

C **ollier's**

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WEEKLY

**Down the
Home
Stretch**
By
**Walter
Davenport**



"Fare Enough!" A Short Story By

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The Shepherd of Guadalupe

By Zane Grey

The Story Thus Far:

CLIFTON FORREST is returning home from the war after having been among the "missing" for over a year. He has been given a month more to live and he wants to spend that with his family in New Mexico, although before the war he had been in disgrace with them for having been expelled from college.

He has not told his family of his home-coming so he takes a taxi at the station and drives to Cottonwoods, his old home, only to find the Lundeen living there.

Virginia Lundeen had been on the same ship coming home though he had not recognized her. They had been drawn to each other and she had been very kind to him. Their families are enemies and when Virginia opens the door of what he thought was his own home and tells him heartbrokenly that it is now her home and that his family live down the road in her old home, an adobe shack, he is so overcome that he faints on the doorstep.

II

"OH, POOR fellow!" cried Ethel. "Ginia, what can we do?" Virginia's father stepped out from the doorway, followed by others. He was a stalwart man past middle age, whose handsome lined face showed the vicissitudes of a hard life in the open.

"Hello, who's this?" he queried, in astonishment, espying the prostrate form at Virginia's feet.

"Father!" she replied, recovering with a gasp. "Something dreadful has happened."

"Is he drunk or what? Who is it? . . . Strikes me I've seen him before."

"No, he's not drunk," rejoined Virginia hurriedly. "Dad, it's Clifton Forrest, who used to live here. I saw him on the Aquitania, but didn't recognize him then. He was returning from France. He must have been badly wounded in the war. He did not know me. . . . He didn't know I lived here . . . that this was not his home. . . . When I told him—he fainted."

Lundeen's features clouded and set: "Young Forrest! Home from the war! Shore, he looks it!"

"Father, let us take him in and do what we can," suggested Virginia faltering.

"What? Take a Forrest in my house? I reckon not," returned Lundeen harshly. He made a sharp gesture, beckoning to the chauffeur, who had just deposited Forrest's luggage on the flagstones. "Take those bags back to your car. An' pack this fellow out of heah."

"All right, sir, but where'll I pack him?" returned the chauffeur.

"He's a son of Clay Forrest, who lives down the west road. 'Dobe shack. You can't miss it," replied Lundeen, and stamped back upon the porch.

"Ethel, we must think of his mother too," said Virginia, in a low voice. "Someone must prepare her. Will you go with me?"

The chauffeur laid hold of Forrest to be checked by Virginia's swift hand.

"Careful. He has been badly wounded," she warned.

"Shore, Miss. . . . Gee, he ain't very heavy."

Virginia did not release her hold on Forrest's arm as the driver carried him. Ethel ran to open the door of the car.

"You get in first, Ethel. . . . We must avoid any jar. . . . I remember— Oh, driver, be careful! Don't let him slip. . . . There. Now hold him, Ethel, until—"

"You girls needn't bother," spoke up a young man, who had followed them from the porch.

"We will bother, thank you, Richard. . . . Driver, is there room for his bags in front?" "I'll take care of them."

Lundeen appeared again, striding out with manner unmistakable. Virginia saw her mother trying to detain him.

"Virginia, what are you about?" "Dad, I'm going to prepare his mother for—"

"You stay out of the car," he ordered furiously.

"Why, Dad," she protested, keeping her temper, "I must go. It's the very least we can do."

"No. Let Dick go."

"But he might be awkward breaking it to his mother—"

"Waal, I won't have you goin', an' thet's all."

"Dad, I've been away two years, and now I'm over twenty-one. I knew I'd have to tell you, but I didn't think it'd come during the very first ten minutes of my return."

Whereupon Virginia, her ears tingling at her father's profanity, stepped into the car. Ethel was holding Forrest, whose head swayed to and fro. Virginia slipped her arm around his neck.

"Let go, Ethel," she said, and gently

drew Forrest to her, until his head rested upon her breast. "Now, driver, we're ready. But don't hurry. And stop at the brook."

Virginia did not look out as they entered the driveway, so she did not know or care about what consternation she had left behind. At the moment she was concerned with the strangest sensation she had ever experienced. Had it to do with the pressure of this young man's head upon her bosom? Ethel's eyes were wide as they encountered hers.

"GINIA, isn't it dreadful? Oh, your father was black as a thundercloud. . . . But I'm glad you didn't give in. It just wouldn't have been decent."

"Ethel, my father always hated the Forrests. I remember that all my life."

"But, 'Ginia, forgive me if I say it's not fair—at least the hate isn't. You have all the Forrests ever had."

