

## CHAPTER VIII

### THE STORY BY THE DESERT WELL

**D**ON DIEGO marvelled much at the briskness of the plans for a season of hunting ere his troublesome charge was well able to see out of both eyes. But on being told that the range might be wide, he laid in a goodly stock of quills and parchment, for every league of the land would bring new things to his knowledge.

These records were to be entitled "Relaciones of the New and Wondrous Land of the Indian's Island" and in those Relaciones the accounts of Padre Vicente were to loom large. Among the pagan people his war against the false gods had been ruthless. Maestro Diego was destined to hear more of the padres method than he dared hope in the earlier days.

José, the Indian of the North whose Te-hua name was Khen-zah, went with them — also his wife — the only woman, for without her the man would not go in willingness. Two only were the members added by Don Ruy to the cavalcade — one a stalwart fellow of many scars named Juan Gonzalvo who had known service with Pizarro in the land of gold — had lost all his coin in an unlucky game, and challenged the young stranger from Seville for the loan of a stake to gamble with and win back his losses. He looked good for three men in a fight. Instead of helping him in a game, Don Ruy invited him on the hunting trip!

The other addition was as different as might be

from the toughened, gambling conquistador — a mere lad, who brought a letter from the hand of the Viceroy as a testimonial that the lad was a good scribe if it so happened that his sanctity the padre — or his Excellency Don Ruy, should need such an addition in the new lands where their hunting camps were to be. The boy was poor but for the learning given him by the priests,— his knowledge was of little save the knowledge of books. But his willingness to learn was great, and he would prove of use as a clerk or page as might be.

Padre Vicente was not present, and the cavalcade was already two days on the trail, but Don Ruy read the letter, and looked the lad over.

“Your name is —”

“Manuel Lenares — and called ‘Chico’ because I am not yet so tall as I may be.”

“It should be Manuella because you look not yet so manlike as you may be,” declared Ruy Sandoval, — and laughed as the angry color swept the face of the lad. “By our Lady, I’ve known many a dame of high degree would trade several of her virtues for such eyes and lips! Tush — boy! Have no shame to possess them since they will wear out in their own time! I can think of no service you could be to me — yet — I have another gentleman of the court with me holding a like office — Name of the Devil: — it would be a fine jest to bestow upon him a helper for the ponderous ‘Relaciones’!” and Don Ruy chuckled at the thought, while the lad stood in sulky embarrassment — willing to work, but not to be laughed at.

He was dressed as might be in the discarded garments of magnificence, well worn and visibly made over to fit his young figure. His cloak of old scarlet,

too large for him, covered a patched shirt and jacket, and reached to his sandel straps of russet leather: — scarce the garb of a page of the Viceregal court, yet above that of the native servant.

“ You are — Spanish ? ”

Again the face of the youth flushed, and he shrugged his shoulders and replaced his velvet cap with its pert cock’s feather.

“ I have more than enough Spanish blood to send me to the Christian rack or stake if they caught me worshipping the pagan gods of my grandmother,” he stated briefly, and plainly had so little hope of winning service that he was about to make his bow and depart in search of the Padre.

But the retort caught Don Ruy, and he held the lad by the shoulder and laughed.

“ Of all good things the saints could send, you are the best,” he decided — “ and by that swagger I’ll be safe to swear your grandsire was of the conquistadores — I thought so! Well Chico: — you are engaged for the service of secretary to Maestro Diego Maria Francisco Brancadori. You work is seven days in the week except when your protector marks a saint’s day in red ink. On that day you will have only prayers to record, on the other days you will assist at many duties concerning a wonderous account of the adventures Don Diego hopes for in the heathen land.”

“ Hopes for: — your Excellency ? ”

“ Hopes for so ardently that our comfort may rest in seeing that he meets with little of disappointment on the trail.”

For one instant the big black eyes of the lad flashed a shy appreciation of Don Ruy’s sober words and merry smile.

“ For it is plain to be seen,” continued that gentle-

man — “that if Don Diego finds nothing to make record of, your own wage will be a sad trial and expense.”

“I understand, your Excellency.”

“You will receive the perquisites of a secretary if you have indeed understanding,” continued Don Ruy, “but if there are no records to chronicle you will get but the pay of a page and no gifts to look for. Does it please you?”

“It is more than a poor lad who owns not even a bedding blanket could have hoped for, señor, and I shall earn the wage of a secretary. That of a page I could earn without leaving the streets and comfort.”

“Oho!” And again the eyes of Don Ruy wandered over the ill garbed figure and tried to fit it to the bit of swagger and confidence. — “I guessed at your grandfather — now I’ll have a turn at you: — Is it a runaway whom I am venturing to enroll in this respectable company of sober citizens?”

“Your Excellency!” the lad hung his head yet watched the excellency out of the corner of his eye, and took heart at the smile he saw — “it is indeed true there are some people I did not call upon to say farewell ere offering my services to you, but it is plain to see I carried away not any one’s wealth in goods and chattals.”

“That is easily to be perceived,” said Don Ruy and this time he did not laugh, for with all his light heart he was too true a gentleman to make sport of poverty such as may come to the best of men. “By our Lady, I’ve a feeling of kinship for you in that you are a runaway indeed — this note mentions the teaching of the priests — I’ll warrant they meant to make a monk of you.”

