

STEALING THE PADRE.

By EDGAR MAYHEW BACON.

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PART I.

When the king was in his twelfth year the campaign of the Agua Alta occurred. Upon resigning command of the army I had promised Perpetua that my fighting days were over, but from the time that the first gun was fired I fretted and chafed. My oranges and grapes no longer engrossed me, the rose garden was untouched and the Hennequin alone went to pole unheeded. From the veranda of my house there was a clear view across valleys and forests to the mountains of Agua Alta, and I spent my time in contemplation of that prospect till Perpetua herself brought me my sword and bade me go and join Gen. Maduro.

"Shame that I should say it, but I went with alacrity. I had no anxiety, no responsibility, no fear. Going as a volunteer, I forgot my gray hairs. I was a soldier of fortune again, and my heart bounded with youthful enthusiasm as I bade adieu to my wife and rode away. I reached Maduro's camp at sunset of the second day after departing from home. Four miles westward of the Agua Alta it lay, on a little plateau, upon the sides of which was the forest. I had with me only my man, Antonio, who had



I CALLED IN THE VOICE MY VETERANS KNEW.

served me in the old wars as body servant, but would not have left me for a fortune. The pickets passed us on till we reached the headquarters of Maduro, whose welcome was evidently dampened by keen anxiety and vexation. I did not have to look far for the cause. Among the fires the men stalked about, meeting in groups, gesticulating excitedly and paying no attention to discipline. Their officers seemed to have lost the power to control them and were in despair. A soldier read aloud indications as a physician knows the symptoms of disease. He does not need to hear any words; the murmur of sullen voices is a threat in itself. It means insubordination.

I turned again to Maduro, knowing that he would have something to say. He answered me looking at me with a frown. "You see I have used appeals and arguments in vain; they have been harassed by an enemy they cannot meet—cannot see—till they are exhausted. For four nights successively, in different camps, we have been attacked by some guerrilla band that hid and scattered in the dark woods and utterly escapes us. The soldiers have grown superstitious about it and exchange all sorts of supernatural stories. I will not be able to keep them in the field long, even with bribes."

"Your pardon, general," said I, interrupting his confession of weakness. "Permit me to go down and talk to the men."
"Willingly," he responded, but added: "It will be useless."
I stepped into the middle of them, and standing on a little hillock, close beside a fire that I knew would light my face strongly, I called in the voice that my veterans knew. "Who was with me at Chisno?" Surprise silenced every voice, turned every head. There was a moment of scrutiny and then some old wardog recognized me and shouted: "Arroya! It is the general!" In an instant, it seemed, the cry was taken up by a thousand throats; "Arroya! Arroya!"

"It was music to me, I knew the braying of the faithful old hounds that led the pack, and when they had shouted themselves hoarse and worked off their excitement that way, I raised my hand for silence and they fell to listening, as docile as children."
"Yes, my comrades; it is Arroya, who has envied you your glory and could not keep away. Your welcome has stirred my heart as no other music could, for the old days when our blood reddened the Chisno and we fled our flag on the wall at Bonita. I have come to fight with you, to share your dangers and your victories; not as captain now, but as your comrade. Now that you are in the face of the enemy again I know that you will justify the praise that I have always given you. Together we

the enemy in an involuntary descent to the bottom of the canyon. I held my men back till the last of the rebels had nearly crossed and then tried to preserve some sort of a formation, not knowing what we might meet when the foe were heartened by finding themselves upon their own territory. The bridge was swinging violently from the hub, so that we had a little time in crossing, and a good many of them escaped us. We pursued them for about a mile, and nothing short of total destruction could have surpassed the punishment they received. I was more than satisfied, knowing the impotency of this skirmish would have in restoring the morale of the army.

I had called a halt and we were commencing to retire, when a groan from a figure that lay by the path arrested my attention just as a soldier stepped aside and raised his rifle to give the coup de grace; an act of mercy under the circumstances, since before morning



THE VETERANS ROSE WITH A YELL.

the wild beasts would glean where we had reaped. In the next instant there was an exclamation of surprise: "Saint Jago! Is this skirmish with the imperator?"

Interposing to prevent the intended shot, I bent over the slight figure that lay full in the moonlight, with loosened hair streaming about the white face and big eyes that shone like those of a tigress brought to bay. She seemed to be beyond the power of speech, but she gave an account of herself, but whether she could speak or not I did not know. At all events, she kept a resolute silence. "Speak, you see devil!" and one of my rough fellows put out his hand as though to shake her. I sternly ordered that no harm be done to the prisoner, and then with such gentleness as the circumstances permitted I lifted the little figure to ascertain where her wound was. The blood was soaking the side of her jacket. She was a mere girl in appearance and was clad in a nondescript costume that was half feminine and half military.

