

# The VALE OF ARAGON

## CHAPTER XI

### Polito Lends a Hand

I shall never forget that scene on the blood-drenched field of Carabobo, when the Liberator went among the scant hundred men that made up the remnant of my Apure battalion, and threw his arms around them, and called them "My boys" and "My children." Or when he stood before the silent, shattered ranks of the British legion, his face working in an emotion he could not control, his eyes unseeing because of the tears he could not hold in check, his voice—for the first time in his life—broken and halting, and called them "Salvadores de mi patria!" For they had been, indeed, the saviors of his country. That is a picture I shall hold to the end of my days.

It came to me that I was free, too, that now, I could lay down my sword and hark to the call of love. And, dreaming, I saw the pleading eyes of Dulce again, and I heard the caressing tones of her voice, and felt almost the glory of her presence.

Manuel awakened me from this pleasant trance. He stood before me, the bridle of a fine bay mount in his hand.

"Manuel," I said, amazed, "is not this the horse that brought me from Caracas?"

"No other, major; and he can take you just as swiftly to Valencia."

"But why should I go to Valencia?"

Manuel spoke swiftly: "Adolfo de Fuentes escaped, as did most of the Spanish officers, for they fight behind the protection of their men. He may have gone to Valencia—who knows? Colonel Pini, with his cavalry, has been directed to pursue La Torre and Morales, who, with a small body of men, are fleeing toward the safe port of Cabello. Pini's orders are to the effect that, if he does not overtake the Spaniards ere they reach Valencia, he is to take over that city, a task that should please him very much, for the moonlight glances of the Senorita have had a devastating effect upon his heart. He is mad, my friend, and when a man of Pini's caliber is mad about a lady, he is dangerous."

"You bring ill tidings, Manuel."

"Francisco told me many of these things," Manuel continued. "He has approached Bolivar, and he has informed the general that the Americano, who, with so small a force, held firm against the right wing of the Spanish army, requests leave to visit Valencia, and Bolivar has given his permission. Therefore—"

"Would Francisco's knowledge, my friend—which seems, indeed, to cover everything—include the location of the house where the Senorita may be found?"

"Of a surety. It is the home of Senora Ybarra, lying three streets east of the house of the governor—toward the lake. A large house of stone and adobe, tinted brown, with a border of red, and resting on a corner of two streets."

"Ah, Manuel," I said fervently, "if I were less American and more French I would kiss thee."

"Then your American blood has saved your life," said he; "begone!"

Eighteen miles—that was all—eighteen miles on this swift bay horse and I would reach Valencia, would find there the lovely Senorita, would take her in my arms again, for she had told me that her love for me had filled her life. I would crush with passionate kisses the warm willing lips, I would hear her call my name again, and I would look into the purple depths of her eyes and find there a light of love.

The battle we had won had opened up new vistas in my life. Because of our love the Senorita Lamartina belonged to me. I could take her back to the land of moonlight that was my own, back to the fine sturdy gentleman who was my father, and to the gracious lady who was my mother, and to Felice, the slim, exquisite little sister of mine. They would love her, and she would make my country her own.

I entered Valencia from the southwest, and had no difficulty in finding the mansion that had been the habitation of various governors. Manuel's directions proved correct, for I found the red-bordered house of brown that was the home of the Senora Ybarra; in front of which I dismounted, giving the reins into the keeping of a grinning muchacho.

I touched very lightly the knocker of the carved door, for I did not know what the place might hold for me. That the Senorita was there I deemed sufficient, and I was quite willing to take my chances with anyone else. A small brown woman opened the door wide enough to give me careful examination, then she loosed the chain and let me in. The sight of my uniform cleansed the fear from her dark eyes and brought a smile of welcome to her face. She spoke in a cautious whisper: "Have the men of Venezuela taken over the city?"

"Ay, Senora."

"I am glad."

"Will the Senorita Lamartina—?"

Now she was looking at my hair. "You'll be the Americano, Senor Garde?"

I nodded.

"She has spoken of you; she has said you would come—some day."

"Ay, Senora."

"But two officers of Spain are with her; can you not hear their voices?"

I started down the wide hallway, whence had come the murmur of con-

By FRED McLAUGHLIN

Author of "The Blade of Picardy"

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versation, but she put a hand on my arm. "Wait, I would tell you. One is her brother, the lieutenant—"

"Yes?"

"And the other is he who was commandant of the Venezuela garrison. Is it safe for you to enter?"

"Ay, it is always safe for me to enter wherever the Senorita may be."