“If such hopes are with them, they must wait until



"I am born again," decided the lad, and again Don Ruy laughed: — the lad was plainly no putty for the moulding, and there was chance of sport ahead with such a helper to Maestro Diego.

"It will be my charge to see that you are not over much troubled with questions," said his employer, and handed back the letter of commendation. "None need know when you were engaged for this very important work. José over there speaks Spanish as does Ysobel his wife. Tell them you are to have a bed of good quality if it be in the camp — and to take a blanket of my own outfit if other provisions fall short."

A muttered word of thanks was the only reply, and Don Ruy surmised that the boy was made dumb by kindness when he had braced himself for quips and cuffs — knowing as he must — that he was light of build for the road of rough adventure.

"Ho! — Lad of mine!" he called when the youth had gone a few paces — "I trust you understand that you travel with a company of selected virtues? — and that you are a lucky dog to be attached to the most pious and godly tutor ever found for a boy in Spain."

"It is to be called neighbor of these same virtues that I have come begging a bed on the sand when I might have slept at home on a quilt of feathers:" — the lad's tongue had found its use again when there was chance for jest.

"And —"

"Yes: — your Excellency?"

"As to that pagan grandmother of whom you made mention: — her relationship need not be widely tooted through a horn on the journey — yet of all things vital to the honorable Maestro Diego and his "Relaciones," I stand surety that not any one thing will

be given so much good room on paper as the things he learns of the heathen worship of the false gods."

"A nod is as good as a wink to a mule that is blind!" called back the lad in high glee. "Happy am I to have your excellency's permission to hold discourse with him concerning the church accursed lore of our ancestral idols!"

Then he joined José and Ysobel as instructed, and gave the message as to bed and quarters. José said no word in reply, but proceeded to secure blankets, one from the camp of Don Ruy. Ysobel — a Mexican Indian — who had been made Christian by the padre ere she could be included in the company, was building a fire for the evening meal. Seeing that it burned indifferently the new page thrust under the twigs the fine sheet of paper containing the signature of the Viceroy.

Ysobel made an exclamation of protest — but it was too late — it had started the blaze in brave order.

"Your letter — if you should need it — perhaps for the padre!" she said.

"Rest you easy, Nurse," said the lad and stretched himself to watch the supper cooked. "I have no further needs in life but supper and a bed, — see to it that José makes it near you own! I am in the employ of Don Ruy Sandoval for a period indefinite. And he has promised — laugh not out loud Ysobel! — that he will see to it I am not questioned as to whence or why I came to seek service under his banner! — even the holy father is set aside by that promise — I tell you that laughter is not to be allowed! If you let him see that you laugh, I will beat you when we are alone, Ysobel — I will though you have found a dozen husbands to guard you!"

Don Ruy did see the laughter of the woman, and

was well pleased that the lad could win smiles from all classes,— such a one would lighten weary journeys.

He felt that he had done well by Maestro Diego. Plainly the quick wit of the lad betokened good blood, let him prate ever so surely on his heathen grandmother!

Don Diego felt much flattered at the consideration shown by Don Ruy for the “Relaciones”—in fact he had so pleased an interest in the really clever young pen-man that the Padre took little heed of the boy—he was of as much account as a pet puppy in the expedition—but if the would-be historian needed a secretary—or fancied he did,—the lad would be less trouble than an older man if circumstances should arise to make trouble of any sort.

So it chanced that Juan Gonzalvo and Manuel Lenares, called Chico, were the only two included in the company who had not been confessed and enrolled by Padre Vicente himself.

It was the magic time of the year, when new leaves open to the sun, and the moon, even in the bare desert stretches of the land, brought dreams of Castile to more than one of the adventurers.

“Good Father,” said Don Ruy with feigned complaint, “Think you not that your rigid rules for the journey might have stopped short of hopeless celibacy for all of us?—Why a moon like that and Venus ascendent unless to make love by?”

“The brightness of that same moon saved you nothing of a cracked pate the hour of fortune when we first met,” observed Padre Vicente drily.—“Maids or matrons on the journey would have caused broken heads in the desert as handily as in the city streets.”

“By the faith—your words are of wisdom and

much to be valued by his highness," agreed Don Diego. "Make note of that thought for the Relaciones Chico, my son. This pious quest may be a discipline of most high import to all of us. Wifeless should we ride as rode the crusaders of an older day."

"Tum-a-tum-tum!" Don Ruy trolled a fragment of love melody, and laughed:—"I have no fancy for your penances. Must we all go without sweethearts because you two have elected to be bachelors for the saving of souls? Think you the Indian maids will clamor for such salvation? I lay you a wager, good father, that I win as many converts with love songs and a strip of moonlight, as do you both with bell and book!"

Around the camp fires of the nights strange tales were told—and strange traits of character unconsciously given to the light, and to all the far seeing Padre gave note;—in emergencies it is ever well to know one's resources.

José the Te-hua slave—caught first by the Navahu—traded to the Apaches—thence to neighbors of the south—after years of exile, was the one who had but few words. All the queries of the adventurers as to gold in the north gained little from him—only he remembered that fine yellow grains were in some streams, and it was said that other yellow metal was in secret places, but he did not profess to be a knower of High Things—and it was half a life time since his eyes had rested on his own people.

