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By John  
Ayscough

# MARIQUITA

BY JOHN AYSCOUGH

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## **TO SENORITA MARIQUITA GUTIERREZ**

Senorita,

It is, indeed, kind of you to condone, by your acceptance of the dedication of this small book, the theft of your name, perpetrated without your knowledge, in its title. And in thanking you for that acceptance I seize another opportunity of apologizing for that theft.

I need not tell you that in drawing Mariquita's portrait I have not been guilty of the further liberty of attempting your own, since we have never met, except on paper, and you belong to that numerous party of my friends known to me only by welcome and kind letters. But I hope there may be a nearer likelihood of my meeting you than there now can be of my seeing your namesake.

That you and some others may like her I earnestly trust: if not it must be the fault of my portrait, drawn perhaps with less skill than respectful affection.

John

Ayscough.

## CHAPTER I.

A whole state, as big as England and Wales, and then half as big again, tilting smoothly upward towards, but never reaching, the Great Divide: the tilt so gradual that miles of land seem level; a vast sun-swept, breeze-swept upland always high above the level of the far, far-off sea, here in the western skirts of the state a mile above it. Its sky-scape always equal to its landscape, and dominant—as the sky can never be imagined in shut lands of close valleys, where trees are forever at war with the air and with the light.

Here light and life seeming twin and inseparable: and the wind itself but the breathing of the light. What is called, by the foolish, a featureless country, that is with huge, fine features, not to be sought for but insistent, regnant, everywhere: space, tangible and palpable, height inevitably perceptible and recognizable in all the unviolated light, in the winds' smash, and the sun's, in the dancing sense of freedom: yet that dancing not frivolous, but gladly solemn.

As to little features they are slurred (to the slight glance) in the vast unity: but look for them, and they are myriad. The riverbanks hold them, between prairie-lip and water. The prairie-waves hold them. Life is innumerable present, though to the hasty sight it seems primarily and distinctly absent. There are myriads of God's little live preachers, doing each, from untold ages to untold ages, the unnoted things set them by Him to do, as their big brothers the sun and the wind, the rain and the soil do.

Of the greater beasts fewer but plenty—fox, and timber-wolf, and coyote, and still to-day an antelope here and there.

Of men few. Their dwellings parted by wide distances. Their voices scarce heard where no dwelling is at hand. But the dwellings, being solitary and rare, singularly home-stamped.

## CHAPTER II.

Mariquita came out from the homestead, where there was nobody, and stood at its verge (where the prairie began abruptly) where there was nobody. She was twenty years old and had lived five of them here on the prairie, since her mother died, and she had come home to be her father's daughter and housekeeper, and all the servant he had. She was hardly taller now, and more slim. Her father did not know she was beautiful—at first he had been too much engaged in remembering her mother, who had been very blonde and fair, not at all like her. Her own skin was dark; and her rich hair was dark; her grave, soft, deep eyes were dark, though hazel-dark, not black-dark: whereas her mother's hair had been sunny-golden, and her eyes bright (rather shallow) blue, and her skin all white and rose.

Her mother had taught school, up in Cheyenne, in Wyoming, and had been of a New England family of Puritans. Her father's people had come, long ago, from Spain, and he himself had been born near the desert in New Mexico: his mother may have been Indian—but a Catholic, anyway.

So, no doubt, was José: though he had little occasion to remember it. It was over fifty miles to the nearest church and he had not heard Mass for years. He had married his Protestant wife without any dispensation, and a judge had married them.

Nevertheless when the child came, he had made the mother understand she must be of his Church, and had baptized her himself. When Mariquita was ten years old he sent her to the Loretto nuns, out on the heights beyond Denver, where she had been confirmed, and made her first Communion, and many subsequent Communions.

For five years now she had had to "hear Mass her own way." That is to say, she went out upon the prairie, and, in the shade of a tree-clump, took her lonely place, crossed herself at the threshold of the shadow, and genuflected towards where she believed her old school was, with its chapel, and its Tabernacle.

Then, out of her book she followed the Ordinary of the Mass, projecting herself in mind and fancy into that worshipping company, picturing priest and nuns and school-fellows. At the Sanctus she rang a sheep-bell, and deepened all her Intention. At the Elevation she rang it again, in double triplet, though she could elevate only her own solitary soul. At first she had easily pictured all her school-fellows in their remembered places—they were all grown up and gone away home now. The old priest she had known was dead, as the nuns had sent her word, and she had to picture a priest, unknown, featureless, instead of him. The nuns' faces had somewhat dimmed in distinctness too. But she could picture the large group still. At the Communion she always made a Spiritual Communion of her own—that was why she always "heard her Mass" early, so as to be fasting.

Once or twice, at long intervals, she had been followed by one of the cowboys: but the first one had seen her face as she knelt, and gone away, noiselessly, with a shy, red reverence. Her father had seen the second making obliquely towards her tree-clump, had overtaken him and inquired grimly if he would like a leathering. "When Mariquita's at church," said José, "let her be. She's for none of us then."

And they let her be: and her tree-clump became known as Mariquita's Church by all the cowboys.

One by one they fell in love with her (her father grimly conscious, but unremarking) and one by one they found nothing come of it. Whether he would have objected had anything come of it he did not say, though several had tried to guess.

