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(Continued.)

CHAPTER VII.

In the high altitude of the San Simon plain the September nights are always cool, and in the growing chill of the outer air our little company was not tempted to sit long before the station door. First the herders got up and went to take a look about the corral before turning in for the night. Next Don Ramon, his mind made easier by my report about the harness for his mules, retired to repose upon his cowskin baccata spread on the station floor. The two prospectors went down to where their luggage lay heaped by the asses of their campfire, brought the donkeys up from their grazing, tied them to bushes near by, and then rolled themselves up in their blankets somewhere, not far away, in the darkness. Keeping me company, the station-keeper still remained seated on the bench by the door, and the glow of his pipe, reddening and subsiding as we sat talking in low tones, was the only sign of human activity in the scene except where a candle burned, somewhere in the showman's tent, faintly illuminating the canvas and suggesting that some life was stirring within its walls.

As we talked of various matters, the keeper's thoughts reverted to the buckboards, due from the East and West, and he was loath to abandon the idea that they might yet arrive that night. Reluctantly he gave it up at last.

"No use keeping awake any longer for them," he said, rising and knocking the ashes from his pipe. "One of two things has happened—they've either been jumped by Apaches on the road, or else, to avoid the Indians, they've delayed starting until evening, so as to travel all the way in the darkness, and in that case we may look for both of the stages to come rolling up to the station in the morning. In either event I can't see anything better for me to do than turn in."

"Where'll you spread your blankets to-night?" he asked. "Hain't you better come into the station? There's lots of room."

"My pard and I have arranged to sleep in the corral shed," I answered. "We'll be near the horses to help the herders out in case of any trouble during the night."

"That's a good idea, in case the rustlers should come prowling round. Indians we don't have to look out for so much at the station. That tent there is of itself enough to keep 'em at a distance. No matter how big or how bad a band of Apaches may be, they're slow to come near where a big tent is set up. Some say it's because they've got a superstition against attacking anything white. They worship white birds. Perhaps you've heard of this way?—A good many years ago a war party of Apaches crept up to where a big tent was pitched on the prairie. It looked all quiet and peaceful, and they allowed they'd give whoever was in it an un-

pleasant surprise. Well, when they got through chuckling over the fun they meant to have, they jumped it in great shape, whooping and yelling. But the surprise didn't come in the way they'd counted on. The tent turned out to be full of soldiers, and they all ready for 'em with guns in hand, and the way they thinned out the Apaches that morning was a caution to red evil-doers everywhere. Those Indians that got away and those that grew up after 'em have had a prejudice ever since against jumping at any enclosure where they don't know what's inside it, and the very sight of white tents makes 'em skittish. By the way, I haven't seen your pard for a good bit of time. I reckon he's visiting the showman's party. They're still keeping it up inside the canvas."

"From the interior of the tent came the tinkle of a guitar, and the low-sung notes of a Spanish melody. These romantic sounds, doubly beautiful to the moonlight that now flooded the scene, did not avail to detain the station-keeper from his slumber, and he entered the station, leaving me to wait alone for Felix. The sound of guitar and singing ceased, but the light in the tent continued, and my comrades still did not appear. It was wearisome to wait longer and unadvisable to go in quest of him, so I went to the open shed of the corral, where our blankets already had been carried, spread them out, and, rolling myself in mine, dropped lightly off to sleep. It was a full hour later when, roused by the restlessness of the mules and horses, I woke to see a tall figure crossing the corral. Hailing him in a low voice, I was answered by Felix.

"I raised myself on my elbow. 'What have you found out?' I asked, when he had come to me. 'Did you learn what the Mexican girl's tentrum was all about?' he answered. 'I found out something,' he answered. Then, glancing significantly toward the herders, lying asleep at the

other end of the shed: 'We'd better talk it over where we shan't be overheard. Let's go outside the corral.' I rose and silently followed him from the enclosure. The full moon now risen in the east, bathed the plain in mellow light, in which appeared as dark masses those objects upon the ground which intercepted the luminous rays. 'Keep well in the shadow,' Felix cautioned me. 'There may be other people than we abroad to-night, who would resent our intrusion.' From the station building a long black shadow stretched westward and

mingled with the darkness of the cactus and mesquite clumps off in that direction. Into this shadow we passed, and in its darkness walked silently down into the hiding of the vegetation. We continued onward until we had got so far away from the station that the sound of our voices, talking in low tones, could not reach it. Not until then did we stop. We crouched in the concealment of a mesquite clump, and Felix in a whisper told the story of his experiences since the close of the performance.

"When I left you and went in to the tent," he began, "I found the Señor Trimbajo, naturally enough glad to see me, bringing the money to pay for his entertainment. The company, after the fatigues of the evening, were all taking a late supper of tortillas and chilli Colorado. After I had counted the money out to him, and he found that it exceeded the amount agreed on, the señor, in the fulness of his heart, insisted that I join in their repast, an invitation that I duly accepted. La Lupita had so far recovered from her recent excitement as to develop a very fair appetite, and as she munched away prettily at a tortilla there was only a shade of moodiness in her face as a reminder of the rumpus she had so lately raised. But it only served to see that the storm had not lullied, not passed away, and that it would take very little provocation to set the señorita on the warpath once more.

"Under the circumstances I did not think it advisable to try to improve my acquaintance with her; so, instead, I made myself as agreeable as I knew how to the company in general. There was a new complication in the situation when, in the course of a few minutes after my arrival, who should walk in but our outlaw leader, Billy the Kid. He swung in, with his dark devil air and pistols displayed, evidence that he was a personage to be respectfully treated. He made himself entirely at home, picked up a guitar, strummed a tune and sang a Mexican love-song, then talked in Spanish to Lupita in a fashion decidedly free and easy.

