



CARMEN OF THE RANCHO

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CHAPTER IX—Continued

Despite the utmost care an occasional bit of rock would rattle down the canyon wall; fortunately the dull ascending roar of the small waterfall muffled the noise. For the weary rancheros this final climb on hands and knees, dragging their rifles with painful care, topped the hardships of the night. But just as the first faint streak of dawn lightened the eastern sky Sanchez, with the utmost caution, turned the top of the trail and led his men into a second recess in the precipice.

As each man crept around the corner he beheld with astonishment a small fire burning fifty yards away with dim figures dancing and chanting around it. Sanchez did not allow a word to be even whispered. He had achieved his surprise; what, now, of the attack?

"Dancing to keep warm?" asked Bowie to Sanchez.

"War dance," whispered Sanchez. "Another raid tonight."

"Maybe!" exclaimed Bowie mentally. "Call on them to surrender, Sanchez."

The high shrill yell of the vaquero broke loud over the empty gorge. The dancers stopped, petrified. The squaws sprang up and scurried from sight. Sanchez called for surrender. The startled warriors looked about in vain for a foe. They raised a quick sharp yell of defiance. For most of them it was the last. A burst of rifle fire toppled them over like pasteboard men. The few who partly escaped the fatal hail staggered or plunged, wounded, back to shelter.

Undismayed and sooner than the Californians could reload, a fresh party of warriors ran out; one limping savage pointed in the direction of the gunfire. A shower of arrows flew from the cave mouth. As these struck the rocks hiding the attackers a yell and a volley came from across the canyon. Three of the warriors went down before the rifles of the Texan scouts and Pedro. The savages had not recovered from their amazement at gunfire from a new quarter when a second volley was poured into them from the Californians hidden on the trail.

To add to the trouble of the cave men, boulders were tumbling down on them from above. As warrior after warrior, yelling defiance, issued from the cave he was struck down. The ledge was soon covered with dead. Still Sanchez waited. He waited till the patience of Bowie and that of the shivering rancheros was exhausted. But the patience of an Indian surpasses the patience of a white man.

"Sanchez," protested Bowie at length, "it has been half an hour since a buck has come out—"

"Yosco is waiting to ambush us," said Sanchez quietly. "If he can get us to attack he will fight."

"No matter. We can't lie behind these rocks all day," continued Bowie. "When the sun gets high enough they can pick us off with arrows. You say there's a hole at the other end of the cave. They can crawl through there and get above us. When they do, we're done. Sanchez, we've got to rush the cave."

"Senores?" Bowie called quickly to the men lining about him. He explained the situation and what he purposed. He asked for five or six volunteers.

Bowie, moccasin shod, crept down toward the cave, followed closely by Sanchez and the picked Californians.

As they drew closer to the cave entrance they heard within the low walls of the squaws in death song—mourning their warriors; its one advantage for the men advancing was that it helped absorb the slight noises of rock fragments underfoot. Bowie was thus able, by hugging the wall, to gain the side of the opening itself without discovery.

He paused only long enough to signal his followers, then, whirling to the right, threw himself, knife in hand, into the narrow cave opening.

An ear-splitting yell burst from within. Using only his knife and pushed closely by Sanchez, Bowie grappled the first warrior, a tall supple fellow, not heavy, but with muscles of steel. For a few swift minutes a deadly encounter was waged for possession of the mouth of the cave. The floor on which they fought put the Texan at a disadvantage, but he managed to dodge the knife of the Indian until he could bring him down.

He cut and jimmied his way inside, dodging as best he could knife thrusts and ax blows, but he gained the entrance.

The struggle was too furious to last long. Once they saw inevitable defeat, the surviving warriors retreated behind their squaws into the farthest recesses of the cave and begged for quarter.

Bowie stopped his Californians and took stock. One of the rancheros was seriously wounded, Sanchez was a mass of bloody bruises and Bowie had suffered a vicious knife slash across his bared chest and half-a-dozen lesser cuts.

The enraged Californians were for extermination. The Texan would have none of it. Sanchez, wild to reach the stolen girls and Amelita, found the frightened neophytes where they had been hidden by the squaws.

But he searched in vain for Amelita. Beside himself, he searched every rift in the cave for Yosco. His frantic efforts were bootless. His bloody knife in hand, he faced the beaten subchief of the savages, threatening instant death for all unless Yosco were produced. "Only his squaws can tell you where Yosco is," muttered the stolid Indian.

"Yosco is not here," said the swarthy, wrinkled woman. "He started yesterday for the high mountains."

"Where is Amelita?" demanded Sanchez, beside himself.

"He took two mission girls along. Amelita was one."

Late that night a weary and straggling procession roused Santa Clara Mission with resounding shouts.

Despite the hour they were given a joyous welcome. Padre Martinez, for himself and his associates, ordered the slender reserves of his fatlings brought from the cold room, and at midnight the fires were still blazing and the kettles bubbling to fill a half-starved company with the best provender the mission afforded.

To the surprise of the savages, who expected to be executed at once, they, too, were served with an abundance and went to their quarters, filled both with stew and with amazement.

