

# Felix Blanchard

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

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(Continued.)

### CHAPTER X.

It was not until after the station stock and other property had been accounted for, and the fact fairly well demonstrated that the invaders of the corral, whoever they might be, were gone, that any one approached the man lying dead at the outer corner of the wall, for the purpose of finding out who he was. After carefully reconnoitering around and beyond the corral the station-keeper stopped at the corner, lighted a match, and, stooping, inspected the face of the dead man. Around him, as he did so, the other men gathered to look over his shoulder. The man was to all appearance a Mexican, his swarthy face white as the pallor of death. His revolver, lying on the ground beside him, contained three loaded and three empty cartridge shells, and it was at full cock, indicating that he had fallen while in the act of firing. His clothes, while not fine of make and texture, were of a quality superior to those ordinarily worn by shepherds and freighters. His whole appearance and equipment, as well as the place and manner of his death, were evidence sufficient in the minds of all who looked at him that he was no peaceable citizen. It confirmed the theory which Felix and I were desirous should prevail, that the disturbance at the corral was caused by an attempt of robbers to enter and steal the stock inclosed therein. Under such circumstances as these there was little disposition to spend much time investigating the matter. The station-keeper voiced the general opinion as to the situation when he said:—

"He was one of a gang tryin' to break into the stage company's corral to steal its property, and here met his death at the hands of parties unknown. They can stay unknown for all I care, except that I'd like to move them to a vote of thanks for doin' their work so thoroughly. This man we will leave here until mornin', subject to the inspection of anybody who chooses to examine him for purpose of identification.

"After a reasonable time, say until nine o'clock a.m., if nobody knows or claims him, we'll plant him and call the whole proceeding closed. Gentlemen, do you agree with this verdict? Very well, as you do, will two of you lend a hand to help me lay the body out? Over this way, please, where it will rest in the shade, out of the moonbeams, and not so near the gate that every horse and mule will go into it when it is led out through the gateway. That's well. I'll throw this bit of wagon cover over him, and we'll call the inquest adjourned without day."

Now that things had quieted down, and it had become pretty evident that the disturbance at the corral, whatever had caused it, was over, some of the men camped near the station began to appear one by one to see what the firing had all been about. The Missourian, with long rifle on shoulder, strode first up to the station, and following him came one of the prospectors, whose "pard" remained behind to guard their joint effects. But the show figure in the gathering was the maestro, who when satisfied that his own belongings were safe, and that no attack on his tent was meditated, emerged from his retirement with pistols at belt, and in his hand the sword with which, by his account of the previous evening, he had, in the days when he was a matador, slain the valorous bulls of Bashan and Torreon.

But of all that came none identified the dead robber, who, without guard or watcher, was left lying alone under the corral fence, beneath the stained and dinky piece of canvas which the station-keeper had spread above him. "Only one dead man more," remarked the prospector as he turned indifferently away. "It's a great year for killings in Arizona."

During the excitement it seemed that no one present, except Felix and myself, was aware of the absence of Dolores. I was recalled to the thought of her by Felix's remark to me, delivered in a low tone:—

"I wonder what's become of the little Indian girl? She hasn't turned up in all this rumpus, and I'm afraid she won't."

"Carried off, or left on the prairie most likely," I answered, suddenly remembering her existence, and the part she had unwittingly taken in admitting the bandit leader to the corral. "There's a big chance that her lover has acted on his chief's kind permission to dispose of her in his own way."

"They seem not to have found out her absence as yet," said Felix. "When they do, there'll be no end of surmise and guessing as to her fate."

Don Ramon was still standing at the door, talking with his daughter. If Carmen had any knowledge or suspicions as to the cause of the midnight invasion of the station, or if her father had, it did not appear in the conversation that Felix and I had with them, when, a little later, Don Ramon politely called us to the door, and asked us a few guarded questions concerning the matter. Beyond giving him a fair description of Sangrado's

appearance we did not tell him any more of what we knew than we had let out to the others. Knowing the whole matter as we did, it was not difficult to infer from the tenor of his enquiries, cautious though they were, that he vaguely suspected Sangrado's connection with the matter, and the true purport of his visit.

