts to make himself irresistible to her. Nor did she fail to observe that Trinidad, likewise, had spruced himself up a little more than usual, with the same purpose in mind.

"Hello, Girl!" he said, strolling up to her with a ludicrous swagger.

"Hello, Trin!" came from the Girl, smilingly.

There was an awkward pause in which both Sonora and Trinidad floundered about in their minds for something to say; at length, a brilliant inspiration came to the former, and he asked:

"Say, Girl, make me a prairie oyster, will you?"

"All, right, Sonora, I'll fix you right up," returned the Girl, smiling to herself at his effort. But at the moment that she was reaching for a bottle back of the bar, a terrific whoop came from the dance-hall, and ever-watchful lest the boys' fun should get beyond her control, she called to her factotum to quiet things down in the next room, concluding warningly: "They've had about enough."

When the barkeeper had gone to do her bidding, the Girl picked up an egg, and, poising it over a glass, she went on:

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"Say, look 'ere, Sonora, before I crack this 'ere egg, I'd like to state that eggs is four bits apiece. Only two hens left —" She broke off short, and turning upon Handsome, who had been gradually sidling up until his elbows almost touched hers, she repulsed him a trifle impatiently:

"Oh, run away, Handsome!"

A flush of pleasure at Handsome's evident discomfiture spread over Sonora's countenance, and comical, indeed, to the Girl, was the majestic air he took on when he ordered recklessly:

"Oh, crack the egg — I'll stand for it."

But Sonora's fancied advantage over the others was of short duration, for the next instant Nick, stepping quickly forward with a drink, handed it to the Girl with the words:

"Regards of Blonde Harry."

Again Sonora experienced a feeling akin to jealousy at what he termed Blonde Harry's impudence. It almost immediately gave way to a paroxysm of chuckling; for, the Girl, quickly taking the glass from Nick's hand, flung its contents into a nearby receptacle.

"There — tell 'im that it hit the spot!" She laughed.

Nick roared with the others, but on the threshold of the dance-hall he paused, hesitated, and finally came back, and advised in a low tone:

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"Throw around a few kind words, Girl — good for the bar."

The Girl surveyed the barkeeper with playful disapproval in her eye. However advantageous might be his method of working up trade, she disdained to follow his advice, and her laughing answer was:

"Oh, you Nick!"

The peal of laughter that rung in Nick's ears as he disappeared through the door, awakened Ashby and brought him instantly to his feet. Despite his size, he was remarkably quick in his movements, and in no time at all he was standing before the bar with a glass, which he had filled from the bottle that had stood in front of him on the table, and was saying:

"Compliments of Wells Fargo."

"Thank you," returned the Girl; and then while she shook the prairie oyster: "You see we live high-shouldered here."

"That's what!" put in Sonora with a broad grin.

"What cigars have you?" asked Ashby, at the conclusion of his round of drinks.

"Regalias, Auroas and Eurekas," reeled off the Girl with her eye upon Billy Jackrabbit, who had quietly come in and was sneaking about in an endeavour to find something worth pilfering.

"Oh, any will do," Ashby told her, with a smile; and while he was helping himself from a box of

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Regalias, Nick suddenly appeared, calling out excitedly:

"Man jest come in threatenin' to shoot up the furniture!"

"Who is it?" calmly inquired the Girl, returning the cigar-box to its place on the shelf.

"Old man Watson!"

"Leave 'im shoot,—he's good for it!"

"Nick! Nick!" yelled several voices in the dance-hall where old man Watson was surely having the time of his life.

And still the Girl paid not the slightest attention to the shooting or the cries of the men; what did concern her, however, was the fact that the Indian was drinking up the dregs in the whisky glasses on the faro table.

"Here, you, Billy Jackrabbit! What are you doin' here?" she exclaimed sharply, causing that generally imperturbable redskin to start perceptibly. "Did you marry my squaw yet?"

Billy Jackrabbit's face wore as stolid an expression as ever, when he answered:

"Not so much married squaw — yet."

"Not so much married . . ." repeated the Girl when the merriment, which his words provoked, had subsided. "Come 'ere, you thievin' redskin!" And when he had slid up to the bar, and she had extracted from his pockets a number of cigars which

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she knew had been pilfered, she added: "You git up to my cabin an' marry my squaw before I git there." And at another emphatic "Git!" the Indian, much to the amusement of all, started for the Girl's cabin.

"Here — here's your prairie oyster, Sonora," at last said the Girl; and then turning to the Sheriff and speaking to him for the first time, she called out gaily: "Hello, Rance!"

"Hello, Girl!" replied the Gambler without even a glance at her or ceasing to shuffle the cards.

Presently, Sonora pulled out a bag of gold-dust and told the Girl to clear the slate out of it. She was in the act of taking the sack when Nick, rushing into the room and jerking his thumb over his shoulder, said:

"Say, Girl, there's a fellow in there wants to know if we can help out on provisions."

"Sure; what does he want?" returned the Girl with a show of willingness to accommodate him.

"Bread."

"Bread? Does he think we're runnin' a bakery?"

"Then he asked for sardines."

"Sardines? Great Gilead! You tell 'im we have nothin' but straight provisions here. We got pickled oysters, smokin' tobacco an' the best whisky

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