

Felix Marchant

A STORY OF THE SAN SIMON PLAIN.
BY CLARENCE PULLIN.

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(Continued)

The two men emerged from the shadow of the cactus, and for a moment stood fully revealed to us in the moonlight. One, as I already knew from what had been said, was the Mexican whose face I had seen at the tent entrance. He was of medium height, of slender, athletic form, and was dressed in the Mexican costume of jacket, sombrero and "charro" pantaloons. His large silver spurs were fastened at his heels, and two pistols hung at his belt. His companion, a man shorter of stature, was similarly but less richly attired, and was equally well equipped with weapons. Unconscious of our presence, they passed so near us that I could, by reaching forth my arm, have touched them with the muzzle of my revolver. Silently they stole past us. Rising to our feet, we watched them vanish from our sight as they passed into the long shadow of the station building on their way to reconnoitre the scene where their plot was to be enacted.

Felix touched my arm and pointed westward down the plain, where the moonbeams lighted a long vista among mesquites and cactuses. There at the end they were reflected from a bit of metal that might have been a buckle or gun plate. About it were darkly outlined the forms of a group of men and horses standing motionless in the shadows.

CHAPTER VIII.

In trying to find out who the stranger was whose appearance at the tent entrance had been the cause of Lupita's demonstration and had resulted in breaking up the show, Felix and I had gained far more information than we had expected. Our principal concern in making the quest had been the safety of our horses. We now not only knew that Sangrado, the undesirable suitor of Don Ramon's daughter, was lurking, with his followers, about the station, but also the purpose of his visit and the details of the plot he was about to put into execution for carrying off Carmen. More than this, his conversation with his lieutenant, Miguel, had informed us of what was very important that we should know—that Carmen was ignorant of his presence and that she would not willingly go away with him or so much as consent to see him. It also made us aware of the part Dolores was playing, in which, through her sentimental attachment for Miguel, she was acting unwittingly as an accomplice in the scheme to abduct her mistress.

There was no tie of kindred or long friendship to impel my comrade and me to entangle ourselves in the hazards of interference with a Mexican love affair. But in the light of what we knew it plainly belonged to us that we should not permit Carmen to be carried off against her will by a bandit. So far our duty was clear. As to our course of action, we had first to stay in concealment where we were until Sangrado and his companion returned. The meaning of their present excursion to the station was only to spy out the ground, and it was almost a certainty that they would come back the same way that they had gone. The time they would have to consume in getting their men and horses in readiness and in bringing them up to their stations would give us time to return to the corral and there take such measures to balk them as the situation seemed to require.

In about 20 minutes Sangrado and his lieutenant came back, moving stealthily and swiftly down the long shadow from the station. As soon as they had gained the shelter of the mesquites they began to talk in low tones. Sangrado was the first to speak.

"We must do it to-night, Miguel. If we wait to daylight them on the trail, the thing is doubly dangerous. In that case we must kill all but Carmen, and then, an outlaw, of what use will the old Don's hacienda on the Santa Cruz ever be to me? But here no watch is kept, for her father believes her safe. We are nearer our strongholds, too. If once I get Carmen safe away from the station, we shall be in the morning where no pursuers can follow us."

"It is well, señor. Shall I bring the men and horses up at once?"
"Stay a moment. I wish to think." Miguel, with instinctive caution, crouched, as he waited, a little behind his leader, who, shielded from view from the station, stood erect and indifferent to observation in the moonlight. His clear cut, handsome face, showing in profile beneath his broad sombrero, was dark and sinister. His right hand rested upon the butt of the pistol at his hip as if it were grasping a sword hilt. With his haughty attitude and the picturesqueness of his "charro" costume, he might well have served as the model of a Spanish cavalier of the sixteenth century as he stood about to embark in an adventure so desperate and so unscrupulous in purpose that it would have been deemed not unworthy of the chivalry of that epoch.

His meditations were brief. He turned to his follower, who at once rose to his feet and stood in an attitude of attention.

