

CLEMENCIA'S CRISIS

A Thrilling Romance of the West
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CHAPTER I.

ONE glorious February morning a young man stood on the summit of a beautiful pass in the San Rafael Mountains. He belonged to a type which should have attracted attention anywhere, but alone, in that splendid setting, into which he seemed to fit so well, he was especially worth observation. Tall and well built, his cumbersome knapsack, which might have appeared unwise on another man, seemed but to contribute grace. The olive tint of his face showed intimate acquaintance with nature. His deep set eyes, now gray, now steel blue, looked steadily ahead. His clean-shaven jaw showed great strength of purpose and evidenced that the will of its possessor once aroused would dominate to the end. The humorous mouth softened a bit the almost sinister sternness of the face and when the latter relaxed into smiles it seldom failed to win a friend.

Here unquestionably was a handsome man, and as his record showed, a brave one. Before he was twenty Lieutenant Arslan Barrington had won his spurs in active service, and under Dewey sailed quickly and fearlessly into the hearts of the American people.

He had accompanied our now famous admiral on the dark night when in Manila Bay he had carried his ship stanchly into the enemy's midst, catching them asleep, winning fame for himself and glorifying a nation.

But that victory was not the only one in which Lieutenant Barrington had shared. Every line of his splendid figure showed that he was born to fight and, although when he was deeply moved his quivering nostrils and his glowing face indicated a somewhat sensitive nature, one never mistook the strength and power revealed in his countenance.

Standing now with cap in hand he watched the blue waters of the Pacific—that ocean so rare in its beauty, so unforgettable in its splendor. The waves, tipped with sunshine, flashed fire, while the air above quivered with luminous rays. Far out the waters dissolved from blue into wondrous shades of green and across the rainbow colors misty, mysterious islands reared their heads, glinting like jewels in a turquoise setting.

Dropping his gaze to the land below him the young officer tried to make out the Franciscan mission of the Santa Barbara, for that was his destination. The admiral of the Pacific squadron at San Diego had, a few days previously, entrusted him with special dispatches to be carried there.

And then the news was flashed around the world! From the Atlantic to the Pacific, from East to West, the wires tingled with its importance. From the smallest adobe in the foothills of the Sierras to the palaces on the Hudson the interest vibrated. The American fleet would sail around the globe!

Lieutenant Barrington had undertaken the journey to Santa Barbara with delight, especially as he had sufficient time to allow of his walking over the Casitas Pass. In no better way could he travel that sunlit California than with a map and compass. The trails were not always clear, but he never minded a detour, for it invariably revealed some unexpected beauty. The graceful groping of the mountains, the surprises of canyons and dividing ridges, all so supremely lovely that it is impossible to over-estimate their charm, were indescribable.

With his field glasses Barrington at last spied the mission—beautiful enough to attract attention, even did one know naught of its interesting history. Built on the crest of a hill commanding a view of the valley, its twin towers are boldly outlined against the higher range.

The young man descended the pass rapidly and came out in an open stretch of valley. He had almost finished his journey. The mountains had been cool, but here in the valley the day had become suddenly very warm and he felt his energy wane.

It was high noon. He would find shelter, eat his modest lunch, sleep away the heated hours of the afternoon and reach the mission in time for supper. He threw himself down under the shade of a great pepper tree and sank to sleep almost as soon as his head touched the ground.

CHAPTER II.

HOW long he had been asleep he did not know, but it must have been several hours, for when he opened his eyes again the sun was setting low and he awakened suddenly as if something had disturbed him. He sat up and leaned against the trunk of the huge pepper tree and as he did so he realized what it was that had broken in upon his rest.

Three women were approaching and from their attire he judged they were nuns. He arose and stood waiting for them to come near him.

Two of the women were old, but the third, from a certain easy undulation in her walk, he knew was young. Their heavy full-skirted brown dresses were looped up on one

lip and together with their flat shoes retarded their movements. But in spite of this, the elastic step of the woman in the center betrayed unmistakably her youthful vigor. They were conversing earnestly.

The young woman appeared to be protesting vigorously and her excitement was in great contrast to the calmness of the others. All three were too engrossed to notice him, although they were so near now that he caught a part of their conversation.

He decided to make his presence known, but quickly changed his mind and drew back beneath the branches of the tree. For a strange thing was happening. The nuns had stopped. The two older ones faced him, and, lifting their hands, began praying aloud. The third sank on her knees before them, her face in her hands. He could not understand what they said, but at last the words "Heaven give peace to our afflicted sister" fell on his ears. Then, ceasing, they kissed her on the forehead, chin and either cheek, in this manner making a cross. When she had risen to her feet they kissed her cheek again and after saying aloud "Beloved, goodbye," they turned and walked away quickly.

