# The Esmeralda Herders

Elia Wilkinson Peattie

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LOUIS PAPIN laid his thumbed Shakespeare on the table, after many ineffectual attempts to read it, and said aloud in a speculative tone of voice, "Perhaps I'd better try a game of solitaire."

He spread the cards out before him with much care; but the game proceeded slowly, for the reason that he seemed to have difficulty in recognizing the value of a card, staring at a three spot or a knave of clubs with uncomprehending eyes, as if he had never seen the like before. All of which meant, of course, that the enterprising impresario of the Esmeralda ranch had something on his mind.

Something was, indeed, so imperatively upon his mind that, after fifteen minutes of uncomprehending devotion to his game, he gathered up his cards, and, putting them in their case, began to pace the floor of his room. He had, no doubt, plenty of troubles of a personal sort, if he had had the time to think about them. But his perplexity on this night was of another kind. The truth was, he stood face to face with the most vexatious problem which had confronted him since he came down from San Francisco to look after eight thousand merinos for Leonard and Filbin. One year there had been an epidemic of acute tonsillitis, but he had nursed the men through that so successfully that not one grave on the wind−ravaged desert told the tale; another season the sheep had been stricken with influenza, but that was weathered with the loss of a few hundred head; and once, in the dead of the wet season, the season of black nights, a series of disastrous raids had been made by the Mexicans, in which nearly two thousand of the long−wooled sheep had been "cut out."

Papin congratulated himself upon having met all of these difficulties with decision and a heart for the struggle. Neither he nor his men had faltered till order and normality were restored. But it was a different matter now. A malady of more serious character than tonsillitis had broken out among the men. It was homesickness, endemic, contagious, malignant homesickness.

Three of the men were down in bed from sheer sullenness, and there was hardly a man about the place who would vouchsafe an intelligible and frank answer to a question. The home−madness was on them, and deeper each day grew their disgust for the desert, where the senseless sheep browsed and the rabid sun made its frantic course.

It had come about naturally enough. The season had been unusually hot and dusty, and it seemed as if the sun grudged every hour which the night claimed for its own. The stars were well upon their way before the eyes of the herders could discover them, and the dawn was hustled, dry and breathless, over the mountains. They hardly caught a glimpse of her pale draperies before the day, swaggering and insolent, was there, holding her place with evil assurance. The quarters looked even more than usually uninviting. Lee Hang, the Chinaman, was an evil fellow, careless and ill−natured, and things got at their worst under his management. It seemed as if the men breathed and ate dust. It was actually in their food. It was on their beds. They could not escape it; the sky appeared to be blurred with it. They began to see visions in the twilight hour, visions of trees beside running brooks, and dewy paths where women walked. The desert was womanless, and thereby doubly a desert. All of these things Papin reviewed in his weary mind. He wished more than he could say that some perfectly sane and disinterested person would com see visions in the twilight hour, — visions of trees beside running brooks, and dewy paths where women walked. The desert was womanless, and thereby doubly a desert. All of these things Papin reviewed in his weary mind. He wished more than he could say that some perfectly sane and disinterested

person would come along, to whom he might explain his perplexities. Perhaps he was a trifle anxious about his own poise. It had come to him once or twice that if there should be an hegira of the whole gang, — the dogs would follow merrily, — he, Papin, would have a good and legitimate excuse for ceasing to be factor of the dreariest ranch in Southern California. And this thought, upon reflection, did not seem to be just the sort which Leonard and Filbin would expect their manager to entertain.

He was granted his wish for a companion much sooner than could possibly have been expected.

The next afternoon, just as the west was getting red, along came a white−covered wagon, driven by a coolie, and containing Mrs. Ambrose Herrick, wife of the manager for Stebbins of the 'Toinette ranch, with her baby and two maids.

"I've been up in the mountains all summer, Mr. Papin," she explained, when she had been lifted out of her roomy vehicle. "Mr. Herrick said it wasn't fit for the sheep down here in midsummer. But I'm worn out with sunrise excursions and horseback parties and hops. I made up my mind that if the rest of you could stand it down here, we could. Besides," she added, somewhat anxiously, "it's the middle of September. Don't you think Mr. Herrick will forgive me for surprising him by my return?"

"I should think it would be an offense easy to overlook," answered Papin.

"The first night we put up at Farnsworth's Inn, but there was no hope for a roof over our heads to−night unless we reached the Esmeralda. I hope you are not going to be inconvenienced. We'll put up with any sort of accommodation."

"Don't you know you are conferring a favor, Mrs. Herrick? Lee Hang will be tickled to death at sight of your coolie; and the maids can have more admirers than they ever dreamed of, if they'll only consent to talk with my lonely fellows. The sight of women will do us all good."

