

Felix and Lupita

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

(Continued)

The woman within the gate had been thus far uttered a sound, but now, as she ceased her desperate attempts to gain entrance to the corral, she laughed—a low, mocking laugh, filled with the spirit of exultation and derision.

At the sound of her laugh Sangrado stood still and listened. Evidently he recognized the one who had laughed as his enemy for he drew back and stood erect and attentive, like a serpent about to strike. I have, in the experiences of an adventurous and varied life, seen many expressions unpleasant to contemplate in the features of humanity, but never have I seen or imagined an expression of baffled hate to compare in fiendishness with that I saw working upon the face of Don Gaspar Sangrado as he stood before the barrier interposed between him and the consummation of his plot.

Again he looked at the wall as if he would scale it at any risk.

Through all this pantomime Felix and I had stood with clenched rifles in readiness for instant action. Should he attempt to break into the corral there was no doubt that we ought to do. By every precept of the frontier code we should unhesitatingly have shot him. After that there were his followers to deal with.

But he did not make the attempt. Even his ungovernable rage did not blind him to the fact that there was no chance to effect a surprise, and that to attempt to force matters now would, by causing an alarm, only endanger his safety without bringing him nearer the accomplishment of his purpose. His arm moved restlessly behind him beneath his long cloak as he again approached the gate. The expression of deadly hate upon his face belied the soft tone in which he spoke.

"Lupita," he called, in a tone gentle and insinuating, "Lupita, mia carissima."

The black mantled figure within the gate moved a little aside so as to place the solid wall between her and the man who spoke.

"So, Senor Sangrado," she said, in a tone as derisive as her laugh had been, "it appears that you recognize me. What have you to say to me now?"

CHAPTER IX.

To the girl's question thus peremptorily put Sangrado did not at once make answer. Astounded and infuriated by this unlooked for interruption in his undertaking, he for the moment was plainly at a loss what to do or say. When every obstacle to the execution of his desperate design had seemed to be overcome or smoothed away, this Mexican actress, whose vindictiveness toward him had been so recently shown in her outbreak during the tent performance, now unexpectedly appeared in his path and barred his approach to Carmen.

Baffled and angry, as he stood before the gate his thoughts were revealed in the expression of his face as clearly as if they were spoken. Could he but have been within reach of Lupita so as to strike her down, strangle her, drive a knife blade into her heart before she could make an outcry, his course of action would have been simple, and its adoption immediate. But the high wall and gate were between them, and so he must speak her fair and hide his time. True, he might scale the wall that separated them, but he knew Lupita and that she thoroughly knew him. She was as suspicious, as alert, as ready as he was, and leap the wall as suddenly as he might, he could not surprise her so swiftly that she would not raise an alarm that would defeat his plans. So, with murderous rage in his heart, which his movements, restless as those of a jaguar shut from its prey, betrayed, he tried other tactics and plied her with cajoleries.

"Do you hate me then so bitterly, Lupita," he said, in the same smooth, plausible voice as before, "that you bar my way when I seek you? I had lost sight of you, had missed you so long. Now, when at last I have found you again, will you repulse me? Has it all passed from your memory, the love that we bore in the happy days of the past? Open the gate to me, Lupita, life of my soul, for I swear I love you and you only!"

He paused. There came no words of answer from Lupita—only her laugh, bitter and taunting. Such mockery, triumph and derision I had never imagined could be expressed in articulate tones of the human voice. I could hear Sangrado's teeth grind fiercely as the sound of her laughter came to his ears, but he went on to talk as smoothly as before.

"I heard that you were travelling eastward across the plain and I followed you. I sought you in the tent during the performance, but your violence repelled me. Now I have found you here where I may plead with you. My passion is unabated. I am mad with love of you, Lupita, carissima I kneel before you. I throw myself at your feet. Will you not fling open the gate that bars me from you?"

With all his semblance of sentimental ardour and impassioned he did not raise his voice, but spoke in a low tone intended to reach only the ear of the girl he addressed.

