

Jim the Conqueror

... By Peter B. Kyne ...

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CHAPTER VI—Continued

"Why should he? He came off second best, didn't he? He was drunk at the time and my father was intoxicated, otherwise there would have been two funerals. Father was heart-broken when he sobered up, and sent his lawyer to your Uncle Bill to apologize, so your Uncle Bill accepted the apology and sent back one of his own. When I was a very small boy your uncle sold out his ranch to old man Hobart, whose son, Kenneth, is now my general manager. Does Uncle Bill treat you with civility and decency?"

"Of course he does. He's adorable. He's a love."

"Very well, then, I'll not kill him. You must agree, though, that I did you a real service in bumping off old Uncle Tom."

"Uncle Bill says you did," Roberta admitted. "But then he's biased."

"My father always declared that Uncle Bill was all wool and a yard wide. . . . Dinner's ready, thank God. That stout saddle-colored female who appeared in the door just now says we'd better come and get it or she'll throw it out."

"What an extremely old-fashioned young man you are, Don Jaime."

"Please do not call me Don Jaime. The don is really a title of respect, and is used by one's employees or social inferiors—rather like having a pullman porter address you as 'judge' or 'colonel.' You may call me Mr. Higgins. Mr. Higueneas, James, Jimmy or Jaime."

"Very well, Mr. Higueneas," the girl murmured in a very small voice. Then: "Hold everything, mine host. I must run to my room for a handkerchief. I forgot to fetch one."

Don Jaime gazed after her. There was no doubt but that he approved of her mightily. When his gaze shifted it met Mrs. Ganby's.

"How does she impress you?" she queried.

"Miss Antrim is physically beautiful and mentally alert. Yes, she's as smart a young woman as you and I will ever meet. Well raised, well spoiled, haughty, aware of her power over men and just loves to use it. Sound at heart, though, I think."

"Will she be here long, Don Jaime?"

"I do not know. In all probability she will not be here long enough to please me. In fact if I hadn't run that Bill Dingle scrawling down the road she wouldn't be here now. She's a new note in life to me, but I'm not going to let her know she is."

CHAPTER VII

Robbie, his pale face glowing from his recent ablutions, arrived with Roberta and the four went in to dinner. The table had been set in the gallery, Don Jaime explaining that during the summer they always ate outside.

Roberta appraised the table with the eye of an expert. It was covered with a white linen cloth; short-stemmed red roses peeped from a jade-green bowl in the center; the service was of sterling silver and very old and beautiful. On closer inspection she saw that it carried a coat of arms.

"My great-great-grandmother's silver," Don Jaime explained. "Fellow in New York once heard I had it and sent his secretary down to buy it. He offered me an unbelievably high price for the service and didn't seem to believe me when I told him it was not for sale. He just kept tilting the ante and couldn't seem to see he was annoying me. Some people are like that. They think money is the beginning and the end of everything."

"Perhaps you would, also, Mr. Higueneas, if you had ever been poor," Roberta suggested.

"I've paid 12 per cent for rented money," he retorted. "I've had the ranch mortgaged in bad years and banks carried my father half his lifetime. Only those who are poor in spirit, who lack courage, can be really poor."

"Do you not find life a little lonely here?"

"A busy man is seldom lonely. My father spent his life in bondage to the irrigation system you probably observed en route here, but after his death I completed it and transformed a semiarid valley into alfalfa and cotton fields. I got rid of the scrubby long-horned cattle that were built for speed and substituted Herefords, which are built for beef. All this has been a considerable task and fell to my hands when I was eighteen. That was ten years ago."

"After I was demobilized in the spring of 1919 I really started to put this ranch on a paying basis. I cleaned up on cotton in 1919 and '20. And cattle prices were unbelievably high. I had a feeling, however, that such a wartime prosperity wouldn't last, so I sold all my cattle in the fall of 1920, and in 1921 I didn't plant any cotton. Well, the market smashed on both—and lucky Jim didn't have any!"

