

## CHAPTER IX. BARBARA IN MEXICO

THE manager of El Orobo Rancho was an American named Grayson. He was a tall, wiry man whose education had been acquired principally in the cow camps of Texas, where, among other things one does NOT learn to love nor trust a greaser. As a result of this early training Grayson was peculiarly unfitted in some respects to manage an American ranch in Mexico; but he was a just man, and so if his vaqueros did not love him, they at least respected him, and everyone who was or possessed the latent characteristics of a wrongdoer feared him.

Perhaps it is not fair to say that Grayson was in any way unfitted for the position he held, since as a matter of fact he was an ideal ranch foreman, and, if the truth be known, the simple fact that he was a gringo would have been sufficient to have won him the hatred of the Mexicans who worked under him--not in the course of their everyday relations; but when the fires of racial animosity were fanned to flame by some untoward incident upon either side of the border.

Today Grayson was particularly rabid. The more so because he could not vent his anger upon the cause of it, who was no less a person than his boss.

It seemed incredible to Grayson that any man of intelligence could have conceived and then carried out the fool thing which the boss had just done, which was to have come from the safety of New York City to the hazards of warring Mexico, bringing--and this was the worst feature of it--his daughter with him. And at such a time! Scarce a day passed without its rumors or reports of new affronts and even atrocities being perpetrated upon American residents of Mexico. Each day, too, the gravity of these acts increased. From mere insult they had run of late to assault and even to murder. Nor was the end in sight.

Pesita had openly sworn to rid Mexico of the gringo--to kill on sight every American who fell into his hands. And what could Grayson do in case of a determined attack upon the rancho? It is true he had a hundred men--laborers and vaqueros, but scarce a dozen of these were Americans, and the rest would, almost without exception, follow the inclinations of consanguinity in case of trouble.

To add to Grayson's irritability he had just lost his bookkeeper, and if there was one thing more than any other that Grayson hated it was pen and ink. The youth had been a "lunger" from Iowa, a fairly nice little chap, and entirely suited to his duties under any other circumstances than those which prevailed in Mexico at that time. He was in mortal terror of his life every moment that he was awake, and at last had given in to the urge of cowardice and resigned. The day previous

he had been bundled into a buckboard and driven over to the Mexican Central which, at that time, still was operating trains--occasionally--between Chihuahua and Juarez.

His mind filled with these unpleasant thoughts, Grayson sat at his desk in the office of the ranch trying to unravel the riddle of a balance sheet which would not balance. Mixed with the blue of the smoke from his briar was the deeper azure of a spirited monologue in which Grayson was engaged.

A girl was passing the building at the moment. At her side walked a gray-haired man--one of those men whom you just naturally fit into a mental picture of a director's meeting somewhere along Wall Street.

"Sich langwidge!" cried the girl, with a laugh, covering her ears with her palms.

The man at her side smiled.

"I can't say that I blame him much, Barbara," he replied. "It was a very foolish thing for me to bring you down here at this time. I can't understand what ever possessed me to do it."

"Don't blame yourself, dear," remonstrated the girl, "when it was all my fault. I begged and begged and begged until you had to consent, and I'm not sorry either--if nothing happens to you because of our coming. I couldn't stay in New York another minute. Everyone was so snooty, and I could just tell that they were dying to ask questions about Billy and me."

"I can't get it through my head yet, Barbara," said the man, "why in the world you broke with Billy Mallory. He's one of the finest young men in New York City today--just my ideal of the sort of man I'd like my only daughter to marry."

"I tried, Papa," said the girl in a low voice; "but I couldn't--I just couldn't."

"Was it because--" the man stopped abruptly. "Well, never mind dear, I shan't be snooty too. Here now, you run along and do some snooping yourself about the ranch. I want to stop in and have a talk with Grayson."

Down by one of the corrals where three men were busily engaged in attempting to persuade an unbroken pony that a spade bit is a pleasant thing to wear in one's mouth, Barbara found a seat upon a wagon box which commanded an excellent view of the entertainment going on within the corral. As she sat there experiencing a combination of admiration for the agility and courage of the men and pity for the horse the tones of a pleasant masculine voice broke in upon her thoughts.

"Out there somewhere!" says I to me. "By Gosh, I guess, that's poetry!" "Out there somewhere--Penelope--with kisses on her mouth!" And then, thinks I, "O college guy! your talk it gets me in the eye, The north is creeping in the air, the birds are flying south."

Barbara swung around to view the poet. She saw a slender man astride a fagged Mexican pony. A ragged coat and ragged trousers covered the man's nakedness. Indian moccasins protected his feet, while a torn and shapeless felt hat sat upon his well-shaped head. AMERICAN was written all over him. No one could have imagined him anything else. Apparently he was a tramp as well--his apparel proclaimed him that; but there were two discordant notes in the otherwise harmonious ensemble of your typical bo. He was clean shaven and he rode a pony. He rode erect, too, with the easy seat of an army officer.