"Lupita," he implored, "be as forgiving as you are beautiful. Alas, that we separated! How did I ever bring myself to part from you? I was mad with love and jealousy of you. Every minute since our parting has been an age of unhappiness to me. I have come for your forgiveness. Let me only see you, kiss your hand, then, if you will, send me from you forever."

Now she answered him, speaking in

a voice as sweet and ingratiating as his.

"Gaspar mio, all this is so strange from you who forsook me. And do you really sought me? And do you really love me?"

"Love you, carissima! A thousand times more than ever before, for I had lost and have found you."

"You are sure you care for me, no one else? You love me wholly?"

"There is no other woman on earth fit to stand in your shadow. My heart is yours alone."

"Ah, my heart, it flutters with emotion! Why did you come to disturb me when I hoped I had forgotten you? Oh, the risk I run in trusting you again. If I forgive you, open the gate to you, will you be ever constant to me? You will not leave me again, Gaspar mio?"

"I swear constancy and that my heart shall be ever yours."

She shook the heavy bar of the gate and partly lifted it from the socket in which it rested.

Felix and I, in our ambuscade, were astounded at Lupita's sudden change of behaviour. Was this fierce creature's jealousy so easily satisfied her resentment placated with a few fair words? Was she indeed so readily deceived that she would open the gate to meet in reconciliation this faithless suitor waiting in silent expectancy outside? Open it to meet her death, merciless and swift!

Sangrado's restless impatience had given place to a frightful calm. His features, no longer working with suppressed anger, had assumed an expression more ominous and terrible. They were set in an expression of deadly purpose, his satisfaction at the change in the situation being revealed only by the gleam of the white teeth beneath his heavy black mustache. He stood alert and motionless. His cloak, thrown back over his shoulder, left the right arm free, and his right hand, held close by his side, clutched a long, glittering knife.

Our cocked rifles covered him; our fingers were against the triggers. We would not kill him until the last moment, when it might become necessary in order to save the girl's life. But he should not kill Lupita if our shots, deliberately aimed, could do their work quickly enough to stop him. One thing I noticed, so alert are the senses of men who wait thus in suspense. Closely watching Sangrado's face, ready to anticipate every movement of his that its expression might indicate, I at the same time was noting an indistinct something beyond him almost wholly concealed by the house, but which to my mind seemed to bear the semblance of a man peering round the corner of the building.

Once more Lupita let her bar fall back into its socket. She then rattled and partly lifted it again.

"The bar is heavy, Gaspar mio," she complained. "Are you becoming impatient?"

Upon Sangrado the suspense of delay was telling. He found it hard work to control his voice as he said encouragingly, "Once more, carissima. Push hard against the gate as you life the bar, and it will open."

Again she shook the bar, so that it rattled in her apparent effort to lift it. What was the meaning of this performance? We had seen her fasten the bar in its socket easily enough when she had entered the corral, and it was a thing no more difficult to unfasten it. Could it be that, after all, she was only playing with Sangrado?

"Hurry, hurry!" he urged, his impatience increasing beyond his power to restrain.

She struck the bar back with a clang into the socket. Her laugh rang forth loud, exultant, and mocking.

At the sound Sangrado started as if a serpent had stung him.

The girl's laughter continued as if in merriment that she could not suppress. But such merriment! Nothing that the human voice might utter could have expressed more that was taunting and insulting to the man standing as if frozen, disappointed and dismayed, outside the gate.

At last the scorn of her laughter found expression in words: "Fooled and foiled, Gaspar Sangrado, liar, traitor, perjured villain! You have truly done well to try again to deceive me who know you. You say you love me, and came here to find me. Shall I tell you how much you love me, and why you are here? You followed Senor Bustamante's party from the Santa Cruz valley, and to-night you have come to carry away his daughter."

Again Sangrado started and his half-stifled exclamation reached her ear. She laughed.

"Ah, you wince! I have discovered your secret, and it displeases you. You planned your scheme well, Senor Sangrado, but it would be strange if you had devised so deeply as to hide it from Lupita. Now, let me tell you something."

