We'll only be reading the first 2 chapters of this book.

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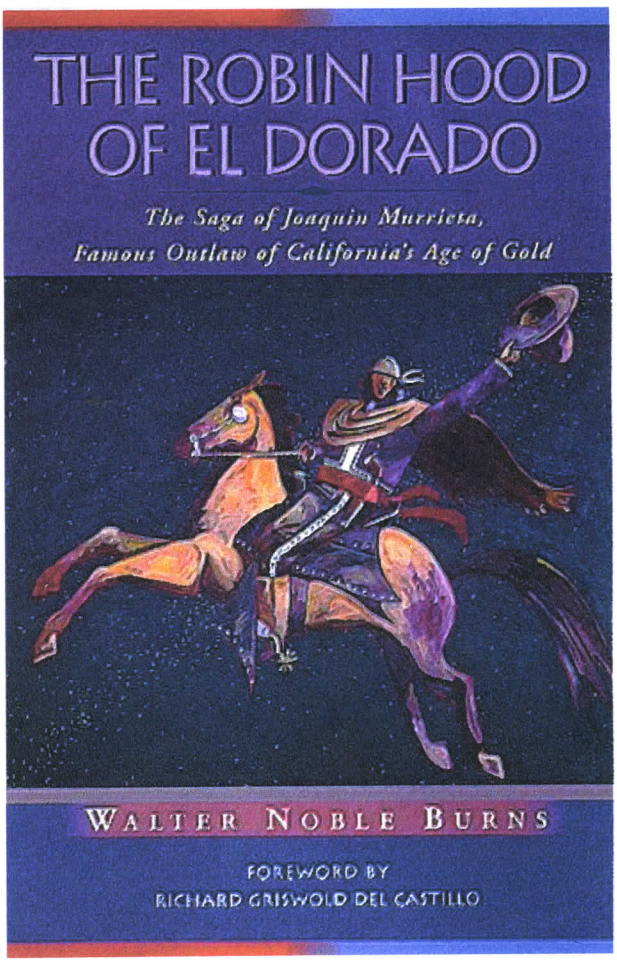

You are welcome to skip the first five pages of Chapter One.

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THE ROBIN HOOD OF EL DORADO

CHAPTER I.

JUST ANOTHER MEXICAN.

THE old man in overalls and checked cotton shirt sitting in a rocking chair on the front porch fanned himself with his battered straw hat and looked out over the little valley. The high hills were dark with pine and live oak and here and there on their lower benches were four or five farm houses gray with weather and half hidden among orchard trees and roses and oleanders in full bloom. Wood's Creek winding through a level flat sang a pleasant tune among willows and alders.

"This is all that's left of Saw Mill Flat," said the old timer waving his straw hat at the landscape. "Back in the early fifties when these California hills was swarmin' with gold hunters, it was a roarin' camp with more'n a thousand people and a main street a quarter of a mile long lined with saloons and gamblin' houses. They say the fellers that come in the first rush picked up gold like hickory nuts along Wood's Creek and later on a miner was out o' luck who couldn't wash out $300 and $400 a day in gold dust. I often wonder what become of all that gold. My dad was one o' them miners, but he died pore and all he left was this here two-by-four farm. The rest o' the people in Saw Mill Flat—there ain't no more'n fifteen or twenty—ain't got no more'n me. And I reckon you'll find it that a-way all up and down the Mother Lode. The Forty-Niners dipped up a fortune casual-like from some nameless creek in a tin washpan but their children have had to scratch mighty hard for a livin'.

"There was a couple o' saw-mills here in the early days and that's how come the camp got its name. But Saw Mill Flat ain't heard the whine of a buzz-saw for nigh on seventy years. The camp wasn't as tough as Sonora a mile or so off over that ridge yonder or as wild and woolly as Columbia four miles up that other way but it was a hard town with the saloons and gamblin' games wide open day and night and the fiddles goin' in the fandango house from dark till sun-up. Judgin' by the old tales, you might think them miners of early times worked all day up to their hips in muck and water and then drank whiskey and danced with Mexican gals and bucked the tiger all night. The camp didn't have a man for breakfast every mornin' but there was considerable cuttin' and shootin' and killin' and a hangin' now and then. You hear a lot about the honesty in the mines in them gold rush days and how the miners used to leave their gold dust layin' around in their cabins in kettles and tin cans and buckskin sacks. Well, maybe that was true but the honesty of Saw Mill Flat wouldn't 'a' stood no sech test and the feller who took them kind of chances was a fool. Thieves was thick as fleas, and with a bottle of whiskey worth its weight in gold, there was plenty o' low-down cusses who'd slit your throat for the price of a dram. Hardly a night passed some sluice boxes wasn't robbed.