"Instead I raised alfalfa and stacked it; then I bought cattle for a song when the banks and the governmental loan agencies foreclosed. Cheap cattle and cheap feed, you know. I had my moments of panic; the road was

rough and rocky in spots, although that, of course, made it all the more interesting, the victory all the more delightful. I think that when one has had to fight for his land and his people he learns to love both, no matter how unlovely or uninteresting they may appear to those whose lives have been spent in shelter and without effort."

"My life has been spent that way. I must admit," Roberta confessed. "And I like it," she added.

"Why not? You've never tried any other life, have you?"

Roberta noticed that her host was much more at his ease, now that their conversation had veered into new channels. It occurred to the girl that Don Jaime Miguel Higueneas had lived more in five minutes of his colorful life than had the last three generations of Hacketts. And the Hacketts were a long-lived race.

"What gainful occupation, if any, does Mr. Latham practice now?" Don Jaime asked Roberta.

"He plays the stock market."

"With success, I hope."

"He has always been very successful until recently, when he lost practically everything he had—or at least he would have lost it without the aid of some people who love him. We anticipate a reverse in the market which will pull him out, if not with a profit at least without terrific loss."

"My father loved your Uncle Bill, even if he did shoot him in the heel and disagree with him politically. I would be glad to give my father's friend a leg up. You live with your Uncle Bill, I take it."

"I've been his ward and a member of his household since my tenth birthday. I have never known a wisher hasn't hastened to gratify, at whatever cost. So, you see, now that he's old and liable to suffer financial reverses, it is my duty to take care of him, and for that reason my Uncle Tom's estate comes to me somewhat in the nature of a godsend."

"One more reason why I should be dealt with charitably in the matter of your deceased avuncular relative," the young man suggested humorously. "Well, we'll pull you out all right on the sheep."

"I understand the estate is boarding on you, Mr. Higueneas."

Don Jaime shrugged. "Es nada," he replied. "That is, the grass they consume doesn't amount to that," and he snapped his fingers. "The knowledge that I am serving a distressed lady is a rich reward."

Two maids removed the empty soup plates and set the roast down in front of Don Jaime. "A wild turkey," he informed Roberta, then he sharpened his carving knife on the steel and attacked the bird, dissecting it in a very neat and scientific manner.

"Can you cook, Miss Antrim?"

"Heavens, no!"

"I had heard it was a lost art with the rising generation. I'm a rattling good cook, myself, if I do say so. Most Latin males are, you know. I enjoy cooking fish and game."

"How about boxing?"

"Great sport. I have three vaqueros who are paid five dollars a month extra to box with me."

"That, I suppose," said Roberta dryly, "appeals to your Irish blood. Are you of a religious turn of mind?"

"Well, I built a church in my pueblo and I support a padre for my people. I play the organ in my church and I've rehearsed the choir until it's really rather good. You must come to mass with me tomorrow and listen to it."

"Why were you armed today? Do you always carry that arsenal?"

"No," he replied soberly. "I do not. But of late I have felt that discretion might be the better part of valor. You see, I have been unfortunate enough to make some new enemies recently. The last time I went abroad unarmed I was carried home on a stretcher."

"I fear," the girl suggested, "that the Antrim sheep are proving to be a source of embarrassment to you."

"Oh, not at all! My enemies never embarrass me, I assure you." He said it so simply, so earnestly, so absolutely without brag or bounce, that Roberta laughed aloud.

"You are a new note in life," she declared. "Mrs. Ganby; do you not find Don Jaime a source of profound amusement?"

"Don Jaime, I must admit, is different," Mrs. Ganby replied guardedly.

"I'm sure of it, Mrs. Ganby. He isn't a bit religious, but he is very charitable—so charitable, in fact, that I am certain he is obliging me, in the matter of those sheep, at considerable loss and nuisance and inconvenience to himself."

"Not at all," her host protested. "I expect to collect from the Antrim estate a reasonable fee for my services, to reimburse me for my outlay or inconvenience."

Roberta had a feeling of helplessness in this man's presence, for he was a new experience with her. She had never met a man who remotely resembled him—so ruthless, forceful and dominating.

Not knowing what to say, she was silent and attacked her meal. When presently, her glance met Don Jaime's again he was smiling at her, whereupon she itched with a desire to pull his undoubtedly Celtic nose. "He has all the audacity and assurance of the Irish and all of the ego of the Latin," she thought.