Her voice, not rising in pitch, was becoming intenser and more vibrant in her gathering excitement as she continued:

"You have come for Carmen Bustamante, but her you shall never have. Lupita, whom you lived with, pretended to love, made to shed many bitter tears, and at last cast off—stands between you and what you seek. Don Ramon's daughter is within your call. Your voice may already have waked her. She can see you from her window should she care to look out—and you are as far off from possessing her as if she were a star in the sky."

Sangrado's rage burst forth in words: "You lie, tiger cat, devil's daughter of Jezebel!" he shouted, unmindful in his passion of all caution

her in spite of her father and of you, and were to let those who stand in my way. For at the time of reckoning will be soon."

"So you threaten me, bandit, whose life rests on my word as you stand talking! Have you made confession, Don Gaspar, that you speak so boldly? It were wise if you had seen a priest. Your soul may take a long journey to-night."

He was silent and listening intently. I could see that his arm moved beneath his cloak. Lupita went on:—"There is something more that I would say for your pleasure, my loyal and gentle caballero. The one for whom you have travelled so far and taken so great a risk would not welcome your coming. It is not Don Ramon alone who scorns you and laughs at your pretensions. Carmen does not love you. The dust that

floats beneath her father's carriage wheels is of more account to her than you are. She does not even think of you. Her thoughts are of an Americano. Did you not see him when you were peering, like a prowling coyote, into the tent to-night? He is taller and handsomer than you—a true and gallant caballero. No wonder her eyes were for him. As for you—"

Her voice was drowned in the loud report of a heavy pistol. Crack, crack, crack! Don Gaspar's cloak fell from his shoulders as, with revolver suddenly thrust forward, he fired three times in rapid succession through the gate, directing his aim by the sound of the taunting voice.

"Curse you, I'll make my work sure," he muttered, and sprang like a cat to the top of the wall and over into the corral.

Two pistol shots rang out sharply behind him, coming from the corner of the house, as he rose to the crest of the wall. His sombrero flew from his head and went spinning half way across the corral. But he struck on his feet within the wall, and turned, revolver in hand, toward Lupita.

At the first report of Sangrado's pistol, she had darted to one side into the shelter of the wall. Now she stood, facing the corral, with her back against the wall. By the light of

the moon I could see a blackened mark across her cheek from which the blood was trickling, showing that Sangrado's first bullet had not gone wide of its mark.

As the Mexican came over the wall Felix had slipped to the ground in front of the wagon. As the bandit landed within the corral the butts of our rifles were at our shoulders, and we stood in readiness to fire instantly at him. Another moment and the barrels of our pieces were lowered as quickly as they had been aimed. Beyond Sangrado, Carmen had stepped from the house, and was standing upon the doorstep directly in our line of fire.

Her hair, unbound, streamed back over her shoulders to her waist. The moonlight irradiated her face, and was reflected in the depths of her glorious eyes. Her loose gown she had pulled together in front, and held with one hand. Her delicate feet, bare and white, rested upon the dark doorsteps like exquisitely carved cameos. Awakened by the commotion and firing, the causes of which she could in no way understand, she looked, in her alarmed surprise, a divine picture of beauty and startled innocence.

Sangrado raised his pistol. With the weapon pointed full at her breast, Lupita did not flinch or scream, but faced him, disdainful and defiant, her back against the wall, her arms held against her sides like a Mexican political prisoner stood up before the muskets of a firing squad. There was but one way to save her life, and that way would have been impossible of execution by one less resolute and ready than Felix. Two long, quick steps, and his rifle barrel struck down the arm of Sangrado, whose revolver, going off, threw up a dust with its bullet at the feet of Lupita. As if with the same movement, the heavy rifle barrel whirled in the air down upon the head of the Mexican, who, staggering back several paces, went down to the ground like a dead man.

