

THE BASKET OF ANITA.

By Grace Ellery Channing.

IXTEEN in all. Five large ones, two small queer ones, four medium, three with the Greek pattern, the little brown one, and this beauty. Just look at it, Manuelo!" and the speaker balanced in her hand, with an air of triumph, the

delicate basket whose intricately woven tints formed a whole fascinating even to the eye of the uninitiated.

"It is a good one, señorita," admitted Manuelo, guardedly. "The señorita has as fine a lot of baskets now as anyone in the valley, saving only old Anita. Ah! if the señorita could see hers——!"

He stopped abashed, for the young girl had clapped her hands over her ears, and was shaking her head laughingly at him.

"Manuelo! Manuelo!" said she, reproachfully, "how many times have I forbidden you to mention old Anita to me? Isn't it enough to spend all my time—and money, pursuing every basket which reaches my ears, without being

haunted by the ghost of old Anita? Besides," she added, irrelevantly, "you know I don't believe in old Anita and her baskets."

Manuelo smiled; a smile like swift sunshine. "That is because you have not seen them, señorita," said he. "If you had, you would believe in no others. There is one of them so high, señorita"—with a graceful turn of the wrist indicating the size.

"Three feet! Why, it is a mammoth, Manuelo!"

"And *fine*"—he cast a disdainful glance at the baskets about her—"you have nothing like it, señorita. But that is not all. Where the pattern goes there are feathers—woodpecker's feathers woven in, all of the brightest scarlet—oh, far gayer than these!"

Elsa shook her head, dejectedly.

"You are determined to make me miserable, Manuelo. Now, what is the use of telling me this when Anita and her baskets are—how many miles away?—and you know she wouldn't sell one of them for less than the price of a small ranch. If I were a man I might mount my horse, make off into the wilderness, and raid the mystical Anita for the sake of her baskets; but since I am not—" with an expressive smile the young girl turned again to the contemplation of her treasures.

It was a pretty enough sight—Manuelo thought so, at least—the dainty creature surrounded by the ancient baskets, beneath a frame of splendid scarlet passion-flowers. The sunlight glinted on her golden hair and floating dress; and all about and beneath lay the fragrant groves of orange and lemon, and the gardens where roses—red, white, and golden—held carnival all the year round. A pretty sight, Manuelo thought, quite unaware what a striking element he himself added, cast upon the lower step with all the lazy grace of his nation in his figure, all its dark beauty in his face, and all its picturesqueness in his costume—loose shirt, wide trousers, sombrero, and gay kerchief knotted about his throat. By his side lay his guitar.

There were two things on earth that Manuelo loved—his guitar and Lolita.

Lolita was loosely tethered in the grove at this moment. There was noth-

ing in her appearance to distinguish her from any other of the score of bronchos in the village. But as for the guitar, there was none like it in all the South or West. In the first place, it was very old. Manuelo's mother had fingered it, and her mother's mother before her. They said it came first from Spain, a love-gift from some ardent Spanish lover, in the days when Manuelo's ancestors were great people in the new land, and to be a Mexican was to be of the nobility of California. Be that as it might, nothing else remained of all the traditional grandeur and pride save the guitar, and, perhaps, a statuesque turn of its young heritor's head. And the quaint golden inlaid tracery of the guitar had grown rusty, while the statuesque head served only to set off a ragged sombrero.

That troubled Manuelo not at all, strange compound of pride and carelessness, fiery impetuosity, and supine indolence that he was.

His old curmudgeon of an uncle, with whom he lived, might scold and swear, rolling Spanish oaths at him; Manuelo was thoroughly contented with his meagre lot, equally happy while tearing madly about the country on Lolita, or lying idly at the feet of Elsa Loring, singing Southern melodies to his beloved guitar.

How many hours he had spent so since blue-eyed Elsa came to occupy the hammock on the porch at Las Delicias, neither Manuelo nor Elsa cared to reckon. To Elsa it was such a natural thing to have him at her feet; to Manuelo, so simply natural to be there. And now Elsa had contracted the basket craze.

"What will you do with them all, señorita?" demanded Manuelo, abruptly, after watching her silently for a space.

Elsa looked up from the five she was critically trying to make a choice between.