"What an indolent, semi-indolent glance he has! And he isn't good-looking at all. Still he isn't bad-looking. He's just masculine and knows it. All of his life he has been accustomed to being high and low justice on this ranch; because these peons of his koto to him he thinks he can get away with murder. He's just a Mexican feudal baron who has established his feudal sway just far enough north of the border to make good with it."

"Is it possible for one to send a telegram from your ranch, Mr. Higueneas?" she asked.

"Certainly. After dinner you can telephone your message to the office at Los Algodones and charge it to my account."

"I suppose I should go to Los Algodones in a day or two to consult with my attorney."

"Well, the longer you delay your visit, Miss Antrim, the more agreeable it will be to Prudencio Alviso. Prudy's almost a full-blooded Spaniard. About one thirty-second Aztec or Yaqui, but that's enough to make him want to take life easy. Be kind. Your visit on a business mission will cause him to bestir himself."

Roberta laughed again—softly, suddenly, for again she had a swift vision of Glenn Hackett and compared the activities of his law office with the somnolent status of Don Prudencio's legal mill.

"I feel like Alice in Wonderland," she declared suddenly.

"Speaking of bees and birds and sealing-wax, and cabbages and kings," said Don Jaime, "I am sincerely delighted to have said Prudy to you. He's so slow, so deliberate; I know he'll just lengthen out your visit to



"Just a Mexican Feudal Baron."

the Rancho Valle Verde until you get to like the country. Just now you think my country's bare and lonely and desolate, but—it will grow on you. To one unaccustomed to wide horizons there is born, in Texas, a feeling that one is lost. But presently one discovers that out of all this loneliness and vastness a surprising number of good-natured and contented people come; they're friendly and they do not talk too much, although they do talk to the point. I'll miss my guess a mile if you find yourself without a serious interest in Texas. Mees—I mean Miss—Antrim."

"He's secretly excited and disturbed," Roberta thought. "Pronouncing 't' as 'e.' I wish dinner were over."

"Provisionally, it was not a long course dinner, such as Roberta had expected would be served and which she had looked forward to with dread. A soup, a salad, a roast, two vegetables, a light dessert and black coffee. That was all.

"He runs his household like a sensible man, at any rate," the girl reflected.

She watched a humming bird flitting from flower to flower, saw a quail come forth and bear away a crust tossed him by Don Jaime. Then, as the shadows lengthened, the mocking birds, replete with food and happy, perched in a lime tree and paid for their meal in melody. Roberta had never heard a Spanish mocker before and was delighted with the beauty and variety of their extensive repertoire.

"You are fond of music?" Don Jaime queried.

Roberta nodded and he tossed a quick order in Spanish to one of his dusky maids.

From behind the climbing passion vines on the gallery across the patio a guitar was strummed; Roberta heard the mellow notes of a harp as unseen fingers ran the scale. Then a girl's voice—without much volume, but wondrously sweet and sympathetic—commenced to sing "La Golondrina."

"When I am unhappy," Don Jaime explained, "they sing that sad song to me and make me happier."

"Why don't you have them sing something joyful?"

"My dear Miss Antrim, no Higgins ever wants to be made happy when he's unhappy. It's like enjoying poor health. We must feed our racial melancholy."

"You incorrigible Celt! Are these professional entertainers brought out from Los Algodones?"

"No, they're part of the ranch assets. That harp has been in our family since the first Higgins emigrated to Madrid. Hello, bub, you getting sleepy? Tired after your long ride today, eh?"

Robbie had left his chair and climbed up into Don Jaime's lap; his thin little arm was around the brown, powerful neck, his head cuddled under the big square chin. Don Jaime held him close with his left arm, and Roberta noticed that with his right hand he gently massaged the atrophied muscles of the boy's left leg.

The purple shadows crept over the patio, the music sobbed and mourned behind the passion vines.

Presently Don Jaime shook Robbie gently. "Come, son," he said softly. "Say your prayers—in Spanish, as I have taught you. Nuestro padre—"

The sleepy voice spoke haltingly the unfamiliar words, the man prompting from time to time. When the prayer was finished he rose and, with the boy in his arms, stooped over Mrs. Ganby that she might kiss her son good night. Then he passed around the table to Roberta's chair. "Innocence and helplessness," Roberta heard him murmur. "Who could not love it!" He stooped over her and lowered the boy until the childish lips brushed her cheek; then he bore the lad off to bed.