"I was born in Saw Mill Flat and never was more'n sixty miles away from it in my life. But I can't remember the old wild days. All I know about 'em is what my father and mother and the old timers 've told me. You see I'm only seventy-five years old. Like most of the old people of these parts I'm what you call a second generation Forty-Niner. But if I never seen the town when it was alive, I seen it die. I ain't given to sentiment, bein' raised rough, but I'm here to tell you, stranger, it ain't pretty to see a town die. I felt like a mourner at a fun-

eral standin' by an open grave listenin' to the clods thumpin' down on the coffin. By the time I was old enough to remember anything, the gold here petered out, the miners struck out for new diggin's and the saloonkeepers and gamblers and Mexican dance gals closed up shop and hit the out-trail. The town was left lifeless all of a sudden and seemed like it might 'a' died with its boots on with a bullet between the eyes. But its corpse was still here with no undertaker to bury it and, as the years went by, it crumbled into dust before my eyes. Some of the buildings was tore down for the lumber; others fell into wrack and ruin and almost before I knowed it, all was gone and where they'd stood was only chaparral and thickets of young pine.

"When I was a lad, the old place seemed like it was haunted. When I looked into the windows, splashed over with rain and dirt, I kinder thought I might see ghosts clinkin' glasses at the old bars or whirlin' round the dusty floor of the old fandango house. That palatial dancin' establishment, made out o' pine boards with a plank stretched across a couple o' barrels for a bar, stood right out yonder where that jackrabbit is scratching hisself with his off-hind foot and where you see that robin wrastlin' with a worm, Joaquin Murrieta * dealt monte in Ed. Parson's saloon. Nowadays as I set here on the front porch and look out over the empty valley, I sometimes

* There is a great diversity of opinion as to the correct spelling of the famous outlaw's name. It has been spelled Murieta, Murrieta, Murietta, Murrietta and Muriete. Ridge in his life of the bandit spells it Murieta. Bancroft spells it the same way. This spelling is used by the U. S. Congressional Library at Washington in cataloguing the name and by the California State Library at Sacramento. As the name of a town in Southern California the U. S. Post Office authorities have adopted Murietta. Ireneo Paz, whose life of the outlaw has been translated from the Spanish by Frances P. Belle, spells it Murrieta. This spelling was pronounced correct by Don Antonio Coronel, once mayor of Los Angeles, who knew the family, and it is the spelling that was used by Rosa, Herminia and Anita Murrieta, who formerly lived in Los Angeles and were the daughters of Joaquin's brother Antonio.

rub my eyes and wonder if the old hell-roarin' gold camp of Saw Mill Flat wasn't just a dream after all."

The old man mentioned Joaquin Murrieta's name casually. A tablet by the red dirt road that winds through the valley corroborates his statement. "Joaquin Murrieta dealt monte here," the tablet reads. So it is here in Saw Mill Flat we first pick up the trail of that famous young outlaw, knightliest of highwaymen, most romantic of cut-throats, who to avenge a tragic personal injury became the most remorseless of killers and wrote his name in letters of blood across California's Age of Gold.

"See that big pine tree over there on the hill across the creek?" remarked the old timer. "Just about there Joaquin Murrieta lived in a little adobe house with his wife Rosita. A grape vine they say Joaquin and Rosita planted used to wind about the trunk o' the tree. It's done gone now but many's the bunch o' grapes I et off it when I was a boy. You can still see some low ridges grown over with weeds where the house used to stand. Them's what's left o' the 'dobe walls melted down to nothin', you might say, by the rains of eighty years. And if you look close you can make out the line of a ditch runnin' past what used to be the front door. That was the *asequia* that watered Joaquin's little vegetable patch."