It was an enthusiastic welcome, as she had known that it would be. Papin made her pour the coffee at dinner, while he gave himself up to the enjoyment of an evanescent sense of domesticity.

"I wish I could commend your impulsiveness, Mrs. Herrick," he said. "Herrick will certainly congratulate himself because of it. But the actual truth is that you have come back four weeks too soon. You haven't had a chance yet to learn what the Californian desert can do. Pity may sit in the heavens elsewhere, but not here. The world's hidden batteries may hold swift currents for others; for us they have nothing, — not even the boon of swift destruction."

And he told her of the madness that had come upon the men.

"They are preposterous children, Mrs. Herrick. If they were down with the fever, I might see some hope ahead. But they're in the dumps, and it's dangerous."

"I suppose I am to take you seriously?"

"Quite seriously, madam. I have told them my best stories, and had the pain of seeing them fall flat. I have essayed jokes; they might as well have been lamentations. I have played jigs on my violin, but I might better have devoted myself to funeral marches."

The Chinese sweets had been served and eaten, and Mrs. Herrick's host led the way out to the gallery.

They seated themselves comfortably in the low chairs, and Mrs. Herrick clasped her hands and watched the stars beginning to burn fervidly through the dust−laden atmosphere.

"Our stars have all turned red," commented Papin; "and as for our sunsets, they are bloody."

"I'm afraid it was too soon to bring the baby back," Mrs. Herrick said anxiously.

A penetrating and imperative cry broke the stillness.

"There is the baby now!" She arose and ran to her chamber, returning with the little creature in her arms.

"The maids are at dinner, so I thought I would bring him out here, Mr. Papin. I hope you don't mind."

"A man who has seen only saddle−skinned herders with sun−bleached elf−locks for four months is not likely to object to this," was Papin's ardent reply.

The baby was undressed, and its flesh showed the tint of a half−opened wild rose. Its shy azure eyes contemplated Papin curiously, and it finally reached out a moist and clinging hand and inclosed one of the impresario's fingers. It gave inarticulate, wild−bird cries; and when the moon showed a florid face above the horizon, it stretched out its arms in longing for this celestial toy.

"The immemorial aspiration of babies," said Papin, really very much amused at the offended manner in which the baby buried its face in its mother's breast and wailed, when it found that the glorious object was not handed

over to it.

"Everything seems immemorial," Mrs. Herrick said, — "the desert most of all."

"I know what you mean," responded Papin. "I have felt it. The herders, — how ancient is their vocation! The sheep, — they are of eld! I believe these are the same flocks that the holy shepherds tended; the same ones that Phillis and Corydon piped to. And I, — am I not the most ancient of all? I, the man who does nothing, — who waits for some event within his own soul, knowing it will never come?"

"I read Amiel's Journal while I was up in the hills," commented Mrs. Herrick.

"Did you? I started to read it, but I feared I might be trying to extenuate myself by means of its logic. It will make me melancholy if we talk of Amiel. See what a flush the moonlight has! No one could call this a silver light."

"No; it is red gold."

A silence fell, — a tribute to the beauty of the night. Then the baby grew restless, and Mrs. Herrick nuzzled it, and sent it to Banbury Cross and brought it back again. Somehow, all this gave a certain pang to Papin. It even embarrassed him. He ventured a suggestion.

"Mrs. Herrick, I wonder if you would have the great goodness to take the baby to the quarters and show him to the men? You have no idea how they would appreciate it!"

"If any poor creature wants to see the baby, he must not be denied. It is really pitiable to me to think of the number of persons in the world who have never seen the baby." She arose, laughing and eager, and followed her host.

Such of the herders as were not upon the night shift were sitting on benches without the house, looking off with un−anticipatory eyes toward the arching sky, when Victoria Herrick went out to them in her fragrant white garments, carrying her half−naked baby in her arms. The glorifying radiance of the night lit up her young face, elate with its maternal joy, picked out the rounded whiteness of her arm, and glimmered through the drifting draperies of her gown.

The men stared from her to the babe, and something clinked hard and dry in their throats. Louis Papin had made a mistake, and he realized it. Still, the scene must be gone through with somehow.

"We are all a trifle awkward with babies," he said, addressing Mrs. Herrick, but speaking for the benefit of the men. "The only ones we see are at lambing time."

Mrs. Herrick's clear and happy laugh rang out.

"I like all kinds of babies, from pigs to monkeys," she said. "I am sure I should like little lambs. But this kind of a baby is my choice!" And she snatched her little son close to her, fairly wreathing him about her neck, while the baby clutched at his mother's hair, and gave little shrieks as penetrating as the cries of a young jay. Then, under cover of the little one's happy clamor and the shy compliments of the men, Mrs. Herrick made good her retreat.

