

5¢ a copy
November 10, 1928

Collier's

THE NATIONAL WEEKLY ★



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The Shepherd of Guadalupe

The Story Thus Far:

By Zane
Grey

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.

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, enemies of the Forrests, living there.

Virginia Lundeen had been on the same ship and again on the same train coming home though he had not recognized her. She had been very kind to him.

When Virginia opens the door of what he thought was his own home and tells him heart-brokenly that it is now her home and that his family live in her old home, an adobe shack, he is so overcome that he faints on the doorstep. Virginia and her friend Ethel Wayne take him home, much to Mr. Lundeen's displeasure. Mrs. Forrest is gracious and pleasant and grateful but Mr. Forrest merely ignores Virginia. Ethel accuses Virginia of being in love with Clifton.

Returning home, where a house party is in progress, Virginia hears the rumor that her father is going to marry her off to Malpass, supposed to be part Spanish, a man who is evidently in charge around her father's estate.

Virginia is introduced to Malpass and then realizes that he is the man who once made rather questionable love to her. Just before going to her room she announces that from now on she will take charge of her horses and cowboys. A few moments later her father walks into her room.

III

"ARE you alone?" Lundeen asked, coming to the window.

"Ethel is asleep in the bedroom," replied Virginia, studying her father's face.

"May I smoke?"

"I'd prefer you didn't. I hate cigarette smoke in my room. There's enough of it outside."

"Shore, you're a queer girl," he rejoined as he sat down, to look at her with amusement and curiosity. "You love money, travel, friends, excitement, horses, don't you?"

"I'm afraid so, especially the last."

"Ethel's mother has been telling me about you," went on Lundeen. "She has a high opinion of you. Thinks you ought to get married."

"Yes, she's told me—the old match-maker."

"I'd like to talk to you about that presently. . . . We're not very well acquainted, Virginia: that is, like we used to be when we were poor."

"How could we be? You sent me away to school while I was growing up and to travel afterward."

"Shore. It's my fault. But there were reasons why I didn't want you heah, outside of my wish to give you a good education."

Virginia did not encourage him to explain those reasons. She feared his candor. He was too cool, too sure of himself.

"Mrs. Wayne tells me you're home for good. No more rustlin' about?"

"Did you read my last letter?"

"Waal, if I did, I've forgotten."

"Father, you want me to stay home now, don't you?"

"Why, I shore do, Virginia, providin' you're—waal, like your mother. It'd please me to see the ranch overrun by young people. I'm away a good deal. An' the place ought to be kept up."

"I can't be like my mother. I've a mind of my own."

"Waal, that was plain today, when you told Malpass where to get off. I wish you hadn't done it, Virginia. He hasn't spoken to me yet, but he shore was riled."

"That is nothing to me. I was annoyed because my horses were not here, and he discharged Jake and Con. The nerve of him! I shall get them back. Why are there nothing but Mexicans on the ranch?"

"He prefers them. Cheaper an' easier

to manage. I'm bound to admit he's right. Cow-boys, when you haven't any cattle, are a blamed nuisance."

"Aren't you running any cattle?" asked Virginia, in surprise.

"No. Cattle went to nothin'. Ruined a lot of ranchers. Clay Forrest, for instance. All he had was in cattle. He was cattle poor."

"How did you come into possession of Cottonwoods?" inquired Virginia casually, but under veiled eyes she watched him keenly.

"Waal, at the beginnin' of the war I sold out, an', for the first time in my life, had money. Malpass was the brains of my luck. He advised it. He went in with me, an' we lent Forrest money. Malpass saw the break comin' an' knew we'd catch Forrest. Waal, the crux of it came when Malpass struck rich silver in an old mine on Forrest's land. Up in the foothills. Padres in the early days had worked it, an' Malpass had a map. Got it in Mexico."

"On the strength of that we lent Forrest all the money we had an' could raise. Forrest owed it. He was in a bad fix then, an' it went from bad to worse. Yet the fool had faith in cattle goin' up, so he bought more an' more. But cattle dropped to nothin'. That ruined Forrest. Our deal went into the courts, an' we got Forrest's land an' stock. By land I mean this ranch, which was a Spanish grant. The property below, where Forrest lives now an' which was our home for so long, was not on the grant. It always was Forrest's, an' that was all he saved out of the wreck."