"Some girl who had gone to meet her lover at the bridge when he returned from the attack upon our camp," I said. "No, general," protested another of my men; "I saw her once before. That woman was with the foremost of those who passed our ambush tonight, and I have seen her, too, when her husband, Sanchez, was executed." I could feel the start of the form in my arms as that name was mentioned and saw the fierce look of rage and hate which she flashed upon the speaker. Then I knew that this was really the very crown of our victory.

In a moment she turned her face to me again. "General! Gen. Maduro!" She thrust her arm against my chest, nearly forcing herself from my grasp by the suddenness and fury of the effort. I understood the hatred of the man who had sent her husband's head as a present to the king. "Not Gen. Maduro, my child. I am Arroya." For though she was an enemy she was also a woman, and I pitied the little creature. At the name her whole expression changed and she looked at me with wonder and questioning. "Arroya? Arroya who was at the Chisno?" she cried.

"Yes, I am that Arroya."
"Save me—as you are brave and merciful, save me," she faltered. She looked at the soldiers as though she would have them further away. Understanding that she might have something for me, I asked her name and when she told me, I knew that she was a woman, and I pitied the little creature. At the name her whole expression changed and she looked at me with wonder and questioning. "Arroya? Arroya who was at the Chisno?" she cried.

"Do you remember Col. Poe, who was with you at Chisno?"
"Poe, my dearest companion in arms; he died long since. I owed my life to him once on the battlefield. Why do you speak of him?"
"Because I am Col. Poe's daughter."
The news stunned me. I could find no words to express my astonishment. As though in a dream I heard her say: "I am mortally hurt. But I would not die without the consolation of the church. Will you, please, get me to the river, if you are really that Arroya that my father loved, get me a Padre that I may confess and receive absolution before I die."

"I would not be difficult, I thought, to do as she wished if I had but a place to leave her; for it was very evident that an attempt to force her to our camp would be fatal before we could reach it."
"Is there no house or cabin near?" I asked.

"There is a hunter's cabin about half a mile from here," she gasped. "It is in the footpath that turns to the left as you go toward the river."
So we lifted her carefully and carried her slowly to the hut she had indicated, and in that rude and inhospitable shelter we laid our burden, who had faintly from the loss of blood and the pain of her journey.

"Go to," I directed Sapporetz. "Go to the camp; take a dozen men with you for safety, carry this (a note I scribbled to the general) and bring back your Padre."
But Sapporetz said: "General, we have no Padre in the camp. We had two, but one died of the fever and the other accompanied the body back to the city to celebrate mass for him."

Here was a dilemma which had not been anticipated. Just then Antonio came up to me.
"Antonio," I asked, "do you know El Libertad?"
"As well as I know your house, senator. I was born and raised there."
"Stay Sapporetz. You will not go to the camp, but I will leave you in command here to guard the prisoner. Dispose your men well, recollecting that you are in an enemy's country. Place your pickets carefully; guard the lady at the house, and if you are forced to do necessary, against any harm, but do not on any account permit a rescue, and rather than have her taken from you alive kill her with your own hand first. Do you understand?"

"Yes, senator. Perfectly. I am to kill the witch—"

"No, no!" I exclaimed. "That is only the last alternative; when you find that your life will no longer serve to keep her from being rescued. She is to be cared for until I return. Now, do you comprehend?"
"I understand, senator."
"Then come, Antonio." We reached the main path, and I had turned toward El Libertad before Antonio, who was a well-drilled servant, ventured to ask a question.

"May I be pardoned, senator—but where are we going?"
"To El Libertad. You are to show me some way by which we may enter the city undetected."
"But, senator! To attack the garrison? Only two of us?"
"No, no. But only to steal the Padre, Antonio."

We had gone another mile before the man again addressed me. "Parcourez de grace; but here are three dead by the path."
"Well, what of it?"
"Their clothes might be convenient as a disguise."

We approached them, and some night creature fled snarling away into the dark. I exchanged my coat and hat for those of a dead rebel, and Antonio did the same, hiding ours in a convenient place. Then we pushed on rapidly towards the city, my man leading as we drew near till we reached a shaded wall, at the end of which was a little white house. Upon the wall he got, and I followed in silence. At the little house we clambered down again into an overgrown garden and up a circuitous path that was only broad enough to permit us to travel in single file, but which was worn hard with frequent use. It seemed as though we had made a detour of half a mile, constantly ascending, when Antonio departed by the same path, but here are three dead by the path.

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"Now, where is the priest's house?"
"It is there, on the corner, senator. There are two there who live together."
"Two? The devil!"
"No, senator, both Padres, I assure you."

"But, too you, Antonio. We do not want two. One will be plenty for our purpose. Perhaps they are not at home, as there is no light in the house?"
"No, senator, they are both at home. Do you see those little red sparks on the veranda? Sure enough, there were two points like the eyes of an animal. As we looked out described a semi-circle and returned to its first position. They were the cigarettes of the reverend companions."