"You should not have asked me to go out there!" she cried reprovingly, when she was alone again with the impresario. "The baby quite upset them."

Louis Papin looked at the glowing and beautiful face of the young woman, and smiled.

"The vision was too fair," he admitted. "I would better have left them to a contemplation of the desert."

When the serving women had made all comfortable for the night, and the lady and her little one were sleeping, Louis Papin paced the earthen floor of the gallery, and indulged himself in a luxury of reminiscence, which, unfortunately, he could confide to none. The great lack in his life was a friend. As star dust may float in space, luminous and unformed, so the friendliness of this man failed to find any creature to whom it could attach itself. There had once been a man, out there at the Edge of Things, to whom Papin might have told many secrets, but somehow the chances had slipped by; and just when he had reached the point where he might have unburdened his heart, the man had gone off toward the North, with exultant heart, following a phantom, and Papin saw him no more.

To−night there came to him, with cruel tantalization, a vision of the home potential, — the home to which he had not attained, and which, because of some inherent hesitancy of his nature, compacted of delicacy and melancholy, he seemed never to be likely to achieve. As a convict in his cell dreams of joy, so this man, environed by the desert, who had sucked solitude into his soul, permitted himself, for an hour, to picture eagerly the comforts, the fine amenities, of a life about a hearthstone. He reproached himself for having been false to his

generation. He blamed himself bitterly for what seemed, to−night, to be nothing better than criminal stupidity. He had turned his back, with silly cowardice, upon the beauty and fire of life, and, secure, as he had thought, from all assaults of passion or ambition, had fixed himself here in the wilderness among these sullen men. Perhaps never in his experience with them had he been so willing to apply unpleasant epithets as he was this night. For a fortnight he had seen them slouching about their tasks, cross to the dogs and brutal to the sheep. He had heard them using ugly words in the quarters.

"We're ripe for murder," he thought. "We must have a diversion of some nature. If I were to break my leg, even, it would have a bracing effect. But it's absurd to hope for the unexpected. It is the expected that always happens out here."

But for once he was unfair to the land of eternal heartbreak, for even while he complained a horse's hoofs pounded the earth with a message of haste.

Papin heard. He was glad to hear anything. He hastened to the gallery, and by the starlight he saw approaching a mounted figure in headlong haste, and heard a short barking cry, — the danger signal of the Esmeraldas. The factor sent back a cheerful shout. The unexpected was arriving, — in the form of disaster, perhaps, but welcome nevertheless.

"The Salita gang!" the man cried, as his horse plunged forward and was brought up on his haunches at the edge of the gallery. "They crept up by the arroyo and shot into the crowd."

"Anybody hit?"

"Dox."

"Not killed!"

"I didn't stay to see, sir. I saw a black crowd of fellows, and I lit out to git help."

"Going to have a pitched battle, think?"

"It's on now."

Papin walked with a quick step to the outer door of the quarters.

"Out, men! Out!" he cried, his voice trumpet−clear. "The Salita gang is making a raid! Billy Dox has been shot! Best hurry, or he'll have company!"

There was no excitement in Papin's voice. Certainly vociferation would have been superfluous. The men were on their feet before he had finished speaking. It does not take a herder of the sun−blistered desert long to make his toilet. His articles of clothing are not numerous, even when his cartridge belt, his pistols, and his short rifle are counted in. Now the men dressed themselves with the rapidity of firemen, and ran shouting to the corral where the saddles lay in a heap. They had no trouble, however, in finding their own, — no more trouble than soldiers do to pick their muskets from a stack of arms. The ponies struggled up, snorting and curious; sniffed the air to make sure that it was not yet dawn; and then, smelling adventure, nervously submitted to the adjustment of the saddles and the rough haste of the men who mounted them.

Papin did not stop to get out of his white linens, but put himself at the head of his men, armed like the rest, and with riding boots adding to the incongruity of his costume. The men fell into their places behind him, riding four abreast as was their habit, and the ponies, roweled to the feat, scurried over the plain like frightened rabbits.

After fifteen minutes of this kind of riding, the sound of firing reached their ears, — a brisk fusillade. The men sent a shout ahead of them that scared the breathless desert, but which was intended to convey reassurance to their fighting comrades. A moment later the stars showed them bunches of sheep plunging aimlessly forward, and it was necessary to drive carefully to avoid trampling them.