"Do with them?" she repeated, vaguely; "oh, I shall—take them home with me." She blushed a little. Manuelo said nothing. "You see," continued Elsa, confidentially, "in our part of the country they don't have anything like them, nothing half so beautiful, and so the people are all wild about them. The

more I can get the better I shall like it, and the prouder I shall be. Only"—she added, ruefully—"I can't get many more, for I have pretty nearly ruined myself already, in spite of the wonderful bargains you have found for me."

Manuelo looked pleased. "You need not give yourself trouble for that, señorita," said he, "there are more, plenty more, and—cheap. I will find them for you."

Elsa's blue eyes gave him a glance before which his own fell for sheer joy.

"Yes," said she, "I dare say you will. I believe you even cause them to spring from the ground. I am not sure you don't sit up nights to manufacture them yourself—and all for a song! Look at that beauty—only four dollars it cost me. You could have sold it to the Englishman for double. I sometimes think, Manuelo, that you are—*too* good to me."

Manuelo looked out into the grove—at Lolita.

"Señorita," he stammered, "impossible! It is you who are too good."

"And all the other things, the walks, and drives, and music," persisted the girl, "when I was so ill, and they brought me here to cure me, and I was so homesick that I almost preferred to die. Do you know what I should have done without your music?—I should have gone mad."

She turned her eyes to him. Actually there were tears in them.

Manuelo sprang from his step. "Señorita," he cried, quite beside himself, "I beg of you! It was all nothing! I loved to do it, señorita—the walks, the drives, the music; and as for the baskets—a miserable set of wretched ones, not worth your thanks," he added, in order to dispose of them utterly. "Now, had they been the baskets of Anita, the señorita might indeed—"

And Elsa threw back her golden head and laughed merrily with still moist eyes.

"Aunt Mary," she said, an hour later—Manuelo, after singing her many songs, had gone in search of the mail, a duty he had long since assumed, counting himself richly paid for the dusty ride by the smile home letters brought to Elsa's lips—"Aunt Mary," said she,

"this is the loveliest country on earth, but it would be rather dull without Manuelo, don't you think? Tell me—what can I give him to show how grateful I am to him?"

Aunt Mary thought a moment, her mild eyes fastened upon the delicate wild-rose face before her. Perhaps that very thing suggested her reply.

"My dear," she said, "why not give him your photograph?"

Elsa sat bolt upright in horror.

"Good gracious, Aunt Mary! My photograph to Manuelo!"

"Well, my dear," answered the placid lady, "there is nothing he would like so well. You asked my opinion. You owe a great deal to his devoted service. He has shown himself a faithful friend, and it would please him to be treated as such. Besides, the lad is a gentleman. Under the circumstances there can be no impropriety."

"No, of course not," murmured Elsa, blushing daintily, "but it is very, very unorthodox! Still, as you say, I owe him a great deal."

She sat very thoughtfully after that for a long time, leaning back in the hammock, letting her eyes wander from the nest of roses and passion-flowers about her, over palms, and pepper-tops, to the distant snow-capped peaks against the sky of more than Italian blue. All that landscape was full of Manuelo to her—full as her days had been since she first came, a delicate invalid, who could do no more than lie all day in the hammock and listlessly absorb the sunlight. Well, it was Manuelo who swung the hammock for her the very day after her arrival—Manuelo, who chanced just then to be irrigating the orange-groves at Las Delicias.

Elsa's fragile grace and fairness, the golden hair and blue eyes which looked twice angelic beside the florid Spanish beauties and tropical wealth of color all about, exercised a subtle spell upon Manuelo from the outset. Her sufferings and needs appealed to all that was chivalrous in his ardent nature. From watching to occasional ready aid, from that to daily service, was a rapid growth. Never had lady more devoted cavalier than Elsa in the dark-eyed Mexican. It was he who guided her walks; who found

a safe little mustang for her ; who devised excursions ; who piloted her to all the points of beauty ; who introduced her to the Padre at the old mission, and trotted out for her benefit all picturesque characters in the neighborhood ; who ransacked huts and scoured ranches in pursuit of Indian baskets, when finally the fell mania of collecting seized upon Elsa.

"Manuelo," she asked him once, marvelling at his unwearied energy, "why is it that you, who are so full of activity, don't *do* something?"

"Señorita," he replied, calmly, looking up from under his sombrero, "there is nothing to do."