The two women exchanged glances, the mother's eyes were moist. "That is the Latin in him, Miss Antrim. He's not ashamed to demonstrate his affection."

Roberta did not answer. She was thinking of a remark that Crooked Bill had once made in her presence. "When children and dogs love a man a woman is usually safe with him." She wondered now if Glenn Hackett loved children and dogs and decided presently that he would love his own children, if and when he had them, but that he would not be interested in dogs or human beings beneath him in the social scale.

"He is a strange man, Mrs. Ganby," she said at last. "I have never met his kind before. I do not know what to make of him—whether to like him or dislike him, to fear him or to trust him. He killed my uncle and then, masquerading under the name of Jim Higgins he induced me to accept the hospitality of Jaime Higueneas. Where I come from one doesn't do that sort of thing, you know. How long have you known him, Mrs. Ganby?"

"Since three days after he killed your uncle. I am a trained nurse and I came down here to tend his wounds, although he would have recovered without my aid, for he is as healthy as a horse. Later he asked me to be his housekeeper, but since he does not appear to regard me as a servant, I imagine I am a sort of paid hostess. I think he had a hope that you might visit the ranch some day, and of course you would never have been invited unless he had a duenna here. He is very punctilious in matters of social propriety."

"And Robbie?"

"When he discovered I had a little crippled son he sent his general manager to El Paso to bring the boy here. He knew I'd want him with me, of course."

"I understand. Innocence and helplessness. Of course his heart went out to Robbie."

"Children understand, Miss Antrim. I think Don Jaime is a man who likes a fight—any kind of a fight. He is tremendously interested in that atrophied leg of Robbie's. Lately he has started massaging it, stretching it, studying it. He has been sending for medical treatment on infantile paralysis and talks of sending Robbie East to be treated at the Rockefeller Institute."

Further confidences were interrupted by the return of the host. He called something in Spanish to the



"For a Moment I Had Forgotten I Had Killed Your Uncle Tom!" He Murmured.

singer and she came and handed him her guitar, received the thanks of her audience and departed covered with embarrassment.

"Now, then," quoth Don Jaime, "we'll have a little old Anglo-Saxon minstrelsy from the boss himself." He smote the strings with a firm, assured hand and in a perfectly thunderous basso began. "The Yellow Rose of Texas." To his great delight Roberta joined in the song. He cocked one lazy eye at her inquiringly; at a half-rest in the music he demanded:

"How come?"

"Uncle Bill," she replied, and he nodded comprehension. Yes, of course Uncle Bill would know that one. But Don Jaime played now while Roberta sang.

The song ended and Don Jaime looked up, a fleeting gleam of sadness, of resignation in the lazy eyes. "For a moment I had forgotten I had killed your Uncle Tom!" he murmured.

"Oh, please, Mr. Higueneas—"

"Oh, please, Jaime," he corrected.

"I had forgotten, too, Jaime."

"Now that you have made up your mind not to dislike me or the task of trying to like me, I have a confession to make."

"I'll try to hear up under it."

"A few days after I shot it out with your uncle, his man, Bill Dingle and five others came over here with the intention of doing me great bodily harm—lynching me to one of the cross-pieces in that heavy trellis in the grape arbor yonder, as a matter of fact. I captured Dingle and his idiots and confined them in my private bastle here for thirty days. Before turning them loose I had my foreman flog them all."

"Oh, Jaime!"

"That's the sort of bad egg I am, senorita. That's why I was wearing two guns today. By the way, can you sing Gounod's 'Ave Maria'?"

"Why, yes!" she answered a little breathlessly.

"Oh, grand, wonderful! Let's go inside and practice it with a piano accompaniment. I want you to sing it at mass tomorrow for my people. You will, of course. I know you will. Poor devils. They'll love it so! But first send your telegrams. The office in Los Algodones will soon be closing."