To her he never spoke of it, any more than to them: he hardly spoke to her of anything except the work—which she did carefully, as if carelessly. If she had neglected it, or done it badly, he would have rebuked her: that, he considered, was parental duty: as she needed no rebuke he said nothing; his ideas of paternal duty were bounded by paternal correction and a certain cool watchfulness. His watchfulness was not intrusive: he left her chiefly to herself, perceiving her to require no guidance. In all her life he never had occasion to complain that anything she did was "out of place"—his notion of the severest expression of disapproval a father could be called upon to utter.

It was, in his opinion, to be taken for granted that a parent was entitled to the

affection of his child, and that the child was entitled to the affection of her father. He neither displayed his affection nor wished Mariquita to display hers. Nor was there in him any sensible feeling of love for the girl. Her mother he had loved, and it was a relief to him that his daughter was wholly unlike her. It would have vexed him had there been any challenging likeness—would have resented it as a tacit claim, like a rivalry.

Joaquin was lonelier than Mariquita. He did not like being called "Don Joaquin"; he preferred being known by his surname, as "Mr. Xeres." One of the cowboys, a very ignorant lad from the East, had supposed "Wah-Keen" to be a Chinese name, and confided his idea to the others. Don Joaquin had overheard their laughter and been enraged by its cause when he had learned it.

He had not married till he was a little over thirty, being already well off by then, and he was therefore now past fifty on this afternoon when Mariquita came out and stood all alone where the homestead as it were rejoined the prairie. At first her long gaze, used to the great distances, was turned westward (and south a little) towards where, miles upon miles out of sight, lay the Mile High City, and Loretto, and the Convent, and all that made her one stock of memories.

The prairie was as empty to such a gaze as so much ocean.

But the sun-stare dazzled her, and she turned eastward; half a mile from her, that way, lay the river, showing nothing at this distance: its water, not filling at this season a fifth of the space between banks was out of sight: the low scrub within its banks was out of sight. Even its lips, of precisely even level on either side, were not discernible. But where she knew the further lip was, she saw two riders, a man and a woman. A moment after she caught sight of them they disappeared—had ridden down into the river-bed. The trail had guided them, and they could miss neither the way nor the ford.

Nevertheless she walked towards where they were—though her father might possibly have thought her doing so out of place.

### CHAPTER III.

Up over the sandy river-bed came the two strangers, and Mariquita stood awaiting them.

The woman might be thirty, and was, she perceived (to whom a saddle was easier than a chair) unused to riding. She was a pretty woman, with a sort of foolish amiability of manner that might mean nothing. The man was younger—perhaps by three years, and rode as if he had always known how to do it, but without being saddle-bred, without living chiefly on horseback.

His companion was much aware of his being handsome, but Mariquita did not think of that. She, however, liked him immediately—much better than she liked the lady. The lady was not, in fact, quite a lady; but the young man was a gentleman; and perhaps Mariquita had never known one.

"Is this," inquired the blonde lady—pointing, though inaccurately, as if to indicate Mariquita's home, "where Mr. Xeres lives, please?"

She pronounced the X like the x's in Artaxerxes.

"Certainly. He is my father."

"Then your mother is my Aunt Margaret," said the lady in the smart clothes that looked so queer on an equestrian.

"My mother unfortunately is dead," Mariquita informed her, with a simplicity that made the wide-open blue eyes open wider still, and caused their owner to decide that the girl was "awfully Spanish."

Miss Sarah Jackson assumed (with admirable readiness) an expression of pathos.

"How very sad! I do apologize," she murmured, as if the decease of her aunt were partly her fault.

The young man was amused—not for the first time—by his fellow-traveller: but he did not show it.



"You couldn't help it," said Mariquita.

("How very Spanish!" thought her cousin.)

"Of course you did not know," the girl added, "or you would not have said anything to hurt me. And my mother's death happened five years ago."

"Not really!" cried the deceased lady's niece. "How wholly unexpected!"

"It wasn't very sudden," Mariquita explained. "She was ill for three months."

"My father was quite unaware of it—entirely so. He died, in fact, just about that time. And Aunt Margaret and he were (so unfortunately!) hardly on terms. Personally I always (though a child) had the strongest affection for Aunt Margaret. I took her part about her marriage. Papa's own second marriage struck me as less defensible."

"My father only married once," said Mariquita; "he is a widower."

"Oh, quite so! I wish mine had remained so. My stepmother—but we all have our faults, no doubt. We did not live agreeably after her third marriage—" (Mariquita was getting giddy, and so, perhaps, was Miss Jackson's fellow-traveller.)

"I could not, in fact, live," that lady serenely continued, with a smile of lingering sweetness, "and finally we differed completely. (Not noisily, on my part, nor roughly but irrevocably.) Hence my resolve to turn to Aunt Margaret, and my presence here—blood is thicker than water, when you come to think of it."

"I met Miss Jackson at —," her fellow-traveller explained, "and we made acquaintance—"

"Introduced by Mrs. Ploser," Miss Jackson put in again with singular sweetness. "Mrs. Ploser's boarding-house was recommended to me by two ministers. Mr. Gore was likewise her guest, and coming, as she was aware, to your father's."

Don Joaquin, besides the regular cowboys, had from time to time taken a sort of pupil or apprentice, who paid instead of being paid. Mariquita had not been informed that this Mr. Gore was expected.

"So," Mr. Gore added, "I begged Miss Jackson to use one of my horses, and I have been her escort."