"Then why not go away?" persisted Elsa. "You are young and strong. You waste your life in this sleepy little village."

Manuelo's eyes grew suddenly very far away.

"Who knows?" said he, dreamily ; "I have thought of it. It is dull at times, and Pedro grows crosser. There is my cousin Jesus in the Esperanza mines. *There* there is always something. Perhaps—some day!"

"Some day is no day," said Elsa, shaking her head. "You should make up your mind and go at once."

Manuelo glanced about, at the garden, the vine-covered porch, the cool little fountain in its forest of calla lilies, then he looked at Elsa and smiled very sweetly.

"Señorita," said he, "it is good here too." He picked up the guitar, touched the chords, and swept the girl away with the magic of a Southern song.

Elsa thought of all these things and many more now. The result of her meditation was that she selected from her desk that night a photograph of herself. On the back she wrote, "Manuelo, from Elsa Loring, with grateful thanks."

She gave it to him the next day with a little graceful, merry phrase ; but she was totally unprepared for its effect upon Manuelo.

A great wave of color, of light, surged into his face and glowing eyes. He absolutely trembled. For a moment he could say nothing. When he did speak, it was but two stammering, tremulous words.

"Señorita ! Gracias ! mille gracias !"

"It is nothing, nothing at all, Manuelo," said Elsa, lightly. But in her heart she had a sudden misgiving as to the wisdom of Aunt Mary's benevolence.

Manuelo never spoke again of the gift. Only he was, if possible, more serviceable and gentle and thoughtful than ever, while his mellow voice and plaintive guitar might be heard nightly floating above the perfumed groves of Las Delicias.

Elsa grew fonder and fonder of him, and treated him like a favored brother. She found the country, the climate, and Manuelo all perfect, and declared that she herself should be perfectly happy but for one thing.

"And that one thing——?" said Aunt Mary, with a smile.

"The baskets of Anita," asserted Elsa, as with a mischievous laugh she disappeared into the house.

The peaceful weeks flew by. In a land where there is nothing to mark the flight of time save fresh succession of flowers, time flies faster than elsewhere. The oranges came, and ripened upon the trees into luscious globes of juicy sweetness ; the almonds blossomed, and the apricots and peaches turned the landscape into a Japanese garden of pearl and white. The poppies blossomed and ran across the mesas, acres of them,—waves of living, palpitating orange-golden glow. The larks came and sang over them. One by one out came the multitudinous wild flowers and carpeted every inch of ground, running boldly into the very poppy-fields. And, finally, when every tree and bush and bit of land was set in flower and leaf and clothing green, the roses held their perfect April festival. By millions they waved and climbed and bloomed extravagantly on every hand. White and gold and crimson, and every tint between, the land disappeared under roses, the whole face of the country glowed and blossomed with them.

So, perfumed and flattered and wooed, and caressed by flowers and sun and softest air, the fragile Elsa strengthened her hold of life daily, and bloomed, like the land about her, into beauty and sudden happiness. Such a change had come over her. Manuelo was not a little proud of it.

"Señorita," said he, "you should live always in our South."

Basket-hunting remained Elsa's favorite occupation. She was constantly renewing her determination to consider the collection complete, and as constantly being lured from it by the sight of a novel form, a quaint pattern, or some "bargain too good to be lost."

Her collection was quite a theme of interest to all the inhabitants of the little village who knew her, each one of them personally, by this time. They were fond of bringing their friends to see the assortment which Elsa was always ready to display, and more than one excellent bargain found its way to Elsa's ears through their interest. It was early days then. If Elsa went back now to the village she would find baskets rarer than roses in an Eastern winter, and held at proportionate prices. But in these days she had it much her own way.

Many and various were the baskets. Great bell-shaped black and white ones; tall, delicate, vase-like shapes; odd ones like hour-glasses broken abruptly; some small and dainty like a lady's bonbonnière; others flat and like tiny saucers for sweet-breathed violets—there was no shape, size, or texture missing from Elsa's store. Of every age, tint, degree of wholeness and cleanliness—truly they formed a treasure to make a connoisseur's heart beat high and enviously.

One unusually warm afternoon Manuelo rode up to the entrance of Las Delicias. He had been setting out orange-slips all day, and then had ridden a couple of miles beyond to secure a basket of which Francisco Martinez had told him over their work. Baskets were growing scarce, and Manuelo had to look farther afield each day.

