

CARMEN OF THE RANCHO

By FRANK H. SPEARMAN

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SYNOPSIS

Don Alfredo, wealthy, Spanish owner of a Southern California rancho, refuses to heed several warnings of a raid by a band of outlaws, Sierra Indians. One day after he has finally decided to seek the protection of the nearby mission for his wife and family, the Indians strike. Don Alfredo is killed and his two young daughters are torn from the arms of the family's faithful maid, Monica, and are carried away to the hills. Padre Pasqual, missionary friend of the family, arrives at the ruins of the rancho and learns the story of the raid from Monica. After a trying and difficult trip across the plains and mountains from Texas to California, youthful Henry Bowie, a Texas adventurer, with his friends, Ben Pardaloe and Simmie, an Indian scout, sight the party of Indians who have carried off the two little girls. The three Texans attack the war party of fifty-odd Indians and through a clever ruse scatter the savages to the hills. The girls are saved. The group makes its way out of the hills and meets the distraught Monica, the children's maid. The girls are left with Monica and the friendly Padre at a mission, and the Texans proceed to Monterey. Here Bowie completes his business for Gen. Sam Houston of Texas, who has commissioned him to deliver an important message. Bowie decides to have a look at the wild untamed country that California was in the middle Nineteenth century. Bowie disappears from California but returns eight years later and makes the acquaintance of a friendly Spanish family at the Rancho Guadalupe.

CHAPTER VI—Continued

"You must have dry clothing," Francisco insisted despite Bowie's protests. "You are my guest. I am now what you call the boss; you must let me be your servant. My clothes are not big enough. But my uncle, he is a big one, like you. Wait."

An Indian boy was dispatched with a message to Don Ramon. He was soon back, bringing a coat, two shirts, trousers, stockings and boots for Bowie.

In vain the Texan protested. Don Francisco had a persuasive way—he laughed away one objection after another with so much good-natured banter that Bowie found himself clad in Californian accouterments of the head of the house, walking into the big living room where he met the Estradas.

Don Francisco introduced his new acquaintance to his uncle and to his aunt, Dona Maria.

But the uncle, Don Ramon, and the Dona, his wife, called for particular attention at the hands of their guest. Except for the youthful nephew, Don Ramon Estrada was the first real Spanish gentleman that the Texan had met.

While there was nothing of haughtiness in Don Ramon, there was something that called for consideration and respect. His mere presence made itself felt, presenting as it did a certain graciousness of manner tempered by dignity and reserve that put his guest at ease with a mute assurance of welcome.

When Bowie had met his host and hostess he felt already at ease, so exquisite was the kindly welcome expressed in their manner. But not until he was presented by Don Francisco, with due formality, to a young lady who now entered the room was the gaunt Texan conscious of a feeling of his own awkwardness and ill-fitting apparel. She was Senorita Carmen, of the rancho, cousin to Don Francisco.

The young Spaniard did the interpreting and much of the talking. Host and hostess extended repeated Spanish greetings to Bowie which Don Francisco translated. The young lady was wholly silent, save that when spoken to by her cousin she responded clearly and composedly.

Dinner was announced. Dona Maria was seated at her husband's right hand, and Bowie was given the place of honor on his left. Next to him sat Don Francisco; seated below Dona Maria was Senorita Carmen. As she sat opposite the Texan she made good use of her eyes, yet so skillfully that he was never aware of her inspection.

Don Ramon, as the beef, mutton and fowl in bewildering abundance were served in formal turn, asked many questions of his stranger guest—questions about Texas; about the differences of the Americans with the Mexican government; then as to what brought Bowie to California. This drew only vague generalizations from the Texan. The Don switched next to what lay immediately ahead; what Bowie had in mind to do.

"As to that, señor," responded Bowie frankly, "I hardly have any plans. I find myself here on the coast with two scout companions. Soon we are going up the river, to Sutter's Fort. Our principal occupation in the interval must be to find something to eat."

Don Ramon laughed. "Truly important."

"So we are heading upcountry after game to sell in Monterey. There is a good demand, I am told, from the ships for venison and elk."

