

# Talbot of Ursula

By Gertrude Atherton

## I

The Señora as usual had written a formal little note in the morning asking John Talbot to eat his birthday dinner at the Rancho de los Olivos. Although he called on the Señora once a week the year round, she never offered him more than a glass of angelica or a cup of chocolate on any other occasion; but for his natal day she had a turkey killed, and her aged cook prepared so many hot dishes and *chulces* of the old time that Talbot was a wretched man for three days. But he would have endured misery for six rather than forgo this feast, and the brief embrace of home life that accompanied it.

The Señora and the padre of the Mission were Talbot's only companions in Santa Ursula, although for political reasons he often dropped in at the saloon of the village and discussed with its polyglot customers such affairs of the day as penetrated this remote corner of California. And yet for twenty-three years he had lived in Santa Ursula, year in and year out, save for brief visits to San Francisco, Sacramento, and the Southern towns.

Why had he stayed on in this God-forsaken hole after he had become a rich man? He asked himself the question with some humour as he walked up and down the corridor of the Mission on this his fortieth birthday; and he had asked it many times.

To some souls the perfect peace, the warm drowsy beauty of the scene would have been a conclusive answer. Two friars in their brown robes passed and repassed him, reading their prayers. Beyond the arches of the corridor, abruptly below the plateau on which stood the long white Mission, was, so far as the eye was responsible, an illimitable valley, cutting the horizon on the south and west, cut by the mountains of Santa Barbara on the east. The sun was brazen in a dark blue sky, and under its downpour the vast olive orchard which covered the valley looked like a silver sea. The glittering ripples met the blue of the horizon sharply, crinkled against the lower spurs of the mountain. As a bird that had skimmed its surface, then plunged for a moment, rose again, Talbot almost expected to see it shake bright drops from its wings. He sighed involuntarily as he reflected that in the dark caves and arbours below it was very cool, far cooler than he would be during an eight-mile ride under the midday sun of Southern California. Then he remembered that the Señora's *sala* was also dark and cool, and that part of his way lay through the cotton woods and willows by the river; and he smiled whimsically again. He had salted his long sojourn at Santa Ursula with much philosophy.

One mountain peak, detached from the range and within a mile of the Mission, was dense and dark with forest, broken only here and there by the boulders the earth had flung on high in her restless youth. There was but a winding trail to the top, and few had made acquaintance with it. John Talbot knew it well, and that to which it led—a lake in the very cup of the peak, so clear and bright that it reflected every needle of the dark pines embracing it.

And to the west of the Mission—past the river with its fringe of cotton woods and willows, beyond a long dusty road which led through fields and cañon and over more than one hill—was the old adobe house of the Rancho de los Olivos.

Talbot was a practical man of business to-day. The olive orchard was his, the toy hotel at the end of the plateau, the land upon which had grown the rough village, with its one store, its

prosperous saloon, its post-office, and several shanties of citizens not altogether estimable. He was also a man of affairs, for he had represented the district for two years at the State Legislature, and was spoken of as a future Senator. It cannot be said that the people among whom he had spent so many years of his life loved him, for he was reserved and had never been known to slap a man on the back. Moreover, it was believed that he subscribed to a San Francisco daily paper, which he did not place on file in the saloon, and that he had a large library of books in one of his rooms at the Mission. As far as the neighbours could see, the priest was the only man in the district in whom he found companionship. Nevertheless he was respected and trusted as a man must be who has never broken his word nor taken advantage of another for twenty-three years; and even those who resented the manifest antagonism of his back to the national familiarity felt that the dignity and interest of the State would be safe in his hands. Even those most in favour of rotation had concluded that it would not be a bad idea to put him in Congress for life, after the tacit fashion of the New England States. At all events they would try him in the House of Representatives for two or three terms, and then, if he satisfied their expectations and demonstrated his usefulness, they would 'work' the State and send him to the United States Senate. Santa Ursula had but one street, but its saloon was the heart of a hundred-mile radius. And it was as proud as an old don. When its leading citizen became known far and wide as 'Talbot of Ursula,' a title conferred by the members of his legislature to distinguish him from two colleagues of the same name, its pride in him knew no bounds. The local papers found it an effective headline, and the title clung to him for the rest of his life.

It was only when a newspaper interviewed Talbot after his election to the State Senate that his district learned that he was by birth an Englishman. He had emigrated with his parents at the age of fourteen, however, and as the population of his district included Germans, Irish, Swedes, Mexicans, and Italians, his nationality mattered little. Moreover, he had made his own fortune, barring the start his uncle had given him, and he was an American every inch of him. England was but a peaceful dream, a vale of the hereafter's rest set at the wrong end of life. He recalled but one incident of that time, but on that incident his whole life had hinged.

It was some years now since it had grouped itself, a tableau of gray ghosts, in his memory, but he invoked it to-day, although it seemed to have no place in the hot languid morning with that Southern sea hiding its bitter fruit breaking almost at the feet of this long white red-tiled Mission whose silver bells had once called hundreds of Indians to prayer. (They rang with vehemence still, but few responded.) Nevertheless the memory rose and held him.

His mother, a widow, had kept a little shop in his native village. He had gone to school since the tender age of five, and had paid more attention to his books than to the village battle-ground, for he grew rapidly, and was very delicate until the change to the new world made a man of him. But he loved his books, the other boys were kind to him, and altogether he was not ill-pleased with his life when one day his mother bade him put on his best clothes and come with her to a wedding. He grumbled disdainfully, for he had an interesting book in his hand; but he was used to obey his mother; he tumbled into his Sunday clothes and followed her and other dames to the old stone church at the top of the village. The daughter of the great family of the neighbourhood was to be married that morning, and all the little girls of John's acquaintance were dressed in white and had strewn flowers along the main street, and the road beyond as far as the castle gates. He thought it a silly business and a sinful waste of posies; but in the churchyard he took his place in the throng with a certain feeling of curiosity.