"Push ahead! Push ahead!" came Papin's voice. The firing reached their ears spasmodically, and each time the advancing herders sent their wild cry of warning through the startled night. Then, a moment more, they were in the thick of the tumult. At first it was almost impossible to distinguish friend from foe. Then it became apparent that the Mexicans had ranged themselves so as to protect a great body of the sheep which they had succeeded in detaching from the herd; but Papin led a flanking movement, and pressed down on them relentlessly. They made a feint of fighting, but gave way almost immediately before the onslaught of avenging men and frantic horses, and were blown before the herders like flies before a wind. Papin laughed aloud at the flight, and then sent out warnings to his men, too headlong to note the arroyo, now not a hundred yards distant.

"Steady! Steady!" came his voice above the din.

They halted on the verge of the rocky declivity.

"They're brilliant thieves, but rather dull fighters," commented the factor. "They might have given us more of a party than this!"

The men were rending the air with their derisive calls, and curveting their horses in sheer excess of activity.

"Who's hurt?" called out Papin.

"I got plunked in the arm," sang Basil Watts cheerfully.

"Richards," said Papin sharply, "why are you sitting limp like that? Why don't you own you're wounded?"

"All I need is a screw−driver, sir. Something seems a leetle loose about my right ribs."

"Ride home slowly, Richards. Some one go with him. Now, how about Dox?"

A man rode to find out, and the herders, once more the swaggering guardians of the desert, sent out their long, wild sheep cry: —

"Coo−ee! Coo−ee! Coo−ee!"

The beat of a myriad little hoofs was heard. The sheep began to answer to the looming call, and came running together excitedly, and still full of vague alarms. Seeing this, the call of the men became steadier and more reassuring. Papin gave orders that the trampled sheep should be carried to a designated spot, watered, and left till morning, when the experienced surgery of the men might benefit some of them. No one wanted to go home. The wind of the dawn began singing afar off in the east, and the pink and yellow clouds that danced about the horizon appeared as a procession of Aurora's servitors.

It was decided finally not to return to the ranch for breakfast. No man had a notion for an indoor meal. Some one was dispatched for the wagons, and a fire made on the ground ready for the coffee when it appeared in the guardianship of the smiling Chinese, who brought word incidentally that Mrs. Herrick had a sufficient guard in her coolie, and would set out upon her journey without delay.

"Dey lun, dose Salita lascals?" queried Lee Hang.

"Run!" responded Papin. "They ran so, my friend, that if they had had pigtails like yours they would have all been whipped off."

The smoke of the fire flirted up through the golden air. The strange voices of the waste whispered along the ground. Then the fragrant scent of the coffee reached the nostrils of the hungry men, and Lee Hang began tossing griddle cakes in the air. The horses, staked at a little distance, called out their congratulations to their masters in tremulous whinnies, and the sheep kept up a sociable bleating. The men were full of noise, and told stock jokes, at which everybody roared.

"They'd even laugh at one of my jokes, this morning," thought Papin.

The man who had been sent to inquire about the wounded herder returned with word that Dox wanted coffee. A great shout went up.

"What's the matter with Billy Dox?" they inquired of the scurrying coyote who appeared above the edge of the arroyo. Then, as he vouchsafed no answer to this vociferous inquiry, they supplied the antiphon, "He's all right!"

He was, in fact, lying in the shelter of a clump of bushes, suffering from a rather serious head wound.

"Thank God the Mexicans are not better marksmen!" said Papin devoutly. "We're all alive; but the real question is, are we glad of it?"

A chorus of yells greeted him. The homesickness was gone. The desert claimed its children again. The familiar scene appealed to the men with eloquence. The arch of the sky, the limitless space, the friendly beasts, the dauntless company, the comradeship, the liberty from man's yea and nay, — was this not better a thousand times than a life of rules between walls or along thronging streets, with women forever cluttering the world?

"Lyon," said Papin, "where's your music box? Out of order?"

Lyon was the singer among the Esmeraldas.

He set his cup of coffee down between his knees, and, as the dawn gilded the low sky behind the scrub of twisted oaks, he opened his mouth like one who utters a challenge to destiny, and cheered his messmates thus: —

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"Sonny, there was seven cities a−builded on th' plain;
     Coronado, he beheld 'em, so he said.
But I've hunted high an' low, under sun an' in th' rain,
     An' them highfalutin' cities, they is fled.
I have ranged this blisterin' desert for a pretty turn of years,
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     I ken foller paths no mortal man ken see,
But I'd ruther take my chances roundin' up unbranded steers,
     Then a-verifyin' statements of a giddy ole grandee."
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To this there was added a chorus, ribald and strident: —

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"He was talkin' thro' his hat,
     Don't you see?
Oh, where could he have bin at,
     That grandee?
     Coo-ee! Coo-ee! Coo-ee!
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The wild and melancholy sheep call, uttered by fifty throats at once, heralded the scarlet face of the sun as it swung arrogantly upon the habitated desert, — a desert which, upon that morning, found no man sad among all the tribe of the Esmeraldas.