

The Girl of the Golden West

NOVELIZED FROM THE PLAY

BY
DAVID BELASCO

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY
J. N. MARCHAND



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“Mr. Johnson, come down”

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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.

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

“See, Señorita,” 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 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.

"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.

“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, Señorita, 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.”

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: “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 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 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 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 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 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 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.

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 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.

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 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 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.

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 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.

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 death-bed 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.

“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?”

“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 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. 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 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 holdup 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 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.