

Felix Marchant

A STORY OF THE SAN SIMON PLAIN.

BY CLARENCE BULLEN.

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(Continued.)

CHAPTER VI.

Foremost in the procession that entered the tent came the Pike county man and his household. He carried with him his rifle and also the splint-bottomed rocking chair, that I had seen accompanying his travels, strapped to the back of his wagon. Behind him came his wife, and after her a procession of children, eight in number, whose tow-tinted heads, all of a colour, ranged like the descending notes of the musical scale, from the eldest, a comely girl of 16, downward to the toddler of two years, that brought up the rear of the line. Behind them the rest of us fell in, giving precedence to Don Ramon and his party, and so we all got into the tent.

Within we found that on the side opposite the entrance a stage or amphitheatre had been laid off by means of a rope supported by wooden stakes. It was square in shape, and at the rear the blanket hung up as a dressing-room for Lupita now served as a common retiring-room for the troop between acts. In this amphitheatre was a performing bar, the sole piece of stage furniture in the outfit. About the space without the rope the audience dispersed itself. There were no seats provided by the management for spectators, so, while the Pike county lady rocked herself serenely in the splint-bottomed chair that her husband had brought along, the rest of the audience sat or reclined in attitudes they found most comfortable on the dry, hard turf of the prairie.

It was pleasure-seeking extraordinary and picturesque. Every man present carried his weapons in full view, and almost everyone added to his enjoyment of the performance by smoking a pipe or cigarette. The faces were the faces of men accustomed to danger and hardship, and the most of them bore the hard expression that is so often found on the frontier, and betokens recklessness of life and readiness to meet every emergency with the quick and determined resolve. In the midst of the wild scene Carmen, seated on a gaudy Mexican blanket spread on the ground, was royal and splendid in her beauty as a youthful and innocent Cleopatra on an Egyptian divan. To complete the strange elements of this impromptu gathering, Billy the Kid and his two companions sauntered in and threw themselves on the ground a little apart from the other spectators. Felix approached them and politely asked if they would like to contribute some money to the welfare of the admirable Senor Trimbajo's troop, whereupon Billy smiled rather peculiarly, reached into his pocket and carelessly handed him two Mexican dollars, which Felix, with thanks, placed with the funds already contributed for the maestro's benefit.

It is scarcely worth while to give the details of the performance, except so far as they were associated with other scenes yet to come. There were simple tricks of juggling performed by the worthy maestro with an air of great impressiveness and mystery, some feat of strength, and a variety of exercises with a sword, illustrating the manner in which he professed to have overcome furious wild bulls in the arena in his experience as a matador. After this came an acrobatic performance in which he acted in conjunction with the young Mexican known as Rosconomo, who varied his clowning by feats of ground and lofty tumbling.

The incomparable Lupita next took her turn, first rendering a Spanish melody to her own accompaniment with the guitar, in which the singer and her song were pretty and piquant enough to satisfy the most exacting. Sad to say, she responded to an encore with an American popular song of the variety hall sort, the only redeeming feature of which was her crisp, pretty Spanish enunciation of the English words. This was followed by Spanish dance with castanets, into which she threw so much grace and fire and enthusiasm that it was with difficulty that the audience, after repeated encores, punctuated by silver coin thrown at her feet, permitted her to retire, panting and laughing with gratified vanity, to prepare for her next act.

At this point I was summoned outside the tent to take my turn at guard duty and give the other man a chance at the show. I was not sorry to get out into the clear night air, under the bright stars. The whole scene was of peace and beauty, and it carried no hint of the dangers that lurked within and without our little encampment.

As a first duty, I made the rounds of a considerable space about the station, and noted that the Missourian's and the prospector's outfits appeared quiet and undisturbed. All being well there I turned toward the station. Seen from a distance, it was indeed a strange, weird scene in the wide, lonely spaces of the plain—the low adobe station, with its right angled outlines, and look of massiveness, the wagons here and there, and the showman's tent, looking very large by contrast with its surroundings, and illuminated warmly by the lights within. From it came the sounds of applause, the strumming of the primitive orchestra, and the calls of the performers whose shadows faithfully repeated their movements as they swaggered and tumbled on the ground or swung from the horizontal bar.

As I approached the station and corral from the rear, I noted that in the shadow of the angle between the house and corral walls the horses of our three inauspicious visitors, who had come at sundown, were standing saddled and bridled, as if in readiness for a start at a moment's notice. The steel grey horse of the leader, a beautiful, spirited animal, I paused to admire

as he stood, with head erect and snuff ears moving, as if listening for his master's tread.

At the house door I paused to pass a few remarks with the herder who was my fellow-sentinel. I remarked to him:—

"No word from the eastward or westward, I suppose?"

"Nothing whatever," he replied. "I reckon the buckboard won't get along to-night. It's overdue an hour now, and I have put it up all along either to arrive on time or not get in at all to-night. I'd give something to know what's happened to-day between here and Silver City. We may get news of another killing on the stage trail with the coming of morning."