We stood listening, in the gloomy corridor, for the voices had become high, belligerent. I could hear, very faintly, the soft sobbing of the Senorita Lamartina, I heard a rasping oath from Adolfo, and an accusing complaint from Polito.

"A fine soldier, Adolfo—you, who leave the field before the battle is over. I saw you, I saw you run like the veriest coward when the llanero cavalry struck us, and—useless as a soldier because of my crippled arm—I followed you, for I knew you would come here to try some devil's trick upon my sister."

"I must protect her," said Adolfo, "for we have lost."

"Ay, we lost; and we should have lost, for the Spanish officers deserted their men. Bah, that a colonel, and a De Fuentes, should run in the face of an enemy. Mother of G—d, I gasped, "can my sister marry a craven, can you expect her to look upon you with anything save loathing?"

"Polito," came the voice of Dulce, "ah Polito!"

"I told you, Adolfo," Polito continued, "that I would kill you if you tried to force my sister into marriage, and Dulce told you she would marry you when Spain should win in Venezuela." He laughed bitterly. "Spain has lost, my country has lost the western world; because of the stu-

pidity and the cowardice of De Fuentes and La Torre and that murderer, Morales, Spain will have fallen in her attempt to build a mighty empire in the New World. All the wealth of this fair land could have made us a great nation, but his majesty, Ferdinand, puts his work here in the hands of cowards!

"Ay, worse than cowards—cheap tricksters. In Caracas you played an evil trick upon my sister. You and that other liar, Morales, told her that the tall Americano lay in the dungeon, awaiting execution, and that she could save him by going to the altar with you."

Ah, name of a sweet and sacrificing angel! How I loved her for that. A whole life of service could never repay her.

Now Adolfo got in a word or two: "You talk to me thus, lieutenant, you a subordinate officer, talk to a commandant of the Valencia garrison? A word from me and a firing squad will face you as you stand against a wall, and that word, believe me, shall be given before the sun has set. And the Senorita Dulce, who has held me off with threats and promises, and who has loved secretly this lad, she has picked up in a New Orleans park—"

"Ah, Dios," the Senorita cried, "Dios!"

Polito laughed. "Colonel Fuentes will give no order for my execution, for such order is out of his province. He is not the commandant of the Valencia garrison."

"Polito, my own," said Dulce, "surely your mind—"

"Not at all, my sister. While the poor deluded Adolfo pleaded with you, and coaxed and threatened, the Venezuelan army has taken over the city of Valencia. He is a prisoner, and I am a prisoner, and I am going to do my earnest best to kill him and take my chances on escape."

I hesitated, not because I was afraid of Colonel Fuentes, but because I believed that the clean courage of this boy would win.

"You have a weapon in your hand, Adolfo, and you should not be afraid to use it. I might tell you that my left hand in my pocket also holds a pistol. You have been a traitor to Spain in your service, and a traitor to honor and decency in your love. If you have a spark of courage left you will use your pistol before I kill you like the dog—"

A deafening report filled the house with thunder, and, an instant later, another shot added volume to the din. Senora Ybarra held to me for support. "It is murder," she gasped, "murder . . . My poor house!"

I heard the choking cry of a man in agony and the crash of a heavy body falling to the floor. I waited for the sound of a voice, waited anxiously. Finally, it came:

"Polito, ah, Mother Mary, Polito!"

"You will notice, my sister," said Polito coolly, "that it was not I who fired first."

As I pushed through the portieres, the knocker clanged loudly on the front door. Dulce screamed at sight of me, for she must have imagined that I was an apparition, then she ran into my arms, sobbing and crying my name.

"Loren, ah, Loren! Polito has killed him, my brother has killed Adolfo!"

Over the shining curls I looked at Colonel Fuentes, who lay motionless in the sprawling posture of his fall. "A good thing, my own," I said; "Polito has only saved me the task of killing him."

I loosed her and Lieutenant Lamartina proffered his weapon to me. "I will be a prisoner, Senor—eh?"

"Yes, Polito, for I fear there will be no chance for your escape. The forces of Venezuela hold the city."

As I stood over the prostrate man, the pistol in my hand, Colonel Pini appeared at the portieres. He approached the Senorita and, cap in hand, offered a deep bow before her. "May I apologize for Maracay, Senorita, for a madness must have possessed me?"

"My mind is closed to Maracay, Senor," she said coldly. Ah, what regal poise of her head, what limitless heights from which she looked down upon him!

He studied the still form of Adolfo. "Pretty quick work, major; you offer valiant service in aiding us to win the battle of Carabobo, and then you rush away to attend a few personal feuds that you have accumulated. I congratulate you—a busier man I have never seen."