"Father, did you consider that an honest deal?" queried Virginia.

"Waal, it was business, an' that's pretty sharp these days. Clay Forrest an' I clinched from the time we came heah from Georgia. I laid many a hard knock to him. So it didn't grieve me to take over his property. Ha! Ha!"

"But the old mine where Malpass found the silver. How about that?"

"Made our fortune. We got money out of it to develop the phosphate mines in the South. An' there's where our big money comes from."

"Are you and Malpass partners?"

"Yes, in our minin' deals. But this ranch is mine."

"Father, it was crooked," declared Virginia feelingly.

"Waal, it always was dog eat dog with me an' Forrest. An' I won't split hairs over it, arguin' with you."

"Such a deal might not show Forrest's rights in court, because naturally you'd claim you discovered the silver after you got the land. But morally it is dishonest."

"No, not in this heah day an' age. You're a woman, an' you always were sentimental about the Forrests."

"But at least you will split the proceeds from the silver mine?"

"I wouldn't give Clay Forrest a dollar to save his life," declared Lundeen, with hate swelling in every word.

"Then I shall," replied Virginia calmly and coldly.

"Waal, you won't do anythin' of the kind. You haven't it to give. That two hundred thousand I put on interest for you isn't available."

"Where is it?" asked Virginia, aghast.

"Malpass took the principal, or most of it, an' invested it down South. We needed some money quick. Of course you'll gain in the long run. But you can't get hold of it now."

"Then I have no—no income?"

"We'll fix that up, Virginia. I reckon there's ten thousand or so to your credit in the bank. By the time you spend it we'll arrange the other."

"Mr. Augustine Malpass! . . . He seems—ahem—quite important in the affairs of the Lundeens."

"Waal, I reckon," returned her father with a short laugh, ignoring her scorn. "An' that brings me to the point. You rode me off the trail. . . . Virginia, as far back as three years ago me an' August talked over a marriage between you an' him, when the proper time came."

"Indeed! How interesting!"

"YOU needn't be so cuttin'. You shore owe it to August that you got your education an' travel an' that you're heah at Cottonwoods now. It was his brains."

"I have much to thank Mr. Malpass for," returned Virginia, in bitter passion.

"Virginia, I hope you're not mixed up in any love affair."

"No, I'm not, if that will relieve your extreme anxiety about me."

"Waal, I'm glad. For my heart is set on this. I don't want to rush you, daughter, but in good time, I hope—"

He rose, evidently disconcerted by the sudden turn of her head to face him with her contempt and shame.

"You are proposing marriage for me—with Mr. Malpass?"

"It amounts to that," he answered, regaining his assurance.

"Thank you. I feel immensely flattered that you'd like to see me the wife of a crook."

"Virginia, he's no more than I am," protested Lundeen impatiently.

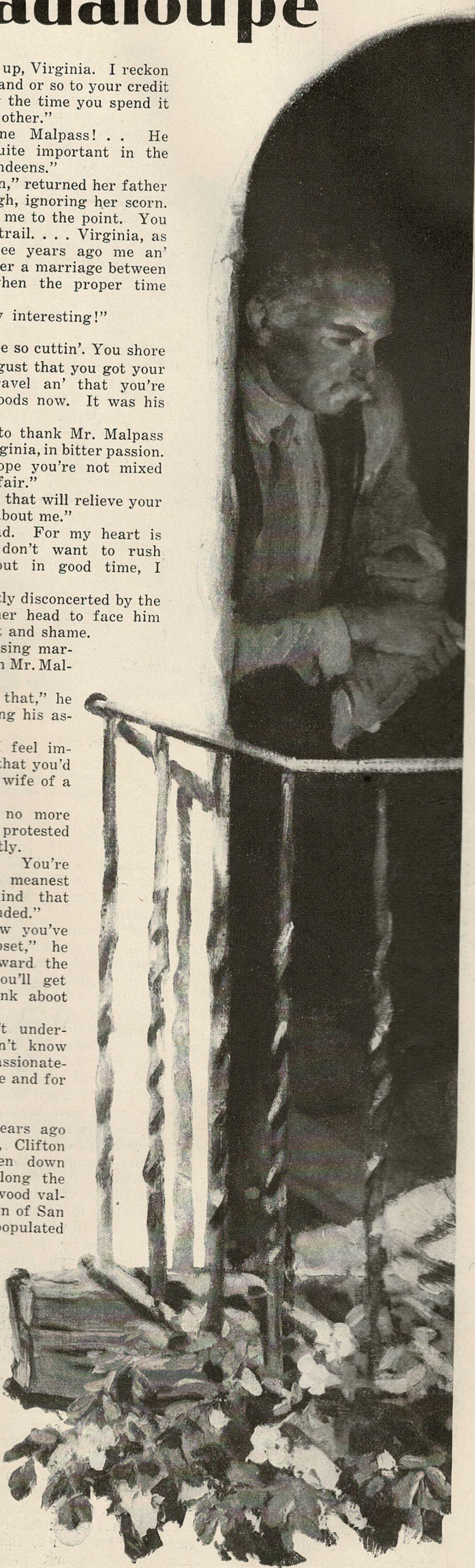
"Assuredly not. You're both crooks. The meanest of crooks—the kind that can't be apprehended."