The young nun remained immovable until they had disappeared. When the last flutter of their brown garments had faded in the distance she raised her hands deliberately and took off her cap and veil. Then gradually, she loosened her hair. It fell in a long yellow stream far below her waist. Suddenly she shook her head and the golden shower floated from her in waves of light, falling almost to her knees. The man who watched her wondered that one woman could possess so much. It waved, it rippled, it shimmered in the sunshine. He had never dreamed anything so glorious as this woman's loosened hair. It was bewildering. It thrilled him. Then the reflection that the possessor of this golden mass was utterly unconscious of his presence gave him a tingling sensation of guilt.

He had had no view of her face. Indeed, with the sunlight which fell over her head, he scarcely distinguished her features.

Suddenly she gave a great cry and stretching her arms out wildly threw herself upon the ground and broke into piteous weeping. Sobs shook her slender form from head to foot. She quivered with a grief so violent he wondered what could be the tragedy which it expressed.

It began to feel most uncomfortable. It seemed criminal almost to watch this woman who, believing herself to be alone, was giving away to her sorrow. Still, he could not leave any human creature suffering as she evidently was without offering assistance.

Impulsively he took a step forward. She heard his footsteps and sat up instantly, at the same time drawing her hair more thickly across her face, concealing it entirely. When he reached her side she had ceased to sob. Only a long quivering movement of her body showed her agitation.

As he stood before her he never felt more awkward in his life, yet he felt that he must say something, and after the manner of man he asked the first question which came into his mind.

"Can you show me the Camino del Rey?" She started to rise, but her paroxysm of grief had weakened her and she staggered. Impulsively he caught her hands to aid her to her feet. Only an instant he held them because she withdrew them at once, but though her face was still concealed behind the golden veil he said instinctively to himself:

"I am sure that she is beautiful. Her hands have told me so. No woman with such hands could be homely."

When she spoke he would learn more from her voice. But she did not speak, and her manner compelled him, also, to silence. There was aloofness even in her way of answering his question, for she merely raised the brown-shrouded arm and pointed silently to the way he should follow. Then before he could thank her for even this silent courtesy she turned and walked swiftly in the opposite direction until she disappeared into the valley.

As he took his way down the road to which she had pointed, although he had not even seen her face or obtained the slightest clue to her name he told himself calmly:

"I know I shall see that woman again. Strange, even ridiculous as it may seem, I was never more convinced of anything in my life. Something passed between us when I touched her hands; although no words were uttered, it seemed as if our souls spoke, but I recognized it as psychical communion at once, although this is my first experience with anything of that sort."

CHAPTER III.

ALl around Barrington the cypress and the myrtle bloomed. Birds in scarlet plumage flickered like flame between the branches of the green trees as he passed by groves where golden oranges dangled temptingly.

He was in the most fascinating highway in all the world—the Camino del Rey, which like a broad ribbon stretches through California and which once connected the missions and linked the settlements built by the Spaniards and the Indians. What wonderful

tales could be written of it—tales of the splendid heroism of the padres, without whose mighty efforts California could not have lived in those early days when, happily or wearily, those sainted priests tramped that broad highway.

Inspired by these thoughts Barrington strode along toward Santa Barbara. Just outside of the town a sudden turn in the road brought him in full view of a man and woman. Both were Spaniards. The woman was refined in appearance, astonishingly pretty and apparently not more than 25. The man bore the earmarks of an aristocrat, yet he was of a distinctly disagreeable type. Unlike most of his race, he was tall, and, though unusually handsome, his face showed the weakness of self-indulgence and deep lines of dissipation. Furthermore, it was now convulsed with anger.

The couple had evidently just left their horses, for the woman wore the California riding dress with its divided skirt, while the costume of the man was accentuated to picturesqueness by the sombrero and high-top boots. They were too absorbed in their quarrel to notice

Barrington's approach. The man was older than his companion. Barrington judged him to be about 35. The woman was talking rapidly in her native tongue, which Barrington understood perfectly. She was reproaching her companion and it evidently angered him greatly, for suddenly he seized her by the shoulders and shook her.

To the officer's astonishment the girl showed no resentment. She did not even struggle. But her submissiveness instead of softening apparently only angered him all the more. He raised his whip and undoubtedly would have struck her had not Barrington, unable to contain his indignation longer, sprung forward.

At the sight of him the astonished Spaniard dropped the girl's arm and exclaimed in fury:

"Where in the devil's name did you come from?" Ignoring his question and making no effort to veil his contempt Barrington asked:

"What kind of man are you to strike a woman?"

"Must I account to you, sir?" replied the Spaniard haughtily. "I may do as I like. The woman is mine."

"But humanity is the world's," came the quick retort, "and real men do not strike their wives."

The Spaniard's angry flush heightened as the two men faced each other.

"And pray, sir, who are you that you should dictate the proper treatment of wives?"

"Only a man," answered the other. The girl had drawn off a little to one side and was quietly weeping. She showed no interest whatever in the altercation.

"Well," continued the Spaniard, advancing a step nearer, "and what will humanity and your damned impertinence choose to do now as against my property, sir?"