I was sure that Dulce would not be safe in the city so long as this man was commanding officer, for the rule of Valencia was martial law, and Colonel Pini himself, for the present at least, was the law. I determined, therefore, to settle my affair with him as quickly as possible.

"Your words of praise warm my heart, Colonel, for I have, as you intimate, made a most excellent beginning; yet there are many important things that I must do."

His eyes narrowed. "Who, may I ask, Garde, will be the next on your list now that you have finished with the estimable Colonel Fuentes?"

"Not so," said Polito. "Major Garde was not—"

"You will be her brother—no?" Pini laughed softly, for there must have been a deal in this situation to please him. "One would imagine that the Senorita Lamartina is well squired."

"Ay, so she is, my colonel," I lied, "and so shall she be. Long ago Adolfo de Fuentes forfeited her regard in such manner as to render a challenge from me imperative. As you can readily see, he has paid most grievously for it. It was my right, Colonel."

Dulce cried out in dismay and Polito bent an astonished look upon me. Nothing could be gained by charging the lieutenant with the death of his commanding officer, and much, I knew might be lost. "The Lieutenant Lamartina," I continued, "was anxious to take from me the honor of defending the Senorita, yet he was a prisoner, and I could not permit it; besides, a soldier may not attack his superior officer—is it not so, my colonel?"

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"Have the Men of Venezuela Taken Over the City?"



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## STAGE COACH TALES

By E. C. TAYLOR

### The Race With Mail

WILLIAM G. BECK, an old stage coach driver of the National road days, lived until recently at Fairfield, Iowa. Nearing eighty years of age, he said he felt like "jumping up and cracking his heels together whenever he heard or read of the men and events on the old National road," and wished he were back there again.

He was the son of James Beck, of the noted bridge building firm of the early decades of the United States, and started driving a stage coach before he was of age. He was born in Uniontown, Pa., in 1819 and went to Iowa to live in 1847, a year after he left the road.

In 1846 he was driving for the "Old Line," the National Road Stage company. Both the "Old Line" and the "Good Intent" line carried the United States mail at that time.

The mail was of two classes, the "lock mail," in leather pouches that was to be speeded west as fast as possible, and the "canvas mail," in canvas bags, which was carried on a slower schedule. The latter was frequently called the "second mail," as it contained what is now second class mail matter.

In December, 1846, the "Old Line" carried the "lock mail" and the "Good Intent" line the "canvas mail." Beck was driving the mail coach for the "Old Line" out of Cumberland, Md., and Jacob Crouch drove the mail stage for the rival company.

Great rivalry existed between the two companies and their drivers over carrying the mail, and races were frequent. On this particular day, Crouch loaded the "canvas mail" aboard his coach immediately after the train arrived at Cumberland, and started off at full speed toward the west.

The "lock mail" was handed to Beck, who had to take it to the post office, where it was overhauled before he could start on his trip, causing him considerable delay. While waiting in front of the Cumberland post office for the mail to be sorted, Jack Shuck and other "Good Intent" line drivers chided Beck with the fact that the "canvas mail" had such a good start that Beck could not get near it.

"I made up my mind," said Beck later, "that if it was in the hides of my two teams I would catch and pass him."

It was after nightfall when Beck got under way, and in crossing a waterway in the Cumberland mountains, his stage coach lamps went out. But what Beck thought was a calamity turned out to be an advantage.

As soon as he had crossed the Willis creek bridge, he put his teams to a full run and never pulled up until he reached Rock Hill, seven miles out of Cumberland.

At that point the road was winding, and he esped the lights of his rival's coach. Crouch, because of the going out of Beck's coach lamps, could not see Beck approaching, although on the long stretches of the road he had kept a careful lookout.

Crouch was very much surprised when Beck pulled up along side of him, and the two raced side by side into Frostburg, Md., lashing their teams at every jump.

Grooms at Frostburg had Beck's second teams hitched to the coach by the time Beck had fairly stopped. A friendly driver ran with the "lock mail" to the Frostburg post office, while another lit the lamps. Beck did not leave his seat.

The reins on the fresh teams were thrown up to him and he was off again in full run. The way mail bag was thrown onto the coach as he dashed past the post office.

Crouch, carrying the "canvas mail," had not had to stop, and had gone on ahead. At Sand Spring, at the foot of Big Savage, Beck passed Crouch. Thereafter he held the lead, trotting his team every inch of the road to Piney Grove, the end of the mail route.

Beck had covered the 22 miles in 2 hours and 10 minutes. Fourteen miles of the way had been up hill, but