

A ROMANCE OF LAS CHERITAS

BY MRS. LOU V. CHAPIN.

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UNDER the shadow of frowning mountains the mining town of Las Cheritas stretched itself in one long street upon the borders of a deep, swift stream, whose waters were turbid and muddy from the dumpings, dykings and trailings of the sluice. A year ago this turbid stream was as clear as crystal and mirrored only upon its pellucid bosom the red berries of the mountain ash, the campfire of the Indian or the gaunt form of the grizzly who came down from his rocky fastness to slake his thirst in its cool waters.

A party of wandering mountaineers discovered gold in the sands upon the water's edge, and suddenly, as if by magic, a town sprang up of two thousand souls, who toiled all day hidden from the light of the sun down in the ravines or worked at huge windlasses extending over unsightly holes in which they had sunk or were sinking shafts, dragging up by sheer strength of muscle great buckets of dirt from the bowels of the earth.

It was evening in Las Cheritas. The sun kissed the snow-capped summit which towered over the town, let his touch linger for an instant as if in benediction, then vanished, and far up, streaming from behind the mountain, a few rosy rays trembled, then melted into the clear purple of the sky, and the silver horn of the young moon hung in the heavens.

The sounds of the blows of pick and shovel were still, the buckets swung idly upon the ropes and a living stream of men from every country and of every race and type poured down the slopes and through the streets of the town, with the implements of their toil upon their shoulders and their gold pans under their arms. They shouted jests to each other, sang fragments of songs, walked by twos or in groups conversing, or slouched moodily and sullenly toward their cabins.

Smoke curled in pearly gray spirals from the rude chimneys, and soon the fragrance of coffee and fried bacon filled the air.

Upon a hill near a shaft at the side of the trail, one of this rolling array of gold seekers lingered, looking down upon the familiar scene. He sat in a thoughtful attitude, with his shovel and pick at his feet. A magnificent specimen of manhood, he was, fully six feet in height, with a strong, intelligent face, clear dark eyes, and curling hair falling over the collar of his clay stained "jodie." Sitting thus in the waning light, he was a figure in harmony with his surroundings, the mountains behind him, and at his feet the noisy stream, which lashed itself into a yellow white foam, as it fell over a miniature precipice, the basalt of the rocks seeming black by contrast.

His thoughts were evidently pleasing, for he smiled to himself and took no heed of the gathering shadows.

His cabin was half a mile up the slope, away from that babel down below, with its flights and brawls, gin shops and gambling hells, but he did not seem in his usual haste to seek it to-night. "It's been a hard pull," he said



"HELLO! BARB, YOU ARE OUT LATE."

to himself, as if thinking aloud. "A tryin' and a wearin' life, but this is the last of it. I've struck it rich and have sold out before my last turn."

He took a slip of blue paper from his bosom and read it over. "Forty thousand dollars from Guinness and Hoyle for my claim. Ray's schoolin' is done and his prospects are good. Thank God I've done well by the kid. An' he's twenty-five come this month. I'll go back to the states an' marry Agnes, an' settle down on the farm."

The sound of approaching hoofs disturbed his reverie, and as he stooped to gather up his tools a girl of seventeen, riding astride a ragged clay-colored cayuse, came in sight. She would have been a ludicrous spectacle to eyes accustomed to the conventional equestrienne; but to Capt. George, who approached her with a hearty greeting, there was nothing improper in her mode of riding or in her dress, which consisted of a coarse blue blouse, and a skirt of the same material reaching a little below the knee, bound at the slender waist with a bright Mexican scarf in which were seen the handles of a pair of pistols. Leggings and moccasins of untanned leather were upon her feet and a gray sombrero covered her head. In spite of her unorthodox dress, the girl was strikingly handsome, with chestnut brown hair, clear blue eyes, a red mouth and a firmly molded chin. There was an air of dignity and resolution about her, and fearlessness in her gaze, which at once challenged admiration and respect.

"Hello, Barb, you are out late," said Capt. George, approaching the girl, who slid lightly from the cayuse and gave it a cut with the switch she held in her hand. The shaggy little beast bounded away up the trail, nothing loth, for he knew himself to be near home.

"I've bin down the valley for medicine for pap. Am just gettin' home," she answered, and although she spoke the rude vernacular of the region, there was a certain refinement in her tones.

"Barb," as she was called by the entire camp, was the daughter of Sandy Ellis, one of the better class of miners, who, in his young days in Scotland, had been the master of a village school. He married a pretty English girl when he met upon a summer journey in Derbyshire, and lured by stories of fortune to be made in the transatlantic world, sought the western gold mines by the quickest road to wealth. His delicate wife soon succumbed to the hardships of frontier life, and left him with a child of seven, some ten years before our story opens.

Barb had picked up some education and had inherited refined tastes from her mother, and as she grew older was a comfort to her lonely father, who guarded her with jealous care from the rough associations of the various mining camps to which he wandered in search of wealth.

Capt. George and Ellis were chums, drawn together by mutual tastes and mutual dislike of the vicious life of a miners' camp. Their cabins were near each other whenever their rude home had happened to be. A year ago they had come together to share in the toils and triumphs of Las Cheritas. Sandy's toil and triumphs, however, would soon be over, for even the healing air of the mountains had no power to stay the progress of consumption, brought on by a winter of severe privation, and it was plain to Barb that she would soon be fatherless, as well as motherless.

With the proverbial hopefulness which is a phase of his malady, Sandy was confident of his recovery, and Capt. George seemed to share his belief. Barb was not deceived as to the truth, and as she rode slowly along this particular evening she thought of her future with sad forebodings. "Come, set down here, Barb, I want to talk to ye." The girl's face flushed to the roots of her brown hair, but she refused to take the seat upon the boulder to which George motioned her.

"George, pap is waitin' for me."

"Well, let him wait. Ye're my girl as much as pap's. Come, I want to talk to yer. And mind ye, don't tell yer pap what I say, not for two or three days at least."

The girl's blue eyes sought the ground and the blush deepened, for her heart throbbled painfully under the coarse blouse

(To be Continued.)

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