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

Formal Notification of Call to Domestic Duty

It seems that the wife of a well-known member of the Central Manufacturing District club, whom we shall name fictitiously for obvious reasons, has experienced considerable difficulty in persuading her spouse to assume a share in the family responsibilities. Particularly would she appreciate a helping hand in the morning when there are breakfast to get, children to dress, and a host of other cares to discharge in a minimum of time.

Other means failing, she finally resorted to the formally ironic and, wakening him one morning, thrust before his astonished eyes the following neatly done card:

Mrs. Easton Weswood requests the esteemed company of Mr. Easton Weswood at the robing of their children, Edward, Eleanor, and Edelweiss, this morning at seven-fifteen in the main and only bathroom of the Weswood domicile. (Overflow will gather in the south hall)



CHRISTMAS morning dawned cold and clear. Over field and farmhouse and winding roads, was a snowy blanket. "Good Christmas weather!" said Jared Pigeon, as he stamped in from the post office, and thumped a bundle of letters on the kitchen table. He was regarding his wife from a watchful eye, for he had noted a letter from Caroline, their daughter.

Jared went out to his car to bring in the Christmas packages. He saw his wife's pretty, wrinkled face bent over a long letter in Caroline's handwriting, as he closed the door. Of course it was natural for their only child to desire other friends—and it would be pokey indeed to come home to eat Christmas dinner with two old people! And there was Billy Wakeman, too. She used to go around with Billy. Now they had quarreled and Billy was very grave and grown up in the conduct of his public garage. He had a good mind to go down and ask Billy to come and eat Christmas dinner with them—Billy had no folks of his own.

Forgetting all about the Christmas packages in the back of his sleigh—Mr. Pigeon jumped in and, turning around in the hard way he had dug out of the snow, went tinging out of the yard and down the road toward the large garage and oil and gas station that Billy Wakeman had built on the main road.

"Hello, Mr. Pigeon," said Billy. "Merry Christmas!"

"Same to you," returned Jared Pigeon. "I came over after you, Billy Wakeman."

"What can I do for you?" asked Billy.

"Come and eat dinner with me and me—I kinder expect Caroline ain't coming down."

"Thank you," said Billy getting very red, and then pale.

"Come when you like, so's you get there before one o'clock," grinned Jared, wishing he knew some girl he



"Well, Jared Pigeon," Exclaimed His Wife, "Where Have You Been?"

could ask to share dinner with Billy. "Well, Jared Pigeon!" exclaimed his wife, coming to the back door as he came in with his delayed packages. "where have you been—leaving me with this news about Caroline?"

"Don't get excited, the hoe," protested her husband dumping the packages on the floor and closing the kitchen door. "I know it's terrible that Caroline can't come home this Christmas, but you know what young folks are these days. I've asked Billy Wakeman to dinner. If you can't think of any girl I can't ask so there'll be four of us, mother—"

Mrs. Pigeon smiled sedately. "Land no, Jared, Caroline's the only girl I can think of," she said, "and now, with company, we've got to get busy."

Mother Pigeon, running up and down stairs, was very busy—setting the table with all their best china. There was a delicious warmth up there in Caroline's room.

Then, when Mrs. Pigeon in her best black silk, and a new cap with a tiny violet bow on her lovely white hair, was entertaining Billy Wakeman, just as a mother cares for her own beloved son, just before it was time to sit down to that delicious dinner mysteriously set for four people—though Mr. Pigeon knew mother always set a place for Caroline, anyway—just then they heard the horn of the village stage.

"It's stopping here!" yelled Mr. Pigeon, rushing to the side door, and in a moment a lovely, laughing girl was throwing off her furs among them, not seeing Billy Wakeman at first, where he stood white and tense. Then she saw him, and a wonderful look came into her face—"Billy!" she whispered. "You here? Oh, this makes it perfect!"

Billy Wakeman held out his arms and Caroline went into them like a homing bird.

Mrs. Pigeon drew her husband into the kitchen and closed the door. "Jared," she said, "you look it for granted this morning that Caroline wasn't coming home—but she is here! She said she was tired of the city, and that she would find something to do in town. I knew her heart was breaking for Billy—you did a wonderful thing to ask him—"

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—Exchange