The bride happened to be one of the beauties of her time; but it was not so much her beauty that made John stare at her with expanding eyes and mouth as she drove up in an open carriage,

then walked down the long path from the gate to the church. He had seen beauty before; but never that look and air of a race far above his own, of light impertinent pride, never a lissom daintily stepping figure, and a head carried as if it bore a star rather than a bridal wreath. He had not dreamed of anything alive resembling this, and he knew she was not an angel. After she had entered the church he drew a long breath and glanced sharply at the village beauties. They looked like coarse red apples; and, alas, his mother was of their world.

When the bride reappeared he stared hard at her again, but this time he noticed that there were similar delicate beings in her train. She was not the only one of her kind, then. The discovery filled him with amazement, which was followed by a curious sensation of hope. He broke away from his mother and ran after the carriage for nearly a mile, determined to satisfy his eager eyes as long as might be. The bride noticed him, and, smiling, tossed him a rose from her bouquet. He had that flower yet.

It was a week before he confided to his mother that when he grew up he intended to marry a lady. Mrs. Talbot stared, then laughed. But when he repeated the statement a few evenings later during their familiar hour, she told him peremptorily to put such ideas out of his head, that the likes of him didn't marry ladies. And when she explained why, with the brutal directness she thought necessary, John was as depressed as a boy of fourteen can be. It was but a week later, however, that his mother, upon announcing her determination to emigrate to America, said to him, 'And perhaps you'll get that grand wish of yours. Out there I've heard say as how one body's as good as another, so if you're a good boy and make plenty of brass, you can marry a lady as well as not.' She forgot the words immediately, but John never forgot them.

Mrs. Talbot died soon after their arrival in New York, and the brother who had sent for her put John to school for two years. One day he told him to pack his trunk and accompany him to California in search of gold. They bought a comfortable emigrant waggon, and joined a large party about to cross the plains in quest of El Dorado. During that long momentous journey John felt like a character in a book of adventures, for they had no less than three encounters with Red Indians, and two of his party were scalped. He always felt young again when he recalled that time. It was one of those episodes in life when everything was exactly as it should be.

He and his uncle remained in the San Joaquin valley for a year, and although they were not so fortunate as many others, they finally moved to San Francisco the richer by a few thousands. Here Mr. Quick opened a gambling-house and saloon, and made money far more rapidly than he had done in the northern valley—where, in truth, he had lost much by night that he had panned out by day. But being a virtuous uncle, if an imperfect member of society, he soon sent John to the country to look after a ranch near the Mission of Santa Ursula. The young man never knew that this fine piece of property had been won over the gambling table from Don Roberto Ortega, one of the maddest grandees of the Californias. His grant embraced some fifty thousand acres, and was bright in patches with little olive orchards. John planted with olive trees, at his own expense, the twelve thousand acres which had fallen to his uncle's share; the two men were to be partners, and the younger was to inherit the elder's share. He inherited nothing else, for his uncle married a Mexican woman, who knifed him, and made off with what little money had been put aside from current extravagances. But John worked hard, bought *varas* in San Francisco whenever he had any spare cash, supplied almost the entire State with olives and olive oil, and in time became a rich man.

And his ideal? Only the Indians had driven it temporarily into the unused chambers of his memory. Not gold mines, nor his brief taste of the wild hot life of San Francisco, nor hard work among his olive trees, nor increasing wealth and importance, had driven from his mind that

desire born among the tombstones of his native village. It was the woman herself, with a voice as silver as his own olive leaves, who laughed his dream to death, and left him, still handsome, strong, and lightly touched by time, a bachelor at forty.

He saw nothing of women for several years after he came to the Mission, for the one ranch house in the neighbourhood was closed, and there was no village then. He worked among his olive trees contentedly enough, spending long profitable evenings with the intellectual priests, who made him one of their family, and studying law and his favourite science, political economy. Although the boy was very handsome, with his sunburnt well-cut face and fine figure, it never occurred to the priests that the most romantic of hearts beat beneath that shrewd accumulative brain. Of women he had never spoken, except when he had confided to his friends that he was glad to get away from the very sight of the terrible creatures of San Francisco; and that he dreamed for hours among his olive trees of the thoroughbred creature who was one day to reward his labours and make him the happiest of mortals never entered the imagination of the good padres.

He was twenty and the ranch was his when he met Delfina Carillo. Don Roberto Ortega had opportunely died before gambling away more than half of his estate, and his widow, who was delicate, left the ranch near Monterey, where they had lived for many years, and came to bake brown in the hot suns of the South. Her son, Don Enrique, came with her, and John saw him night and morning riding about the country at top speed, and sometimes clattering up to the corridor of the Mission and calling for a glass of wine. He was a magnificent caballero, slim and dark, with large melting eyes and long hair on a little head. He wore small-clothes of gaily coloured silk, with much lace on his shirt and silver on his sombrero. His long yellow botas were laced with silver, and his saddle was so loaded with the same metal that only a Californian horse could have carried it. John turned up his nose at this gorgeous apparition, and likened him to a 'play actor' and a circus rider; nevertheless, he was very curious to see something of the life of the Californian grandee, of which he had heard much and seen nothing, and when Padre Ortega, who was a cousin of the widow, told him that a large company was expected within a fortnight, and that he had asked permission to take his young friend to the ball with which the festivities would open, John began to indulge in the pleasurable anticipations of youth.