It is difficult to imagine that this little valley, peaceful and beautiful, brimming with sunshine and filled with the clean smell of pines, was ever the scene of outrage and murder. But here in this cabin on the hillside occurred the tragedy that changed Joaquin Murrieta from a normal young man, living happily with a wife whom he loved and who loved him, into a murderous demon who tracked those who had wronged him to their death with a sustained passion of vengeance that knew no mercy. And the old pine tree that casts its shadow over the ruins

of his home marks the starting point of a career as lurid as a madman's dream.

A handsome young fellow with black eyes and black hair but with a face of ivory pallor such as you might have expected if his hair had been golden and his eyes blue. Of medium height, well set up, athletic. An *hidalgo* touch in his grave dignity, his punctilious politeness and his air of proud reserve. A calm thoughtful countenance that indicated a coolly poised character. Quiet, frank, unpretentious. Honest. Known as a square gambler and a square man. Not averse to a glass of wine. Considered a good dancer. A lively, agreeable companion. Some humor and laughter in him. Even tempered. Never known to have had a fight or a quarrel. A far remove from the traditional adventurer type. Finding his greatest pleasure in quiet domesticity. His interest centered in his wife and his home.

That was the Joaquin Murrieta that Saw Mill Flat knew. All the old timers, who knew him and who disagreed on many of the details of his career, were in unanimous agreement on this estimate of his original character. All declared that in these early years before he turned a corner of the road and by an accident of fate stumbled upon life-wrecking tragedy, there was nothing in his appearance or conduct to suggest even vaguely any dangerous or criminal possibilities. Yet beneath the calm exterior of this every-day young man were slumbering whirlwinds and in the still depths of his commonplace soul volcanoes of passion were smouldering. Doubtless if he had been left in the grooves of ordinary routine, he would have lived a humdrum, blameless life and been forgotten before the first daisies bloomed on his grave. But when a catastrophe of seismic proportions jarred him from his peaceful foundations, this unassuming youth became a devil who rode through blood to his

horse's bridle and sank all scruples of conscience and every kindly impulse in the depths of a frozen heart. One can imagine no stranger or more revolutionary metamorphosis. But with his wild, tempestuous future unguessed, this human hieroglyph, that no one could read, aroused no curiosity and went unregarded by the men who elbowed him on the street or crowded nightly about his monte table. Few knew or cared anything about him. He was a nobody lost in the hurly-burly of the mining camp. To Saw Mill Flat, Joaquin Murrieta was just another Mexican.

Listen now to the quaint tale of the love affairs of Joaquin and Rosita. At the Real de Bayareca between Arispe and Hermosillo in one of the great valleys into which the Sierra Madres divide the state of Sonora in the northwest corner of Mexico, Joaquin Murrieta and Rosita Carmel Feliz were born. Their families were of old pioneer stock and boasted pure Castilian descent though doubtless, as is commonly the case in Mexico, their ancestral lines had been tinctured at one time or another with a drop or two of Yaqui or ancient Aztec blood. The valley had been settled by the Spaniards soon after the Conquest; Cortez had visited it; from it Coronado had set out on his romantic quest for the Seven Cities of Cibola; and it is possible the forebears of Joaquin and Rosita had marched as mail-clad soldiers under the banners of the old Conquistadores. From babyhood, the boy and girl grew up together. They were educated at the convent school, went to mass every morning at the old church in the plaza, danced together at the fandangos. When Joaquin was eighteen and Rosita sixteen, they fell in love. Or perhaps they had been sweethearts all their lives.

Just here, Don Jose Gonzales steps unexpectedly from the wings into the little drama. Don Jose was old and

very rich. His *hacienda* was measured in square miles rather than acres; he owned cattle and horses by the tens of thousands; he lived like a grandee among his servants and retainers and had once been a familiar figure at the court of the Emperor Augustin Iturbide. By chance one morning, Don Jose saw Rosita on her way to church. Very sweet and pretty she looked as she stepped daintily along with her rosary and missal in her hand. Never, thought the old hidalgo, had he seen a girl so beautiful. He had long felt the need of a wife to solace his declining years. But not for him a frumpy old dowager painted and powdered to hide her wrinkles. His wife must be young and comely. Here was the very girl of his dreams ready to his hand. He had but to reach out and pluck her as he might a rose. What mattered it that Don Jose was old enough to be her father? His vast wealth would tilt the scales in his favor. Did not every pretty darling have her price? Were not all women for sale?