"We will bring the horses up to the

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edges of the mesquites," he said. "Then you will go to the station and give Dolores the signal to come to you. Get her away from the house so far that she can give no alarm. Don't be far away from the horses. I will leave them in charge of Colombo. The other two men will keep near me to help if necessary. Then I will enter the room and persuade the senorita to come willingly with me or will carry her out wrapped in a blanket. For several seconds she stood thus, motionless as a statue, save for the slight movements of the head as it bent to left or right so as to keep in sight the disappearing figures, she stood until they must have passed from view. Slowly she raised her right arm above her head and then brought it forward, pointing in the direction they had taken with a gesture of menace, dramatic, and terrible. For several seconds she stood thus, motionless as a statue, then turned and glided into the long shadow of the tent, with which her form instantly merged indistinguishably.

In the instant that she turned and passed us we caught a full view of her face. The rounded contours of cheek and chin and the handsome features could not be mistaken. But the look of fixed resolve and deadly hate, the still gleam of eye sombre black and vengeful, had transformed her usual gay, devil-may-care expression to one infinitely more menacing and dangerous even than that she had exhibited in her frantic outburst of passion in the amphitheatre three hours before.

Whether one of us said it, or whether it was a thought that came simultaneously to Felix and me, I could not tell then, nor can I to-day. But it seemed that the whisper passed between us:

"It is Lupita—or the devil walking in her form. And she has overheard Don Gaspar Sangrado's plot."

A new element had entered into the situation, and its effect, neither Felix nor I could compute. Would the discovery Lupita had made intensify her resentment against her recreant lover, or would it turn the volume of her wrath upon the innocent head of Carmen, whom she might now regard as her rival and supplanter? She was a Mexican woman, wounded in her affections, and there was no foreseeing the direction in which her jealous passion might lead her.

Her form had vanished like a wraith into the obscurity, and the way was open for us to go back unobserved to the station. But still we stood looking in the direction she had taken, and then at each other, trying to estimate the bearing of this new complication upon Don Gaspar Sangrado's design. From these meditations our attention was attracted by another apparition, the form of a man, stealing up from the direction of the stage trail toward the tent. Dimly we could discern him, for his clothes were of a neutral tint, difficult to distinguish in the night. But as he came nearer, where the moon rays fell upon him so that we could see him more distinctly, we could tell that he was slight of build and wore a light-coloured sombrero.

"It's the Kid, I believe," whispered Felix. "We must try to gather what he's abroad for in the moonlight. If he's after Lupita, as I suspect, I wish him joy of his courtship in the mood she's in to-night. If she doesn't bring about a shooting match between him and Sangrado, it won't be for want of trying on her part."

The advancing figure came near the tent and passed into the shadow it threw down the slope. Following his motions, which we still dimly could discern against the canvas, we saw him pause. Then from where he stood came the low note of a bird call, given in a tone singularly natural, fresh and clear. After he had several times repeated the call its note was succeeded by the tones, sung under his breath, of an Andalusian love-song. Presently we could distinguish that between the lines of the song he was improvising words of his own, an impassioned appeal that his true love, his beautiful senorita, would come forth to her impatient and sorrowing lover.

His song, a mingling of terse and idiomatic frontier words and phrases, with the extravagant metaphor and hyperbole of an Oriental singer, all rendered in the liquid Spanish tongue to attractive melody, was strangely effective in concealment not fifty yards away from the singer, Felix and I, knowing that we were on the very verge of a hostile encounter with a bandit gang, whose desperate purpose we meant to thwart at all hazards, listened entranced to the song of this romantic desperado. Coldly murderous of nature and steeped in crime, he was to his mood of wooing, corolling

have belted a story of the "Arabian Nights," calling to his veiled and hidden face to emerge from her retirement and come to him.

His song was not unavailing. From somewhere in the darkness within or without the tent, came a low answering note—a feminine voice. There was a little interchange of appeals and responses, and soon we could see stealing along the outer side of the canvas toward the singer a mantled figure, whose supple undulation of movement showed it to be a woman's, and whose voice when she spoke revealed itself as Lupita's. She came close to him and stopped, with a little space separating them. He would have approached her, but she held him at a distance.