"Dear, I know it's not fair. Ever since Dad took over this property it has been a thorn in my flesh. . . . But I didn't say I hated the Forrests."

"I'm glad. Poor boy! . . . He's very handsome, 'Ginia. . . . What will come of it?" And her blue eyes quickened

They all finally wound up being edified over an impromptu rodeo

and dilated with all a young girl's mystic sense of romance.

"He's not a boy, Ethel. He's twenty-eight. . . . Even when I was a girl of ten or twelve he seemed a grown-up man."

At the turn below the knoll the chauffeur halted the car where the brook ran clear and swift over gravel bars.

"Wet my handkerchief," said Virginia, handing it to the driver, who leaped out of the car and, complying with her request, hurriedly returned. "Ethel, you bathe his face. . . . Now, driver, take the left-hand road at the forks and go slowly."

Virginia watched Ethel as gently, with trembling hand, she applied the wet handkerchief. She was very serious and grew almost solemn as her efforts at resuscitation appeared fruitless.

"'Ginia, when people faint they don't usually stay under so—so terribly long, do they?" she queried anxiously.

"I don't know a lot about it, Ethel. But I'd think not. You remember on the train, when he was unconscious so long. That was bad . . . but this is worse."

"'Ginia, he—he might be—be dead," faltered Ethel. "His face is so—so cold."



"Oh, that would be too awful," cried Virginia, shuddering. Then, with her right hand, which shook like a leaf, she unbuttoned his vest and felt for his heart. "There!—yes, he's alive, Ethel. . . . Thank Heaven! If he had died—at my feet—I'd never, never have got over it."

"Neither would I," murmured Ethel, resuming her task more vigorously.

VIRGINIA leaned her head back and shut her eyes, seeking to free herself from that inward clutch.

"His eyelids fluttered," whispered Ethel excitedly. "'Ginia—he's coming to."

"Oh, Mr. Forrest, you're all right again," she said, eager, like a pleased and relieved child.

"What happened?" asked Forrest, in a voice which seemed far away, yet pierced through Virginia.

"You fainted. And it took longer to revive you than that time on the train."

"I see. . . . I'm back in the car. . . . Where are you taking me?"

"To your mother. It's not far."

"My mother! . . . I thought—I was afraid—when that girl said she knew nothing of . . . where is she?"

"I just told you. Your mother lives down the road a ways."

"I mean that Luncheon girl."

"Oh! She's not very far," replied Ethel shyly.

Then probably Forrest became aware of the position of his head and the arm that encircled him.

"Yes," said Ethel, as if answering a mute interrogation. The thing so dear to a woman's heart—the romance inseparable from this situation—shone tenderly and subtly in Ethel's eyes. "It is Virginia who is holding you. She insisted that she should be the one to take you to your mother."

In his slight movement Virginia divined that his position in her arms was vastly distasteful to him, but he had not the strength even to lift his head from her breast. Whatever vague and dreamy sensations of pleasure and pathos had stirred within her were suddenly dispelled. He knew her now as a Luncheon.

At this juncture the driver brought his car to a stop at the vine-covered gateway of a red adobe wall, a wall pregnant with memory for Virginia. She recalled the time when she had sat on that wall, a roguish little girl of twelve, dangling her bare legs, to watch with worshipful eyes Clifton Forrest riding by, calling out, "Hello, little redhead!" And now—how strange and terrible after what seemed a changing span of a lifetime, to be bringing him to his mother, ruined, broken, dying!

"Ethel, you hold him now. Let me go in first."

"I think I can manage, if you steady me," said Forrest to Ethel.

How would Clifton's mother receive her? Courteously and kindly as always, she thought, but perhaps with the same fear of Clay Forrest that ever had obstructed friendship. A flower-skirted irrigation ditch, full of murmuring water, further burdened

Virginia with poignant associations of childhood and girlhood. The adobe house showed its age, especially in the size of the great vines that climbed its cracked walls, to shade its adobe-tiled roof with spring foliage. The fragrance here was sweet, dry, pregnant with the atmosphere of unhurried time and solitude. Birds sang in the trees and bees hummed in the flowers.

Virginia went round to the back of the house from which a trellis, with heavily vined roof, served as a porch. In trepidation Virginia prayed that Clay Forrest would not be in. If she remembered correctly, he was as impossible as her own father. But, to her relief, it was Clifton's mother who came out, not by any means as aged or changed as Virginia had anticipated.

"Mrs. Forrest, do you remember me?" asked Virginia, earnestly gazing up into the motherly face.