When Don Jose opened diplomatic negotiations with Ramon Feliz, Rosita's father, that worthy man was elated at the prospect of such a dazzling alliance. Of course he would arrange the affair at once. He had but to speak to Rosita and that would settle it. Don Jose could rest assured of that. How Rosita felt about it was a matter of no moment. She was very young and needed paternal guidance in the selection of a husband. She was a dutiful daughter and her father's word was her law. So between Papa Ramon and Don Jose, Rosita's future seemed pretty definitely determined.

Ramon Feliz now walked among the clouds. All his life he had been very poor. As a packer, or what might be called less euphemistically a mule skinner, he earned a meager living carrying provisions by mule train to the silver mines in the mountains. He had grown gray driving

mules over the mountain trails, fighting with them, dodging their heels, lashing them, swearing at them. Mules, nothing but mules, as long as he could remember. In the new life opening for him, the hee-haw of nightmare mules would fill his ears no more. Don Jose was no niggard; he would provide handsomely for his father-in-law; and the old mule-skinner dreamed of the happy days when he would loll in the cool patio of his home, gorging himself on costly viands and tossing off bumpers of sparkling wine. The dear God, it seemed, had at last been good to him.

Ramon returned one day from what he supposed was his last trip to the mountains and his farewell forever to those terrible mules. As he entered his home from the street, his mind was in a whirl with the glitter and pomp of the approaching wedding of Rosita and Don Jose. He pictured to himself the crowded church, the bridal procession, the solemn ceremony at the altar. How the people would stare and crane their necks. What a beautiful bride Rosita would be in her shimmering white gown and billowing veil. Walking through the hallway, still under the spell of his happy dream, Ramon stepped out into the patio . . . and saw Rosita in Joaquin's arms!

"*Nombre de Dios!* Rosita! What does this mean? Joaquin, you young scoundrel, how dare you make love to my daughter? Do you not know she is promised in marriage to the great Don Jose Gonzales? Has a beggarly rascal like you the effrontery to aspire to her hand? Out of my house! Begone! Never darken my door again."

That night the thunder of horses' hoofs aroused the dwellers along the valley road from their slumbers. In the moonlight they saw two riders sweeping past at breakneck speed. One was Rosita, the other Joaquin. They were married next morning in Arispe.

For the young lovers, the Camino del Diablo and

Hell's Home Stretch, those tragic roads across the deserts of Arizona and southern California strewn with the bones of so many men and women in the days of the gold rush, became a honeymoon trail. On their journey to the California mines, they stopped frequently here and there for an indefinite length of time to replenish their funds. In Los Angeles, Joaquin worked as a horse trainer with a Mexican *maroma* or circus. At San Juan Bautista and San Jose he dealt monte. On the ranch of the famous Dr. John Marsh in the Mount Diablo country, he was employed as a bronco buster. In Stockton, according to tradition, he opened a store stocked with goods bought on credit at the exorbitant prices of the period and lost money in the venture. Near the mining town of Sonora he panned for gold. He lived for a while at Martinez, where to-day they will show you the site of his cabin, and mined among the gulches of Yankee Hill. Next we find him settled at Saw Mill Flat where he is supposed to have arrived in the spring of 1850. The journey from Mexico must have taken a year or more. When he left his native village, he could not speak a word of English. When he arrived in the California hills, he spoke the language almost without trace of foreign accent.

Rosita was a modest girl for all her roving life with her vaquero-gambler husband. She was, however, no cloistered spirit, no madonna, but a lively little minx, gay, sparkling, bubbling over with happiness; a vital part of the world about her, full of interest in everything in it, reacting with quick sympathy to its joys and sorrows, tears just back of her smiles; a woman of the earth as unaffected as a woodland creature. The vividness of the tropics was in her dark beauty. Her eyes were Mexico. All the languorous charm, mystery, romance, of that ancient Spanish land were in them. In a flowered mantilla with a crimson blossom in her hair, she would have been

such a figure as one might imagine dancing a fandango to the click of castanets or leaning from a latticed balcony to drop a rose to a cavalier strumming a guitar in the moonlight.