He was a silent man whose words were in the main for his Ysobel and the boy secretary. But the gold nugget worn smooth in the pocket of Padre Vicente was as a charm to find its parent stock in all good time! Men were with them who knew minerals in

other lands! — It would go hard but that it should be found!

He willingly let the nugget pass from hand to hand: — it was restful as sleep to make the trail seem short. To Don Ruy he had told somewhat of its finding, and the story in full was promised some day to the cavalcade.

And at Ah-ko where they rested — they had not halted at hostile Ci-bo-la! — At Ah-ko where the great pool on the high mesa made glad their eyes, and the chiefs came to pay ceremonial visits, and the men felt they were nearing the end; — there, at the urging of Don Ruy who deemed it worthy of the “Relaciones” — there was told the story of the bit of gold, the Symbol of the Sun, as it had been told to Padre Vicente years before.

“Yes — I did mean to tell you of the finding of it,” he announced amiably. “I have listened to all your discourses and romances on the journey — and good ones there were among them! But mine would not have been good to tell when seeking recruits, it might have lessened their ardor — for a reason you will shortly preceive!”

“I plainly preceive already that the good father has saved us thus far from a fright!” decided Don Ruy.

“Since a man lived through it you can perhaps endure the telling of it — even here in the half darkness,” said the priest, and noted that Don Diego was sharpening a pen, and Chico taking an ink horn from his pocket. The journal of the good gentleman had grown to be one of the joyful things of the journey, and the more gay adventurers gave him some wondrous tales to include.

“It is not a pretty tale, but it may teach you somewhat of these brown people of the stone houses — and some of the meaning back of their soft smiles! It is not a new tale of to-day: — it goes back to the time when the vessels of Narvaez went to the bottom and a few men found their way westward to Mexico.”

“De Vaca and his men?” said Don Diego. But the priest shook his head.

“Earlier than that.”

“Earlier? Holy Father: — how could that be when no others —”

“Pardon me: — you are about to say no others escaped, are you not? Have you forgotten De Vaca’s own statement as to two other men who went ashore before the sinking of the vessels, and who were never heard of again?”

“I have heard of it with great special interest,” announced Don Ruy — “heard it in the monastery on the island of Rhodes where the white man you speak of (for one of the lost ones was a negro) had as a boy been trained in godly ways by the Knights of St. John. There the good fathers also educated me as might be and tried with all zeal to make a monk of me! Ever before my mind was held the evil end of the other youth who fled from the consecrated robe, — for he had made a scandal for a pretty nun ere he became a free lance and joined hands with Solyman the Magnificent against Christendom, — oh — many and long were the discourses I had to listen to of that heretic adventurer! He was a Greek of a devout and exalted Christian family, and his name was Don Theodore.”

Juan Gonzalvo — called Capitan Gonzalvo in favor of his wide experience and wise management of



camp, had been resting idly on the sands, but sat up, alert at that name.

“Holy name of God:—” and his words were low and keen as though bitten off between his teeth—“is he then alive? Good Father—was it he? and is he still alive?”

While one might count ten, Padre Vicente looked in silence at the tense, eager face of his questioner, and the others stared also, and felt that a spark had touched powder there.

“Yes:—it is true. It was that man,” said the priest at last. “But why do you, my son, wake up at the name? May it be that the Greek was dear to you?”

“He should be dear should I find him, or any of his blood!” But the voice of the careless adventurer was changed and was not nice to hear. “All the gold the new land could give me would I barter but to look on the face of Don Teo, the renegade Greek!”

“But not in friendship?”

Juan Gonzalvo laughed, and Don Diego crossed himself at that laugh,—it had the mockery of hell in it, and the priest turned and gave the heretofore careless fellow a keener attention than had previously occurred to him. By so little a thing as a laugh had the adventurer lifted himself from the level where he had been idly assigned.

“You will not look on his face in this world, my son,” said the priest, “and enmities should cease at the grave. The man is dead. You could have been but a child when he left Spain, what evil could have given him your hate?”

“My father was one of the Christian slaves chained

by him to the oars of Solyman the infidel Turk! Long days and horrible nights was he witness to the lives of Solyman the magnificent, and Don Teodore the fortunate. When the end came,— when the magnificent patron began to set spies on his favorite lady of the harem, the tricky Greek escaped one dark night, and brought up in Barcelona as an escaped slave of the Turk, pretending he had eluded the swords of the oppressor after dreadful days of bondage.”

“ I remember that time,” said Don Diego. “ He was entertained by the nobles, and plied with questions, and was offered a good office in the next crusade against the unsanctified infidels.”

“ So it was told to me,” said Juan Gonzalvo — “ told by a man whose every scar spoke of the Greek wolf! I was told of them as other children are told the stories of the blessed saints. My first toy sword was dedicated to the cutting down of that thrice accursed infidel and all his blood. God: — God: — how mad I was when I was told the savages of the new world had done me wrong by sending him to hell before I could even spell his name for curses! ”

“ My son! You are doing murder in your heart! ” and Padre Vicente held up the crucifix with trembling hand.

“ That I am! ” agreed Gonzalvo and laughed, and laid himself down again to rest on his saddle.— “ Does it call for penance to kill a venemous thing? ”

“ A human soul! ” admonished the priest.

“ Then he came by such soul later in life than his record shows trace of! ” declared Juan Gonzalvo, and this time the priest was silent.