"For the land's sake! Virginia come home!" she ejaculated mildly, without trace of astonishment, and she leaned off the step to kiss Virginia. "Come in, lass. Well, an' lackaday, it's a woman you are now. Did you fetch home a husband?"

THE big living-room smiled at Virginia and seemed to intimate her place was there. Still there were treasures of color and beauty that had not graced it during the Luncheon occupation. Clay Forrest had saved fine rugs and paintings and furniture from the wreck of his fortunes—family belongings too splendid for this adobe house.

"No, indeed, Mrs. Forrest," replied Virginia, "not a husband. But I did bring you some good news of Clifton."

A spasm convulsed the lined face, and a quivering hand went to the heart: indications that justified Virginia's decision to break to Mrs. Forrest the news of her soldier son's return.

"Clifton! . . . Oh, my dear, you saw him in France! How good of you!" The darkening, hungry eyes almost made Virginia falter.

"No, hardly France. We were a whole day out," hurried on Virginia, brightly. "Do you know, Mrs. Forrest, I saw Clifton on the ship several times, and never recognized him. Isn't that just funny?"

"Ship! He was on his way home?" "Surely. Then by the strangest and luckiest chance he was on my train. Still I didn't know him. I'm so sorry now, because I could have spared him pain."

Mrs. Forrest sat down shakily, but Virginia's wise, kind words had checked the shock of surprise, and now joy was fortifying the revelation that was to come.

"Pain. You mean he never knew—" "Poor fellow! Naturally not knowing, he went direct to his old home. I had to tell him it—it was no longer his. How I hated that! . . . Then I came down with him—to show him where you lived."

"And he's out there now?" whispered the mother, a glory in her face that struck deep to Virginia's soul.

"Yes, out in the car. You see, the long journey—he must have come right out of a hospital—weakened him. He's not very strong. He looks pretty thin and—and ill. I wanted to see you first—and tell you, so you'd not be frightened."

"Frightened? I am only happy," replied Mrs. Forrest. "Lass, your heart was never that of a Luncheon. . . . Bring my boy in."

"You stay right there," said Virginia chokingly. "Else it might be—you'll frighten Clifton instead of the other way round."

"You needn't fear. I'm perfectly calm. But hurry, lass."

Virginia ran out with bursting heart,

and at the corner of the house she encountered Clifton, one arm over the chauffeur's shoulder and the other over Ethel's.

"Is Mother all right?" he shot at her with a gasp. His eyes seemed to bore into her.

"Yes, she is."

"You prepared her?"

"Clifton, she doesn't dream you—you're so badly off. I didn't dare tell her. But she knows you're sick, weak, all worn out. . . . Now please play up to that. If you do, all will be well. Then gradually she—it'll be safe to tell her—"

"Where is she?" "In the living-room, waiting. . . . Oh, Clifton, try to be natural."

HE LIFTED his arms from his supporters and stood erect, with a light of eye and face which blazed out the havoc that was there. "Virginia Luncheon, I have this to thank you for. . . . I'll go in alone."

Unflinching, with no hint of his slight stoop and halting step, he went round the house. Virginia kept pace with him, saying she knew not what, while Ethel retained a timid hold on his sleeve, until they crossed the porch. Then he opened the door, as the girls drew back.

"Mother!"

"Cliff! . . . Oh, my son—my son!"

The door closed on him. Virginia, wiping her blurred eyes, saw that Ethel was crying.

"Wasn't he wonderful? I could just—love him!" sobbed Ethel.

"I'm afraid it might be hard not to—just now, at any rate," replied Virginia, trying to smile at her friend.

"'Ginia, I'll wait out in front," went on Ethel. "If I saw his mother, I'd bawl like a baby."

"I'm not so sure of myself. But I'd better stay a few moments. . . . Tell the driver to bring his luggage back."

Virginia was left alone, a prey to mingled sorrow and gladness and a remorse that did not seem as right and natural as the other emotions. She was strong of will, and sternly fought them, as much for Mrs. Forrest's sake as her own. She waited. The driver brought Clifton's several bags and left them. Only silence from within the house! The relaxing of a tension left Virginia nervous. She wanted to get home, to hide in her room, to cry without restraint. And the thought of home roused feelings that were enlightening and dismaying.