"But with the thousands of head of cattle everywhere available to furnish a beef supply?" objected the Don.

Bowie smiled as this was translated. "The beef of the range cattle is no competition for the meat of the deer and the elk, certainly not with the officers, nor even with the hungry sailors."

"And what is your equipment for the undertaking?"

"Our rifles, señor."

The amiable Don was astonished. "Nothing seems to appall you—your undertaking would, of a certainty, give me pause. And you need nothing?"

Bowie smiled. "One thing we do need."

Don Ramon lifted his eyebrows as if pleased—at last he had found a weak spot in the Texan's armor. "What is it?" he exclaimed.

"Salt," returned Bowie simply.

"Then allow me to be your debtor—you shall leave here with salt for yourselves and for your game. But self-reliant as you are, señor, I can lighten your labors a good bit if you will allow me a further pleasure."

"You are most kind, Don Ramon. I realize that we are strangers and your advice might save us much."

The Don shook his head. "Not advice. I doubt if you need it. But what I know you do need is plenty of horseflesh. It will save you much time and some hardship if you will accept a caponera from us and leave here in the saddle—with your salt," he added, smiling significantly, "in your mochilas."

Bowie sat perplexed. "Caponera?" He looked inquiringly at Don Francisco.

"Horses," explained Francisco. "My uncle means twenty horses, or twenty-five."

Bowie, despite his poise, regarded Don Ramon incredulously. Much talk and much translating followed. But it was for Bowie at last to say, as he was best able, that he



Both were beautiful.

and his scouts were grateful but could not think of so great a draft on this magnificent hospitality.

In the living room, while the rain poured furiously outside, Don Ramon smoked tranquilly and listened to Bowie and his nephew. The ladies talked about the wedding in Monterey. In the morning it was still raining hard—the rancho seemed afloat. The Texan had no choice but to accept Don Ramon's hospitality, and the day went in stories told before the big log fire—stories of Texans and the country of the Staked Plain; the story of Santa Ana and the Alamo, which was told without any effort to water down the cruel butchery by the Mexicans. And interspersed were stories of this new California, to which the plainsman listened with hungry interest. Don Francisco had already taken a fancy to Bowie. That evening he questioned the Texan with a purpose.

Bowie, quite alert to all that went on, noticed the glances that Francisco cast at times toward Carmen, who was in animated talk with Dona Maria. Even the Texan's attention wandered at moments from Francisco's explanation to the two women as they chatted. Both were beautiful, of a type the rough-hewn Texan had never yet seen. They were beautiful in artless animation. The bronzed son of the desert was almost stunned by the atmosphere of charm. The Dona at forty had lost none of her youth; the years had tempered without engraving the portrait of her maidenhood. The vivacity of youth was still hers, enriched now by the dignity of matronly charm. Yet Bowie's eyes were drawn to her daughter Carmen, just old enough to realize the presence of a stranger and protecting her attractiveness by the slight repression of girlhood.

Bowie listened, indeed, to the words of Don Ramon; but he heard the cadences of another voice—a voice of sweet-throated music, strange to the ear but bewildering in utterance. For the first time in his life the Texan, without realizing it, began to love the strange tongue in which Californians spoke and to listen for every syllable that might fall from the lips of the young Spanish girl. The clinging black of her gown did not hide the tender slope of her shoulders; it contrasted with the ivory of her slender neck; and above this, from a perfectly poised head, fell soft masses of brown hair. They framed the features of one just at the threshold of full-bloomed adolescence: lips filling with promise of a richer maidenhood; eyes that retired under long dark lashes and opened with a searching light.

"You want to start tomorrow?" Don Francisco was asking. Bowie nodded.

"But I have an idea," suggested Francisco. "My uncle is having ma-

tanza this week. He is slaughtering surplus cattle for the tallow. Captain Davis, with whom my uncle trades, is in port at Monterey from China. He will want much tallow for South America and Boston—it will be a big matanza. You should see one. Much attention, much excitement, much work. Stay over a day or two. The streams will then be fordable, and you and your scouts, in the meantime, will be well entertained. Plenty of bears!"