“ In truth, report does stand by our friend in that,” agreed Don Diego. “ He lived as a Turk among the Turkish pirates, and was never so much a Chris-

tian as are those who serve as devils, in the flames of the pit. To slay the infidel is not to slay a soul, good father,— or — if you are of that mind,” he added with an attempt at lightness which sat ill on him — so stiff it was as he eyed the still priest warily,—“ if you are of that mind, we can never grow dull for argument in the desert marches. In the Holy Office godly men of the Faith work daily and nightly on that question even now in Christian Spain.”

The priest shuddered, and fingered his beads. Well they knew in those days the “question” and “Holy office” in Christian Spain. The rack loomed large enough to cast its shadow even to the new found shores at the other side of the world!

And plainly he read also that two otherwise genial gentlemen of the cavalcade were equipped well for all fanatic labor where Holy Cross or personal hates were to be defended. It is well to know one’s comrades, and the subject of the Greek had opened doors of strange revelation to him.

“The mind which is of God and of the Holy Mother Church is the mind for the judgments of souls,” said Padre Vicente after a silence. “We may thank the saints that we are not called on to condemn utterly any of God’s children.”

“But what of the Devil’s?” asked Don Diego plainly not satisfied with the evasive reply where he had least expected it. “What of the children of the darkness and the Evil One?”

Padre Vicente, of the wild tribes, looked around the group and smiled. Scarce a man of them without at least one lost life to his record — and more than one with murders enough on his list to have won him sainthood if all had been done for the Faith: — which they were not! Back of them crouched dusky

Indians of the village, watching with eager yet apparently kindly interest, this after supper talk of the strange white men of the iron and the beasts, who had come again to their land. The priest made a cigarro — then another one, lit both and passed the first made to the oldest chief — the Ruler of the Indian group. The Indian accepted it with a breath of prayer on the hand of the reverend father, and the latter sent out smoke in a white cloud ere speaking.

“Every brown skin here is a worshipper of false gods, and is therefore a son of Beelzebub — yet to slaughter them for that won no favors for the last Capitan-General who led an army across this land,” he remarked, “and mine must not be the task to judge of their infidelity to the Saints or to Christ the Son who has not yet spoken to them!” The words were uttered with an air of finality. Plainly he did not mean to encourage blood lust unless necessary to the work in hand. Don Diego sulkily made the sign of the cross at the Name, and Don Ruy noted that the good father was good on the parry — and if he could use a blade as he did words, he would be a rare fencer for sport. One could clang steel all day, and no one be the bearer of a scratch!

“Since the illustrious and much sought for Greek is without doubt serving his master as a flame in hell, it would add sweetness to a fair night if you would tell us how he fared at the hands of his brown brothers,” suggested Don Ruy — “and how the Devil found his own at last. These others will be much entertained to hear what share he had in the finding of the gold. Strange it is that I never thought to ask the name of the man — or you to tell it!”

The priest hesitated ever so slightly. Was he of

two minds how much to tell these over eager adventurers? Especially that one of the curses! But the truth, as he had told Don Ruy in part, was an easier thing to maintain, and keep memory of, than a fiction dressed up for the new man. And the man was watching him with compelling eyes, and the boy Chico, with eyes agog, was also alert for his endless notes.

“Yes, he had to do with the gold — much!” he said at last. “He was the only white man who had been told the secret of it.”

“Ah-la-la!” murmured Don Ruy, plainly suggesting that such evidence would be the better for a trusty witness.— Padre Vicente heard him, and puffed his cigarro, and half closed his eyes in his strange patient, pale smile.

“But it is true for all that!” he insisted. “And of all places we have crossed since Culiacan was left behind us, none seems more fitting than this for the telling of his story.”

His eyes glanced over the men circled above the great pool. The stars were making little points of light in the rock bound water. Far below in the desert a coyote called to his intimates. Indians loitered at the edge of the circle. And at the rim of of the mesa, and high places of the natural fortress, armed sentinels paced; — dusk figures against the far sky. It was truly a place made for tales of adventure.

“Whatever evil your much hated Greek was guilty of, there is one question to ask: — in monk’s cell, or in the battles for the wrong — left he the record of a coward?”

“No,” acknowledged Don Diego — “but his zeal was damnable in all things.”

“ I ask because various things which he endured could scarcely be understood if you put him in the list of the weak or the incapable.”

“ Often the strength of the Evil One is a stupendous force for his chosen people,” agreed Don Diego. “ That is widely known in Europe to-day when Paracelsus with infernal magic of the mind makes cures which belong by every right to the saints alone! ”

“ And the people are truly cured of their ills — truly healed? ”

“ Their bodies are truly healed for the life that is temporal, but each soul is doomed for the life that is eternal. No Christian doubts that the mental magic of the physician is donated by Beelzebub whose tool he is.”

“ He was a student of exceeding depth,” — agreed Padre Vicente — “ and it may be he has found magic forbidden to man. But the Greek laid claim to no such power as that, however much it is said that the devil loved him! He had only a strong body, and the dislike to see it cut to pieces for a heathen holiday.”

“ De Soto, it is said, found a dirk of his when he crossed the land of Apalache years later, seeking empire. But the tribes could or would tell nothing of the lost Greek and the negro slave. The latter was killed by the people called Natchez, and the Greek, who had been among many things: — a sailor, escaped by the water, leaving no trail — not even the trail made by a white skin in a land of dusk people.