This adobe house was more her home than that palace above. Virginia had been born in Georgia, her father having been a planter when a young man, but she had only dim recollections of her Southern home. Here, under these spreading cottonwoods, she had slept and played for twelve years. Then she had gone to school in Las Vegas, spent a year in Denver, staying with relatives, and later, when she had reached eighteen, had been sent to a fashionable school in New York City. The Spanish

(Continued on page 42)



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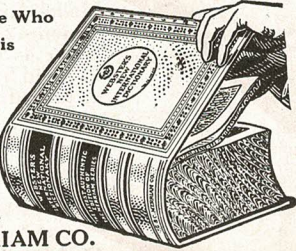
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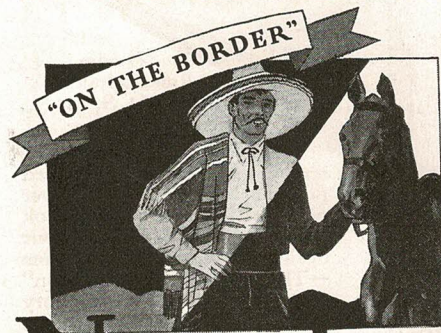
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Shepherd of Guadalupe

Continued from page 24

mansion on the knoll had known her for only few and short intervals. Now she had come back to stay, only to find the romance and joy of it ruined perhaps forever.

Her sad misgivings were interrupted by the opening of the door.

"Come in, Virginia," called Mrs. Forrest, who stood there, with traces of tears on her flushed face.

Virginia slipped in with the weight of other years upon her shoulders. Clifton was lying on the couch under the window.

"Mother wants to thank you," he said, with eyes that would haunt her.

"Please don't," implored Virginia.

"Lass, you made it easy for me," said Mrs. Forrest quaveringly. "Bless you!"

"Mother, not so long ago this tall, dignified, young woman was a red-headed tomboy with bare legs," said Clifton.

"Laws-a-me, Cliff, she was indeed," replied his mother, with a sigh. "She's changed like everything."

"My heart hasn't changed," returned Virginia, her cheeks hot.

"Virginia Lundeen, come closer," commanded Clifton, "so I can see in your eyes. . . . Do you know what your father did to my father?"

His query, sharp though it was, had nothing of the confounding quality of his accusing, soul-searching gaze.

"Clifton, I know nothing—nothing at all about what happened between my dad and yours," she protested wildly, conscious of her inability to maintain composure. "I've been away most of the time since it happened."

Forrest did not answer for several moments. He appeared to be lost in some mood of introspection. Then he said quietly, almost matter-of-factly, "We're ruined—penniless—and I've come home to die."

"Oh, don't say that last—don't!" cried Virginia entreatingly. "Say you will live! You must not—you cannot give up now—and leave them alone, when they most need you. . . . Clifton, you lived to get home!"

"MY SON, prayer and hope and will are mighty," added his mother fervently.

"Oh, Clifton, that is the spirit," went on Virginia eloquently. "You stood it all to get home. Now stand it all and more—to get well. . . . And let me help you. I—I have more money than I know what to do with. If you will only let me make it easy for you—till you're strong again!"

"Do you imagine I could take money from a girl whose father robbed mine?" demanded Forrest.

"Robbed! Oh, that's not true," she returned hotly. "You are unstrung. You speak wildly. My father might have been hard, unforgiving to your father, who was hard too. But dishonest—no. I couldn't believe it—and—and you must apologize."

Heavy footfalls on the porch outside stopped Virginia's lips. The door jarred—opened wide to disclose a tall man with upstanding, grizzled hair like the mane of a lion. Virginia knew him, though four years had passed since her last glimpse of this rugged face, gray like a stone, with eyes of burning jet that transfixed her.

"Mr. Forrest," said Virginia, brave at the sight of him. "I'm Virginia Lundeen. . . . Clifton came up to my—to Cottonwoods by mistake. And as he needed assistance I—I brought him down."

Forrest inclined his head, as if in forced acknowledgment, and his hand swept toward the open door, dismissing her from a roof that could not harbor a Lundeen.

Virginia fled. And as she reached the porch she heard his booming voice: "Howdy, prodigal son! So the war drove you home to Dad?"

Perhaps some of Virginia's breathlessness, when she reached the car, was due to haste; however, a little hurry could hardly have been responsible for her scarlet face.

"'Ginia, what'd the old devil do?" demanded Ethel, bridling.

"He deigned me—a grand gesture of dismissal," panted Virginia as she flounced into the car. "Take us back, driver."

"Didn't he say anything?"

"Not a word. I was dirt—in his house—and his hand swept me out."

"AFTER all your kindness? Mean of him! 'Ginia, he was as nice as pie to me until he asked who was calling. Then I got fussed. I was afraid you'd come out. I spilled the beans all right. He turned as white as a sheet. It was good I wasn't the one to tell Clifton's mother. I felt sorry for him. Then, when I got to Clifton's mistake, going to your house, and your bringing him down here—whew! Oh, my! . . . Come to think it over, I don't really believe he meant to curse us. Probably it was the rotten luck of it."