Small wonder men stared at her when she went abroad in Saw Mill Flat. Women were not numerous in the camp. Pretty women were rare. But Mexican women were not above suspicion; the camp judged them by the free and easy standards of dance hall wenches. The glances that followed Rosita were for the most part the tributes of clean-minded men to beauty abloom with health. But not all the glances were of that kind. Among the men who jostled one another on Saw Mill Flat's crowded street were many of refinement and scholarly attainments. But there were also bad eggs. The luck of gold rush days was uncertain. It made some men rich overnight. It left others stranded vagabonds. But in the rough mining camps, the lucky and unlucky, the good and bad, dressed alike. A lawyer was hardly to be distinguished from a horse-thief or a preacher from a stage robber. The bartender in a tough dram shop might have been a judge in the East. A musician scraping a fiddle in a fandango house possibly had been a college professor back home. The boarding house waiter or saloon roustabout once might have strutted proudly as a society beau and made love to dainty belles in crinolines and corkscrew curls. It was not easy to read character through a red flannel shirt and patched pants stuffed into heavy boots were a poor clew to a man's past.

But Rosita walked serenely among them all, unmindful alike of admiration of the better sort or the burning glances of drunken satyrs. She was as chaste as a lily. No whisper of scandal had ever touched her. For her there was only one man in the world and that was her husband. Other men meant nothing to her.

Joaquin, Rosita and Frank Wilson, a friend who lived on an adjoining claim, sat in the front room of the Murrieta home—the adobe of three rooms under the old pine tree on the hill. The afternoon was waning. Cool shadows filled the valley. Miners were busy at their long toms along the creek. Saw Mill Flat was quiet, awaiting the night's revelry. The walls of the room were neatly whitewashed; the floor was of clean, hard earth. On a little bracket stood a painted plaster image of the Virgin. Beneath it hung a crucifix. On a table lay Joaquin's bowie knife in a leather sheath. Rosita sat in a corner idly plucking the strings of a guitar. A door at the rear opened into a bedroom. Behind the bedroom was the kitchen.*

"They tell me," remarked Wilson, "those five fellows working the claim next to yours have struck it pretty rich."

"I heard so," replied Joaquin.

"But it seems to me they are trenching over on your ground."

"They are. And they are using water from my *asequia* to do their sluicing. I went out and spoke to them about it."

"What did they say?"

"They got ugly and told me they would dig where they pleased. I wanted no quarrel and walked away."

"I think they are bad men," declared Rosita.

"What do you know about them?" asked Joaquin.

"Two of them tried to flirt with me on the street. One caught me by the arm and called me *'querida.'* The other

* My account of this affair is based on a story supposed to have been told originally by Frank Wilson. It was corroborated with some difference in details by Lewis Page, a resident of Saw Mill Flat at the time, who told it to his daughter, Miss Marian Page, still living a half mile or so from the scene of the occurrence.

asked me to slip out some night and meet him. I had a hard time getting rid of them."

"Why didn't you tell me of this?"

Rosita shrugged. "I didn't want you to get mixed up in a fight. It was nothing. I think they were drunk."

"Well," said Wilson, "are you going to let these rowdies rob you of the gold in your claim without doing anything about it?"

"I hardly know what to do. If trouble started, some one might get killed."

"I think I can take care of this for you," Wilson answered. "There's some law in this country. I'll go into town right away and consult an attorney. He'll find a way to stop them."

Soon after Wilson had gone, the five American miners, fresh from the ditches, their clothes splotched with wet mud, marched into the house, boldly, noisily, with the air of swashbucklers. They were plainly bent on trouble. Rosita looked up in alarm. Joaquin arose.

"Well?"

"We're here to tell you, you've got to pull your freight out o' these here diggin's," blurted out the leader, a huge, glowering savage, in a loud, menacing voice.

"Who says so?"

"We say so."