"Waal, I'll allow you've reason to be upset," he added, moving toward the door. "Reckon you'll get over that, an' think about it."

"Father, I don't understand you. I don't know you," she ended passionately. "I refuse—once and for all!"

* *

Many a time, years ago it seemed to him, Clifton Forrest had ridden down the shady road along the edge of the cottonwood valley to the little town of San Luis, which was populated by Indians and Mexicans. The trading store there had finally been taken from Lundeen by Clifton's father, who had then run it more to help his many employees than to exact profit from them. The few bits of silver that it now brought in constituted the extent of the Forrest income. Toward San Luis Clifton walked now, and when he fell down, which



he did often, he got up and went on. "Cliff," his mother had said the day of his arrival home, "your father tried to stick in that store. But he couldn't. I hired one Mexican after another. If one was lazy, another was dishonest, and our only income is from that store. Think of that, my son! It used to be one of your father's charities. What a sad pass we have come to!"

"Mother, I'll run the store," Clifton had replied, with cheer and a smile that hid his earnestness. And this was why he was trudging along the road, not, despite his mental and physical ills, insensible to the glory of the May morning.

THE white snowy cottonwood seed was floating in the amber air and falling like thistledown on the green grass. Quail ran across the road, leaving tiny tracks in the dust. Birds and colts and calves showed their delight in the balmy air and golden sunshine of spring. Clifton felt the renewal of nature in his own heart and along his veins. He could not help being glad that he had to live instead of to die. How he had longed to give up the struggle! Who but one like himself could understand the torture of body, the destruction of fate, the end of hope, the unutterably soothing thought of rest and oblivion?

Illustrated by
Harold
Von Schmidt

The little adobe store, once a trading post, was situated off the road, on a bank above the irrigation ditch that supplied water to the natives, whose homes were scattered along the gentle slope above the valley.

The natives had small farms and a few head of cattle, upon which they subsisted when not working in some capacity on the range. The decline of the cattle business had made them poor and unable to buy much. Therefore the store was fairly well stocked with canned goods, merchandise, tobacco and all the necessary requirements of horsemen. In addition there were many blankets and baskets which Forrest had purchased from the Indians.

Clifton had cut the price of everything in the store, but the natives were slow to respond. Outside, by the door, stood an old rustic chair with sheepskin lining, and to Clifton it was the most comfortable one he had ever rested in. Here he passed most of the day, a good deal of which he slept away from sheer exhaustion. The natives, except the wild, ragged youngsters, did not pass by often, and they seldom lingered. On the first day Clifton found out that the natives had never overcome the distrust engendered in them during the Lundeen régime of high prices and sharp dealing. Clifton made a present to his informant, and that was his initial act through which he meant to regain confidence.

The day passed like a dream half remembered. Then began the toiling homeward. Dusk caught him stalled at the niche in the adobe wall from which he took a short cut. When his father loomed under the trees Clifton had survived the worst of his collapse.

"Waal, son, Ma was anxious and sent me to meet you," he said, and helped Clifton to his feet. He never alluded to Clifton's condition. If it caused him distress, he gave no sign. Clay Forrest had always been a man who considered physical defects things to conceal. But he did not lack gentleness.