“ From the Turks he had learned a trick of using stain of barks and herbs. His hair was of brown, but the eyebrows and lashes were heavy and dark. After using such concoction, a mirror of clear water



showed him no trace of himself except the eyes — they were blue beyond hope, but the heavy lashes were a help and a shadow.

“With stolen arms of bow, hatchet, and a flint knife, the man went north — wading the river edge at night, and hiding by day until the land of the Natchez was left behind. A strong river came from the west — and an old canoe gave him hope of finding New Spain by the water course. That journey was a tedious thing of night prowlings, hidings, and, sometimes starvings. Then the end of solitude came, and he was captured by heathen rangers.

They were a large company and were travelling west. Later he learned they were a war company and in a fight his master and most of the others were killed. At the rejoicing of the victors, he sang louder, and danced more wildly than all the others, so they did not kill him. He was traded to other Indians further west for a painted robe and some clay pots. This last move brought him to the villages of the stream, named later by Coronado the Rio Grande, but called by the Indians another name, the Pō-sōn-gé.”

“The very villages where we are to go?” demanded Don Ruy.

“Possibly some of the same,” said the priest. “How many of you remember the great comet of 1528?”

Several did, and all remembered the dread and horror it spread in Western Europe.

“Think you then what that same threat in the sky must have been to these wild people who seek magic ever from the stars and even the clouds. It was a threat and it called for some sacrifice propitiating the angry gods.”

“Sacrifice? Do these infidels then practise such abominations?” asked Don Diego.

“To look at the mild eyes and hear their soft voices of these our guests it is not easy to think it,” agreed Padre Vicente, “but these people are but the northern cousins of the men Cortez conquered—their customs differ only in degree. To both Venus and Mars were human god-offerings made—that day of sacrifice is not so long past, and in that day it was done here.”

“And?”

“And your lucky Greek was the one to be chosen! He was fed well as one would fatten an ox for the knife. He had some knowledge of simple remedies, and in brewing herbs for their sick he had also stolen the opportunity for the further addition to his coat of color. He was to them an Indian of an unknown tribe, yet, since he was to be offered to the gods, he was made the very center of ceremonial dances, and infernal heathenish customs.

“Both men and women enter into certain sacred—or infernal orders, whose ceremonies are only known to those initiate. An inter-tribal connection is kept up in such societies between villages speaking a totally different language,—even though the tribes be at war, there is always a truce for these wild creatures who dance together for some magic, or some prayer to their false gods.”

“And the truce is kept?”

“It would not be possible for a tribe to break truce of their diabolical things of their spirits. At the ceremonies for the sacrifice to the comet god was a girl of another tribe, and when the Greek noted that her desire was not to see him destroyed, he had the first glimpse of hope,—the only other he had was

to remove the stain in some way, and convince them that their gods had made a miracle to save him."

The priest made a gesture towards the great sand drifts at every side of rock wall and column.

"To which of you would it occur, if hiding meant chance of life — to which of you would it occur to go under that sand for days so close to the trail that the women with the water jars would pass you scores of times in a day carrying water from this pool?"

"This pool? — this —" — the eyes of Don Ruy lightened — "this is then that place of the great danger?"

"A man could not hide in the sand like that — nor deceive these wild trailers of animals," decided Don Diego — "and of a certainty it could not be close to the trail!"

"So we would naturally think," decided Padre Vicente. "But the Indian girl was wiser than our wisdom, Señor, for she did aid his escape, and she did hide him there. To get breath, his face was touching a great wall of rock against which another was carelessly laid. The place had been chosen with a knowledge that seemed inspired — for only close to the trail where the sand was like to be disturbed by naked romping children, — only there in all these deserts could he have been hidden from their hunters."

"Here? — in this place?" again said Don Ruy. "Holy father it is a good story — yet sounds a romance fantastic to fit this weird place of the pool and the star shine of the night?"

"By the name of these people, the Queres, and the name of the village Ah-ko, this should be the place of the sacrificial intentions," said the priest. "By the careful account given, this is the pool to which the trail led, and it may even be that the ancient Cacique

to whom, but now, I gave the cigarro, was chief priest of the sacrifice in that day."

"A truly delectable neighbor for a help to pleasant fancy," said Don Ruy and laughed. "If the amiable devil should be moved to sacrifice now, I would be the nearest to his hand — think you he would make ill use of my youth and tenderness?"

"His Sanctity, the padre was indeed wise that no word of this was breathed in the viceregal ears of Mexico," said Don Diego with a testiness not yet subdued over the question of utter damnation for the souls unregenerate. "Piety would carry me far — but no warrant is mine to follow even the Highest where cannibals do wait for unholy sustenance!" and he arose and bowed to Don Ruy.

"Oh — Name of the Devil!" said his noble ward, and laughed and stretched his legs. "I may not be so unholy as your words would suggest. Give not a dog a bad name in the days of his youth!"

And at this the scandalized and pious dignitary multiplied words to make clear how far from such meaning were his devoted intentions. But if wild tribes must be fed ere their souls could be reached, — victims could be found other than the heir of a duchess!

At which outburst Don Ruy suggested that he save his pious breath and devote it to prayers, and to take some of his own medicine by remembrance that soul of king and soul of peasant weighed the same before high God.