"I wouldn't put him above it."

"But if he loves Clifton? . . . Pretty tough on Clifton, don't you think?"

"Sickening to me. What must it have been to him? . . . But oh, Ethel, he's game. You should have seen him!"

"'Ginia," murmured Ethel dreamily, "you'll fall in love with Clifton Forrest."

"I would if it'd help him get well," flashed Virginia, unreckoning. Then she was appalled at a reply which had not emanated from her thoughtful self.

"You've fallen already," went on Ethel, bent on completing her case.

"Ethel, you're a sentimental little idiot," declared Virginia impatiently.

"Well, darling, if you don't fall in love with Clifton, I will."

"Ethel Wayne! I'll pack you back home to Denver and never ask you here again."

"You've asked me for two months. You can't go back on that. And, honey, you've likely forgotten how much I can do in little time."

"Do be serious, Ethel. This—this thing has made me unhappy."

"I am serious. And I wouldn't give a hoot for you if you weren't unhappy. But, 'Ginia, you're as cold as a fish. All our Western boy friends say as much, anyhow. Who'd ever think you were born in the South? You slip into a Southern accent once in a while—just enough to make me want more, but as for Southern love and passion, why, you're simply not there."

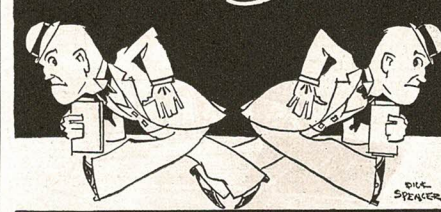
"Ethel, it strikes me you're not paying the Southern girls much of a compliment. And your own mother came from Louisiana."

"I sure am. Love, anyway, is the only thing in the world."

"You speak from a wide experience—that is, dearie, if by flirtation you mean love."

"Is that so? You've got a pair of eyes yourself. Don't be a prune, Virginia. Be a good sport, as you always used to be. You've toddled home from the East for good, so you say. You've

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Excuse for a divorce by a companionate marriage husband: "She didn't return my call."

The Department of Labor says the selling of newspapers by boys builds character. And on Sunday, muscle.

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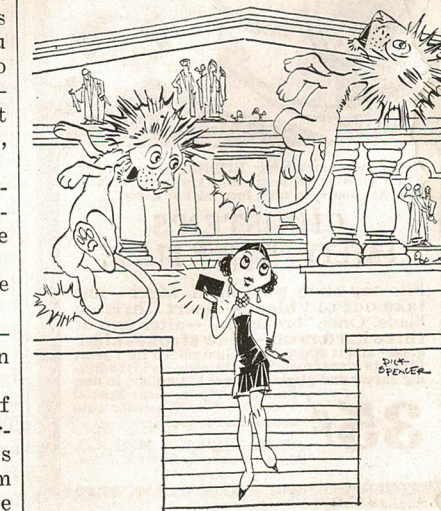
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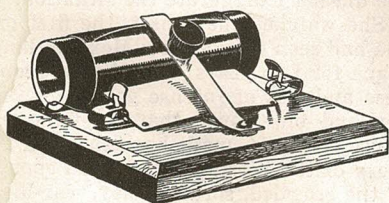
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certainly been away long enough. And you've sure skidded into a rotten mess. Well, there's only one thing you can do, if you're a thoroughbred. And Heaven knows that's your middle name."

"Very good, wise little monitor. What is the only thing I can do?"

"Help this poor, almost destroyed Clifton. Love him back to hope and strength. Give him yourself, for all he's lost."

"Ethel, you sound like a book. But, all the same, you hurt. . . . If Clifton doesn't despise me now, his father's hate of all Lundeens will soon make him."

"Fiddlesticks! You talk like a ninny. It needs only one to start a love affair, especially if it's a girl."

"You shameless child," retorted Virginia, driven to heat, "would you have me throw myself into Clifton's arms?"

"Sure, Mike," coolly replied this tantalizing friend. "Soon as he is strong enough to hold you."

The car stopped, and Virginia looked up to see that they had arrived at Cottonwoods.

"I'm glad that's over—and your mushy talk too," Virginia declared. "Here we are home. And I'm reminded I have a house party, worse luck."

Ethel let out a little peal of silvery laughter. "It's coming to you, 'Ginia, old girl; I always said so. You're too darned pretty and fascinating and good and rich and lucky."

Virginia's mother met the girls as they entered the house. No one else was in evidence, which fact afforded Virginia some ease. She certainly did not want to meet her father just then.