"I was stuck here last night."
"Cliff, somethin' happened today," returned Forrest, with perturbation.
"What?"

"I got back early, an' there talkin' to Ma was that Lundeen girl." He made the announcement with suppressed feeling. "I'd showed her the door the other time, an' I did it again. But she wouldn't leave. Shore, I couldn't throw her out. An' there I was."

"She said, 'I've come heah to ask you somethin', an' I'm goin' to do it.' Waal, seein' I was out of luck an' couldn't get rid of her quick, I told her

to fire away. An' she shore did it, short an' sweet."

"Dad, you could never tell anything. Hurry."

"Cliff, she told me before she went away two years ago she had a couple of hundred thousand dollars in the bank. She found on gettin' home she had only ten thousand left. Malpass had persuaded her father to let him have the rest. . . . An' by Heaven, Cliff, that girl begged me to take the ten thousand!"

Clifton halted, and even in the dusk he could see his father's oxlike eyes rolling. "She did! What for?"

"I asked her, an' she said she believed we had been wronged, an' she wanted to help right it in what little way she could. Begged me to take the last of her money, an' when I replied I couldn't do it she tried to persuade me to take half. Then I said we Forrests would starve to death before we'd accept a dollar of Lundeen money. . . . Cliff, she cried out it wasn't Lundeen money, but Forrest money. I was sort of stumped at that. She was actually testifyin' against her father. I could use that when the deal goes to court again, as it shore will."

"You could, but you won't," declared Clifton.

"Waal, now, why wouldn't I?" demanded Forrest, letting go his hold on Clifton.

"If for no other reason, because I wouldn't let you."

"Hell! Are you in love with that girl?"

"No. I—I hate her, I guess. . . . But I've sense enough to see she's good."

"Waal, Cliff, you sure do love her. An' so does Ma. Reckon it's about the last straw. . . . My stock, my land, my home an' now my family gone over to these cursed Lundeens!"

FORREST stalked away under the gloom of the cottonwoods.

Excitement carried Cliff on and he arrived at the house, breathless but unconscious of fatigue. The living-room was cheerfully bright and supper ready. Clifton related to his mother the conversation between him and his father.

"He's implacable, Cliff," she said, with a calmness that soothed him. "But for me he'd have shot Lundeen and Malpass long ago. We have our task, my son."

"Mother, it plumb riled me when he said I—I was in love with Virginia. It sure floored me. And when I denied it he came out more bitter. He even said you loved her too."

"I do, an' I'm afraid he's guessed."

"Mother!"

"Go on with your supper, son," she returned. "As for Virginia—I used to love her when she was a ragged, wild child. An' I reckon it's come back. She's grown beautiful, Cliff, an' spite of it all she's unspoiled. She might spend money like wastin' water, but it means little to her. I think it noble of her to offer what they'd left her."

"Noble, yes. But it's an admission of her father's guilt. I wish she hadn't done that. Dad swears he'll use it in court. We must keep him from it."

"My son, we must keep him from a great deal more," she replied gravely. (Continued on page 52)

"Thank you. I feel immensely flattered that you'd like to see me the wife of a crook"

The Shepherd of Guadaloupe

Continued from page 15

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"No one, except you, could ever turn Dad back from anything he wanted to do."

"You can help, Cliff. Your return an' the way you've been have struck him deep. It takes time for a change to work out in Clay. You must be patient. You must persuade. An' if Virginia is anythin' to you—hide it."

"Virginia is nothing to me, Mother," he said after a moment of astonishment at her speech.

"Cliff, I reckon it takes all the heart you have to keep to the task you've set yourself."

"All—and more, I'm afraid, Mother dear."

"MY SON, both your father an' I have taken a new lease on life since you came home. He doesn't know, but I do."

"Then you'll never hear me say anything like that again."

"I must tell you something that ought to be just as helpful," she went on, now in sweet seriousness. "It's about Virginia."

"But, Mother, I don't want to hear any more," returned Cliff, dreading he knew not what. It was as if he stood with blinded eyes on the verge of a precipice which, when he saw it, would draw him down.

"I reckon it's because you don't want me to that I will. Trust your mother, Cliff. . . . Do you remember Virginia as a little girl?"

"Not very little. She must have been ten or twelve, anyway. She was a red-headed imp always in sight somewhere."