But he did not occupy the interval with dreams alone. He went to San Francisco and bought himself a wardrobe suitable for polite society. It was an American outfit, not Californian, but had John possessed the wealth of the northern valleys he could not have been induced to put himself into silk and lace.

The stage did not go to Santa Ursula, but a servant met him at a station twenty miles from home with a horse, and a cart for his trunk. He washed off the dust of three days' travel in a neighbouring creek, then jumped on his big gray mare, and started at a mild gallop for his ranch. He felt like singing his contentment with the world, for the morning was radiant, he was on one of the finest horses of the country, and he was as light of heart as a boy should be who has received a hint from fortune that he is one of the favourites. He looked forward to the social ordeal without apprehension, for by this time he had all the native American's sense of independence, he had barely heard the word 'gentleman' since his arrival in the new country, his education was all that could be desired, he was a landed proprietor, and intended to be a rich and successful man. No wonder he wanted to sing.

He had ridden some eight or ten miles, meeting no one in that great wilderness of early California, when he suddenly drew rein and listened. He was descending into a narrow cañon on whose opposite slope the road continued to the interior; his way lay sharply to the south when he

reached the narrow stream between the walls of the cañon. The sound of many voices came over the hills opposite, and the voices were light, and young, and gay. John remembered that it was time for Doña Martina's visitors to arrive, and guessed at once that he was about to fall in with one of the parties. The young Californians travelled on horseback in those days, thinking nothing of forty miles under a midsummer sun. John, who was the least self-conscious of mortals, was moved to gratitude that he wore a new suit of gray serge and had left the dust of stage travel in the creek.

The party appeared on the crest of the hill, and began the descent into the cañon. John raised his cap, and the caballeros responded with a flourish of sombreros. It would be some moments before they could meet, and John was glad to stare at the brilliant picture they made. Life suddenly seemed unreal, unmodern to him. He forgot his olive trees, and recalled the tales the priests had told him of the pleasures and magnificence of the Californian dons before the American occupation.

The caballeros were in silk, every one of them, and for variety of hue they would have put a June garden to the blush. Their linen and silver were dazzling, and the gold-coloured coats of their horses seemed a reflection of the sun. These horses had silver tails and manes, and seemed invented for the brilliant creatures who rode them. The girls were less gorgeous than the caballeros, for they wore delicate flowered gowns, and a strip of silk about their heads, instead of sombreros trimmed with silver eagles. But they filled John's eye, and he forgot the caballeros. They had long black braids of hair and large dark eyes and white skins, and at that distance they all looked beautiful; but although John worshipped beauty, even in the form of olive trees and purple mists, it was not the loveliness of these Spanish girls that set his pulses beating and sent the blood to his head. This was almost his first sight of gentlewomen since the memorable day in his native village, and the certainty that his opportunity had come at last filled him with both triumph and terror as he spurred down the slope, then paused and watched the cavalcade pick their way down through the golden grass and the thick green bush of the cañon. In a moment he recognised Don Enrique Ortega, who spoke to him pleasantly enough as he rode into the creek and dropped his bridle that his horse might drink. The two young men had met at the Mission, and although Enrique regarded the conquerors of his country as an inferior race, John was as good as any of them, and doubtless it was best to make no enemies. Moreover, his manners were very good.

'Ah, Don Juan,' he exclaimed, 'you have make the visit to Yerba Buena—San Francisco you call him now, no? I go this morning to meet my friends who make for the Rancho de los Olivos so great an honour. Si you permit me I introduce you, for you are the friend de my cousin, Padre Ortega.'

The company had scattered down the stream to refresh their horses, making a long banner of colour in the dark cañon. Don Enrique led John along the line, and presented him solemnly to each in turn. The caballeros protested eternal friendship with vehement insincerity, and the girls flashed their eyes and teeth at the blue-eyed young American without descending from their unconscious pride of sex and race. They had the best blood of Spain in them, and an American was an American, be he never so agreeable to contemplate.

The girls looked much alike in the rebosos which framed their faces so closely, and John promptly fell in love with all of them at once. Selection could take place later; he was too happy to think of anything so serious as immediate marriage. But one of them he determined to have.

He rode out of the cañon with them, and they were gracious, and chattered of the pleasures to come at the Rancho de los Olivos.

John noticed that Enrique kept persistently at the side of one maiden, and rode a little ahead with her. She was very tall and slim, and so graceful that she swayed almost to her horse's neck when branches drooped too low. John began to wish for a glimpse of her face.

'That is Delfina Carillo,' said the girl beside him, following his gaze. 'She go to marry with Enrique, I theenk. He is very devout, and I think she like him, but no will say.'

Perhaps it was merely the fact that this dainty flower hung a little higher than the others that caused John's thoughts to concentrate upon her, and roused his curiosity to such an extent that he drew his companion on to talk of the girl who was favoured by Enrique Ortega. He learned that she was the daughter of a great rancher near Santa Barbara, and was La Favorita of all the country round.

'She have the place that Chonita Iturbi y Moncada have before, and many caballeros want to marry with her, but she no pay much attention; only now I think like Enrique. Ay, he sing so beautiful, Señor, no wonder si she loving him. Serenade her every night, and she love the musica.'

'It certainly must be that,' thought John, 'for he hasn't an idea in his head.'

He did not see her until that night. The priest wore the brown robe of his order to the ball, and John his claw-hammer. They both looked out of place among those birds of brilliant plumage.