This one proved to be a miserable affair, small, dingy, and ragged, besides smelling most self-assertingly of all its latest uses. Manuelo almost decided not to take it at all, but he hated to go back empty-handed. The owner compounded for "four bits," and finally Manuelo left the hut with the basket in his hand and disdain in his eyes.

"Still," thought he, solacingly, "it is one more, and will amuse the señorita."

He made Lolita fast to the usual pepper-tree. "Here is Manuelo now," he

heard Elsa say, as he came up the path. And then a fierce pang of jealousy smote his heart.

On the top of the wide steps sat Elsa, radiant, and Aunt Mary close behind; and in front of Elsa, huge, mellowed by age to a beguiling brown, and with a great, florid pattern sprawling alluringly about its wide mouth, stood the king of all baskets. Yet it was not the basket, nor Elsa's triumphant eyes, which Manuelo noticed with that bitter pang, but the lounging figure of José Silva on the step below.

José was the natural rival of Manuelo. In the first place José was a year older, and an inch taller, and as agile with his feet as Manuelo with his fingers—the best dancer, as Manuelo was the best musician, in San Miguel. In the second place, José had in his blood that taint which no Mexican ever pardons—the Indian taint—and Manuelo was a Mexican Caballero at heart, with all the pride and prejudice of his race hot within him. There was no love lost between the two. Doubtless it was more to anger Manuelo than for any other purpose that José, knowing well his devotion to Elsa—had he not ridiculed it for months back as openly as he dared?—had taken the pains to bring her a basket which far outrivalled any Manuelo had ever been able to find.

"No doubt he stole it," thought Manuelo, bitterly, as he went up the steps. He was too proud to show his feelings, except by an extra touch of Castilian dignity as he saluted the ladies and José.

"Only look, Manuelo!" cried Elsa, unable to suppress her excitement. "José has brought me the most magnificent basket! Only see how fine it is, and what a pattern! He says it is at least a hundred years old. Isn't it superb?"

"It is very fine, señorita," answered Manuelo, proudly.

"And only ten dollars," said Elsa, exultantly. "Think of it! Why, I wouldn't have missed it for half as much again."

José smiled, a swift, flashing smile. He was very handsome when he smiled.

Manuelo hated him.

"Then take care, señorita," said José, "I may raise my price."

Elsa laughed. "No," she said, "I am not afraid. You are honest; all you Mexicans are. Look at Manuelo; he has sold me baskets for a song all winter."

José glanced, just glanced, at the baskets about him, and then back at his own, and he smiled a little. The smile said as plainly as words, "I am too polite to say so, but *such* baskets——! Now mine——!"

Manuelo's blood boiled. He, too, looked bitterly at the baskets he had gathered with such loving pride. How coarse and dingy and common they had all at once grown beside the magnificent basket of José. And as for the last wretched one—he would gladly have thrown it out into the grove, had such a thing been possible. At this very moment Elsa caught sight of it.

"Oh!" she exclaimed, "what is that in your hand?—another basket for me?"

Manuelo gathered all his Castilian pride. He produced the basket and handed it to her indifferently.

"It is a wretched one, señorita," he said, calmly, "but will serve to increase your collection."

Elsa took it and looked at it silently.

José looked at it too, and smiled.

"It was very kind of you to bring it," said Elsa, gently, "and I only wonder you could find any—you have brought me so many." She put it beside the others, then she stood off and looked at the entire row. Manuelo watched the varying expression as she looked from one to another. When she came to the monster which headed the line with an air of conscious superiority (for which Manuelo could have kicked it) her eyes brightened with delight, and she clasped her hands together, naively; Manuelo's heart contracted. "Oh, you beauty!" she exclaimed, involuntarily; then, "I believe I *shall* have to give up collecting *now*," she said, with a laugh. "I shall never be satisfied with anything less than this again, and there are no more, there can't be any more like it—can there, Manuelo?" She turned to him, confidingly. "Did *you* ever see a basket more beautiful than this?"

José cast a glance of malice. Manuelo drew himself up proudly.