"Seeing that there was nothing to be done with Lupita, I fell to talking with the maestro. I had some cigarette tobacco that hit his taste, and, after I had made him a present of a handful of it, he found a bottle of tequila among his luggage, and, taking me to one side, we had some drinks together, on the quiet, very sociably. The mescal warmed his heart and loosened his tongue. To make a long story short, I led him on to talk, and after he had aired his own merits and the excellencies of his show I brought into the conversation the topic of the charming Lupita, who I took good care should be well out of earshot. He expatiated upon her attractions as a performer and actress, and then, to bring him to the point I was after, I complimented her beauty and acting, and asked him if her rush from the ring with the dagger upraised was part of the play.

"He shrugged his shoulders. 'No, señor, I regret to say it was not. It was a pity to waste such superb passion on reality instead of in the actress' art, but such is her nature. The reason for her strange behaviour to-night I do not fully understand, but from words she let fall it appears that she thought she saw some one in the audience whom she regards as a deadly enemy. It is ever so with these gifted children of genius and beauty. The emotional nature predominates, and their tempers are not under control. I cannot deny that she has given way to her anger before, but never has she behaved so violently.' 'Do you suspect who the person may be so honoured as to have moved the lovely señorita to such a magnificent outburst of passion?' I asked. 'Quien sabe! Suspect I may, but I did not see him.' 'I saw him. He was peering in at the entrance to the tent. Can you

guard, so as to be enabled the better to block my plans.' 'Truly, señor, the affair was unfortunate, but it is only one more obstacle to surmount. After all is said there are only her father and Manuel

to be reckoned with, and we are five in number. And the little Indian, Dolores—she, you know, is my dear friend. She is loyal to her mistress and will not help us to do anything against the señorita's inclinations. But she will serve her in anything she desires to do and will take a message to her if I request it. She has talked very freely with me about how things go on at the station, and all the people that are there.' 'How did you manage to get an interview with her?' 'There was no trouble in the matter, señor. I introduced myself to the showman's people as a compadre, and was welcomed to their hospitality. I stood by the entrance when Don Ramon's party came into the tent. No one at the station except Dolores knows my face, and those who entered supposed that I belonged with the show. A whispered word to Dolores as she passed me was enough, and as soon as she safely could she stole from the tent to join me for a few minutes. In that time I found out all that was to be learned from her.' 'What had she to say of the Señorita Carmen? Will she grant me an interview?' 'I am sorry to say it, Don Gaspar, but she is positive the señorita will not consent to speak with you unless in her father's presence and with his consent.' 'Then it is needless to waste time in waiting longer. We must carry away this scornful señorita to-night.' The speaker ceased, suddenly to have become aware that he was speaking too loudly, and continued in a lower tone. 'You tell me there are a door and a window to their room?' 'Yes, señor, a door opening upon the corral and a window that looks upon the plain.' 'And her father and Manuel, where do they sleep?' 'In the front room, where the station-keeper and his herders stay. But the herders will sleep in the corral to-night.' 'It is well to know that. We must have our horses in readiness and force the door that opens upon the corral. It will be in the shadow almost until the dawn.' 'Good. Have the men in readiness and let them understand that they are to make short work of anyone who gets in the way.' 'One word more, señor. There are two caballeros, Americans, who have travelled with Don Ramon's party from the Apaches' pass and intend to accompany him so far as Silver City. They are well armed, and in carrying away the señorita we may have to reckon with them.' 'Where do these cursed gringos sleep?' 'That Dolores could not tell me, but she thinks they spread their blankets in the front room of the station, with Don Ramon and Manuel.' 'Pity it is not upon the prairie, where we might anticipate all trouble from them by quietly cutting their throats. But we will deal with them quite as effectually if they presume to interfere.' 'It is well, señor. Shall I go to inform the men to bring up the horses?' 'Wait a little, Miguel. We will reconnoitre the station to see that all is clear. The moon is too bright to be the best for our undertaking. Would it were darker.'

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'About Lupita?' I asked. 'You said that Billy the Kid was devoting himself to her. How did he succeed? Did he persuade her into a kinder mood?'

'Well, yes. But it's not any too kind, I can assure you. She seemed flattered and pleased by the attention of so dashing a caballero. There was a dangerous devil in her eye, though, and I'll wager she was thing more of revenge than of lovmaking. He said good night to her before I left. Then he sauntered out to where the maestro and I were sitting, helped himself to a glass of tequila, sized me up from head to foot while he drank it, said buenos noches and went away. I shouldn't be surprised if he had a part to play in the drama that we are all enacting around this well in the desert.'

'My limbs were cramped and weary with crouching "at attention" while I listened.

'If everything's been said, I suppose we may as well go back to the corral.' I began and started to rise to my feet. But Felix's hand was suddenly pressed upon my mouth and forced me back among the mesquite roots.

'S-s-s-t!' he cautioned me, in a low whisper. 'Don't move or stir, but listen.'

'Lucky for us that the night breeze, lightly rustling the leaves, the grass, and weeds, had merged in its sound our whispered voices. To the windward, not twenty yards away, two persons were talking together in low tones, and the breeze brought their words to us with perfect distinctness. From their accent they were clearly Mexicans, and the language they used, their native tongue, was well understood by Felix and myself. Peering intently into the darkness, we presently could discern the figures of the speakers as they stood in the shadow of a branching cactus that screened them from observation from the direction of the station.

This was the part of their conversation important to our story:— 'It was the devil's own doing, Miguel, that I should meet Lupita here. Of course, as soon as she saw me, the painted hell-cat came for me, knife in hand, and made a great scene. I slipped away, but the discovery has been made that I am here, and no doubt Don Ramon will be put on his

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