Roused by the firing, the mules and horses were running in wild alarm about the corral. Sangrado came to his feet as quickly as he had fallen, caught up his pistol which had dropped from his hand, dashed in among the frightened, plunging creatures, and, in a twinkling, had disappeared from our view. Out of the dust and tramping two shots from his revolver came our way, as a reminder that he was still in existence, and desirous to pay off his indebtedness to all concerned with promptness.

Felix sprang to Carmen. "Go back into the house, senorita," he hurriedly said. "This is no safe place for you." As she still stood, irresolute, perhaps not disposed to obey an order given so summarily, a third shot from Sangrado's pistol chipped the adobe in the house wall above her head. Felix waited no longer, but swiftly and gently lifted her to the doorsteps and pushed her back into the room.

"Your father will be here in a minute or two," he said, as he closed the door. "Do not, on your life, venture out until he comes."

As he turned from the doorway we saw, at the farther end of the corral, a dark form scale the wall and disappear beyond it. Felix and I both fired at it while it was in view for a moment above the crest of the wall, but the chance that such snap shots would find their mark we knew to be a

small one. The creature desperado had made good his retreat.

We looked for Lupita, but she was gone. Amid the confusion within the corral after Sangrado had leaped inside, I had heard outside the wall the reports of the Kid's pistol mingling with other firing, by which it was to be inferred that, after his two shots at the bandit leader, he might be transacting some business with the men Sangrado had left in reserve. Lupita, in passing out at the corral gate, had left it open. There was no other sign of her going, but it was reasonable to believe that she had disappeared with her desperado lover, Rily. Of his work there was characteristic evidence in the shape of a man with two bullet wounds through his body, lying dead at the outer corner of the corral with a half emptied revolver on the ground before him.

All these events, since Sangrado had fired the first shot, had taken place more rapidly than I have told them. The sound of the firing had awakened everyone at the station, and the men in the building and those camping about it were quickly astir. But as every one had to find his weapons, and see that they were all right for service, some little time elapsed before they appeared upon the scene of action. The two herders who slept at the end of the shed were the first to appear. Whether they were slow waking or had unusual difficulty in finding their weapons, they did not emerge from the darkness until the firing was over, and all parties concerned, except Felix and myself, had disappeared from the scene of action. The station-keeper and Don Ramon, with Manuel accompanying, came next round the corner of the house, and it was quite evident that within the tent and down at the Missourian's wagon and the prospectors' camping place, the people were astir.

With the caution that comes from experience to those who have camped much in the far Western country, every man kept out of sight until he could, by observing and listening, gain some idea of the cause of the shooting and excitement. Before this should be ascertained no man cared to rush into unknown danger or expose himself in any way to the chances of catching a stray shot. It was better to lie low in readiness to protect his own life and belongings.

Don Ramon's first thought was of Carmen. With carbine in hand he passed at once round to the door and called her name. Immediately she appeared to assure him of her safety. In answer to his anxious questionings, she told him so much as she had seen, but was equally in the dark with himself as to what the disturbance was all about. The station-keeper and herders, assisted by Manuel, were counting up the mules and horses in the corral meantime, and they soon reported that none were missing.

Felix and I, of course, were beset with questions, but we gave little satisfaction to the inquiries. We had heard a noise outside the corral, we said, then some shots had been fired, and a man had jumped over the wall into the enclosure. We had exchanged shots with him, and he had disappeared. Of who were engaged in the affair, and of the events which led up to what had happened we professed no knowledge. To have dropped a hint of the true state of things, and of the chain of circumstances that had led up to the midnight encounter, would have been to invite the questioning and curiosity of people who had no concern in the matter, and we knew that Don Ramon would sternly resent such intrusion into his private affairs.

One clew was found to stimulate the imagination of the curious when a herded picked up Don Gaspar's sombrero in the corral. Although much trodden by the feet of horses and mules, its gold band was intact, and it had the further ornamentation of a bullet hole through both the brim and crown, indicating that the missile that had caused it had come dangerously near where the head of the owner might be expected to be when wearing it. Felix and I recognized the hat, of course, but there was no mark on it to enable any one else to discover the identity of the owner, and we kept our knowledge to ourselves.

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