Doña Martina, large and coffee-coloured, with a moustache, and many jewels, sat against the wall with other señoras of her kind. They wore heavy red and yellow satins, but the girls wore light silks that fluttered as they walked.

Doña Martina gave him a sleepy welcome, and he turned his attention to the dancing, in which he could take no part. He knew that his manners were good and his carriage easy, but the lighter graces had not come his way.

At the moment a girl was dancing alone in the middle of the sala, and John knew instinctively that she was Delfina Carillo. Like the other girls, she wore her hair high under a tall comb, but her gown was white and trimmed with the lace of Spain. Her feet, of course, were tiny, and showed plainly beneath her slightly lifted skirts; and she danced with no perceptible effort, rather as if swayed by a light wind, like the pendent moss in the woods. She had just begun to dance when John entered, and the company was standing against the wall in silence; but in a few moments the young men began to mutter, then to clap and stamp, then to shout, and finally they plunged their hands wildly into their pockets and flung gold and silver at her feet. But she took no notice beyond a flutter of nostril, and continued to dance like a thing of light and air.

Her beauty was very great. John, young as he was, knew that it was hardly likely he should ever see beauty in such perfection again. It was not an intellectual face, but it was faultless of line and delicate of colouring. The eyes were not only very large and black, but the lashes were so long and soft, the wonder was they did not tangle. Her skin was white, her cheeks and lips were pink, her mouth was curved and flexible; and her figure, her arms and hands and feet had the expression in their perfect lines that her face lacked. John noticed that she had a short upper lip, a haughty nostril, and a carriage that expressed pride both latent and active. It was with an effort that she bent her head graciously as she glided from the floor, taking no notice of the offerings that had been flung at her feet.

And John loved her once and for all. She was the sublimation of every dream that his romantic heart had conceived. He felt faint for a moment at the difficulties which bristled between himself and this superlative being, but he was a youthful conqueror, and life had been very amiable to him. He shook courage into his spirit and asked to be presented to her at once.

Her eyes swept his face indifferently, but something in his intense regard compelled her

attention, and although she appeared to scorn conversation, she smiled once or twice; and when she smiled her face was dazzling.

‘That was very wonderful, that dance, señorita; but does it not tire you?’

‘No.’

‘You are glad to give such great pleasure, I suppose?’

‘Si—’

‘You are so used to compliments—I know how the caballeros go on—you won’t mind my saying it was the most beautiful thing I ever saw—and I have been about the world a bit.’

‘Si?’

‘I wish I could dance, if only to dance with you.’

‘You no dance?’ Her tone expressed polite scorn, although her voice was scarcely audible.

‘Would—would—you talk out a dance with me?’

‘Oh no.’ She looked as astonished as if John had asked her to shut herself up alone in her room for the rest of the evening, and she swayed her back slowly upon him and lifted her hand to the shoulder of Enrique. In another moment she was gliding down the room in his arm, and John noted that the colour in her cheek was deeper.

‘It is impossible that she can care for that doll,’ he thought; ‘impossible.’

But in the days that followed he realised that the race was to be a hot one. He was included in all the festivities, and they went to *meriendas* among the cotton woods by the river and in the hills, danced every night, were entertained by the priests at the Mission, and had bull-fights, horse-races, and many games of skill. Upon one occasion John was the happy host of a moonlight dance among his olive trees.

Enrique’s attentions to his beautiful guest were persistent and unmistakable, and, moreover, he serenaded her nightly. John, riding about the ranch late, too restless to sleep, heard those dulcet tones raining compliments and vows upon Delfina’s casement, and swore so furiously that he terrified the night birds.

But he, too, managed to keep close to Delfina, in spite of an occasional scowl from Enrique, who, however, held all Americans in too lofty a contempt to fear one. John had several little talks apart with her, and it was not long before he discovered that nature had done little for the interior of that beautiful shell. She had read nothing, and thought almost as little. What intelligence she had was occupied with her regalities, and although sweet in spite of her hauteur, and unselfish notwithstanding her good fortune, as a companion she would mean little to any man. John, however, was in the throes of his first passion, and his nature was ardent and thorough. Had she been a fool, simpering instead of dignified, he would not have cared. She was beautiful and magnetic, and she embodied an ideal. The ideal, however, or rather the ambition that was its other half, played no part in his mind as his love deepened. He wanted the woman, and had he suddenly discovered that she was a changeling born among the people, his love and his determination to marry her would have abated not a tittle.

His olive trees were neglected, and he spent the hours of their separations riding about the country with as little mercy on his horses as had he been a Californian born. Sometimes, touched by the youthful fervour in his eyes, Delfina would melt perceptibly and ask him a question or two about himself, a dazzling favour in one who held that words were made to rust. And once, when he lifted her off her horse under the heavy shadow of the trees, she gave him a glance which sent John far from her side, lest he make a fool of himself before the entire company. Meanwhile he was not unhappy, in spite of the wildness in his blood, for he found the tremors of love and hope and fear as sweet as they were extraordinary.

One evening the climax came.

Delfina expressed a wish to see the lake on the summit of the solitary peak. It had been discovered by the Indians, but was unknown to the luxurious Californians. The company was assembled on the long corridor traversing the front of the Casa Ortega when Delfina startled Enrique by a command to take them all to the summit that night.

‘But, *señorita mia*,’ exclaimed Enrique, turning pale at the thought of offending his goddess, ‘there is no path. I do not know the way. And it is as steep as the tower of the Mission—’

John came forward. ‘There is an Indian trail,’ he said, ‘and I have climbed it more than once. But it is very narrow—and steep, certainly.’