"After which devout exhortation from your servant, good father, we again give ear to the tale of that devil's disciple — the Greek Teo," he said, "Did they find him in the sand? And did the merciful dame hide in the sand also? — if so the prison

might not be without hope. Holy Saint Damien! — to think that the man walked these same stony heights — and drank from that pool! ”

“ They never found him in the sand.” The priest ignored the other frivolous comment. “ They never found him anywhere, and a slave from the Navahu people was made a sacrifice in his stead. The strange girl was a Te-hua medicine maid or magic learner of things from the wise men of Ah-ko. Her prayers were very many, and very long, and she made a shrine for prayer on the sand beside the stone wall where he was hidden. Their men set watch on her, she knew it, but not anything did they find but a girl who made her prayers, and gave no heed to their shadowings.

“ When were ended her days of devotion to the false gods — then she ate, and drank, and took the way to her own people; with moderate pace she took that trail north, but when night came, she ran like the wild thing she was, again to the south, crept unseen again into this fortress, and led the rescued man as far to the west as might be until the dawn came. With the coming of the sun, came also a sand storm of great stress, and all trace of their steps were covered, and the medicine maid saw in that a mystic meaning.

“ To Turk and Spaniard the refugee might be only Teo the Greek, a fugitive from all high courts. But to the Indian he was a lost God of the Great Star for whom even the desert winds did duty. When with moistened yucca root he rubbed his hands that the white skin showed, she bent her head to the sand, and was his slave until . . . the end! ”

“ It moves well, and beautifully smooth: — this tale of the outlaw,” agreed Don Ruy — “ but it is that end we are eager for — and the how it was compassed

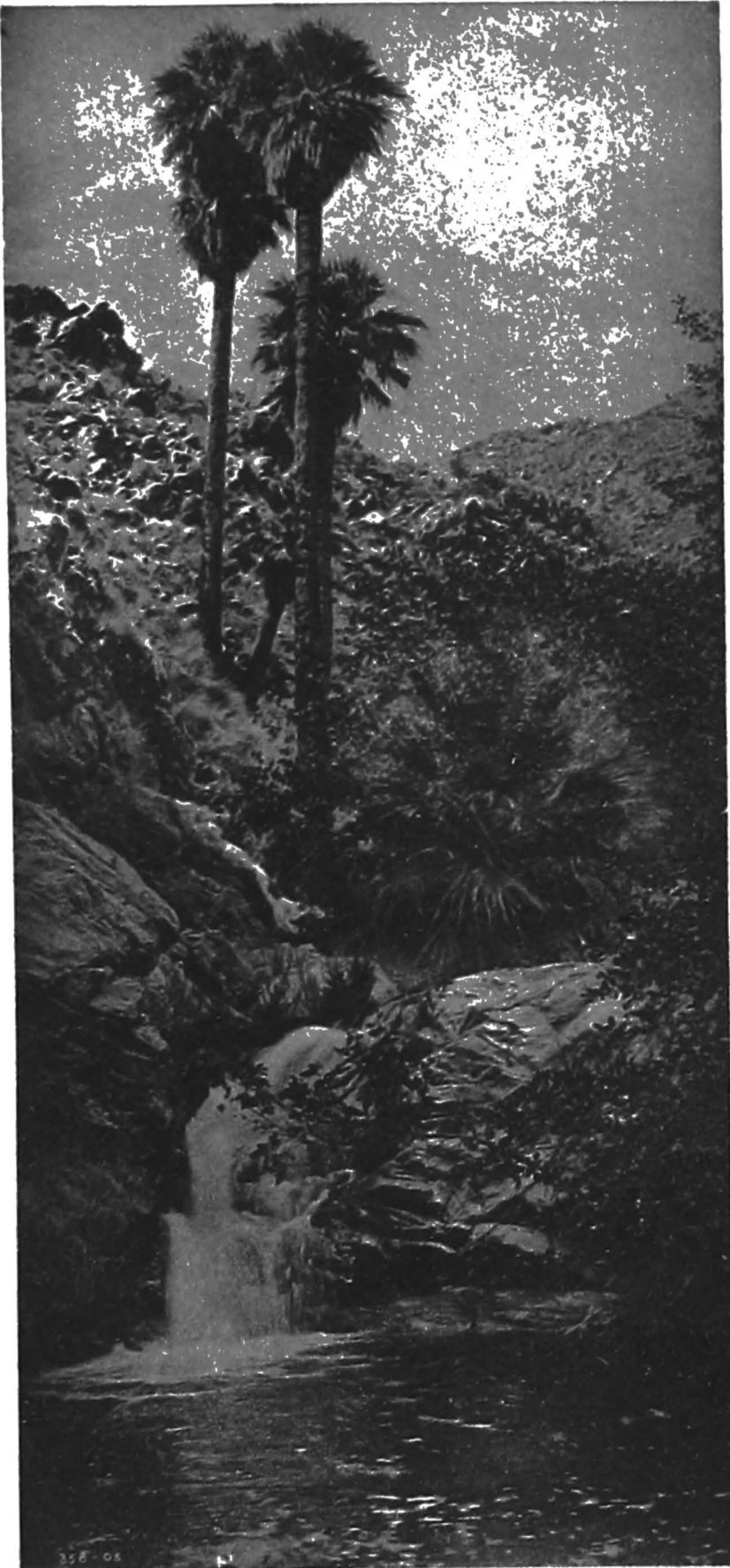
— that she turned slave — or mistress — or both in one, as alas! — has chanced to men ere our day! — was the doom expected from the earliest mention of the pitiful and most devout lady — devout to her devils! But of the end — the end?”