We stood and chatted a few minutes longer until our relief came, and we were free to return to the show, which was still going on at a lively rate. We could not know what eyes besides ours were watching the tent from the waste spaces about, or what schemes were on foot whose realization would mean good or ill to the various members of our little community clustered for a night about this halting place in the desert.

We talked a minute or two with the prospector, and the second herder, who came out to take our places as sentinels, and then strolled over to the tent to see the rest of the performance. As we came to the entrance I saw a man standing motionless, partly concealed by a bunch of cactus close at hand. He was dressed in civilized clothes and wore a sombrero. So much I could see. As he clearly was not an Indian, I did not deem it necessary to accost him, and so without remark followed the herder into the tent.

There the performers were all congenially engaged in acting a melodramatic play. It evidently was their star production of the evening, and a favourite with every one who took part in it. It gave the maestro a chance to air to the full the theatrical expression which was a strong feature of his character, and of which he was extremely proud. Rosconomo found in the play a chance for unlimited clowning and tumbling, while Lupita, intensely dramatic by nature, thoroughly enjoyed the sentimental and tragic part assigned to her, in which she called down the plaudits of the house.

Resting on my elbow, I lay on the ground, watching with much enjoyment, I confess, the storming, ranting, languishments, and broad comedy of the play, rendered with the tremendous fervour and impassioned that belong to the Southern race of which the actors came. Elsewhere, amid more civilized surroundings, it might all have appealed to me as absurd to the point of comedy, but in our savage environment, amid the grim realities of savage perils, I, as all the others seemed to do, took it seriously, as being not at all too highly strung for the occasion.

From where I lay I could see the entrance of the tent at which, the house having already paid its admis-



She rushed like a whirlwind toward the form in the entrance.

sion by contract, no doorkeeper was stationed. Chancing to glance that way, I became aware that some one, concealed in the flap of the canvas, was peering through the aperture, as if desirous of inspecting all that went on inside the tent without being himself discovered. My first thought was that one of the sentinels was neglecting his duty in his desire to get a peep at the show. Without appearing to take notice of him, I kept my eye on the place, and soon perceived that the person was no one that I ever had seen before. The face was that of a Mexican, a young man seemingly, with a scowling brow and gleaming black eyes. Beyond that I could discern little. His gaze, while alert to everything about the interior of the tent, was resting not on the show or the audience in general, but on Carmen, who, absorbed in the performance, was plainly unconscious of his presence.

She certainly was worth looking at as she sat on the red carpet, with its strange figured design, an incarnation of voluptuous southern beauty amid the grim surroundings of men and weapons. She was vastly enjoying the show, laughing, with dazzling gleams of her white teeth, at the fun, and eyes scintillating sympathy and interest at the tragic parts of the drama. It was nothing to her, the fumes of pipes and cigarettes that curled about her. A Mexican girl expects all that sort of thing and doesn't mind it in the least. Perhaps she was half conscious of her own loveliness, and felt the power of her attractions, seeing them reflected

in the admiring gaze of the men about her. The maestro and Rosconomo were playing their parts openly to her, and Lupita, after her bursts of tragedy, laughed and tossed her head defiantly toward her competitor of superior social station, as a challenge to her charms, which action was perhaps a sincerer compliment than the conduct of her fellow performers.

In the melodrama the point was now reached where Lupita's lines required that she should snatch a dagger from her girdle and rush upon the maestro, who was impersonating the villain. Just as this scene was coming I saw her suddenly stop and clasp her hand to her heart, while a pallor overspread her face, which instantly assumed an expression of horror and aversion. Her eyes, fixed in a look of intense surprise, were gazing past me, and, glancing slightly around, I saw that the furtive visitor at the tent entrance, in his desire to see Carmen more fully, had thrust his head into full view within the tent flap. It was on him that Lupita's eyes were fastened.

The voice of the maestro declaiming his lines ceased. His waiting attitude recalled her to her part, and she faltered her denunciation of him like one recalling words long forgotten. Mechanically she plucked the dagger from her girdle. Once she felt it in her hand, her fingers tightened suddenly about the handle, and again her eyes turned to the face at the entrance, and this time they met his. Pain, resentment, ungovernable rage successively imprinted their expression with lightning-like rapidity in her countenance. Instead of advancing on the maestro, who, with arms folded in a heroic attitude and one foot advanced, stood confronting her, she, with an inarticulate cry, as fierce as that of a wounded tigress, rushed like a whirlwind toward the form in the entrance. She saw nothing, regarded nothing that stood in the way. The rope that fenced the amphitheatre waist high yielded before her, and two of the stakes that supported it flew into the air like jackstraws. The other stakes remained fast, and Lupita caught and held in the loop of the rope, shrieking and striking madly forward with the dagger, struggled against the obstacle, then tripped and fell across it. Every man in the audience had sprung to his feet in consternation, not knowing for whom the attack was intended, or, except myself, suspecting the meaning of this terrible outburst of wrath. As Lupita fell the two nearest men, Felix and another, sprang to raise her. As they lifted her to her feet Felix, with one hand, firmly but not ungently wrested from her the dagger. Then, with the aid of the maestro, they half led, half carried, the stormy senorita back to the rear of the tent, where flinging herself upon the ground, she lay pale, trembling and exhausted, but unsubdued. Her breast heaved with emotion, and occasionally she gave a sob, but in her eyes, hard and glittering, there was no vestige of a tear. Leaving her in the care of the maestro and his wife, who had appeared on the scene, the two men came back to the front of the tent, where eager enquiries greeted them as to the cause of the senorita's violent behaviour.