"Bears?" echoed Bowie.

Francisco nodded. "Dozens. They come down from the mountains at night after the matanza offal. Plenty of chance for a bear fight if you like one."

The Texan showed interest, asked more questions, and said he would talk to his scouts.

The next morning Bowie and his host rode out to where the matanza was in progress. Pardaloe and Simmie were already on the scene, watching every move of the vaqueros as one rode quietly into the corral, lassoed a steer by the horns and brought him outside.

When the rider had the beast well placed, a second vaquero roped the steer's hind legs, threw him and, with two ropes taut, tied his feet in a bunch and, with a knife, gave him the golpe de gracia.

What interested the Texan, seasoned as to cattle and horses, was the skill and speed with which the vaqueros worked and the almost human intelligence of their horses—the perfection of their response to every hint of their rider in snaring and handling a steer. It was particularly this skill of the horses that made the work proceed rapidly without mishap or hitch.

For two days the work went forward speedily. The matanza ground was a scene of the greatest activity.

To the Texan the spectacle of such abundance, such profusion of waste and such indifference to everything but the work in hand was a source of amazement. A hearty lunch served to the family at noon was followed by a heartier dinner for the evening, with the difference that native wine accompanied the dinner. This was the family gathering of the day at which the hostess and her daughter were formally dressed.

After the family had settled about the fire in the living room and the conversation had shown signs of lagging, Don Ramon, made a request of Carmen.

Carmen took her place at the family harp, ran her fingers over the strings and sang a Spanish song. The conversation and the words of the song were lost on Bowie, but not the clear, true notes of the girl's voice.

Don Francisco explained that the song was the appeal of a lover to the stars to bear witness of his devotion to his mistress. Carmen sang again, a French chanson. It was very slight, but it echoed in Bowie's ears most of the night.

It bothered Bowie, that in these household meetings he could never manage to catch the eye of Carmen. He was discreet enough not to attempt to coax her glance his way—and old enough to be ashamed of himself for his curiosity. But curiosity persisted. Toward the end of his stay a natural resentment at the aloofness of one who had for a week enlisted his lively interest impelled him to practice such retaliatory measure as he could. The least satisfactory feature of his attempt to ignore her was that this made no apparent difference whatever to Carmen. If she were aware, there was no evidence of it—for her, he seemed not to exist.

Don Francisco, on the other hand, grew increasingly attached to Bowie. Everything about the Texan interested the youth. Especially was he fascinated by the plainsman's novel revolver. Indeed, the whole male population of Rancho Guadalupe marveled at a pistol that would shoot six bullets without recharging.

The matanza always brought down an army of bears from the hills, and Don Francisco, seeking excuse to prolong the stay of the hunters, promised them as many bear fights as they had stomach for—black bears, cinnamon bears and occasionally the famed monarch of the Sierras, the grizzly, the highly respected oso pardo, as Don Francisco called him. This prospect of adventure interested the two scouts. They added their appeal to that of Don Francisco, and Bowie—not loath to linger near the flame of the distant candle he had lighted for himself—consented.

Hardly had night fallen when the vanguard of the bears arrived from the hills. Tempted by the rejected meat and offal of the matanza, the bears would come down at nightfall for a feast. This gave the hunters, disposed for sport, their chance. Shortly the matanza ground was well filled with the hairy monsters, gorging, growling, fighting among themselves and snapping ferociously at those bolder coyotes who dared trespass on the preserves of their banqueting "betters."

The Texans watched. Don Ramon, circling a chosen bear, lassoed him by the neck; Don Francisco, watching his chance, executed the more difficult feat of roping the bear's hind legs; and the two horsemen, riding then in opposite directions, forced the bear to fight his utmost

to save himself. In the end he was killed. The vaqueros made nightly sport with the big fellows. The Texans, seeing bear after bear brought to the knife, were not greatly impressed.