“ The end came to him long after they parted, and for one winter and one summer were their wanderings to the west. Of the Firebrand river deep between rock walls he had heard, and of the ocean far beyond, and of Mexico to the south. To reach the river they crossed dry leagues of desert and lived as other wild things lived. But the river was not a thing for boats or journeys, and they went on beyond it seeking the sea. Strange things and strange lives they passed on the way. His skin had been stained many times and his beard was plucked out as it grew. Enough of Indian words he learned to echo her own tale to the brown savages, and the tale was, that they were medicine people of Te-hua in the land of Pō-sōn-gé, and that they travelled to the shores of the sea for dances and prayers to the gods there. And sometimes food was given them — and some times prayers were sent in their keeping. Thus was their journey, until in the south, in the heart of a desert they found the place of the palms where the fruit was ripe, and the water comes from warm springs, and looks a paradise — but is as a hell when the sand storms come: — and human devils live to the South and by the Sea of Cortez.

“ They knew nothing of that, it was a place for rest, and a place of food, and they rested there because of that, and gathered food for the further journey.

“ All medicine people of the tribes carry on their neck or in a pouch at the belt, some sacred things of





*T*HE PLACE OF THE PALMS



their magic practices, and under the palms, when other amusement was not to be found, it pleased him to see what his brown girl carried hidden even from her master. It took much persuasions, for she felt that evil would happen if it was shown except it be a matter of ceremony. Then she at last took from the pouch, salt from a sacred lake, feather and claw and beak of a yellow bird, a blade of sharpest flint, and — this! ”

He again held the piece of gold that they might see it. Even the Indians leaned forward and looked at it and then eyed the white men and each other in silence. To them it was “medicine” as the priest told the adventurers it had been to the Te-hua girl.

“Your Greek pirate of the good luck went close to madness at the certain fact that for months he had been walking steadily away from the place where this was found. To the girl it was a sacred thing hidden in the earth of her land by the sun — and only to be used for ceremonies. The place where it grew was a special hidden place of prayer offering.”

“Faith! — we all must learn prayers enough to get our share! — if prayer will do the work!” said Don Ruy.—“Chico, it means that you get an Indian primer,— and that you find for me a brown enchantress. His reverence will grant us all a special indulgence for hours of the schooling!”

Señor Don Brancadori sat up very straight and shook his head at the priest: — so well assured was he that enough liberties would be taken without the indulgences of holy church. Moreover it was not well to put the deviltries of camp in the mind of so good a lad as Chico.

“And the girl gave to him the gold and told him its hiding place?” he asked.

“We may say she gave it — thought in truth she declared it could not be given — it could only be made a barter of for other medicine, but it must be strong medicine. The blade of flint was to guard her magic symbols if need be, and the man, her master, saw in that moment that the mind he had to deal with in this matter was an Indian mind, in which there is not reason. And to find a “medicine” potent for charms was a task set for a man in the place of the palms.”

“Then a forgotten thing came into his mind. It had been a vow made to an enticing creature of San Lucar. She was also devout as a young nun. The vow was of a return — and no doubt of other meetings. The end of it was that she gave him a rosary — (his first captors coveted that and took care of it). But also they ate together of fruit, and as both ladies and gallants do strange things at strange times, the lady divided the seeds, and counted them seeking a lucky number or some such freakish quest. And by the rosary, and by his mother, she made him swear that when he had found fortune and a plantation in the new world, he would plant with his own hands the seeds there, and send for the lady to come by ship as chatelaine! Failing the plantation, he was to return, and her own relatives would find on land or sea an office fit for his talents: — only he was to faithfully guard the seed of the fruit eaten in a happy hour, and her prayers would meet his own across the waters.

“It may be that women with prayers for him had not been plentiful — whatever the vow was it was made and sealed with the prayer of the lady. When the savages took her rosary they gave no heed to some brown seeds in a leather pouch — no more of

them than you could count on your fingers! A man alone for long in a wilderness gives meaning to things he would not remember at happier times. And the training of the Holy Church returns to even the most hardened men in their hours of stress! So it was that the prayer of the willing dame kept him company, as he looked on the seeds. They had become his rosary — and were the last evidence of the nightly prayers promised by the lady.

Thus: — because of their smallness had they been unnoted of his several captors. Having slipped between the lining and the cover of the pouch he had ceased to remember them after the Indian maid lessened his loneliness. But he went searching for them now — even one peach seed was still with them — and some grains of the bearded wheat — that by a special grace had fallen into a pocket on ship board while handling grains, and as a jest on himself he had added it to the others for the plantation to be made for the waiting dame.

“He could truly say they were “medicine” given with prayers. But with forgetfulness of truth, he also added much as to their divine origin — and the wondrous power they held.

“Gladly the Indian girl let go the gold for the unknown seeds! She further signified that now she could know always that he was a God, for the gift of the seeds fitted some myth of her own land — something of one of their false gods who brought seeds and fruits and great good to the people.

