

Felix Marchant

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

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(Continued)

"I was curious to see what effect upon the girl the death of Sangrado would produce. Somehow to my surprise she betrayed no emotion either of gratified revenge or of sorrow. She was pleased and sympathetic with Carmen's romantic rescue, and in the terrible avengement upon her abductor by Felix, and showed her interest in the two stung. But in her new attachment to the young rustic chief her wrongs and past endearments with Sangrado seemed equally forgotten, and she viewed the preparations for his burial by his men as indifferently as she would have looked upon the dragging of the bull from the arena after the matador's sword had done its work.

Her feelings for Billy were naively shown by her eyes and expression as he came up to where the four of us were standing. She looked as if she saw no one but him. "You've got the girl and killed the Mexican," he said to Felix. "Now what do you propose to do? You won't be able to get across the arroyo for twenty-four hours. We're going down to Las Polonias. It's a little Mexican settlement in the Gila valley, ten miles below here. You can't do better than to join us in the journey. You'll get a chance to sleep there and something to eat, and I'm afraid you'll have a hard chance if you go the other way. We've a spare horse that the senorita can ride."

Darkness was falling fast, and we all felt that the best thing for us to do was to accept his invitation. In the ravine were nine horses, securely picketed, and on five of them were bridles and saddles. We showed no inquisitiveness as to how the rustlers' possessions had been so greatly enlarged since we saw them at the stage station. We were grateful for the chance to get a lift to civilized settlements. With Carmen seated on the cowboy's saddle, whose pommel was an indifferent substitute for the crutches of a sidesaddle, we took our way, in strange companionship, through the darkness, down the side of the arroyo, bound for Las Polonias.

CHAPTER XV.

After following down the bank of the arroyo a mile or so we struck into a horse-trail which led down toward the Gila river. In and out among thimble-woods foothills, alternating with stretches of grassy valley, sometimes descending abruptly into a ravine, with a steep bank to climb before the party wound its way in single file. The outlaw chief rode in the van, followed by his two men. Lupita and Carmen came next, and Felix and I brought up the rear. In our dark ride through a country unfamiliar to us we had to trust our safety and Carmen's to the good faith of the three rustlers, each of whom rode with a price on his head. The only guarantee of their friendly behaviour lay in the influence of the Mexican actress with the leader, and her good will toward us had been inspired by the desire of revenge upon a recreant lover, with perhaps a compassionate feminine impulse toward her high-bred sister of the same race.

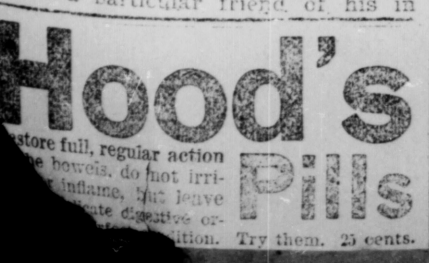
Of the two girls, who, in the darkness, preceded Felix and me along the devious trail, Lupita, sitting astride her horse like a handsome cowboy, rode in advance. Now and then, where the lay of the ground favoured it, Felix pressed his horse onward so as to ride by the side of Carmen. The few softly-spoken words, which at such times passed between them, seemed vastly to comfort and encourage her. As the night grew more chilly he took from behind his saddle the rolled-up Indian blanket and wrapped it about her. Observing this with approval, Lupita took from behind her saddle a large black mantle and wrapped it similarly about herself. Once Felix drew rein and fell back so as to speak with me.

"I never get safe to white settlements, I shall marry her—if I can," he whispered. "So far as her liking for you goes, there doesn't seem to be any hitch in the matter," I said. "Perhaps not. But there is her father to reckon with, and there's likely to be plenty of trouble from him. While you were riding ahead of the carriage this afternoon he may have thought Carmen and I were getting

There she bade them consider the room and the entire house as theirs and saw personally that all preparations were made for their comfort. More than this, she threw open a wardrobe in which were hanging several of the silk gowns and mantillas which every Mexican woman of her quality is supposed to possess. "The beautiful senorita may wish a change of dress," she said. "Anything in the wardrobe is at her service to wear. We were expecting that my niece Tomasa and her husband would occupy this room. They were to have been married to-night. Alas, where are they now?" Then, seeing that her listeners were interested in the topic, she went on to give them an account of the intended wedding and the mishap that had interfered to prevent it.

While Carmen laved herself with fair water Lupita darted into an adjoining room, where she tipped things about and examined them inquisitively. "This is the priest's chamber," she called. "Here is his rosary. I think the alcaide's wife took me for a nun. I've a great mind to be one in earnest for a little while." She swept back to Carmen with the rosary about her neck, and, suddenly stopping, stood posed before her, with hands crossed upon her breast, the long cloak drawn over her head in the attitude of a nun at devotion. Then, with a laugh, she threw off the cloak and began to dance, rattling the beads of the rosary like castanets.