"Who are you?"

"We're good American citizens—that's who we are and that's who you ain't. This here's a white man's camp and no greasers wanted."

"I don't know about that."

"We're tellin' you."

"There are plenty of Mexicans in Saw Mill Flat."

"They're thick as flies at hog killin' time. They've come crowdin' in here like they was as good as white folks and they've took up some of the best claims on the

creek. But we're goin' to serve notice on 'em to pack up and clear out and waste no time about it. California belongs to the U. S. of America. The Mexican war done settled that. California's ourn. And the gold in these California hills is ourn. America for Americans and to hell with furriners. These here greasers pannin' out our gold air thievin' varmints. They're robbin' us American miners of what American soldiers fit and bled fer. Them's the facts put fair and square."

"There's no law barring Mexicans from this country and no law against their mining here. Mexicans have as much right to dig for gold in California as you have." *

"Well, we don't allow to git into no argyment with you. We ain't no lawyers. But we know our rights and, by gosh, we're goin' to have what belongs to us. We're sick o' bein' robbed by a lot o' low-down greaser thieves and we ain't a-goin' to stand it no longer."

"I still have faith in the American government. I think it will do justice to the Mexicans in these mines and see that their rights are protected."

"You and Uncle Sam kin settle that betwixt you. But we're takin' over this property right now. This claim is jumped."

"This claim is mine and you and your bullies won't run me off of it."

"We'll run you off or shoot you off."

"You'll jump my claim if you have to murder me, will you?"

"That's jest what we'll do."

"Kill me and your own countrymen will hang you on the tallest pine in Saw Mill Flat. And you know it. There may be mighty little law in these diggings but there's miners' fair play."

* The California law taxing foreign miners $20 a month was not passed until the summer of 1850. It was repealed in March 1851.

"Git them fool notions out o' your head. It ain't no crime to kill a greaser but we don't aim to take no chances on stretchin' hemp. You light out peaceable and nobody's goin' to lay a finger on you. But git balky and you shore air liable to go out in a pine box."

"I will stay right here on this claim."

"No, you won't," roared the ruffian white with rage. "You dig out o' here or thar'll be hell a-poppin'. Git goin' and keep on movin' and don't you never show hide nor hair in these diggin's agin. Thar's the trail right out yonder. You hit it and hit it quick."

But Joaquin was not to be intimidated by bluster and big talk.

"You can't bulldoze me," he said quietly. "I'm not a rabbit to run every time a cur dog barks. I'm a Mexican but I'm a man. Make no mistake about that. You're wasting time. Go on about your business and leave me to mine. You'll never get this claim unless you pay me for it."

"Well now that's a right bright idee. Fair enough, says I. You're a smarter feller than I took you fer. We'll pay you. Shore we'll pay you. Here's cash down on the spot."

His heavy fist crashed into Joaquin's face. Joaquin fell to his knees but was up in a flash and sprang for his bowie knife on the table. Against such odds, cold steel was his only hope.

"Look out, boys. Don't let him git that knife. Tear into him. Beat the daylights out o' him."

The five men leaped upon Joaquin with flying fists. Strong young athlete as he was, he had as much show against this swarm of hardy villains as a jack-rabbit cornered by a pack of wolves. Their rushing attack drove him fighting desperately back and forth across the room.

"My knife, Rosita. Quick. Get me my knife."

Rosita snatched the bowie from the table. But with Joaquin in the center of the furiously swirling battle, she

could not reach him. But in that terrific moment, the gentle girl turned tigress. If Joaquin could not have the knife, she would use it. She would help him if she died in the attempt. Springing at the leader, she aimed a thrust at his heart. Brave Rosita! But her heroism was in vain. The giant seized her wrist, and twisting the knife from her hand, pinioned her in his arms against the wall. "You little wild cat," he snarled.

Beneath the bludgeoning of iron fists, Joaquin went down time after time, scrambling to his feet only to be felled again. As he sprawled on the floor, the murderous knaves kicked him in the face, the head, the body, driving in the blows from their ponderous boots with all their might and main until, battered and mangled, he lay insensible, a pool of blood spreading slowly about him.