“In that way was made the exchange of medicine for medicine beside some pool by the palms, and well it was it was made that day, else never would we have this golden guide! For: — it fell out that a day later as he was hunting to the south, he was

surrounded and taken prisoner by the savages who range by the inland sea of California. The gold had a hole as you see, he pulled hair from his head, tied the nugget in the braid, and thus hid it for the next two years of his life. The girl he never again heard of. She would die of a certainty alone in the desert.

“A missionary of our order found the man in the wilderness. They were exiles, the two for the length of a winter, and the Greek listened to the tales of the lost fleet on which Don Teo sought the new world, and also of the royal order for his arrest following on the next ship. For a prisoner of Solyman the Magnificent had escaped from the galleys of the Turk, and wild tales were told of princes of the North who gave aid to the traffic in Christian slaves. Don Teo was by all means to be taken back to Spain that the Holy Office learn through him the names and numbers of the offenders!”

“Good it is to hear that the varlet was not let sleep sound all the night!” decided Don Ruy.

“It appears there were many nights when sleep kept from him — to judge by his confessions!” said the priest. But to go into deeper hell while he was yet alive did not march with his wishes, and while he half inclined to the desert again, that he might die quietly there as any other starved wild thing does die: — a thing came which he had not thought: — the padre died of a serpent’s sting, and he, Teo the Greek, was alone, and apart from the world again!

“It was the gown for which the savages had reverence — and he took the consecrated robe from the dead padre and wore it — he had been driven by misfortune back to Holy Church!

“He lived under the name of the padre as a priest in holy orders. His reports to his superior were well



counterfeited as the writing of the man he had buried. He held that mission as the extreme outpost for three years. He died there of a fever, but not until I had found him, and confessed him. The gold and the tale of his wanderings he gave to me. Much of it he told me more than once, for when men are exiles as he was for those several years, the things of the old life loom up big with significance. He felt that he was the *finder of the way*, and that mayhaps, Mother Church, so long forgotten by him, would be the richer that he had lived. Masses were said for the girl dead in the desert. She had saved him, and for a little while of life — he had given her love!”

“He may have made a most righteous end — since it was no longer in his power to do evil!” commented Don Ruy — “But your pirate priest would never have let go the nugget for masses if the breath of life had kept him company.”

“Who knows! — the high God does not give us to see in the heart of the other man,” said Padre Vicente — “In the years of his trial he was made to feel his sins against Holy Church — and when the girl died in the desert, another life died with her. Even men of sin do give thought to such matters.”

But Juan Gonzalvo who hated him, swore at the ill luck of his escape by death, and no one felt any pity for that first white pilgrim across the Indian lands. All of them however gave speech of praise to the priest’s telling of the story. Don Ruy gave him leave to tell romances in future rather than preach sermons.

The men were vastly interested to learn at last the exact region of their destination — and that the province where the yellow metal had been hidden by the

sun was but a matter now of a few days more of journeying — since the people of Ah-ko had brother Queres in settlements adjoining the settlements of the Te-huas.

So, seeing that the guard was good, and that each arquebus was near, and in readiness if need be for dusky visitors, the company fell asleep well content. Only Don Ruy strolled over the path through the sand and tried to fancy how the girl and the Greek had managed the hiding there. A little of the story had been told him in the monastery when the great plan had been made, but no names were given, and the telling of it this night had been a very different matter — he had so lately crossed the desert where those two refugees had wandered, that the story had now a life unknown before. Even the sand billows and the rock walls of the mesa spoke as with tongues. The mate to this wonderful Ah-ko could not, he thought, be in the world any where, and the romance of the young priestess and the Greek adventurer fitted the place well and he felt that the priest of the wild places had chosen rightly in keeping the story until they had climbed to this place where the story of the gold had its beginning.

As he retraced his steps, they took him past the sleeping place of José and his wife of Mexico. Beside them was spread the blankets of Chico, but the lad was not there,— he was standing apart, at the edge of the sheer cliff, looking out over the desert reaches where the sand was blue grey in the star light.

“Hollo!”— said Don Ruy and halted in surprise, “do you select sentry duty when you might sleep soft on the sand? Must I send you another blanket to woo you to a bed?”

“Your Excellency has been most generous in the

matter of the blanket — one has been enough to keep record of your kindly heart.”

“Then why not enjoy your sleep as a hearty lad should? Has this place of wonder bewitched you — or has the story of the Greek and the gold stirred you into ambitions beyond repose?”

The lad might have retorted by reminding Don Ruy that he also was abroad while his company slept, — usually a glib pertness would have answered his employer, but the answer came not readily, and when it did, — his excellency saw in a surprised moment that the boy was not such a child as the careless company fancied him.

“I have thought nothing of the Greek — and little of the gold,” he said. “But the woman who followed the love and the man across the deserts — and who died alone somewhere in the sands like a starved dog — of her I was thinking! All the magic she had learned could not save her from hell when that one man came in her path!”

“But — you are only a lad and may not understand these things,” — said Don Ruy — “The girl may have died like that, it is true, but the hell in the life she perhaps never got glimpse of, — since she loved the man!”

“But if the dead do know, would not a sort of hell be hers when she learned she had given the magic medicine of her God for the idle gift — bestowed by another mistress?”

Then the lad marched to his blankets and wrapped himself in them, leaving Don Ruy the question to ponder.