"Dear, you shouldn't have disobeyed your father," said Mrs. Lundeen reprovingly. She was a woman whose handsome, stately presence failed to hide the travail of earlier years.

"Perhaps I shouldn't," rejoined Virginia, with resignation. "But, Mother, I don't always do what I should. Has the baggage come from the station?"

"Yes. And your guests are all in their rooms. Ethel is to share yours."

"I'll need a maid."

"You may have Juanita. She speaks English and is the best of the lot. All our help is Mexican. It doesn't please me any too well. But Malpass runs the ranch."

"Malpass?" echoed Virginia puzzled.

"Augustine Malpass. You remember him, don't you?"

"The name, but not the man."

"He is your father's partner, formerly superintendent. But he still superintends, as you will see. I advise you to remember him."

THERE seemed more in her mother's words than a hint not to displease her father. But Virginia made no reply, and led Ethel through the magnificent patio, shaded by the single great cottonwood around which the house had been built. Tinkle of flowing water and fragrance of flowers attested to the luxuriance of this walled-in garden.

Ethel drew off her hat and coat, then flung her arms round Virginia's neck.

"You know I love you, 'Ginia?" she asked, in manner far removed from the recent tormenting one.

"Why, of course, you goose," replied Virginia, heartily returning embrace and kiss.

"I'm not serious often, but I am now," went on Ethel. "'Ginia, I'm something of a mystic in spells."

"You certainly are mysterious on occasions. Now, what's troubling you?"

"I don't know. Maybe it's this tremendous, overshadowing Spanish house. But it makes me say I'm no ordinary friend of yours. I don't care a hang for your riches or your favors. I do care for you, though, very, very much. And

if you fell upon evil days—then you'd know me best."

"Evil days? For me!"

Ethel nodded her blond head, like a bright-eyed bird: "I've got a queer feeling you might. And it's not in my little toe either."

Virginia gave her a hug. "You adorable wretch! Don't come any more of your psychic stuff on me. . . . But, Ethel, dear, you are my best friend—my only intimate friend. I shall never forget your loyalty. But let me—help me to forget this—that happened today. Oh, it goes so deep and so far back. I'm afraid—"

"So am I, but don't forget. Not—"

VIRGINIA stopped her lips with a kiss. "Come, we must unpack. Look at the trunks—and the bags! . . . And here's more in this room. While we unpack, honey, we'll talk. We have a houseful for a week; then, thank goodness, I'll have you alone for a time—till June, when the mob comes. Then we will eat and drink and smoke and dance and flirt—and ride, ride, ride. Dad has the finest horses in the West, and he loves to show off and spend money."

"Drink and smoke and flirt?" queried Ethel, with thoughtful softness. "Since when have you acquired these habits?"

"I haven't yet, but I shall. Then we'll ride, ride, ride right into a couple of husbands," replied Virginia recklessly, and she threw her hat aloft.

"Thanks. But I'll choose mine," said Ethel demurely. "I've just about picked him. He's pretty young yet and callow. Needs training, which he's getting unknown to himself."

"Ethel Wayne! You've never told me."

"Well, we never got thick enough until today."

"Tell me who he is. I'll telegraph him to come on," said Virginia eagerly.

"Indeed, not. Do you think I'll risk that precious lad with you? Not now, you lovely, rich, mad creature. Some day, maybe, when I have him corraled. Meanwhile, this riding for husbands, as you so elegantly put it, narrows down to you and—"

"Shut up!" screamed Virginia, "or I will be a mad creature."

The entrance of a maid put an end to possible hostilities.

"Señorita, I come. It is Juanita."

Luncheon brought Virginia's guests together, a merry half dozen, all Western people, among whom was Ethel's mother. Some of these had assembled at the station to welcome Virginia home, and she had whisked them off to Cottonwoods for a week-end.

Virginia noted the absence of her father and of his partner, Mr. Malpass, who, she understood, shared the hospitality of the house more as one of the family than as a guest. She had tried several times to place this individual in memory and to establish clearly in her mind why his name had significance.

"If you all don't mind, let's go out to see the horses," suggested Virginia at the conclusion of luncheon.

A yelp of delight went up from the young people. The Lundeen horses were famous, and Virginia assured her friends that, as horseback riding was a passion with her, they were all invited to choose any mount they liked and keep up with her, or ride when and where they chose.