His insolence and the sneer which accompanied it was too much of a strain upon the American's patience. Barrington suddenly sprang forward, and when a few minutes

later, scowling and cursing with anger, the Spaniard picked himself up with a blackened eye and a sprained wrist, he was doubtless convinced that it was a mistake to fight a man without first measuring his strength.

Barrington felt considerably better. He had not enjoyed bandying words with the man.

"I shall be here for some time," he volunteered, "and can be found at the mission. I shall be glad at any time to discuss the law with you again, on the same terms."

CHAPTER IV.

AN HOUR or so later Barrington sat in the reception hall of the mission awaiting the Superior. The door opened and Padre Galvez entered.

"What a handsome man Padre Galvez must have been in his youth!" thought Barrington.

The old priest's dark eyes, bright and piercing, softened wonderfully as he looked at the young man before him and a gentle smile illumined his face when he said in a voice of fullness and sweetness:

"You are astonishingly like your mother—like her as I knew her in her youth. She must be gray-haired now, but she will always be beautiful," he finished gently, "because her soul was beautiful."

At the priest's words one of his rare smiles broke over the young officer's face.

"My mother, sir, is, as you say, very beautiful still."

When the officer rose to leave he had a strong desire to question the padre concerning the cloistered nuns near by and to tell him of his experience with the novice that afternoon. But it seemed like spying further upon the unfortunate woman and so he held his peace. He felt, however, that there was one question which he must ask this learned man.

"Padre," he ventured, "have you in your faith only condemnation for the psychic?"

"My son, why should the faith condemn?" "But could you as a priest accept some-

thing not clearly explained? Would it not be wrong?"

"Not always. The circumstances would have much weight, but your question is a little vague, I think."

The young man reddened. He dared not be more explicit.

"If you were absolutely convinced of something which reason told you was impossible, padre, would you still believe?"

"The mysteries of the world are many," the priest responded. "Wiser heads than ours have puzzled over them."

There came to Barrington the thought of an episode in his memorable campaign with Dewey which was fraught with mystery at the time, but which later had made him more or less a firm believer in the occult.

"May I tell you of my first experience with the psychic?" he asked.

The priest nodded acquiescence.

"On the morning that the Olympia stole through the gray mist into the waters of Manila Bay I was stationed aft on the lower deck, while our famous commander and his immediate subordinates occupied the bridge."

The young man flushed as he observed a tightening of the lips of the man to whom he was speaking. He felt instantly the inappropriateness of the subject before such a listener, for while Padre Galvez was a man of big mental caliber, the thought of that memorable morning in which his nation's ships had been humbled in a most incredibly brief affray could not but affect him now. The priest saw the young man's embarrassment and came speedily to his rescue.

"Go on, my boy; we cannot quarrel with history. You started to tell me something about the day of which you were justly proud and of which we have no reason to be ashamed. Go on."

"I felt rather than heard a voice," continued Barrington. "It was insistent and in what was probably not more than the passing of a few seconds it seemed to repeat its command a dozen times. Involuntarily I heeded it without attempting to define it."

I stepped a pace to the right and as I did so a ball from one of the Spanish ships tore into and pierced the main hatchway behind which I had stood.

"The miraculous escape did not impress me greatly at the time. I attributed it to luck."

The young officer leaned forward and his ordinarily cold eyes sparkled as he went on.

"The real significance of the incident, padre, came home to me after my return to America. My mother and I were in the library of our New York home. It was late at night, for I had been narrating to her at length the history of the prodigious day that made our admiral famous. Of a sudden she arose, and, walking to my side, put her arms around me. 'My boy,' she said, 'you don't know what a joy it is for me to see you safely here by my side. I always worry about you when you are gone, of course. But this last time I was more uneasy than ever before. Do you know, Arslan, that in the very hour, perhaps the very moment, when you were in the thick of that engagement on the Olympia I seemed to receive some telepathic message that you were in imminent danger. I was agonized and in my excitement cried aloud, 'Move, Arslan, move!' I wonder if you heard me—if a kind Providence made you hear me?"

"You can imagine, padre, my feelings when the thought of that strange warning I had received on the battleship was recalled by my mother's words. I am now a firm believer in mental telepathy. Can you blame me?"

"No," answered Padre Galvez kindly. "The ways of Providence are impenetrable. And now—now in a different way you are experiencing another mystery?"

Again the young man's face flushed, but he did not reply. Perhaps this new psychic feeling could be explained the same way.

CHAPTER V.

BARRINGTON was thoughtful as he bade the padre good night. Later in his room he found himself depressed. Yet he was on the alert as though bracing himself to meet some great pressure.

It had been but a moment that he had held the woman's hands, but the knowledge of her call had come to him instantaneously. His own soul had answered affirmatively as it thrilled in the grip of her appeal.

The mere remembrance of it filled his mind and a dozen times he tried to force his thoughts into other channels, but try as he would he was unsuccessful. Over and over again he asked himself:

"Can I believe? Can any sane man believe?"

Suddenly he heard a voice say: "Open your eyes and believe."

(To be continued next week.)

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