"What set her on the rampage?" "Who was she after?" "I'm mighty glad it wasn't me," were questions and remarks to which Felix and the other man could return no satisfactory replies. Lupita had said nothing that could enlighten them as to the object against which her outburst had been directed. Apparently I was the only spectator who had seen the Mexican's face at the entrance, and I did not care to confide to anyone but Felix such knowledge or surmises as I might have.

Lupita's impromptu tragedy scene broke up the show, and it was to a vanishing audience, already nearly dispersed, that the maestro announced that, in consequence of the sudden disposition of the senorita, the performance must be regarded as closed. The men camped about the station went out to look after their individual outfits and to prepare for the night. Carmen and her maid, who throughout the whole outbreak had looked on with a composure and interest unmingled with fear, that would have astonished most people of northern blood, soon retired to their apartment in the station. Then I got a chance to speak to Felix about the things that I had noticed in connection with the scene Lupita had made.

He listened attentively and seriously to what I had to say. "So the man you saw at the entrance was no one of the crowd that was here when the show began?" he said, when I had told him all I knew or surmised in the matter. "Does anybody at the station know of the coming of such a man and who he is?" "I asked the herders and the station-keeper if there had been any arrivals since the performance began, and both said they hadn't known of any," was my answer.

Felix meditated for a few moments, while his brows bent down in a way that I had learned to interpret as meaning that a situation had arisen that demanded serious attention. "There's something about this that needs looking after," he said at last. "We must find out about that Mexican. He may be merely a follower of the show, or he may have been recording our encampment for some purpose of devilry. Whatever his designs are in prowling about here, one thing is certain—the girl Lupita doesn't stand in with him. She was dead in earnest when she went for him with the dagger, and if the rope hadn't held her she'd have come mighty near getting him."

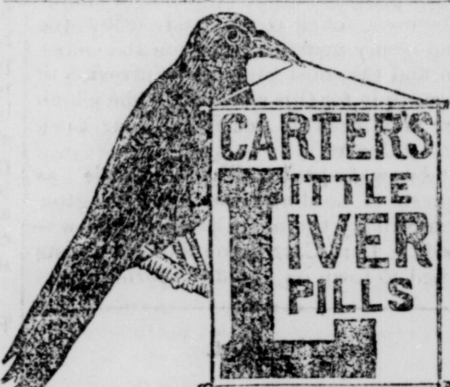
"I've got to go back to the tent to give the boss showman his money," he continued. "Perhaps I can find out something further in the matter while I'm there. He may tell me something, and I shouldn't wonder if, by paying a little attention to Lupita, I might find a clue as to who the fellow is. Whatever information I gain of him from the girl I must get without her knowing what I'm after. I suspect he's been a false lover, and as she's Mexican all through she would rather settle scores with him herself than give him away to me, even if I would take up her quarrel. She's a dangerous creature to handle, but I'll chance it. Don't keep awake for me if I should be late. I'll find you."

He entered the tent, leaving me to await his reappearance. I went to the corral to see after our horses, and found that they were all right. The three outlaws were leading their horses back toward the place where they had eaten

their supper, near the trail, and I saw them taking the saddles of the animals as if they had decided to pass the night there. The Missourian and his family were already at the wagon discharging themselves for the night. Carmen and Dolores had disappeared in the inner room of the station. Don Ramon sat with the station men on the bench before the house, and the two prospectors, after they had gone down to their camping place to look after things there, came back to smoke their pipes with the party about the door. Here we all remained, talking for a half-hour, still hoping that the buckboard would arrive for, if it came, the news it might bring would largely determine with all of the travellers at the station the question of their departure in the morning.

Don Ramon was as yet lacking the harness for his mules. The thought occurred to me to stroll down to the Missourian's camp and enquire whether that percentage might not have a harness to sell. The mother and children had already retired to seclusion of the canvas-topped wagon, but the head of the household was sitting, pipe in mouth, on the wagon tongue, keeping awake so as to let his mules feed awhile longer before he tied them up for the night. I broached the object of my visit and was so fortunate as to find that he had picked up a pair of new harnesses at a bargain from a broken-down team in the Alamosa valley, which he would sell at a price entirely reasonable. Much gratified by the discovery, I came back to Don Ramon with the report that I had secured him the refusal of a pair of harnesses, so that, unless unforeseen obstacles intervened, we might make our start on the morrow.

(To be Continued.)



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