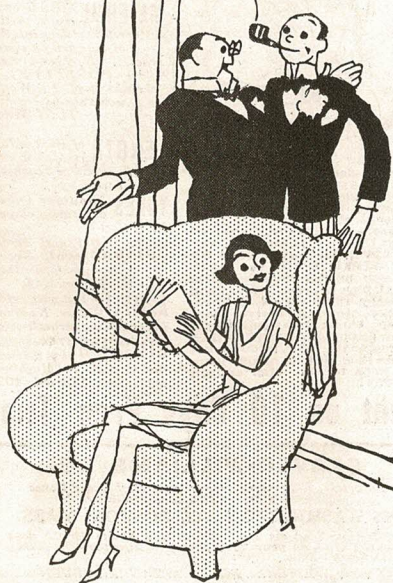
On the way down to the stables Fenton contrived by strategy and a little force to draw Virginia behind the others, and he proposed to her.

"Dick Fenton! I've been home just half a day, and you begin that again," exclaimed Virginia in plaintive consternation.

"Sure," he said, with complacency. "I want to get my bid in first."

(Continued on page 44)

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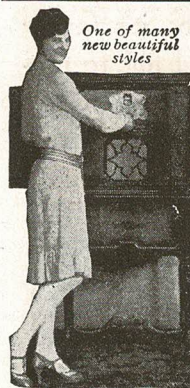
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Shepherd of Guadalupe

Continued from page 43

"Why the rush?"

"Virginia, your father recently made a crack in the Castaneda that has gone the rounds. He bragged he intended to marry you off quick."

"He did? Well, how funny!" re-
turned Virginia merrily. But the gos-
sip was more thought-provoking than
humorous.

"It's not funny to me. I've found out a number of things: Your father's big money comes from his phosphate mines in the South. Well, Augustine Malpass is in on every deal Lundeen makes. They're as thick as hops. Now, Virginia, you've been away, on and off, since you were sixteen. You don't know things. And I want to tip you off pronto. Malpass was never well thought of. My father knows something shady about him. It's common gossip that Malpass engineered the deals for Lundeen which ruined Clay Forrest. And to come to the point everybody believes—indeed, I have a jealous lover's certainty of it—Lundeen intends Malpass to be the lucky man."

"RIDICULOUS," burst out Virginia, but her lips were tight. What kind of an intrigue had she come home to? This linked up with her mother's vague intimation. And suddenly she was realizing that since she had come to call Cottonwoods home, for nearly five years she had been packed off here and there to schools, and finally abroad. During that period her father had come to be almost the stranger he now seemed. She had attributed that to success, money and the power these controlled, which he had always worshipped.

"Virginia, I am most darned glad to hear that," Fenton was saying, fervently. "What's your answer to my offer?"

"No, you wild and sudden Westerner," answered Virginia. "But if you're so serious, I'll be serious. . . . Thank you, Dick, for the honor you do me. I appreciate it, but I must decline. And I have only the same old excuse."

"Reckon I expected it," he said cheerfully. "But I've started again, and I'll soon get in the habit. . . . Hold on now. Just one more word. Suppose it's true. You can't marry Malpass. He calls himself part Spanish, but he's sure half greaser."

"Suppose what's true, Dick?"

"That Lundeen would want you to marry Malpass."

"Why do you always call my father Lundeen?"

"Pardon. Everybody calls him that."

"Well, Dick, in that case, if I couldn't outwit them, I might have to flee to you for protection," she replied archly.

"Devil!"

Virginia ran on ahead to escape him. "Ethel, hang on to me," she begged with a laugh.

"Heavens!" rejoined Ethel, locking arms with hers. "Dick has gone and done it already. Poor simp!"

They entered the zone of barns and corrals, all new to Virginia, and the place appeared to be overrun by Mexi-

cans.

The main barn was a low-roofed enormous structure, with a wide lane running through from one open end to the other. Virginia recognized this as the original barn repaired and greatly im-

proved. It contained twenty stalls on each side, and all but several held horses. What a spirited, glossy-haired, well-groomed lot of thoroughbreds! Not one, however, did Virginia recognize as a favorite of hers. The Mexican

vaquero who tended them could not

make himself perfectly clear to Virginia. She gathered, however, that there were horses in the pastures. The Mexican said something about Walt-
rous, which recalled the fine grazing ranch her father owned there.

"Friends, I don't know a thing about these horses," vouchsafed Virginia. "Never rode one of them. I'll find out where mine are."

"Gee, but it's funny to visit the most wonderful ranch in the West, and not see a single bow-legged, red-faced, winking cowboy," observed Ethel.

"Can't say I love these sloe-eyed vaqueros," added Gwen Barclay. "But they're sure picturesque."

They all finally wound up, even Mrs. Wayne, by sitting on the top rail of a high corral fence, gayly edified over an impromptu rodeo.