A sudden thought seemed to have struck the senior, who asked abruptly of his daughter:—

"Where is Dolores? I haven't seen her anywhere about."

"Why, where indeed? She was with me when I fell asleep. She must have got frightened and run out of the house before I woke. Yes, that must be so, for, now that I think of it, I found the door unbolting when I went to look out."

Felix touched my elbow with his. Now the little Indian's case was coming up for judgment, and no one but he and I had the clue to the whole matter.

"Dolores, Dolores," called Don Ramon, sharply, "where are you?"

To our surprise, an answer came promptly from round the corner of the house:—

"Si, senior, estoy virinedo" ("Yes, senior, I am coming"), and through the gateway of the corral walked Dolores, with the air of one who had stepped outside only for a minute. Her shawl, drawn up over her head, partly concealed her face, upon which, so far as we could detect, there was no sign of discomposure. No one could have suspected her of having borne so prominent a part in the occurrences of the night, unless, like Felix and myself, he had witnessed it.

"Was this a time to desert your mistress?" said Don Ramon, a little sternly. "So you were frightened and ran away when you heard the firing outside? Mahaya! I am ashamed of having such a little coward in my household."

Dolores hung her head and said nothing. As if in pity, Carmen stepped aside and motioned her that she should enter the house. Dolores crept inside as if glad to escape, and disappeared from sight and sound in the darkness. Certainly good fortune was with her that night—she had come unscathed from greater perils than she knew of, and now the unpleasant reckoning which she might reasonably have expected with her master had been easily settled.

Carmen had thrown her light mantle about her head and shoulders when she came to the door to meet her father. As Don Ramon talked with Felix and me, standing before the door, she stood within, a little to one side, in the shadow, so that only her hair above her brow, her forehead, and her eyes showed distinctly in the shaft of moonlight that streamed through the doorway. She seemed to be in no haste to retire and stood listening interestedly as we talked. The eyes of a woman of the Spanish race have an eloquent language of their own. Carmen's, modest as pansies, were as free from coquetry as feminine Spanish eyes can be, but I noted that her gaze rested on Felix, and if ever eyes sent a message, her glance carried this one to him—that she had something to say to him, and wished to speak with him alone.

But if I read her message to my comrade rightly, and her wish was to be realized, it must be an affair of some other time than to-night. The herders were waiting to close the gate, and the other men that had gathered had now dispersed. Don Ramon kissed his daughter, said *buencas noches*, listened until he heard the bolt shut within, shook the hands of Felix and me as he bade us good-night and went to his own stumbers. The herders, after passing a remark or two with us, retired to their rest in the shed. Felix and I, following their example, read out blankets upon the earthen floor of the shed, turned in with weapons in easy reach of our hands, and almost at once were fast asleep.

For the few hours that remained of the night our stumbers were undisturbed. We were awakened in the bright dawn by the voice of the station-keeper calling his men, and it announced that the buckboard was coming. The herders roused themselves from their blankets and set at once to feeding and grooming the mules that were to serve as the relay. Felix and I arose and went from the corral round to the front of the house, where Don Ramon and the station-keeper were standing. The red light of dawn streamed over the eastern mountains, illuminating the fresh tints of the plain in its joyous glow. Seen far away, came on through the brightness an elongated speck, with a whitish rider rising behind it, which the practised eye of the station-keeper, when first it came into view, had identified as the mail buckboard, and the dust raised by its wheels and the hoofs of the mules that drew it. Rapidly it advanced, and soon we saw that there were horsemen accompanying it. In a time, surprisingly short, it drew up to the station, a buckboard with four cavalymen as escort.

With the driver, upon the front seat, sat an orderly, in undress uniform. On the second seat was a military-looking gentleman in the uniform of a general of the United States army, and beside him sat a lady, younger than he, his wife. Every one of the men, the general, the orderly, and the driver, had a revolver strapped to him, or resting by his side, and each held a repeating rifle between his knees.