"No, no, no," we heard her voice, low as a whisper, yet so resonant that to us, listening in the stillness, it came with every shade of delicate intonation and inflection. "You do not love me enough."

"Miguel, I swear that I adore you," he protested. "Stay with me, I implore you."

"No, no," she said again. "I can love no one to-night. My heart is torn with grief and rancour for wrongs unavenged. There can be no peace, no love, in my soul while my betrayer lives."

"Quien es?" (Who is it?) he demanded. "And what do you wish—that I should kill him?"

"Kill him!" she repeated. "Yes, kill him! But you must not do so much for me! Why should you take my quarrel up? I am nothing to you."

"—D—n him, I'd kill him for being such a fool as ever to leave you, if for nothing else." He was speaking now with that slow, measured tone, almost a drawl, which, to one familiar with the accents of men of his kind in the far south-west, sounds as ominous of danger as the rattling of a snake.

"There's no trouble about doing that if you'll tell me who and where he is."

"And you would do this for me?" She advanced and embraced him tenderly, then drew back and surveyed him from the same distance as before.

"But no! You must not venture it. He is alert and skilled in the use of weapons. A dangerous man, señor."

"Who is he?" he asked again, in the same measured tone as before.

"This man—no, not man; he is a base hound and traitor—he is Gaspar Sangrado."

Billy gave a low whistle. "It's he, is it?" he said. "I know him. He plays for a bad man himself, and comes pretty near being the real thing. But that's all right. Where is he?"

"He is here. He will come to the station within an hour as a robber. There is your quarrel, already made. I will take you to where you will meet him."

"Has he a band of followers with him?"

"Four men. But you will meet him first alone. When you have killed him the other she pointed to the westward.

"But what are you to give me for all this risk?" he asked again, in the same measured tone as before.

"I will give you much. Everything! Myself! But hear me in one thing: I will be with you and guide you to where you will meet him. Promise me that you will obey me and not act until I give the word."

"I promise. And now—"

He moved toward her, but with one hand she checked his advance; with the other she pointed to the westward, as if designating our hiding-place. At the same time the sound of horses' hoofs, carefully stepping, came faintly to my ears, moving toward us from behind. We turned and could detect, at not a great distance away, the dark forms of men and horses advancing among the mesquites and yuccas. It was not at us, but at them, that Lupita had pointed. The two dusky figures standing together by the tent paused a moment in an attitude of attention, then melted away in the shadows.

For Felix and me there was no time to lose in getting back to the station. Crouching low and moving noiselessly we crept, in the shadow of the building, up to the corral, passed round to the farther side of the wall, scaled it, and took our position in the darkness of the shed. There, with rifles in hand, we awaited the development of affairs.

As has already been said, the corral stood in the rear of the house, which formed part of its front wall. But the sides of the enclosure, which was a square in shape, were longer than the length of the house, so that the corral wall extended about twenty-five feet easterly from the easterly end

of the building. Between the house and its easterly corner was the corral gate, and in the corner the shed began. It was a primitive structure, built against the easterly wall of the corral. Its open front commanded a full view of the interior of the corral and the back of the house. An empty freight wagon stood in the end of the shed at the corner, and, climbing into that, we could easily look over the corral wall so as to view the easterly end of the house and its one window. Thus we fully commanded the two entrances to the room occupied by Carmen. We had spread our blankets upon the wagon bottom so that in moving about we might make as little noise as possible, and, standing in the darkness, behind the driver's seat, we were completely hidden from the observation of anyone outside the shed.