"As a child she worshiped you. No one but me ever saw it. Then, as she grew up, an' her father an' yours became bitter enemies, she visited us less, an' finally never came. Now she's back an' I think that child worship of you is not dead. Only she's a woman now. Today she told me she had just ridden by the store. You sat outside asleep. You didn't wake an' she stopped, meaning to speak with you. But she didn't have the courage—you looked so white, so frail, so sad. Then she said to me: 'Oh, Mrs. Forrest, my heart broke. Tell me he is not going to die!' An' I told her I knew you were goin' to live. After that she perked up an' asked me if she an' I could not be good friends. But your father came, interrupting us."

"She is only sorry for me, Mother," he replied, with difficulty. "And I'd rather have her hate me, so that I could hate her."

"But hate is terrible, my son. It has ruined your father. If you let anyone hate you, or if you hate anyone, it will poison your blood."

"Mother dear, you are close to the angels." It touched Clifton deeply that his mother should champion Virginia Lundeen, and in her blindness of affection and goodness attach undue sentiment to Virginia's words and actions. Clifton did not dare accept his mother's interpretation.

His father came in, weary and dark, and ate his supper in silence. Soon afterward Clifton went to the little room that had been turned over to him and which once had been Virginia Lundeen's. The very bed upon which he sat in the darkness to undress had been hers, so his mother had assured him, as if there could have been sweetness in the knowledge.

Half undressed, he stretched out on the bed, thankful that he need move no more for hours. The internal strife of blood and nerve, of the very cells of his

bones, gradually quieted. In the blackness and solitude, alone with his soul, he could not adhere to doubt, to hate, to mocking bitterness. And the face of Virginia Lundeen, with the lovely troubled eyes, hung over his pillow.

He saw her standing in the archway of the home that had been his, crying out: "My God, is it possible you don't know!" And he pictured her from his mother's words, watching him asleep, helpless, unguarded, with his secret for anyone to read. Clifton repudiated that heart-moving vision of her. It was an illusion. It was his mother's imagining. It was only Virginia's pity. Nevertheless, whatever it might be, out of it welled a melancholy happiness that warred with reason and survived into his dreams.

Next morning, as he plodded out to endure the long walk to his work, he espied his father plying a spade in the garden. And the sight was a cheering one for the beginning of another interminable day. All his father had done was to sit and brood, or walk endlessly under the cottonwoods, unable to shake off the calamity that had befallen him. That, to Clifton and his mother, was more saddening than the calamity itself.

Clifton slipped along, careful not to be seen, and the walk to the store was not so much of a hateful ordeal. A waiting customer furnished another surprise. What a little thing could revive hope and keep it alive a moment! His chair did not see him fall asleep that day. And somehow he got home without fear that he might drop, never to get up again.

Days followed then, slowly dragging, not inspired, each one sapping his little vitality, which seemed mostly of spirit. And then there came one of the nightmare nights from which he had been mercifully free since his start for home. He did not know what had induced it. But mental depression seized upon him and tightened its grip. He could not get to sleep. The past weighed upon him, phantoms and furies raged, and when he did fall asleep it was to be plunged into a horrible dream, as violent to his physical being as had been the thing it pictured. So when the day came he was already exhausted.

YET he went to work, and it took all day to recover from the exertion. He remained late, hoping his father would come, as he had several times. But at length he started out alone . . . and by sunset he was crawling on hands and knees, as once he had crawled on the battle field, badly wounded, yet with less agony.

He heard the hoofbeats of a horse close behind him in the road. He would be seen. It goaded him to the last remnant of his strength and then he sank face down.

Swift, light footsteps pattered in the trail. He heard the swish of brush—a poignant cry. Someone knelt beside him. Strong arms lifted him, drew him to a sitting posture. He had one glimpse of Virginia Lundeen's face, terror-stricken, then his head fell upon her breast.

"Oh, Clifton—Clifton!" she cried, holding him tight. "What's happened?"

"I—gave—out," he panted.

"Is it only that? You were dragging yourself along. I thought you an animal. It scared my horse. . . . Oh, you must be terribly ill. You look so—so—"

"I thought I—was dying."