Held against the wall by the miscreant who had wrenched the knife from her, Rosita, pale with horror, watched her husband battling for his life and saw him stretched on the floor limp and apparently lifeless. Her sense of helplessness drove her to the verge of frenzy. She screamed hysterically. She cried to the saints for some miracle of deliverance. She called down the curse of heaven on the pitiless brutes. It was a heart-breaking tragedy through which she was passing—an ordeal of torture like the agonies of a martyr being burned at the stake.

Now that the hurly-burly was over, the ruffians, with brazen ribaldry, looked her over critically like gutter voluptuaries appraising the charms of some nymph of the brothels.

"As purty a piece of calico as I've set my eyes on sence I left the Missouri."

"Fer a Mexican wench, she's shore a humdinger. Take a look at that figger. Kinder neat, ain't it?"

"I'll bet she could love a feller to death. She ain't got them black eyes fer nothin'."

"Tried to kill me, eh?" purred the scoundrel who still held her in his arms. "Naughty baby."

"Let me go," cried Rosita.

"What you want to kill a good friend like me fer? You ain't fergot me, have you—me and my pard over thar? We're the fellers who met you on the street and tried to fix things up with you. But pretty baby turned us down cold."

"Holy Virgin protect me!"

"But this is another time, honey. Quit your squirmin'. It won't do you no good. We've got you dead to rights this pop."

"Help me, help me, Mother of God!"

"Come on, baby."

The relentless blackguard dragged the screaming, writhing, fighting girl into the back room. The others crowded in after him. The door slammed behind them.

When Wilson returned from his call on the lawyer, the cabin was silent. The five miners had disappeared. Joaquin still lay insensible. Dashing water in his face, Wilson revived him.

"Rosita? Where is Rosita?"

Joaquin staggered into the back room. There on the bed lay his wife, as white and still as if she were dead, her clothes torn and disheveled. He caught her in his arms. *"Querida! Mi querida!"* Back and forth he carried her as if she were a baby, covering her face with kisses, crooning to her over and over, "My darling! My poor little darling!"

Perhaps in the dark spaces where her spirit wandered, she heard his voice calling her back from the brink of the grave. Her eyes opened as if in resurrection. They lighted with happiness as she saw his face close to hers.

"Joaquin!"

All her love for him thrilled in her voice. Her arms stole about his neck.

Again she sank into unconsciousness. Placing her tenderly upon the couch, Joaquin watched her with anxious gaze. Once more her eyes opened.

"I am cold," she murmured. "It is growing dark. Put your arms about me, Joaquin."

Folding her to his breast, Joaquin could feel the beating of her heart against his own. It was like the weak fluttering of young wings. It grew fainter—and fainter —and ceased.

With bowed head Joaquin stood in a daze looking on his dead wife, unable to understand the sudden, crushing tragedy, unwilling to believe it. Wilson took him by the arm and drew him gently away. But Joaquin shook him off. A transforming change came over him. His face twisted in a grimace of savage ferocity and his black eyes burned with maniacal fury. He trembled from head to heel as he shook his fists aloft and his husky voice was like the menacing snarl of a wild beast at bay.

"By the blood of Christ, I will make them pay for this! I will kill them if I have to follow them to the hinges of hell! I will have their hearts' blood as sure as there is a God in heaven!"

A flock of buzzards wheeled high above a lonely gulch in the Stanislaus river hills a few miles from Columbia. What rare tidbit had these sable-plumed epicures spied upon which to satiate their dainty appetites? Somewhere in the green, still wilderness beneath them, a banquet of death had been spread and slowly, majestically, in vast spirals, they descended to the feast. On weighed pinions, they sank in narrowing circles below the rim of the hills, below the tree tops—lower—lower—lower—

Months later some prospectors looking for gold in the wild ravine stumbled upon five skeletons. The ghastly relics, lying about the ashes of an old camp fire, had been washed by the rains and bleached by the sun until they were as white as polished marble. Creeping vines half covered them. Wild flowers bloomed among the gleaming bones. No one knew who these dead men had been and the skeletons of mystery were buried together in a nameless grave. But there was one clew remaining as to the cause of their death. Through each of the five skulls was a neat, round hole made by a bullet.