At sight of the girl he raised his battered hat and swept it low to his pony's shoulder as he bent in a profound bow.

"I seek the majordomo, senorita," he said.

"Mr. Grayson is up at the office, that little building to the left of the ranchhouse," replied the girl, pointing.

The newcomer had addressed her in Spanish, and as he heard her reply, in pure and liquid English, his eyes widened a trifle; but the familiar smile with which he had greeted her left his face, and his parting bow was much more dignified though no less profound than its predecessor.

And you, my sweet Penelope, out there somewhere you wait for me, With buds of roses in your hair and kisses on your mouth.

Grayson and his employer both looked up as the words of Knibbs' poem floated in to them through the open window.

"I wonder where that blew in from," remarked Grayson, as his eyes discovered Bridge astride the tired pony, looking at him through the window. A polite smile touched the stranger's lips as his eyes met Grayson's, and then wandered past him to the imposing figure of the Easterner.

"Good evening, gentlemen," said Bridge.

"Evenin'," snapped Grayson. "Go over to the cookhouse and the Chink'll give you something to eat. Turn your pony in the lower pasture. Smith'll show you where to bunk tonight, an' you kin hev your breakfast in the mornin'. S'long!" The ranch superintendent turned back to the paper in his hand which he had been discussing with his employer at the moment of the interruption. He had volleyed

his instructions at Bridge as though pouring a rain of lead from a machine gun, and now that he had said what he had to say the incident was closed in so far as he was concerned.

The hospitality of the Southwest permitted no stranger to be turned away without food and a night's lodging. Grayson having arranged for these felt that he had done all that might be expected of a host, especially when the uninvited guest was so obviously a hobo and doubtless a horse thief as well, for who ever knew a hobo to own a horse?

Bridge continued to sit where he had reined in his pony. He was looking at Grayson with what the discerning boss judged to be politely concealed enjoyment.

"Possibly," suggested the boss in a whisper to his aide, "the man has business with you. You did not ask him, and I am sure that he said nothing about wishing a meal or a place to sleep."

"Huh?" grunted Grayson, and then to Bridge, "Well, what the devil DO you want?"

"A job," replied Bridge, "or, to be more explicit, I need a job--far be it from me to WISH one."

The Easterner smiled. Grayson looked a bit mystified--and irritated.

"Well, I hain't got none," he snapped. "We don't need nobody now unless it might be a good puncher--one who can rope and ride."

"I can ride," replied Bridge, "as is evidenced by the fact that you now see me astride a horse."

"I said RIDE," said Grayson. "Any fool can SIT on a horse. NO, I hain't got nothin', an' I'm busy now. Hold on!" he exclaimed as though seized by a sudden inspiration. He looked sharply at Bridge for a moment and then shook his head sadly. "No, I'm afraid you couldn't do it--a guy's got to be eddicated for the job I got in mind."

"Washing dishes?" suggested Bridge.

Grayson ignored the playfulness of the other's question.

"Keepin' books," he explained. There was a finality in his tone which said: "As you, of course, cannot keep books the interview is now over. Get out!"

"I could try," said Bridge. "I can read and write, you know. Let me try." Bridge wanted money for the trip to Rio, and, too, he wanted to stay in the country until Billy was ready to leave.

"Savvy Spanish?" asked Grayson.

"I read and write it better than I speak it," said Bridge, "though I do the latter well enough to get along anywhere that it is spoken."

Grayson wanted a bookkeeper worse than he could ever recall having wanted anything before in all his life. His better judgment told him that it was the height of idiocy to employ a ragged bum as a bookkeeper; but the bum was at least as much of a hope to him as is a straw to a drowning man, and so Grayson clutched at him.

"Go an' turn your cayuse in an' then come back here," he directed, "an' I'll give you a tryout."

"Thanks," said Bridge, and rode off in the direction of the pasture gate.

"'Fraid he won't never do," said Grayson, ruefully, after Bridge had passed out of earshot.

"I rather imagine that he will," said the boss. "He is an educated man, Grayson--you can tell that from his English, which is excellent. He's probably one of the great army of down-and-outers. The world is full of them--poor devils. Give him a chance, Grayson, and anyway he adds another American to our force, and each one counts."

"Yes, that's right; but I hope you won't need 'em before you an' Miss Barbara go," said Grayson.

"I hope not, Grayson; but one can never tell with conditions here such as they are. Have you any hope that you will be able to obtain a safe conduct for us from General Villa?"

"Oh, Villa'll give us the paper all right," said Grayson; "but it won't do us no good unless we don't meet nobody but Villa's men on the way out. This here Pesita's the critter I'm leery of. He's got it in for all Americans, and especially for El Orobo Rancho. You know we beat off a raid of his about six months ago--killed half a dozen of his men, an' he won't never forgive that. Villa can't spare a big enough force to give us safe escort to the border and he can't assure the safety of the train service. It looks mighty bad, sir--I don't see what in hell you came for."

"Neither do I, Grayson," agreed the boss; "but I'm here and we've got to make the best of it. All this may blow over--it has before--and we'll laugh at our fears in a few weeks."