"What shall I do? What can I do?" she moaned. Clifton felt himself rocked

to and fro in her arms. She was kneeling and holding him up. He saw her pull a gauntlet off with her teeth. Then a trembling hand touched his wet forehead, smoothed back his hair, moved warm across his cheek and lips.

"Don't take on so," he whispered. "Maybe I'm—just all in."

"But something should be done," she implored. "I'll run for help—then ride home, get a car and fetch the doctor."

"Wait until—we see. . . . Maybe it's nothing. . . . I'm such a coward."

"Coward!" she cried, her voice deep and eloquent with scornful denial. He felt his head rise softly with the heave of her breast. And her heart sounded like a muffled drum. She hung over him. Her hair touched his face. She was bareheaded, her sombrero lying where evidently she had flung it. She was bending over him. Hot tears fell upon his cheek. Her touch, that even a half-dead man could not mistake, sharply affected him to the point of uplift. He had not the desire, even if the strength had been granted him, to move out of her arms.

Not for moments did he remember his physical state, and then he guessed it was just the old revolt of outraged nature, driven to the limit this time. As he realized gradual recovery, he dismissed a vague, dreamy thought of how sweet it would be to die in her arms.

"Help me to a seat—there," he said, indicating a low section of the broken wall.

"I am—quite beside myself," she replied, with a confused laugh that told she had at least become conscious of her aberration. She lifted him with ease.

"YOU'RE strong," returned Clifton, marveling at her, and he found that with her arm locked in his he could sit up steadily. Her lovely, tear-wet, flushed face would have dispelled all hate. And for the moment her tenderness, her astounding grief at his plight, had dissipated hate, resentment, doubt, all that he had imagined he had ever felt toward her.

"There. You're better. I'm so glad. . . . Oh, Clifton, I was frightened."

"Why?" he asked, fascinated.

"Even if you'd been a stranger, I would have been frightened. But you! . . . On the ship, on the train, up at the house that dreadful day you came—and down here, I was frightened for you. But not like this. . . . Oh, my heart is pounding now."

"Even for a stranger? And of course I'm that. I'm glad you said it."

"Yes, indeed, Clifton Forrest, you are a stranger. For once you liked me—years ago when I was a happy kid—long before the shame of this day to me and the sorrow to you."

"Virginia, I hardly knew you," he protested.

"You've forgotten. . . . You used to wave to me as you rode by. Then you made eyes at me. And once in the old post you caught me alone—you kissed me."

Clifton awoke to realities, to the void absence and war had made in his memory, to the hot blood that tinged his cheek.

"Did I? I had indeed forgotten. So much of the past is dark in my mind."

"There! You've made that strange move with your hand," she burst out impulsively. "You did it on the ship—on the train. And that day up at the house. Now you have done it again. Four times. Clifton, why do you do that?"

"What move? What do you mean?"
 "You pass your open hand before your eyes. It's a slow, strange action. You do not touch your eyes. You seem to brush something away. As if a shadow dimmed them, and you could remove it."

"It's unconscious. I never knew I did that. It must be to brush away pictures that never fade."

"Of what you've seen and suffered?" she asked softly.

"Yes, of what I've seen, surely."

"Clifton, you're doing the most wonderful thing I ever knew a man to do. You were a knight of my childish dreams. Now you are a hero. You had made your sacrifice. You came home beaten and broken. You found all changed—your father crushed, your mother sorrowing, both without even the comforts of life. Cheated out of their home—to grow old, poor and miserable! . . . And instead of succumbing you rise like a giant to conquer fate, catastrophe, death itself. Oh, how I honor you for this courage!"

"Virginia, you—you are making strong statements," he faltered. "I can only believe—you're overcome by my—our troubles—and the excitement of finding me on all fours, like a crippled dog."

"Overcome, yes, and I have been overcome ever since you fell at my feet. . . . Clifton, do you hate me because I am a Lundeen?"

"I'm only human."

"But I had nothing to do with the ruin of your family. If I owned Cottonwoods right now, I'd give it back. And if I ever own it, I will."

"Dad wouldn't take it."

"Would you?"

"Never from you."

"But why? If my father will not right a wrong, why should I be deprived of the happiness of doing it?"

"It would be too late then."

"You wouldn't take anything from me?"

"No."

"Clifton Forrest, your nobility does not extend to helping others besides your own people," she said, showing a bitter hurt.