"Señorita," said he, "*yes*—the baskets of Anita!" Then he felt himself grow scarlet, for there was an irrepressible ripple of laughter, quickly suppressed, from Aunt Mary, and a hoarse chuckle from José. Even Elsa had smiled a swift, involuntary smile. But Elsa was a little gentlewoman, and there was no mistaking the sudden passion of Manuelo's eyes.

"Oh, yes, surely," she said, with easy naturalness, "I had forgotten the beautiful baskets of Anita." Then she picked up one of the lesser baskets, crowned it with scarlet passion-flowers, and called upon them all to admire the effect.

It was gracefully and graciously done, and Manuelo knew it. He took up his hat quickly.

"Adios, señorita!" said he. Elsa looked up quickly.

"Are you going already, Manuelo? Will you not stay and sing for us?"

He shook his head. "Thanks, señorita;" catching the mocking eyes of José he murmured something about "mañana." Then he turned away down the rose-bordered path under the olives, carrying his head very high indeed, while the guitar dangled at his side.

Poor Manuelo! He knew—worst of all—that he had betrayed himself; that all his pride had not availed. Ridiculed, despised, his loving work of all the winter made worthless in a single moment, and finally to be misbelieved. He had not minded Elsa's laughing jests at old Anita all winter—what a different thing they sounded now in the light of José's mocking eyes. Manuelo set his teeth and his face grew stern.

"We shall see if they will believe or no," said he.

He unfastened Lolita, threw himself upon her, thrust his heels into her sides, and without a backward glance at the house galloped away.

Old Pedro was standing in front of the dilapidated adobe house when the clattering of swift hoofs came up the road, and Manuelo, leaping lightly down, with a dexterous turn of the rein made the pony fast to a low pepper-tree. Then he came up to Pedro, who took his pipe from his mouth and regarded him disapprovingly.

"How now, lazy bones!" grumbled he.

Manuelo was pale, and the dust lay thickly upon his purple kerchief.

"Money!" said Manuelo, briefly.

Old Pedro sniffed scornfully, and put his pipe back again. Manuelo came a step nearer.

"I want money! you hear? I must and I will have it!"

"Do you expect me to give it to you, then, idler? Where is that from the orange picking? Gone! thrown away! and you think I will give you more to throw in the dust,"—Pedro's voice was raised discordantly—"good-for-nothing! Not I!"

"See," said Manuelo, "will you lend it?"

"No," said Pedro, "not a cent will I!"

Manuelo made a despairing gesture.

"Have it I must, and will!" He turned away, leaned against Lolita, one hand thrown across her neck, and thought desperately.

Old Pedro watched him curiously. Suddenly an evil light came into his eyes.

"Manuelito," said he, caressingly.

"Yes," said Manuelo, mechanically; he was thinking, thinking.

"You want that money badly?" with an evil grin.

"Desperately."

"Good! Give me the guitar you shall have it."

Manuelo started violently. Involuntarily he laid his hand upon it. Sell the guitar, his best-beloved, his treasure! He dragged it hastily round, and glared at it, the sole remnant of all the faded glories of his family. As soon part with Lolita!

"Good!" said old Pedro, with a sneer; "you can do without the money, idiot, that's plain to see." He turned to go in.

"Wait!" said Manuelo. He unstrung the guitar from his shoulder, and held it out in both hands to Pedro.

"How much for it?" said he.

Old Pedro came back grumbling. The guitar was very old, the inlaid part shabby; it would need new strings; he feared the tone was not what it had been.

"Twenty-five dollars," said Manuelo, sternly, "and it is yours."

Pedro held up his hands to heaven.

Twenty-five dollars! Saints above! was he made of money? Fifteen would be ruinous.

"Twenty-five dollars *now*, on the spot, or I will take it to the Englishman, who you know will give me thirty. Yes or no!"

"No!"

Without a word Manuelo slung the guitar over his head and turned to Lolita.

"Now, did ever one see such a hot head!" cried old Pedro, in grieved surprise. "A word is a blow with him. Here, madcap, give me the guitar and take the money. Besides, the Englishman is away and you are in haste to throw the good money in the dust, I warrant. Come, bring on the guitar." And so, grumbling and swearing, the old man went in and unearthed his miserly guarded store. Manuelo stood by impassive and silent, having once more unslung the guitar.

"Here," said Pedro at last, reluctantly handing the money to him. It went to Pedro's heart to part with these dollars, but there was consolation in the guitar. *He* knew, if Manuelo did not, what the curio-hunting Englishman would give for the rarest guitar in America.