The Californians, after mutual congratulations, scattered for their ranchos. It was almost daybreak when Don Ramon, with Dona Maria, Carmen, Bowie and his men reached Guadalupe. Lights were still burning everywhere in the ranch house.

Some moments passed before Bowie came into the living room. After taking measures with the scouts and vaqueros for the guarding of the corral, Don Ramon and his wife were just retiring to their rooms.

"You must ask Senor Bowie more about the fight itself," Don Ramon was saying to his wife. He had evidently been recounting the story of the day. "Because," he added with a cold glance at the Texan, "he kept me out of it—for which I do not thank him."

The early morning was gray with fog, but even the gray of a California morning is an inspiration to the young. When the mist floats lazily in from the sea, when the valley lies green in the soft light of dawn, when the cattle and the horses in thousands shake off the torpor of the night and turn peacefully to the lush grass of the hill slopes, when the curtained bay lies asleep in the distance, not even the sun is needed to inspire youth with strength and hope.

But the Texan had an added inspiration that early morning when he rode up the field to the house, in the spectacle of Carmen in the saddle. The two wheeled together and loped down the valley on the major-domo's daily round of inspection.

Carmen, animated by the brisk ride, slowed down after a few miles. "Senor," she said, turning to Bowie, "I wanted to thank you for your protection of my dear father. It meant so much to me. I am sorry he did not understand."

"I hope his resentment will pass," said Bowie.

"I know it will. He has the highest opinion of you, and rightly, since you saved his life."

He looked at her to disclaim. But the vision of her face, the depth and splendor of her eyes bent full and with perfect poise on his own, confused him. Just the faintest flush crept to her cheeks.

He looked down and could utter only a word or two. "It was nothing, really nothing. Shall we go a bit faster?"

Her spirit attracted him; it was so brimming with fire. And all the time she was sinking deeper into his life.

He knew she could ride, but now she surpassed even his idea of her daring.

The race was cut short by the appearance of a horseman galloping smartly around the hill ahead of them. He was swinging his hat in his hand as he rode. Heavily bearded, tall in the saddle and riding free as he came on, Bowie placed him as an American, and as he drew closer the verdict was strengthened.

"Hello, greaser," shouted the stranger in Yankee fashion.

"Who are you and what do you want?" asked Bowie in curt English.

"Looking for some stray horses, greaser. What are you doing here with a pretty girl?—I'd like to get acquainted with that shy one myself."

Bowie felt sure the man was lying about stray horses, and, early as it was, he was evidently drunk. A nearer inspection of his features did not better Bowie's opinion of him.

"Look here, Yank," said the Texan, chopping his words sharply, "bride your tongue before you get into trouble. You're on Rancho Guadalupe. The quicker you get off it the better it will suit me. And don't make any more remarks about my companion."

"Greaser, I don't think I like you."

"You'll like me less if you don't move on pronto."

The invader very slowly drew a double-barreled horse pistol from his belt. The movement cost Bowie his first tremor. He wheeled his horse back toward Carmen. "Senorita," he said in Spanish, "ride home. This fellow is drunk and might shoot wild. You're in danger here."

"What will you do?" asked Carmen coolly.

"I think I can handle the situation. Go, do," urged Bowie.

He turned to face the threat from the insolent horseman, who stormed on. "I want you to understand I'm Captain Blood, and I don't take no back talk from any greaser. If you open your mouth once more I'll blow your head off."

Bowie felt suddenly angry with himself. Perhaps for the first time since riding inspection of the rancho he had come out unarmed. In his exhilaration at seeing Carmen in the saddle he had forgotten his revolver.

His anger turned on the intruder. "So you're Captain Blood!" he called out rather contemptuously.

The doughty captain's only retort was to make good his words. He leveled his big pistol at Bowie. The Texan spurred violently and ducked in his saddle as Blood fired. The

bullet missed its mark. Bowie's pony plunged. The Texan rode neither toward nor from Blood, but headed sideways, lobbing his rears from its coil as he rode. The beligerent captain was confused by the tactic. He whirled his own horse about to keep face to face with the flying Texan and get in his second shot to better purpose.

But a racing horseman is a notoriously slippery mark for an enemy in the saddle with his own horse jumping under him. In point of fact, Bowie already had his foe at his mercy. Even the captain, sobering rapidly at this unexpected shift in the fight, sat alertly awaiting his chance to shoot. So vividly intent was he on getting a bead on his adroit antagonist that he saw in his field of vision only as a remote danger the long snakelike coils of the deadly reata now circling above him.

When he perceived his peril it was too late. The great loop settled gracefully over him. Pistol in hand, he tried to dodge, flung a wild shot at Bowie, and the next instant, caught like a rat, he was jerked violently from his horse and, with arms pinioned, dragged headfirst and bumping violently at the heels of his captor. It was rough treatment. No man could have lived long under it. But Bowie was thoroughly angry and hardhearted. It was not consideration for the impudent bully that checked his pace, but as he dragged his captive down the slope whom should he see watching him but Carmen.