The station-keeper, who at sight of the buckboard had set about preparing breakfast, came to the door to greet the arrival, and he and the driver exchanged friendly nods. The herders came running out from the corral to take the mules from the vehicle and care for them.

right," said the keeper. "We didn't know when to expect you, but knew you'd break a hole through if one could be made."

"Yes," replied the driver, as he jauntily stepped to the ground and began to pull off his gloves. "But you can bet your boots it wasn't a dead sure thing we'd get anywhere when we started out."

"Apaches raisin' the devil the country over, I suppose, turbin' up every where that they're least expected?"

"You're talking sense; every word you say. The whole country's stirred up, from the Rio Grande to here. Indian scares everywhere, and a good deal of real killing in the bargain."

He paused and waited until the general's wife, whom her husband had assisted to alight, had passed from hearing into the house, then added:—

"They jumped a Mexican freighting outfit at Burro Springs yesterday afternoon. Killed nine people. A woman with her child was along, and she escaped into the bushes. The Apaches couldn't find her, and they tortured the child so that its cries might draw the mother out of her hiding place to come to it. A party was to go out for the bodies this morning from Silver City. This is a specimen of the sort of news that's coming in from every quarter. It seems as if all the Apaches from the reservations are out on the warpath this time."

"Looks like it for a fact, and they're workin' cunning, too. The catchin' of the two buckboards between here and Bowie night before last was a specimen of their work, and they seem to be keepin' their gait up right along since," said the keeper. "But come in to breakfast, Tom. Everything's ready."

"I'm ready for it," said the driver, lying his gloves upon the wagon seat. "I'd like some coffee about now. I don't mind saying I've had a hard and anxious night handling the reins."

At the breakfast table in the station the general and his wife, seated opposite Don Ramon and his daughter, talked Spanish to their neighbours like

native, and shared with them the marmalade and divilled ham they had brought along to ek out the rade fare to be expected at stage stations. Especially were they interested in Don Ramon's account of the adventures of the night before and the night previous to that. It was a strange meeting, here on the south-western plain, of these representatives of two conquering civilizations, the general representing the military power of the United States, the Don the glories of the Spanish conquistadores. The one had won distinction during the American civil war and in Indian campaigns upon the western frontier. The other upon his broad estate had conducted his affairs and defended his household and property against the Apaches, as his ancestors before him had done since first they settled in the Santa Cruz valley, two centuries ago, under a grant from the Spanish Crown.

More strikingly dissimilar even than these were the types of femininity presented by the general's fair young wife and Don Ramon's daughter. The one, in her fashionable, exquisitely fitting travelling dress, complete in every appointment, brought into the rough surroundings the cultured ease and charm of manner that characterize the highest society in the great cities. Carmen's dark beauty was set off to perfection by the arrangement of her hair, hastily gathered and fastened by a gold arrow shot through its knot, and by her brightly flowered gown, the sole one left her after the death of the Apaches upon her father's camp. Her untutored grace and naive, pretty, half shy manner of speech, and the pride of race that unconsciously to herself pervaded every expression and movement gave her an interest and attractiveness that none appreciated and admired more than the cultivated lady who sat by her. A bond of sympathy and confidence seemed at once established between them, and soon, by inquiries, delicately made, the general's wife learned the destitute condition of Carmen's wardrobe.

After breakfast I saw the general's wife and her husband conversing with Don Ramon apart. As a result of the conversation her trunk was taken down from the buckboard, opened, and she took from it a handsome cashmere wrapper and various small articles of wearing apparel and others for toilet use. The smaller things she rolled up in the wrapper and carried the bundle herself to Carmen's room.

She came back to Don Ramon, still standing in conversation with her husband, and he began to thank her warmly for her kindness to his daughter.

"Not a word, not a word of thanks!" she cried, impetuously. "Why, the poor child! Think what she has narrowly escaped! These trifles I leave with her I shall not miss, and it is a great pleasure to me to think they may be of some use to her."

While the mules were being harnessed to the buckboard under the careful superintendence of the driver, the general, cigar in mouth, watched critically the soldiers composing his escort as they equipped themselves to mount and ride. At the same time he

glave to the little knot of listeners gathered about him his views as to the movements of the hostiles and the likelihood that they might be intercepted and forced to battle by the troops.