Manuelo took the money, laid the guitar in the grasping hands outstretched for it, and turned away. He leaped straight upon Lolita, and paying no heed to the questions and commands which Pedro screamed after him, rode off under the drooping peppers.

"The mad fool!" grumbled Pedro. And then he looked at the guitar and chuckled to himself.

Three days and three nights Manuelo loped southward to the mountains. He stopped each night at some rancho's, but each morning's sun found him again on Lolita's back, his *canteria* stuffed with some frugal provision for the day. The mountains about grew steeper, the ranches lengthened into broad domains holding each many square miles in its boundaries; the villages dwindled into mere scattered

hamlets, and finally there was not much else than a rude trail from one solitary adobe hut to another. But it grew ever more picturesque. The chaparral-covered hills were abloom with silver; quails and wood-doves, jack-rabbits and squirrels started up in all directions from under Lolita's feet; and the yucas, myriads of them, stood thickly over the sides of the great hills, and high on impassable ledges above the wild ravines, like the multitudinous snowy banners of a hidden army.

It was very still. There were no carriages, still less railroads. Only now and then the figure of a horseman going at the easy lope which replaces a walk where distances are always measured by miles, or a solitary tourist with his bag and gun slung across his shoulder. For, year by year, as the ranches go, as the "Greaser" and the Indian go, as all the semi-tropical Spanish-Bohemianism is driven farther back, the picturesque-loving tourist takes refuge more and more in "tramping" it through the by-ways of California.

It was late on the afternoon of the third day when Manuelo, loping along over a level mesa, beheld high upon a hillside the object of his quest—a gray patch which his experienced eye knew for a cluster of adobe huts. He drew a sigh of relief.

"So," he muttered, "there they are. It is well." Then he bent and stroked Lolita's neck reassuringly.

"Courage, my darling," said he, "we are almost there, and then a good supper and a night's rest for thee."

At that moment, round the sharp turn of the road came a pedestrian; a pedestrian at whom Manuelo glanced carelessly, then with sudden wonder, then with a thrill, a shock which made his heart bound and stand still.

The stranger was young, thirty perhaps, tall and slender. He walked with the assured gait of a mountain-climber, but his jaunty costume betrayed the "civilizee," if not the dandy. A picturesque sombrero shaded his handsome face, out of which two clear gray eyes looked coolly and merrily. Certainly there was nothing in all this to make Manuelo's heart behave so madly! The stranger carried a gun across his shoul-

der, and from a leather strap hung a bag, sketching-stool, and a mammoth Indian basket. Upon this basket the gaze of Manuelo was fastened with silent horror. Big, brown, finer than woven silk; and woven in a marvellous pattern which showed a constant scarlet gleam throughout it, Manuelo would have known it among ten thousand others—the basket of Anita! Meanwhile the stranger had approached, and lifting his hat with a smiling "Buenos dios, señor!" was passing by. At the same instant Manuelo reined Lolita straight across the path. "Señor," said he, "a thousand pardons!" He leaped from his horse. The stranger regarded him coolly but friendly.

"A thousand pardons, señor," repeated Manuelo, agitatedly, taking off his hat. "You have there a fine basket, señor!"

The "señor" smiled. "You are a connoisseur, then, my friend?" said he. "Yes, it is a magnificent specimen." He pulled it round and contemplated it with satisfaction. "I bought it from an old Indian woman up yonder," he added, "and I am inclined to think I was in luck, though she fleeced me to a pretty extent. It weighs more than a feather, too," he added, smiling as he readjusted it with a little shrug.

"Señor"—Manuelo's heart beat so fast and hard it must almost have been visible through his jacket—"as you say, it weighs; you will find it will grow heavier as you go, señor. If you would care to part with it——"

"Thanks!" said the stranger, calmly, "I am in nowise anxious."

"If it were a question of the price——?"

"It is not in the least a question of the price."

"Señor"—Manuelo's tone was entreating, supplicating. "I have come many miles to purchase that basket. Three days have I travelled, señor! If you would but sell it——"

The stranger looked at him with new interest. He noticed for the first time the haggard lines of the young Mexican's face.

"Why do you come so far and take so much trouble for this particular basket; there must be thousands of oth-

ers?" he asked, with direct and clear scrutiny.