Delfina’s eyes, which had flashed disdain upon Enrique, smiled upon John. ‘We go with you,’ she announced; ‘to-night, for is moon. And I ride in front with you.’

On the whole, thought Talbot, glancing toward the great peak whose wilderness was still unrifled, that was the happiest night of his life. They outdistanced the others by a few yards, and they were obliged to ride so close that their shoulders touched. It ~vas the full of the moon, but in the forest there was only an occasional splash of silver. They might have fancied themselves alone in primeval solitude had it not been for the gay voices behind them. And never had Delfina been so enchanting. She even talked a little, but her accomplished coquetry needed few words. She could express more by a bend of the head or an inflection of the voice than other women could accomplish with vocabularies and brains. John felt his head turning, but retained wisdom enough to wait for a moment when they should be quite alone.

The lake looked like a large reflection of the moon itself, for the black trees shadowed but the edge of the waters. So great was the beauty of the scene that for a few moments the company gazed at it silently, and the mountain top remained as still as during its centuries of loneliness. But, finally, some one exclaimed, ‘Ay, *yi!*’ and then rose a chorus, ‘*Dios de mi alma!*’, ‘*Dios de ml viada!*’ ‘Ay, California! California!’ ‘Ay, *de mi, de mi, de mi!*’

Everybody, even Enrique, was occupied. John caught the bridle of Delfina’s horse and forced it back into the forest. And then his words tumbled one over the other.

‘I must, I must!’ he said wildly, keeping down his voice with difficulty. ‘I’ve scarcely had a chance to make you love me, but I can’t wait to tell you—I love you! I love you! I want to marry you! Oh—I am choking!’ He wrenched at his collar, and in truth he felt as if the very mountain were trembling.

Delfina had thrown back her head. ‘Ay!’ she remarked. Then she laughed.

She had no desire to be cruel, but her manifest amusement brought the blood down from John’s head, and he shook from head to foot. His white face showed plainly in this fringe of the forest, and she ceased laughing and spoke kindly.

‘Poor boy, I am sorry si I hurt you, but I no can marry you. Never I can love the Americano; no is like our men, so handsome, so graceful, so splendid. I like you, for are very nice boy, but I go to marry with Enrique. So no theenk more about it.’ Then as he continued to stare, the youthful agony in his face touched her, and she leaned forward and said softly, ‘Can kiss me once si you like. You are boy to me, no more, so I no mind.’ And he kissed her with a violence of despair and passion which caused her maiden mind to wonder, and which she never experienced again.

He went no more to the Casa Ortega, and hid among his olive trees when the company clattered by the Mission. At the end of another week she returned to her home, and three months later she returned as the bride of Enrique Ortega.

Talbot smiled slightly as he recalled the sufferings of the boy long dead. There had been months when he had felt half mad; then had succeeded several years of melancholy and a distaste

for everything in life but work. He could not bring himself to sell the ranch and flee from the scene of his disappointment, for he was young enough to take a morbid pleasure in the very theatre of his failure.

He did not see Delfina again for three years. By that time she had three children and had begun to grow stout. But she was still very beautiful, and John kept out of her way for several years more.

But the years rolled round very swiftly. Doña Martina died. So did six of the ten children Delfina bore. Then Enrique died, leaving his diminished estates, his wife, and his four little girls to the care of John Talbot.

This was after fourteen years of matrimony and six years of intimacy between Talbot and the family of Los Olivos. One day Enrique, in desperation at the encroachments of certain squatters, had bethought himself of the American, now the most influential man in the county, and gone to him for advice. Talbot had found him a good lawyer, lent him the necessary money, and the squatters were dispossessed. Enrique's gratitude for Talbot knew no bounds; he pressed the hospitality of Los Olivos upon him, and in time the two became fast friends.

Ortega and Delfina had jogged along very comfortably. She was an exemplary wife, a devoted mother, and as excellent a housekeeper as became her traditions. He made a kind and indulgent husband, and if neither found much to say to the other, their brief conversations were amiable. Enrique developed no wit with the years, but he was always a courteous host and played a good game of billiards, besides taking a mild interest in the affairs of the nation. John soon fell into the habit of spending two nights a week at the Rancho de los Olivos, and never failed to fill his pockets with sweets for the little girls, who preferred him to their father.

And his love! He used to fancy it was buried somewhere in the mausoleum of flesh which had built itself about Delfina Carillo. She weighed two hundred pounds, and her black hair and fine teeth were the only remnants of her splendid beauty. Her face was large and brown, and although she retained her dignity of carriage and moved with the old slow grace, she looked what she was, the Spanish mother of many children.

The change was gradual, and brought no pang with it. John's memory was a good one, and sometimes when it turned to his youth and the one passion of his life, he felt something like a sob in his soul, a momentary echo of the old agony. But it was only an echo; he had outgrown it all long since. He sometimes wondered that he loved no other woman, why his ambition to have an aristocratic wife had died with his first passion; and concluded that the intensity of his nature had worn itself out in that period of prolonged suffering, and that he was incapable of loving again. And the experience had satisfied him that marriage without love would be a poor affair. Once in a while, after leaving the plain coffee-coloured dame who filled the doorway as she waved him good-bye, he sighed as he recalled the exquisite creature of his youth. But these sighs grew less and less frequent, for not only was the grass high above that old grave in his heart and he a busy and practical man, but the Señora Ortega had become the most necessary of his friends. What she lacked in brain she made up in sympathy, and she had developed a certain amount of intelligence with the years. It became his habit to talk to her of all his ambitions and plans, particularly after the death of Enrique, when they had many uninterrupted hours together.