After two hours and more of this kind of entertainment, Virginia's guests, at least the feminine contingent, were glad to bend their steps homeward. And it was when they got back that Virginia met Augustine Malpass. Instantly her memory bridged the gap between the moment and the day some years back when this sleek, dark individual had dared to make bold if not questionable advances toward her. That was before the Lundeen régime at Cottonwood. Evidently his fortunes, along with Lundeen's, were in the ascendant. Fine riding garb made fine-looking riders. From his long, cruel Mexican spurs and shiny high-top boots to his olive-tan face and magnetic eyes and sleek, black hair he personified the modern Western dandy. He scarcely showed the Spanish descent rumor attributed to him. But his eyes were black and piercing as the points of daggers. In his speech there was no hint of the foreigner; in fact, he gave the impression of a keen and successful American between thirty and forty.

"August, I'll bet you don't remember Virginia as the kid who used to sit on the counter down at the old tradin' post," had been Lundeen's introduction of his daughter.

"Who would?" rejoined Malpass, showing his handsome, white teeth. "If I remember the bare-legged kids of those hard days, it's inconceivable that your beautiful daughter could have been one of them."

"Waal, she shore is. Virgie, do you remember August?"

"I didn't by name, but the instant I saw Mr. Malpass I remembered him very well indeed. I'm quite surprised if he has forgotten me."

BY HIS reaction to that cool speech Virginia gauged him as a man of depth and resource. These qualities he might always have possessed; however, along with his immaculate riding garb, he had acquired considerable polish. If he had been a little less impenetrable she might have given him the benefit of a doubt. But he masked himself. He was aloof from the man she remembered.

"Father, where are my horses?" asked Virginia. "I took my friends out to the barns, boasting about my neglected pets, and I couldn't find one I knew."

"Shore, I supposed they were heah," replied her father. "How about it, August?"

"I keep them at the Waltrous ranch. Better grazing pasture there."

"Drive Virginia over tomorrow an' let her see them."

"I want my horses here," declared

Virginia with spirit. "You certainly knew I was coming home. It really isn't like home without my horses."

"I'll take you over tomorrow, and you can pick out what you want to ride," said Malpass.

"I want them all. By the way, I suppose my boys, Jake and Con, are in charge?"

"No. I discharged them."

"You discharged them," rejoined Virginia, with undisguised amaze. "By whose authority?"

"Virginia," interposed Lundeen uneasily. "Malpass has the run of the ranches. My mining interests take all my attention."

"Oh, I see. Very well. But now that I'm home, I shall look after them myself," returned Virginia. These men, if they had considered her at all, had not calculated on this possible development. Not improbably they had been so engrossed in their business deals that they had not given her a serious thought. Virginia sensed more than she heard or saw. Her faculties had been shamed and stung acutely by Clifton Forrest's accusation and later sharpened by Dick Fenton's gossip. Right here, at the outset, she distrusted the situation, and at the risk of being impulsively precipitous she declared herself:

"Mr. Malpass, you need not trouble yourself about my horses—or anything else, for that matter. I have my own allowance and can entertain my friends without drawing more upon Father or charging any bills to the ranch."

MALPASS bowed politely enough, but the blood thickened under his olive tan. Furthermore, Virginia's keen eyes caught her father biting his cigar. Without more ado she excused herself and went to her room.

Ethel was in the bedroom, half undressed and curled up fast asleep. Virginia closed the door softly and left her there. She put on her dressing gown and, making herself comfortable on the cushions of the wide window seat, she gazed out over the valley.

In a vague, easily dismissed way there had always seemed something irregular about the Lundeen household. She could no longer lay it to her father's irresponsible habit of shoving things upon other people's shoulders. Fitting together the few instances that popped out of the past, and what she had heard and seen since her arrival home, she imagined a situation that was very disagreeable if not worse. Her father had never inspired confidence. Her mother was but his echo. It would surely be bad enough for her, even if she did not exaggerate the situation.

She watched the sunset, the first one she had seen over a New Mexican landscape for two years; and the gorgeousness and riot of intense gold, pink, silver and blue, over that far-flung expanse of desert, made her ache with the glory of the West. She had had enough of the crowded, sordid, noisy, war-beset East. This was home, and she did not mean the splendid mansion built by the Dons and named Cottonwoods by the Forrests. Home was the open there, the lonely range, and the grand bronze walls from which it sloped, and the ruggedness of the gray-barked cottonwoods, their strength, color, music and their shade.

Someone tapped on the door. Startled out of her reverie Virginia called: "Come in!" The door opened to admit her father.

(To be continued next week)