"There are thousands of others, señor; yes!—but there is none other like this in all the country."

The señor smiled a little triumphantly.

"In that case," said he, "you must understand that, having been lucky enough to find it, I may naturally wish to keep it. I am sorry for you, my friend," he added, "sorry to be disobliging, but I am a collector of beautiful things, an artist, and this basket is, by your own admission, a treasure." He bowed and made a step to pass politely. But Manuëlo laid a desperate hand upon his arm.

"Señor," said he, "would no price tempt you? Would you not sell it even for a large, a very large price?"

The stranger smiled. "Why," said he, "I don't say that. I dare say I might if the price were large enough; I am by no means a millionaire."

Manuëlo drew himself up. "Señor," said he, calmly, "I offer you twenty-five dollars."

The stranger started and his eyes grew kindly, almost compassionate in their gaze. "My poor boy," said he, gently, "I could not take it—from you."

Manuëlo's head began to go round and round.

"Señor," said he, desperately, "you must—you will! It is not from me; it is—it is from a rich old Englishman, a madman for baskets. He will pay any price; he cares not what they cost him, and he has set his heart upon this. Twenty-five dollars is nothing to him—nothing, señor! Look!" He plunged his hand into his pocket and brought it out full of loose gold and silver. "This is all his, you may suppose, señor—it is not mine! But the basket—I pledged myself. You *will* sell it, señor?—for the love of God! There are reasons!—señor!"

He stopped, and hung with all his soul upon the moment's pause. A wild notion of offering to throw in Lolita, too, flashed across him, but he felt its untenableness in conjunction with the Englishman.

Meanwhile the stranger looked doubtfully from Manuëlo to the basket.

"There is something which strikes me as *odd* about this transaction," he thought to himself, quizzically, profoundly puzzled. "I am a tenderfoot, and, possibly, this is one of the customs of this singular country. Still, to keep a mounted Mexican curio-hunter scouting about the country with unlimited credit—no, *cash*—seems to me an unique luxury, even for a wealthy 'Inglese.' However," he added to himself, tolerantly, "that's none of my business, is it? and the boy's pride is evidently on the *qui vive* to secure this treasure. Shall I let him have it? He certainly wouldn't own that cash, or be so free with it if he did. No doubt he gets his little profit from it, so why should I scruple?"

"Very well," he said at last, aloud, "since you and your Englishman are in the majority, I will part with the basket—at that figure."

"Señor! mille gracias!" Gratitude, the most fervent and genuine gratitude spoke in the tones, and the eloquent dark eyes.

"Decidedly," thought the señor, "this passes!"

Manuëlo counted out the twenty-five dollars, and offered it to the stranger, who was slow to take it.

"You are sure," he said, "that you do not repent; that you are not exceeding your Englishman's authority?"

"Señor—*sure!*"

The stranger unslung the basket and handed it to Manuëlo. "Adios, my friend," said he, kindly; "I yield to you more than to the Englishman's dollars."

Manuëlo removed his sombrero, and stepped aside to clear the path. Under one arm he clasped the basket.

"Adios, señor," said he, courteously, his dark eyes lit with joy, his whole face beaming.

With a parting smile the stranger disappeared down the winding path, while Manuëlo, his heart singing within him, leading Lolita and bearing the basket, went slowly up the mountain trail.

Three days afterward he entered the town of San Miguel, dusty, travel-stained, and penniless, but with his mission accomplished. He brought with him the basket of Anita.

He did not go at once to Las Delicias. Being a lover, he was fastidious. Being

a Spaniard, he was something of a poet; and both the lover and the poet in him dictated that a victor should go not unadorned, bearing his spoils unto his lady. So he went straight to the hut of old Pedro.

Pedro was out, which was an agreeable omen at the outset. Having watered, fed, and groomed Lolita, Manu-elo entered the little hut, washed away the dust of his six day's ride, donned his *fiesta* suit, knotted the gayest kerchief about his beautiful throat, and emerged as gallant a cavalier as heart could wish.

Only he missed the guitar. But before his eyes stood the basket. Smiling he caught it up, and with the lightest heart resaddled the refreshed Lolita, and rode straight to Las Delicias.