Upon Ortega's death Talbot took charge of the estate at once, and into the particulars of her handsome income it never occurred to the widow to inquire. One by one the girls married, and Talbot dowered them all. They were pretty creatures, and John loved them, for each had in her face a morsel of Delfina Carillo's lost beauty; and if they recalled the pain of his youth they recalled its sweetness too. The Señora recalled neither.

For the last year she had been quite alone.

Two of her daughters lived in the city of Mexico. One had married a Spanish Consul and returned with him to Spain. The other lived in San Francisco, and as soon as domestic affairs would permit intended to visit her sisters. Talbot, when at home, called on the Señora once a week, and always carried a novel or an illustrated paper in his saddle-bag.

'Is the tragedy at this end or the other?' thought Talbot, as he walked up and down the Mission corridor on his fortieth birthday—'that I could not have her when I was mad about her, or that I can have her now and don't want her?'

He knew that the Señora was lonesome in her big house and would have welcomed a companion, but he knew also that the desire moved sluggishly in the depths of her lazy mind. *If* he were willing, well and good. If otherwise, it mattered not much.

His Indian servant cantered up with his horse, he gave a last regretful glance at the cool corridor of the Mission, and then went out into the hot sun.

He was only a stone heavier than in the old days, but he rode more slowly, for this his favourite mare was no longer young. His day for breaking in bucking mustangs was over, and he liked an animal that would behave itself as became the four-footed companion of his years.

The road through the pale green cotton woods and willows that wooded the banks of the river—as dry as the heavens—was almost cold, and refreshingly dim; but when the bed and its fringe turned abruptly to the south his way led for five sweltering miles through sunburnt fields and over hills as yellow as polished gold. The sky looked like dark blue metal in which a hole had been cut for a of lake of fire. The heat it emptied quivered visibly in the parched fields, and the mountains swam in a purple haze. Talbot had a grape-leaf in his hat, and the suns of California had baked his complexion long since, but he wished that his birthday occurred in winter, as he had wished many a time before. It was an hour and a half before he rode into the grounds surrounding Casa Ortega. Then he spurred his horse, for here were many old oak trees and the atmosphere was twenty degrees cooler. A Mexican servant met him, and he dismounted and walked the few remaining yards to the house. He sighed as he remembered that Herminia, the last of the girls to marry, had been there to kiss him on his last birthday. He would gladly have had all four back again, and now they had passed out of his life for ever.

The Casa Ortega was a very long adobe house one storey in height and one room deep, except in an ell where a number of rooms were bunched together. The Señora had it whitewashed every year, and the red tiles on the roof renewed when necessary; therefore it had none of the pathetic look of old age peculiar to the adobe mansions of the dead grandees.

A long verandah traversed the front, supported by pillars and furnished with gaily painted chairs; but it was empty, and Talbot entered the *sala* at once. It was a long room, severely furnished in the old style, and facing the door was a painting of Delfina Carillo. Talbot rarely allowed his eyes to wander to this portrait. Had he dared he would have asked for its removal. The grass was long above the grave, but there were such things as ghosts.

The Señora was sitting in a corner of the dim cool room, and rose at once to greet him. She came forward with a grace and dignity of carriage that still had the power to prick his admiration. But she was very dark, and the old enchanting smile had lost its way long since in the large cheeks and heavy chin. Even her eyes no longer looked big, and the famous lashes had been worn down by many tears; for there were six little graves in the Ortega corner of the Mission churchyard, and she had loved her children devotedly. She carried her two hundred pounds as unconsciously as she had once carried her willowy inches, and she wore soft black cashmere in winter and lawn in summer, fastened at the throat with a miniature of the husband of her youth.

She was only thirty-nine, but there was not a vestige of youth about her anywhere, and her whole being expressed a life lived, and a sleepy contentment with the fact. Talbot often wondered if she had no hours of insupportable loneliness; but she gave no sign, and he concluded that novels and religion sufficed.

‘So hot it is, no?’ she said in her soft hardly audible tones, that, like her carriage and manner, were unchanged. ‘You have the face very red, but feel better in a little while. Very cool here, no?’

‘I feel ten years younger than I did a quarter of an hour ago. There was a time—alas I—when I could stand the suns of California for six hours at a stretch, but—’

‘Ay, yes, we grow more old every year. Is twenty now since we *merienda* all day and dance all night—when I am a visitor here, no more; and you are the thin boy with the long arms and legs, and try to grow the moustache.’

It was the first time she had ever referred to their youth, and he stared at her. But her face was as placid as if she had been helping him to chicken with Chile sauce, and he wondered if it could change. Involuntarily he glanced at the portrait. It seemed alive with expression, and—the room was almost dark—he fancied the eyes were tragic.

‘How can she stand it?’ he thought. ‘How *can* she?’

‘You are improve,’ she continued politely. ‘The American mens no grow old like the Spanish—or like the women that have ten children and get so stout and have the troubles—’

‘You have retained much, Señora,’ exclaimed Talbot, blundering over the first compliment he had paid her in twenty years.

She smiled placidly and moved her head gently; the word ‘shake’ could never apply to any of her movements. ‘I have the mirror—and the picture. And I no mind, Don Juan. When the woman bury the six children, no care si she grow old. The more soon grow old, the more soon die and see the little ones—am always very fond of Enrique also,’ she added, ‘but when am young love more. He is very good man always, but he grow old like myself and very fat. Only you are improve, my friend. That one reason why always I am so glad to see you. Remind me of that time when all are young and happy.’