"This thing that's happenin' now won't never blow over 'til the stars and stripes blow over Chihuahua," said Grayson with finality.

A few moments later Bridge returned to the office, having unsaddled his pony and turned it into the pasture.

"What's your name?" asked Grayson, preparing to enter it in his time book.

"Bridge," replied the new bookkeeper.

"Nitals," snapped Grayson.

Bridge hesitated. "Oh, put me down as L. Bridge," he said.

"Where from?" asked the ranch foreman.

"El Orobo Rancho," answered Bridge.

Grayson shot a quick glance at the man. The answer confirmed his suspicions that the stranger was probably a horse thief, which, in Grayson's estimation, was the worst thing a man could be.

"Where did you get that pony you come in on?" he demanded. "I ain't sayin' nothin' of course, but I jest want to tell you that we ain't got no use for horse thieves here."

The Easterner, who had been a listener, was shocked by the brutality of Grayson's speech; but Bridge only laughed.

"If you must know," he said, "I never bought that horse, an' the man he belonged to didn't give him to me. I just took him."

"You got your nerve," growled Grayson. "I guess you better git out. We don't want no horse thieves here."

"Wait," interposed the boss. "This man doesn't act like a horse thief. A horse thief, I should imagine, would scarcely admit his guilt. Let's have his story before we judge him."

"All right," said Grayson; "but he's just admitted he stole the horse."

Bridge turned to the boss. "Thanks," he said; "but really I did steal the horse."

Grayson made a gesture which said: "See, I told you so."

"It was like this," went on Bridge. "The gentleman who owned the horse, together with some of his friends, had been shooting at me and my friends. When it was

all over there was no one left to inform us who were the legal heirs of the late owners of this and several other horses which were left upon our hands, so I borrowed this one. The law would say, doubtless, that I had stolen it; but I am perfectly willing to return it to its rightful owners if someone will find them for me."

"You been in a scrap?" asked Grayson. "Who with?"

"A party of Pesita's men," replied Bridge.

"When?"

"Yesterday."

"You see they are working pretty close," said Grayson, to his employer, and then to Bridge: "Well, if you took that cayuse from one of Pesita's bunch you can't call that stealin'. Your room's in there, back of the office, an' you'll find some clothes there that the last man forgot to take with him. You ken have 'em, an' from the looks o' yourn you need 'em."

"Thank you," replied Bridge. "My clothes are a bit rusty. I shall have to speak to James about them," and he passed through into the little bedroom off the office, and closed the door behind him.

"James?" grunted Grayson. "Who the devil does he mean by James? I hain't seen but one of 'em."

The boss was laughing quietly.

"The man's a character," he said. "He'll be worth all you pay him--if you can appreciate him, which I doubt, Grayson."

"I ken appreciate him if he ken keep books," replied Grayson. "That's all I ask of him."

When Bridge emerged from the bedroom he was clothed in white duck trousers, a soft shirt, and a pair of tennis shoes, and such a change had they wrought in his appearance that neither Grayson nor his employer would have known him had they not seen him come from the room into which they had sent him to make the exchange of clothing.

"Feel better?" asked the boss, smiling.

"Clothes are but an incident with me," replied Bridge. "I wear them because it is easier to do so than it would be to dodge the weather and the police. Whatever I may have upon my back affects in no way what I have within my head. No, I

cannot say that I feel any better, since these clothes are not as comfortable as my old ones. However if it pleases Mr. Grayson that I should wear a pink kimono while working for him I shall gladly wear a pink kimono. What shall I do first, sir?" The question was directed toward Grayson.

"Sit down here an' see what you ken make of this bunch of trouble," replied the foreman. "I'll talk with you again this evenin'."

As Grayson and his employer quitted the office and walked together toward the corrals the latter's brow was corrugated by thought and his facial expression that of one who labors to fasten upon a baffling and illusive recollection.

"It beats all, Grayson," he said presently; "but I am sure that I have known this new bookkeeper of yours before. The moment he came out of that room dressed like a human being I knew that I had known him; but for the life of me I can't place him. I should be willing to wager considerable, however, that his name is not Bridge."

"S'pect you're right," assented Grayson. "He's probably one o' them eastern dude bank clerks what's gone wrong and come down here to hide. Mighty fine place to hide jest now, too."

"And say, speakin' of banks," he went on, "what'll I do 'bout sendin' over to Cuivaca fer the pay tomorrow. Next day's pay day. I don't like to send this here bum, I can't trust a greaser no better, an' I can't spare none of my white men thet I ken trust."

"Send him with a couple of the most trustworthy Mexicans you have," suggested the boss.

"There ain't no sich critter," replied Grayson; "but I guess that's the best I ken do. I'll send him along with Tony an' Benito--they hate each other too much to frame up anything together, an' they both hate a gringo. I reckon they'll hev a lovely trip."

"But they'll get back with the money, eh?" queried the boss.

"If Pesita don't get 'em," replied Grayson.