It was evening. A superb southern moon flooded the quiet town with such light as one must go to California even to imagine. The wide casements and windows at Las Delicias all stood open, but there was no one on the porch when Manu-elo made his way up the path with the basket in his hands. He looked inside. Still no one. Perhaps, thought Manu-elo, they had strolled into the grove. He stood a moment, irresolute, beside the clump of over-reaching laurestinas, when all at once voices came to him, drifting across the still air from the lime-walks on the left; and at the same moment they—the voices—emerged into the moonlit space beyond. The mysterious silver glow made them visible like figures in a dream. Manu-elo, sunk in the shadow, was in another world.

Elsa's white dress brushed her companion—why not, since his arm was about her?—and her sweet eyes were raised with infinite contentment to the strong, loving ones looking down at her.

"And so," said she, "all the time I have been hard at work for you; and while you were tramping about in search of beautiful scenes, I was hoarding beautiful things for you. There will be enough to fill the studio."

"All of which," answered the mellow voice, "was very naughty of you, my sweetheart! You were to do nothing but get well and strong for me."

"Oh, but I did that too!" answered Elsa, lightly. "So well and strong, all

the time I was riding, and climbing, and hunting up treasures. Only ask Manu-elo."

"And who is Manu-elo?"

"Manu-elo is—Manu-elo! My devoted cavalier, the dearest and most delightful fellow! He has been better than the sun and air to me; and, dear, you will not mind that I—gave him—my picture? Aunt Mary said, *under the circumstances* it was quite right. If I had not been betrothed, of course, I would not have done it. You are not displeased?"

"Displeased!—my beloved! Wait and see how I shall thank him for being good to you!"

"He has deserted us for some days—orange-picking, I suppose—but you will see that he never forgets me; I am sure he will bring me a basket when he comes."

"Then," said the mellow voice, between mirth and regret, "I have lost my only chance of outrivalling him in his own line. You should have seen the basket I let slip through my hands the other day, Elsa!"

"Oh, Robert! but why?"

"Well, I had purchased it against my conscience, to begin with, at the rate of fifteen dollars; and it was a mighty one, a regular elephant for a poor pedestrian who was foolishly impatient to catch a certain train, in order to reach a certain little sweetheart of his! However," lightly, "I dare say I should have hung on to the basket in spite of qualms of conscience and legs, had I not encountered a basket-hunter who was madder than I, and who offered me the pretty sum of twenty-five dollars for it."

"And you let it go—oh!"

"Well, my darling, he did want it so very badly—and what right had an impecunious artist to luxuries of that market value? And then I did not know you were smitten with the basket craze, sweetheart, or I would have kept the basket, and gone without—say, coal."

But this mild sarcasm was thrown away. Elsa, the basket-bewitched, was dreaming of the lost one.

"What was it like?" was her meditative and irrelevant reply.

"Well," resignedly, "its majesty would stand, I think, about three feet

high. It was very quaintly shaped. It was the finest I ever have seen. There was a beguiling, mellow-brown tone to the whole, which attested its honorable age, and a most seductive pattern climbing about its sides. But there was something more—a gleam of scarlet about it which gave it character."

Elsa clasped her hands. "And you—sold it! How could you? Why, it is like the basket of Anita!"

"Now, who in the name of reason is Anita? Another of your attendant sprites?"

"Anita is a mythical old woman who lives on a mythical hill, and nurses a mythical basket, visible only to the eyes of Manuêlo—and whose Doppelgänger you sol——"

"Sweetheart!"

Two transfigured faces were uplifted in the moonlight, and two pairs of lips melted together.

Perfectly unobserved, a shadow melted into the shadows down the road.

Unobserved, Manuêlo led Lolita out into the road and leaped upon her back. He hesitated a moment—only a moment—then he turned her head away from the old mission and Pedro, and galloped straight into the open country, toward the mines of Esperanza.

It was only an hour later that Elsa, running up the steps with happy, unseeing eyes, stumbled over something, tripped, and would have fallen headlong, but for the arms about her.

"Why! what was that?" exclaimed Elsa.

Her lover stooped, fumbled in the uncertain dusk until his hand encountered the object; then he held it up in the moonlight.

There was an exclamation from both, then silence.

They had recognized, at the same moment, the upturned photograph in its depth, and the scarlet gleam of woodpecker's feathers about its rim.

It was the basket of Anita.