Old Marcia announced dinner, and Talbot sprang to his feet with a sensation of relief and offered the Señora his arm. She made no further references to their youth during the excellent and highly seasoned repast, but discussed the possibilities of the crops and listened with deep attention to the political forecast. She knew that politics were becoming the absorbing interest in the life of her friend, and although she also knew that they would one day put a continent between herself and him, she had long since ceased to live for self, and never failed to encourage him.

When the last *dulce* had been eaten they went out upon the verandah and talked drowsily of minor matters until both nodded in their comfortable chairs, and finally fell asleep.

For a time the heavy dinner locked Talbot’s brain, but finally he began to dream of his youth, and the scenes of which Delfina Carillo had been the heroine were flung from their rusty frames into the hot light of his memory, until he lived again the ecstasy and the anguish of that time. The morning’s reminiscences had moved coldly in his mind, but so intense was his vision of the woman he had worshipped that she seemed bathed in light.

He awoke suddenly. The Señora still slept, and her face was as placid as in consciousness. It was slightly relaxed, but the time had not yet come for the pathetic loss of muscular control. Still, she looked so large and brown and stout that Talbot rose abruptly with an echo of the agony that had returned in sleep, and entered the *sala* and stood deliberately before the portrait. It had been

painted by an artist of much ability. There was atmosphere behind it, which in the dim room detached it from the canvas; and the curved red mouth smiled, the eyes flashed with the triumph of youth and much conquest, the skin was as white as the moonflowers in the fields at night.

Talbot recalled the night he had taken this woman in his arms—not the woman on the verandah—and involuntarily he raised them to the picture. ‘And I thought it was over,’ he muttered, with a terrified gasp. ‘But I believe I would give my immortal soul and everything I’ve accomplished in life if she would come out of the frame and the past for an hour and love me.’

‘Whatte you say?’ drawled a gentle voice. ‘I fall asleep, no? Si you ring that little bell Marcia bring the chocolate. You find it too hot out here?’

‘Oh no; I prefer it out of doors. It is cooler now, and I like all the air I can get.’

He longed to get away, but he sipped his chocolate and listened to the domestic details of his four vicarious daughters. The Señora was immensely proud of her five grandchildren. Their photographs were all over the house.

At six o’clock he shook hands with her and sprang on his horse. Half-way down the avenue he turned his head, as usual. She stood on the verandah still, and smiled pleasantly to him, moving one of her large brown hands a little. He never saw the Señora again.

## II

Talbot was obliged to go to San Francisco a day or two later, and when he returned the Señora was in bed with a severe cold. He sent her a box of books and papers, and another of chocolates, and then forgot her in the excitement of the elections. It was the autumn of the year 1868, and he was an enthusiastic admirer of Grant. He stumped the State for that admirable warrior and indifferent statesman, with the result that his own following increased; and his interest in politics waxed with each of several notable successes in behalf of the candidate. He finally announced decisively that he should run for Congress at the next elections, and a member of the House of Representatives from his district dying two days later, he was appointed at once to fill the vacant chair.

The Señora was still in bed with a persistent cold and cough when he left for Washington late in November, but he rode over to leave a good-bye with old Marcia, and ordered a bookseller in San Francisco to send her all the illustrated papers and magazines.

She entered his mind but seldom during those interesting months in Washington. Talbot became sure of his particular talent at last, and determined to remain in politics for the rest of his life. Moreover, the excitement until the 4th of March was intense, for Southern blood was still hot and bitter, and there were rumours in the air that Grant would be assassinated on the day of his inauguration. He was not, however, and Talbot was glad to be in Washington on that memorable day. He wrote the Señora an account both of the military appearance of the city and of the brilliant scene in the Senate Chamber, but she had ceased, for the time, to be a weekly necessity in his life.

And being a bachelor, wealthy, handsome, and properly launched, he was soon skimming that social sea of many crafts. For the first time since his abrupt severance from the Los Olivos festivities he enjoyed society. San Francisco’s had seemed a poor imitation of what novels described, but Washington was full of brilliant interest. And he met more than one woman who recalled his boyish ideals, women who were far more like the vision in the English churchyard than Delfina Carillo, who, indeed, had not resembled the English girl in anything but manifest of race, and had been an ideal apart, never to be encountered again in this world.

It was a long and exciting session, and he gave all the energies of his mind to the great question of reconstruction, but more than once he asked himself if the time had not come to marry, if it were not a duty to his old self to gratify the ambition to which he owed the foundations of his success with life. A beautiful and high-bred wife would still afford him profound satisfaction, no doubt of that. He could in the last ten or twelve years have married more than one charming San Francisco girl, but that interval of passionate love between his youthful ambition and his many opportunities had given him a distaste for a lukewarm marriage. Here in Washington, however, California seemed a long way off, and he was only forty, in the very perfection of mental and physical vigour. Could he not love again? Surely a man in the long allotted span must begin life more than once. He found himself, after an hour in some beautiful woman's boudoir, or with a charming girl in the pale illumination of a conservatory, longing for the old tremors of hope and despair, and he determined to let himself go at the first symptom. But he continued to be merely charmed and interested. If the turbulent waters were in him still, they had fallen far below their banks and would not rise at his bidding.