Instinctively he checked his pony. He seemed to realize that this would be too unpleasant a scene for her approval. He was pulling the struggling man toward outcropping rocks. In five minutes more their jagged edges would have torn him to pieces.

Bowie halted within speaking distance of Carmen. He was still under the influence of his anger and spoke sharply.

"I asked the Senorita to ride home."

She spoke without resentment. "I disobeyed."

"You have exposed yourself to danger," he said bluntly.

"Don't kill that poor man, if he isn't dead already. Please."

"He tried to kill me, didn't he?" asked Bowie tartly.

"Yes, but let him go, senor—if he's still alive."

"It's hard to kill such vermin."

"Please let him go."

"He'll make more trouble another time," grumbled Bowie.

"Please let him go."

Bowie rode back to him. His eyes were staring wildly and he was panting. "Had enough?" demanded Bowie sullenly.

The captive could not raise breath enough to speak but he nodded feebly.

CHAPTER X

Bowie, dismounting and stooping to release his captive, heard the clatter of hoofs. He sprang up, expecting enemies. It was only Pedro and Sanchez, galloping in hard after the report of the two shots.

"Sanchez," said Bowie in Spanish, "ride fast back to the house and fetch me my gun. Pedro," he added, "loosen this fellow and set him up. Then pick up his pistol—it's over by that hill somewhere. And bring in his horse—it's probably grazing back of the hill."

A moment or more passed before the doughty captain sat up, staggered to his feet and shook himself to see whether he was all apart or all together. Hatless, hair awry, breathless and covered with dust and dry grass, he was a sight. Bowie, remounting, eyed him with little sympathy. "So your name's Blood?" he snapped.

"Ben Blood," answered the man. "You'll pay for this. I'm a scout from General Fremont's expedition."

"What are you scouting down this way?"

"Horses—three hundred head."

"You've come to the wrong place for horses."

"Give me my horse and pistol, and I'll be going."

"You'll be going, Blood—with an escort. This vaquero will take you to the presidio for trial. You're under arrest."

"You'd better not arrest me! Give me my horse."

"You're headed for the presidio, Blood. Climb into your saddle."

Bowie then spoke in Spanish to his vaquero. "Ride this wretch well away from the rancho—far north; and lose him somewhere along the Melena de Leon. Let him think he's escaping. We don't want to bother with him. When he gets away, chase him and give him a good scare."

When Carmen and Bowie reached the rancho Don Ramon and Dona Maria were on the porch with a group of house servants huddled close at hand, and Dr. Doane. After the story of the morning was told, the surgeon extracted Bowie and with some effort dragged from him a story of the fight at the cave.

The event of the morning was passed over briefly by Bowie. "But, Don Ramon," he added, "do not deceive yourself. Half-drunken rascals like this one we encountered this morning will be back. We must always be prepared for them. Their leaders are unscrupulous—the rank and file are worse."



"Had enough?" demanded Bowie.

Bowie tried all next day to catch Dona Maria alone in order to lay a momentous request before her. But an itinerant painter had appeared at the rancho and for that day and next few, the family was busy having their portraits painted. Even Bowie was included in the paintings. One day the artist took his leave and Bowie appealed to Dona Maria, asking that he might have a word with her.

The lovely mistress of the rancho was, as always, gracious. "You certainly may, Senor Bowie," she said in her gentle Spanish, "and as many words as you like. Come with me."

She led him to her sitting room. "Speak freely," she said.

"I am a stranger to you, Dona Maria," he began.

"Not wholly," smiled Dona Maria, "but let that pass."

"Thank you; yet I am—and to your people. My stay under the roof of Don Ramon has been a very happy one."

"Surely," exclaimed Dona Maria, alarmed, "you are not leaving us?"

"That is the last thing I'd like to think of, Dona Maria. I have come to love Californians and California, I can honestly say, as if it and they were my own."

"I am a Tejano. My own people are from Maryland and France. When Don Ramon asked me to take charge of Guadalupe I hesitated, as you know. The presence of your daughter, Senorita Carmen, made me fear, from the first time I ever saw her, that my feelings might carry me beyond my depth."

"They have done so, Dona Maria, I am obliged to confess. And I am painfully conscious that I have nothing to offer her. She is an heiress of large possessions. Yet—here I am, asking you for her hand. I am not worthy of it. What will you do with me?"

Dona Maria listened with varied feelings, nor did she seem shocked at the confidence, though her expression was grave, as seemed to her to befit the situation.

"Your words do you honor, Senor Bowie," she responded evenly. "There are, indeed, as you say, unusual circumstances to be considered. Yet after discussing it with Don Ramon, I shall not hesitate to lay your avowal before Carmen. From him I do not anticipate any serious objection. As to her feelings, I am not, much as you might so think, in her confidence. Carmen is mature beyond her years and much reserved by nature. She has been delicate—"

"She seems in perfect health now," suggested Bowie.

"So she is," declared Dona Maria, "in perfect health—have no misgivings on that score."

(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 wood-work, 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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