"They have left the Gila valley," he said, "and have been massing and plundering as far east and north as the Mogollon mountains, and the Black range. The troops concentrating upon them have headed them off on the east and south, so that it will be difficult for the Apaches to proceed in these directions, especially if they are loaded down with plunder. Either they must turn back, or they must take the risk of meeting the troops in a fight. There are so many of them out that they may venture to try a battle, but I think they will turn back and run for Mexico, following pretty nearly the route they took in coming north."

"I predict that important news concerning them will come with twenty-four hours," he said, in conclusion. Now everything was ready for the buckboard to start. Before taking her seat the general's wife kissed Carmen, and wished her and her father a safe and pleasant journey to Silver City and Santa Fe. The other farewells, warmer than usually follow so brief a meeting, were said, and then the buckboard rolled away down the trail to the westward, with the cavalymen galloping behind.

The buckboard was not the first outfit to leave the station that morning. Daylight had found the three outlaws there, and—what was as gratifying as their absence—there were no reports of any one at the station of horses or other property missing as a result of their visit. The prospectors did not remain long at the place. They had taken breakfast in the early morning, packed their burros, and immediately after the arrival of the buckboard had started up the trail to the eastward.

Now their little procession was a mere speck in the distance. The Missourian, with more things to look after, was more leisurely in making a move. Breakfast with his family being over, preparatory to packing up his movables for a start, he came up to the station, bringing with him the spare harness which he had engaged the night before to sell Don Ramon. The harness was tried upon the driving mules, and it was found that, with some slight adjustments, it could be made to fit them satisfactorily. The price agreed on was paid the Missourian, and a few minutes later the white-topped wagon, with the rocking chair, and the led cow behind it, and the family mysteriously stowed beneath the canvas, was taking its way up the trail.

One dreary ceremony the station-keeper had asked each man to observe who came up to the station before starting away. It was to look at the dead man, lying unwatched and unnoticed at the corner of the corral, to see if he could identify him by daylight. For this purpose Don Ramon, Felix, and I approached the body with the station-keeper, who lifted the covering from the face. Neither my comrade nor I recognized it as one we had ever seen before. But Don Ramon started at sight of it, and the expression of his countenance grew stern and anxious.

"Do you recognize him, Senior Bustamante?" asked the station-keeper, respectfully.

"Yes—that is, I have seen him," answered Don Ramon. "He is a man whose fate none need regret. He is a thief and a murderer. His name? I don't recall it."

"Shouldn't wonder if there's a reward or two out for him, dead or alive, most likely," remarked the keeper. "If so, the boys at the station might not mind turnin' an honest dollar by sending his body in to the sheriff."

"I don't know how that is," said Don Ramon, shortly. Something evidently had disturbed him, and the subject was distasteful to him. "My advice would be to bury him, and to make no stir about it. By mixing in the matter you might raise some enemies that would give you trouble."

He walked away with a cloud on his brow. He met Carmen at the door of the station, and stood talking with her in a low tone for some time. Being there they missed part of a little conversation that took place at the carriage.

The mules were harnessed to the carriage, our horses saddled, the packing and other preparations all completed ready for a start, when the maestro, likewise ready, came up to speak with us. His face looked so woebegone, and showed so much discomposure of manner that Felix asked him what had gone wrong with him.

"It is the Senorita Lupita, senior. My star, my great attraction, is gone," he said, mournfully. "She disappeared some time during the night, leaving no word or token why she left me or where she has gone. I believe it is the doings of that cursed Sangrado. I knew misfortune would come after he had shown his face here."

"Do you suppose she has gone away with him?" I inquired, hypocritically.

"Quien sabe? With him or with the young caballero, camped down by the trail, El Curbedo, I believe they call him, or with some one else, the devil knows who. She would go with Belphégor himself did he happen to strike her fancy, and would give him the worst of the bargain before she got through with him. But she is a magnificent actress, a genius, and it breaks my heart to lose her."

(To be Continued.)

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