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a dark figure, which we recognized as the man called Miguel, stole swiftly to the window and tapped thrice on the sash. So still was everything about that we could hear—perhaps rather feel—that someone was moving within the room. The moon shone full upon the window, and, directly from the inner darkness, there appeared

against a pane the dusky face, the black eyes of Dolores, gleaming recognition as she nodded with finger on her lips. The visitor outside the window vanished, returning the same way he had come. Slowly and noiselessly the back door of the house opened, and the ruffled form of Dolores emerged into the corral and flitted to the gate. She lifted the great wooden bar, pushed the gate partly open, slipped through the opening, shut the gate lightly behind her, and passed quickly from sight round the corner of the wall.

Some of the horses and mules lying about the corral lifted their heads she went past them, but none arched or showed signs of disturbance. Silently we clutched our weapons, waiting for what was to come. But there was no occasion to use them as yet. It was not Sangrado, but the black shrouded figure of a woman, that next appeared, coming from the front of the house. She glided along the wall to the gate, which stood ajar, opened it, and entered the corral. Then, turning, she closed and barred the gate. She went no farther, but waited by the entrance, silent and motionless, her form pressed like a black shadow against the wall.

The minutes seemed long to Felix and me as we watched with breathless interest for the outcome of this strange pantomime. But the time we had to wait was short. Along the outer wall the slender figure of Sangrado, wrapped in a long cloak, came with swift strides. At the sound of his light footsteps the woman started, then bent listening at the crevice of the gateway. At the gate Sangrado stopped, tried with nervous haste to pull it open, and muttered a curse when he found that it resisted his efforts. Filled in the attempt, and finding that the gate was fastened within, he stepped back and measured the wall with his eye as if he would try to scale it, then turned to the strongly-barred window as if estimating his chances of being able to force his way into the house by that opening. He stamped his foot, and again, in an undertone, vented in curses his disappointment and anger.

(To be Continued.)

MESSAGE TO MEN

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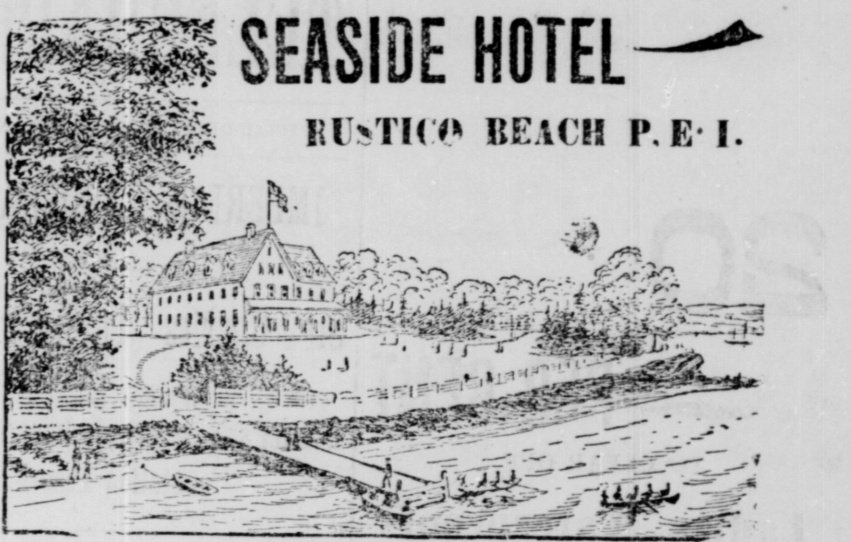
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QUEEN STREET.

BURGLARS WANTED.

To the Burglar who entered our office and broke the Handle of Safe we extend an invitation to call again, promising him a free entry into the safe, and thereby saving him the use of the Stillson wrench. We will not insure his easy exit, but will be on hand with an ambulance and undertaker.

At the same time we give the Dairyman a guarantee for one year with our twelve gang Cheese Presses. Nearly all that were imported here in the past required to be repaired within a year.

Our improved Cheese Vat is the most popular in the market. Our Babcock Testers never break the bottles. The press hoops are right for eighty lbs of curd. And best of all the "ALPHA de LAVAL SEPARATOR" is on f th ff away ahead of all others.

Write for prices. Terms made to suit customers. Our Pumps are winning a name for themselves at prices to beat any im

T. A. McLEAN