"There is no time to be lost. Antonio; you must take away one of them, and I will kidnap the other."
"Listen. You have an errand from the sick. Do you hear that uproar in the distance? That is the noise of a woman wallowing over the dead. There will be some wounded there, too. A wounded man has called for the Padre. Go quickly, Antonio, and be sure you



I AM COL. POE'S DAUGHTER.

take the largest one with you, if there is a difference. If you lead him yonder some one will be sure to want him."
The woman who had called for the Padre in the shadow until he had gone far enough to be out of sight of the house on the corner, then, emerging boldly into the street, passed me running, and so came to the Padre's door. I could hear their voices as they spoke, parleying and debating until one of them flung his cigarette into the street and directly passed my hiding place, guided by the invaluable Antonio.

Rising from where I had crouched, as soon as they were out of sight, I crossed the street and knocked at the door. The remaining Padre, who had gone inside the house when his companion went away, came to the door, and I besought him to accompany me in haste to see a wounded soldier.

"Another your wounded man," he answered. "There was a fellow here just now on a similar errand. Those wounded, all belong to the other city district anyhow; and they have had enough there of their own to attend to them. I do not like to interfere outside of our own cure." With this he would have shut the door in my face but that I put my foot against it. I was angry at my boldness, but I made haste to say that the wounded man was in his own district and was rich. He was little moved by this, to do him credit, and barely allowed the door to remain open between us while I spoke. I was afraid I should have to commence to use force there and that would have been inconvenient. Though he was a small man, I might be seen carrying him across the street and a rescue would be attempted. However, I had another card in my pack.

"I was sent by his daughter, Padre. She is a beautiful girl, who is all alone and who will be most gratefully repaid for all we do for her." This I said in a low tone, and he responded joyfully: "Have you got him, senator?"
"Yes, I have him here; make haste, if we are to finish this night's work in time."

We hurried with all the speed that we could. We were on the road, if road it could be called, being but a half-made

pathway for donkeys and their burdens, before we set our captive on his feet and spoke to him.
"Padre," said I, "I am sorry to put you to this inconvenience, but there is a woman wounded in a hut near the river and she requires confession and absolution before she dies. Will you walk, and so expedite this business, or must we carry you? Do you consent to walk?" He nodded his head.
"Do you also agree, on your honor, to make no noise or outcry if we remove the bandage from your mouth?" Again he signed assent.



I SEIZED HIM AND COVERED HIS MOUTH.

removed the gag than he turned to me with a grave face. "It is Donna Sanchez," he said, inquiringly. When I assented he added: "No one seemed to know what had become of her. But how came she in your charge? Why this secrecy? Who are you?"

"As for that, father, she is a prisoner, and while I was willing to fetch the church for her I was not willing to surrender her person, nor my own, for that matter, to the rebels at El Libertad."
"Let us make haste," was all the answer he made, nor did he say anything more during the remainder of our journey. In fact, our pace was not a good one to encourage conversation, and I doubt if the churchman was accustomed to such violent exercise. When we finally reached the hut Sapporetz saluted and said:

"All has been quiet, general, but you have come none to see, for I think she is only waiting for the consolations of the holy church."
I went into the hut with the Padre, and the dying woman turned to me in the glare of the smoking torch that Sapporetz had placed at the doorway. The poor creature's great eyes were full of gratitude that my heart smote me for having been the cause of her wound. Of all the foes that I have slain or caused to be slain during my life of warfare I never regretted one so much. Crossing the cabin to her side, I knelt and placed my hand on her forehead.

She took it in hers and attempted to kiss it, but I would not allow that, but kiss her, and kissed her brow instead, for the sake of her father, the companion in arms that I loved. So I left her with the priest.

In the early dawn the padre came out from the hovel, and there were traces of tears in his eyes. He said, "she is gone." He said, quietly, then, holding out his hand, added: "Senator General, I thank you for abducting me."
"I need the church's pardon for that violence, Padre."
"That is granted. And now tell me, will you add to the kindness already done and permit me to bury her?"

"That requires the consent with the flag of truce." At noon the party appeared with the little Padre and some dignitary of the city in the lead and between them the flag. In the distance there was a crowd of people with many women among them, waiting so that we could hear their lamentations above the howling of the body as I had agreed and with all possible ceremony and respect. To this Maduro had consented with difficulty and sorely against his will; but when, on the following day, another flag followed, resulting in gottations and the captivities of El Libertad, he embodied his consent, and all his army had fallen to do. As I had said, Maduro's nature was not small nor his disposition jealous.

By my front door is a settee where Perpetua sits with her Spanish lace embroidery. In my arm-chair study command authority on fruit culture or the care of roses. There were the day after my return from the shortest campaign of my life, and I was telling Perpetua the story I have written here. As I told it the tears dropped on her face and on her hand, and I could not see her eyes, but the lashes were wet on her cheeks.

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