In the morning Don Ramon invited Bowie for a canter over the rancho. He particularly wanted to see how the rain had left the foot-bridge leading across the river to the grain fields which stretched in rolling acres toward the bay. Returning, he suggested a short cut through the hills. The two men were riding briskly abreast when, crossing a canyon, they stumbled suddenly, almost on top of a bear ambling along on her way with two cubs to the matanza ground.

"Mira! Cuidado! Oso pardo," cried Don Ramon.

The warning was well ordered. The bear, enraged, reared with the swiftness of a jack-in-the-box on her huge feet and sprang, as luck would have it, at Don Ramon. She struck him with a raking blow of her claw. It caught his trouser leg. The stout cloth, unhappily for the rider, held and the unlucky Don found himself torn from the saddle. In catapulting headfirst to the ground his foot caught in the stirrup, and his frenzied horse dashed down the canyon, dragging the rider a dozen yards before the Don could release himself. As he kicked clear with a mighty effort his head struck a rock, and he sprawled on the canyon floor, half conscious. The bear dashed awkward but swiftly after the fleeing horse and the helpless rider. Bowie, close at hand, had barely seconds to head his panicky mount toward the angry beast and uncoil his lasso. Yelling to the Don to flee, Bowie flung his rope at the loping grizzly. It settled over her head and Bowie, spurring swiftly back despite the weight and size of the grizzly, jerked the monster around and threw her off her feet.

Only for an instant. Rolling over, the bear, doubly infuriated, seized the lasso in her claw and began reeling Bowie and his horse hand over



But in that instant the bear charged him.

hand toward her. The Texan perceived his peril. His horse strove vainly to pit his strength against the strength of his enormous enemy. It was a hopeless endeavor. Relentlessly the bear dragged horse and rider toward him. Luckily a sizable tree stood near. With shout and spur Bowie, plunging forward, whirled the horse and managed to circle the tree before the bear could take up all the slack. It gave the Texan an instant of respite, and he dismounted. But in that instant the bear charged him.

The tree between the two was of little consequence, as the hunted man was aware, and the grizzly's leap was far beyond the nimblest feat of a runner. Taking what was at best a merely desperate chance, Bowie, as he jumped, fired shot after shot into the bear's mouth and head. Then he dropped the empty revolver, whipped out his knife and, waiting not a second, plunged directly into the bear's arms for what was likely to prove a fatal embrace. Only one of the two, he knew could come out alive.

The foreman Pedro was riding away from the corral when he saw Don Ramon's riderless horse racing out of the hills. The half-breed realized at once there was trouble. Shouting to near-by vaqueros to follow, he spurred for the hills. Before he reached them Bowie's horse, dragging the broken rope, shot out of the canyon and gave him the direction. At the same moment he heard pistol shots echoing down the canyon walls. Urging his companions who were stringing along behind to follow fast, Pedro galloped into the canyon.

His practiced eye told him the story as he rode. Whatever it had been, it was over, for the canyon was as still as the grave. On he galloped until, rounding a bend, he saw the bodies of the grizzly and the Texan lying less than ten yards apart, both apparently dead.

(TO BE CONTINUED)

AROUND the HOUSE Items of Interest to the Housewife

Grip the screw top of a jar with a piece of emery cloth or sandpaper, and you will soon have it loosened.

One tablespoonful of sirup sweetens as much as two of sugar.

Store chocolate and cocoa in a cool, dry place to prevent important oils from deteriorating.

This is an attractive way to serve onions. Peel and slice six large onions crosswise. Separate the rings and use only the larger ones, while saving the rest for other use. Cover the selected rings with milk and soak one hour. Then dredge the onion rings with flour seasoned with salt and pepper and fry in deep fat for two minutes. Drain on soft paper to remove any excess grease.

If you have been painting woodwork, the best way of removing the smell is to leave quarters of a large onion in the room until they have absorbed it. Be careful to throw away the onion immediately it has done its work.

Put a basin of cold water in the oven if you want to cool it down. It reduces the heat and helps with the cooking.

Wooden spoons are desirable for candy-making because they do not become uncomfortably hot to handle.

You can bring up the shine on highly enamelled surfaces, if they are dulled after cleaning, by rubbing with a soft chamois leather.

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