"Don't talk sentimental nonsense," he returned with passion. "How could I ever help you? My God! . . . You—a young, beautiful woman! Healthy, strong, supple, clean-boned, who can ride like the wind! Rich! With home, doting parents, friends by the hundreds. You talk like a fool."

"I do not," she flashed spiritedly. "I may have good looks. That's a matter of opinion. I am well and strong, thank Heaven, and if I have to work you bet I can do it. But I haven't any home—any real home. I'd rather be here, where I lived so long. My mother does not side with me in anything. She lives in mortal fear of Father. I despise his greedy soul. It's dreadful to confess. But I think I do. And if he keeps on trying to make me marry Malpass I shall hate him. . . . You're not the only one in terrible trouble, Clifton."

TEARS of anger and shame fell unrestrainedly, and reproach darkened her eyes.

"Well, of all things! Virginia, I'm sorry. I apologize," returned Forrest, aghast. "Malpass! Isn't he the fellow who used to hire the vaqueros at San Luis? Dark, slick, fire-eyed Mexican?"

"You know him, Clifton. He is now my father's partner. He's a crook. It is he who hatched the plot that ruined your people. He absolutely dominates Father. And he will ruin him too if he does not get his way."

"Which means if he does not get you?"

"Precisely. Malpass is too smooth to hint that. But I know it."

"Is he in love with you?" asked Clif-

ton, with an inexplicable curiosity he could not resist.

"He has been for years, since I was sixteen. I didn't believe all Father's rant about it. But lately I have found it out. The more I repulse him the madder he gets. I think opposition has fanned his desire. He wants to take me to Mexico City, to Havana, then to Spain. Raves about how he'd show me off in courts—exquisite gowns, diamonds, pearls. Oh, you should hear him!"

"Thanks," returned Clifton dryly, "but I don't care to. . . . Virginia, how are you going to beat that combination?"

"I don't know. It's maddening. But if he got the best of me I—I'd kill him."

"No. That'd never do for you. I'll tell you, Virginia. Marry someone else pronto."

"Marvelous idea. I've had it myself. But whom?" she returned, with unreadable, dark eyes on his.

"Haven't you lots of—of admirers, among whom there's a fine chap whom you could care for?"

"You ask me that!"

"Yes, of course I do."

"Very well, suppose you choose for me."

"But, you child, I don't know your friends," he expostulated.

"You know the one I want most for a friend or—or—"

"Virginia!" he gasped. "Am I crazy or are you?"

"I'M QUITE sane," she replied. Her rounded cheek was no longer rosy. It shone pearly in the afterglow of sunset. "Suppose I ride down to San Luis tomorrow. Fetch a padre over to your store. . . . We'll keep it secret till the storm breaks. Then I'll laugh in that smiling devil's face!"

"I—I don't quite know how to take you," replied Clifton. "If you're serious, you're out of your head."

"Clifton, I am proposing to you—that you save me from their machinations."

"But, my God, you can't, you mustn't throw yourself away on a shell of a man like me."

"I fail to see the sacrifice. It would save me and might right a cruel wrong some day. And I could help you get well even though we kept our secret. Do I understand you to refuse?"

"Yes. What else could I do?" he replied faintly.

"Oh, because your father hates the very ground a Lundeen treads on. But I can't help my name. I am asking you to change it for me."

"No, Virginia, not because Dad hates your father. But because this would not be right or fair to you. He'd disinherit you. And I would only be a burden."

"You say that for an excuse. You must share your father's hate. . . . Oh, Clifton Forrest! You will never know."

"I tell you, I don't hate you," he cried desperately.

"And I tell you I don't believe you. . . . But this is cruel of me. You've had an awful day. And I, selfish woman, have made it worse for you. . . . Come, let me help you to the house."

"I can go alone. Dad might see you—insult you."

He rose, and she did likewise, still with firm hand on his arm.

"Are you sure you can make it?"

"Yes. I've rested. I'm all right."

"Let me see you walk."

He started off steadily enough.

"Good-by—Clifton," she called low.

The gloom swallowed her before he could muster voice to answer. As he walked on under the whispering cottonwoods he stopped beside one to lean a moment. Then he heard the rapid hoofbeats of a running horse.

(To be continued next week)



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