It was not to be expected that the Señora would write; she hated the sight of a pen, and only wrote once a month—with sighs of protest that were almost energetic—to her daughters. Padre Ortega was too old for correspondence; consequently Talbot heard no news of Santa Ursula except from his major-domo, who wrote a monthly report of the progress of the olive trees and the hotel. This person was not given to gossip, and Talbot was in ignorance of the health of his old friend, in spite of one or two letters of inquiry, until almost the end of the session. Then the major-domo was moved to write the following postscript to one of his dry reports

'The Señora is dying, I guess—consumption, the galloping kind. You may see her again, and you main't. We're all sorry here, for she's always bin square and kind.'

There still remained three weeks of the session, but Talbot's committee had finished its work, and he was practically free. He paired with a friendly Democrat, and started for California the day he received the letter. The impulse to go to the bedside of his old friend had been immediate and peremptory. He forgot the pleasant women in Washington, his new-formed plans. The train seemed to walk.

They were not sentimental memories that moved so persistently in his mind during that long hot journey overland. Had they risen they would have been rebuked, as having no place in the sad reality of to-day. An old friend was dying, the most necessary and sympathetic he had known. He realised that she had become a habit, and that when she left the world he would be very much alone. His mind dwelt constantly on that large brown kindly presence, and he winked away more than one tear as he reflected that he should go to her no more for sympathy, do nothing further to alleviate the loneliness of her life. In consequence he was in no way prepared for what awaited him at Los Olivos.

He arrived at night. Padre Ortega was away, so he could get no news of the Señora except that she was still alive. He sent her a note at once, telling her to expect him at eleven the next morning.

Again he took a long hot ride over sunburnt hills and fields, for it wanted but a few weeks of his birthday. As he cantered through the oaks near the house he saw that a hammock was swung across the verandah, and that some one lay in it—a woman, for a heavy braid of black hair hung over the side and trailed on the floor.

'Surely,' he thought, 'surely—it cannot be the Señora—in a hammock!' And then he suddenly realised that the disease must have taken her flesh.

His hands trembled as he dismounted and tied his horse to a tree, and he lingered as long as he

could, for he felt that his face was white. But he was a man long used to self-control, and in a moment he walked steadily forward and ascended the steps to the verandah. And then as he stood looking down upon the hammock he needed all the control he possessed.

For the Señora had gone and Delfina Carillo lay there. Not the magnificent pulsing creature of old, for her face was pinched, and little blue veins showed everywhere; but the ugly browns had gone with her flesh, her skin was white, and her cheeks flamed with colour. Her eyes looked enormous, and her mouth had regained its curves and mobility, although it drooped. She wore a soft white wrapper with much lace about the throat; and she looked twenty-six, and beautiful, wreck as she was.

‘Delfina!’ he articulated. ‘Delfina!’ And then he sat down, for his knees were shaking. The blood seemed rushing through his brain, and after that first terrible but ecstatic moment of recognition, he was conscious of a poignant regret for the loss of his brown old friend. He glanced about, involuntarily. Where had she gone—that other personality? For even the first soul of the woman looked from the great eyes in the hammock.

Delfina stared at him for some moments without speaking. Then she said, with a sigh, ‘Ay—it is Juan.’

She sat up abruptly. ‘Listen,’ she said, speaking rapidly. ‘At first I no know you, for the mind wander much; and then Marcia tell me I think always I am the girl again. Sometimes, even when I have the sense, I theenk so too, for am alone, have nothing to remind, and I like theenk that way. When I am seeck first Herminia coming to see me, but I write her, after, am well again, for I know she and the husband want to go to Mexico. Then, after I get worse, I am very glad she going, that all my girls are away; for the dreams I have when the mind is no right give me pleasure, and bring back the days when am young and so happy. I feel glad I go to die that way and not like the old peoples. So happy I am sometimes, Juan, you cannot theenk! Was here, you remember, for two months before I marry, and often I see you and Enrique and all my friends, and myself so gay and beautiful, and all the caballeros so crazy for me, and all the splendid costumes and horses. Ay California! her youth, too, is gone, Juan! Never she is Arcadia again.’ She paused, but did not lie down, and in a few moments went on: ‘And often I theenk of you—often. So strange, for love Enrique then; but—I no know—missing you terreeblay when you go to Washington, and read all they say about you in the papers. So long now since Enrique going, and the love go long before—the love that make me marry him, I mean, for always love the husband; that was my duty. So, when my youth come back, though I think some by Enrique, suppose you are more in the mind, which, after all, is old, though much fall away. And I want, want to see you, but no like to ask you to come, for you are so busy and so ambeetious, and I know I live till you come again si is a year, and that make me feel happy. No cry, my friend. I no cry, for is sweet to be young again. Often I no can understand why not loving you then; you are so fine man now—but was boy then, and I admeer so much the caballeros, so splendid, and talk so graceful; no was use then to the other kind. But, although I no theenk much before—have so many babies and so much trouble, and, after, nothing no matter—always I feel deep down I have miss something in life; often I sigh, but no know why. But theenk much when go to die, and now I know that si I am really young again, and well, I marry you and am happy in so many ways with you, and have the intelligence. Never I really have been alive. I know that now.’

She fell back, panting a little, and her voice, always very low, had become almost inaudible. She motioned to a bottle of angelica on the table beside her, and John took her in his arms and put the glass to her lips. It brought the colour back to her face, and she lifted her arms and crossed them behind his neck.

‘Juan,’ she whispered coaxingly, ‘you have love me once—I know; and sometimes have cried, because theenk how I have made you suffer. Make the believe I am really the young girl again, and love me like then. Going very soon now—and will make me very happy.’

‘It is easy enough to imagine,’ he said; ‘easy enough! It will be a ghastly travesty, God knows, but could I have foreseen today during that terrible time, I would have welcomed it as better than nothing.’