Carmen was too much horrified at the sacrilege to protest in words. Instantly Lupita stooped and stood looking at her seriously. Carmen, her simple toilet completed, sat by the window, her elbow on the sill, her forehead resting upon her hand. Her eyes and mouth showed that she was on the point of crying. It was little wonder that she should feel disconsolate, poor child, flung as she was among strangers, weary and famished, after the exciting, perilous vicissitudes of such a day. "What is it, senorita, that troubles you now?" asked Lupita, in a tone that expressed her sympathy. "My father and friends at home—what will they say and think of me after this, carried away and remaining so long under protection of men who are not of my kind? You know how severe and exacting our people are with an unmarried girl. And I am innocent." Lupita was silent for a moment, then laughed. "Senorita Carmen Bustamante," she said, "you love the young American caballero who fought for you and rescued you. Why not marry him to-night?" "Marry him—to-night?" repeated Carmen, turning quickly round toward her madcap adviser with eyes very wide open, yet with no sign of displeasure in her face. "Why not? He will jump at the chance." "Marry without my father's consent, away from his house, with none of my kindred present?" "Why not? The priest is here, and 100 guests will dance at your wedding. Then you can snap your fingers at the world. And at your father, too," she added, under her breath. Carmen said nothing. She was thinking gravely. Presently she rose, walked to the mirror, and began to arrange her hair. She still was absorbed in thought, but a little look of complacency came upon her face at the sight of the fair picture the glass reflected. Lupita threw the cloak about herself and slipped from the room.



He took the Indian blanket and wrapped it about her.

For the safety of our horses, I took my blankets to the corral so as to sleep near the animals. Glancing into the ballroom before I retired from the scene I saw Lupita among the dancers upon the floor. Attired in a gayly-flowered silk gown, she was, both from her beauty and the grace of her dancing, the cynosure of admiration. In the same set with her was Billy the Kid, his pistols bulging his coat skirt as he danced. The priest had long before gone to bed; but, even had he been present, he scarcely would have recognized in the reckless, handsome dancer the same sister of charity who had posed as the guardian angel of Don Ramon's daughter. His rosary he had found in his room in the place where he had laid it down. When I woke next morning in the bright sunlight, the outlaws had departed. In place of their horses there were some other animals in the corral which I had not noted the night before, but which yet had a familiar appearance. The reason of this became clear to me when, on opening the gate, I saw drawn up on the outside the waggons both of Don Trimbajo and the Missourian, and accompanying them had come the two prospectors. Finding the arroyos filled with water, and the road badly washed out by the flood that came from the rains in the mountains, they had turned off upon a wagon trail which led them, after the most of a night spent in travel, to Las Polonias.

Somewhat to my surprise, Lupita had not accompanied the outlaws. Indeed she seemed not at all inconsolable over the departure of her lover, which led me to suspect that they had parted amicably, by mutual agreement, to meet again when the occasion should serve. The priest had gone away before sunrise, so her audacious persuasion before him of a sister of charity remained undetected. Senor Trimbajo, waiting for the water to fall, so that he could resume his journey to Silver City, did a good stroke of business at Las Polonias. He set up his tent in the plaza and announced an afternoon and evening performance. Both were well attended and highly appreciated, and, of all the performers, the Senorita Lupita, acting in her familiar roles, won the loudest plaudits.

Early in the day a messenger was sent up the arroyo to find Don Ramon and notify him what had become of us. The arroyo had become fordable, and the Don came back that night with Dolores and the messenger over the trail which Trimbajo had followed. To say that he was much taken back when he learned of the marriage is to express the situation mildly. But the joy of recovering his daughter and his gratitude to Felix for the part he had played in her rescue prevailed over all disappointment about the failure of his matrimonial scheme concerning her, and he accepted the situation with philosophy and later with satisfaction.

By nightfall the river had so far fallen that the bridal party, with Francisco and Tomasa, from Los Tejonas, arrived soon after sundown. Most of the guests were still present, and, with no lack to eat and drink at Las Polonias, they had only to await the return of the priest from down the river to celebrate the belated nuptials in proper style. But, though Don Ramon and Felix gave the young couple generous gifts, we did not wait to see them married. We were on our way to Silver City, where the Apaches having left the country for the time being, we arrived on the second day without misadventure.

There I found despatches calling me imperatively to the East. So I had promptly to say adieu to our party, leaving Felix to attend to our business matters at Silver City, where he and his beautiful bride were to pass the first week of their honeymoon. After that they were to travel westward for a long visit at Don Ramon's hacienda, in the Santa Cruz valley.

THE END.

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