

For the Honor of the Bacas.

By Margaret Sul-Zearing.

An ominous silence seemed to swallow up Don Carnelo Baca's voice as he stood in the door and called sharply into the ranch-house.

Baca was one of the proudest names in all Mexico, and Don Carnelo was not accustomed to searching for his servants. Dona Eloisa sat resting upon the high-pillared porch. "Why, how deserted it sounds!" she said. "What can it mean?" Rising, she followed her husband into the house.

We were at the Baca ranch in the mountains of Sonora, that treasure-house of Mexico. I was there to examine an old Spanish mine on which Don Carnelo wanted a report. That morning we had gone to get a final bag of samples. The trail was an easy one, and when we decided to go on foot, Dona Eloisa accompanied us. We had been gone probably five hours.

I sat down on the porch, thinking some one would be in for discipline shortly. In a moment Don Carnelo came out and went in the direction of the corrals. Dona Eloisa followed him to the door. She had a serene face, but now her eyes were troubled.

"It is very strange!" she said to me. "Even Nurse Marta and my little Tito are gone, and it is now the hour for the child's siesta."

I followed as she turned back into the house. The Bacas had many ranches. This one, isolated in the high mountains, was seldom used as a place of residence. Don Carnelo and his wife and child had come to remain only during the three days of my stay.

Dona Eloisa and I now looked about for a clue to the mystery of the deserted house. The rather bare rooms were undisturbed. On the floor of the hall lay a rebozo, a scarf Mexican women wear,—strung out as if it had sailed free from the shoulders of a woman running. In the kitchen the stone upon the metate lay in half-ground meal. In a basket on the hearth were freshly-baked tortillas, yet warm, and the fire still burned.

The kitchen door was closed, but it had a little open square for light. I stood there looking out, wondering what it all meant, when, up on the mountain back of the house, I saw the tops of a thick clump of bushes swaying in a manner I knew was not from the wind. I had a field-glass strapped over my shoulder, and I focused it on the bushes, without the least thought the motion had anything to do with the absence of the peons, but expecting to see a browsing deer or a bear.

Just then Don Carnelo came in. "What do you see?" he asked, sharply.

"There is some animal in the bushes." He almost snatched the glass from my hand. As he looked I saw his face grow gray.

"They told me the trouble was settled!" he burst out. And then he turned to me. "It is an Indian scouting, señor. The Yaquis have risen!"

There was a little cry behind us, and we turned. There stood Dona Eloisa, clasping in her arms the little Tito, rubbing his sleepy eyes. "I—I found him under my bed, asleep," she said, faintly. "I heard his breathing."

Then, terrified as she was, she came to her servants' defense. "They did not realize they were deserting us, señor—they were crazed with fear. If you knew the Yaquis, you would understand."

I did know about the Yaquis, as any one who reads the history of Sonora must. I knew they were dreaded even more than the Apaches were in Arizona. From Don Carnelo's exclamation I understood there had been fears of a long peace being broken—fears that had been quieted. But here we were a hundred miles from Yaqui strongholds. It showed how long was their arm and how swift their stroke.

Somewhat stunned, I must confess, I stood there, trying to think, after the others had rushed from the room. In order to ride as light as possible over the mountain trails, I had brought no arms whatever. I heard doors and window-shutters close, and then Don Carnelo's excited voice in the hall.

"There is left only a shotgun with seven shells, Eloisa—shells loaded for quail!" he cried. "The peons have taken the rifles—and the horses from the

corral! We can neither fight nor run! Help me to think, Eloisa!"

Together they came back to the kitchen. Dona Eloisa far the more composed. Setting the child on a stool, she snatched up the basket of tortillas, and with swift fingers, began making them into two bundles. I realized at once that she had taken command.

"The servants must have had warning," she said, "for I feel sure, from his actions, this is the first scout. So it may be some time before they sweep down upon us. Tito and I are going to hide in the well, so that you men may escape and return with troops. Quick, Carnelo! Bring me a cloak for the señor, and one for yourself."

Don Carnelo obeyed without a word. He was plainly too excited to plan for himself.

Dona Eloisa knelt before the child, taking his face between her palms. "We are in great danger, Tito," she said, as if that youngster were a man of forty. "And we must be brave—brave! Do you understand? You and mama are going down into the well to hide. It is very deep. We must cling to the rope. But we shall not fear nor cry—shall not fear nor cry, for the honor of the Bacas," she said, slowly and impressively. "Say it after mama," she commanded. "Say it!"

And as she repeated the words, the child said them after her. At the time I thought it a waste of precious, precious moments.

Rising, Dona Eloisa tied a bundle of tortillas to her waist, and laid the other beside the gun. Then she put the boy upon my back, and threw about us one of the cloaks Don Carnelo had brought, all the time explaining and directing in terse sentences, without the loss of a moment.

"To defend the house would be useless," she said. "And in flight the child and I would hopelessly encumber you. They would overtake us. We must win by cunning. In the wall of the well, just above the water, is a stone on which a man may stand to clean the bottom. Above this is another. If I sit on the lower stone I shall be concealed. That Indian watching, on the mountain shall see two men go to the well to drink. Two men shall return, and go slowly to the arroyo. It cuts through the length of the valley, and there are side gulches leading into the hills. Once in the bottom of the arroyo, make all speed—you are under cover. But watch,—always watch,—they may be all around us!"

Then she stood close to her husband's back and drew a cloak about them both. Thus we started, the woman clasping Don Carnelo's waist and stepping when he stepped.

We went out the front door, in order to face the mountain as we approached the well at the back. To the sharpest eye, viewing us from a distance, we were but two cloaked men, leisurely advancing to the well.

A wooden curbing, waist-high, enclosed the top of the well. Following Dona Eloisa's command, I took a stone and knocked off the lower board. It was an undesirable proceeding for watching eyes to observe, but there was no help for it. Dona Eloisa could not climb over the curbing without being in plain view from the mountain. When I had removed the board she slipped from under Don Carnelo's cloak to the ground and crawled through the opening. I let the boy down from under my cloak, and he followed her.

Not for a second did she waver. She clasped the child's arms about her neck, tied his body to her own with a scarf, grasped the rope, and stood up in the bucket.

Then Don Carnelo lost control of himself. "You cannot do it, Eloisa! It is forty feet deep, with eight feet of water—yet I know not what to do!" he cried, distractedly.

"But I can do it," she said. "I can do it for you, Carnelo!"

Then, just as she had done for the peons, she took precious seconds to come to his defense. It showed how fine and true she was.

"It is often so with the bravest, señor," she said to me. "Fear for loved ones shakes their courage—it is the reason why I direct. Lower me quick!"

I thought best to take charge of the rope. And so, with her eyes looking up, bravely refusing to challenge the ter-

ror in the depths beneath her, she sank from view.

The well was equipped with two buckets, one at each end of the rope, which ran through a pulley fastened to a beam across the top of the curbing. Lowering one bucket brought the other up filled.

"I shall not fear nor cry," I heard Dona Eloisa say slowly and calmly to the child. Then the filled bucket passed them, and I heard the water splash out as the bucket was pushed aside by their bodies. The child gave a gasp as it showered upon him, but there was no other sound.

I could plainly hear Dona Eloisa speak when she reached the bottom, and I held or lowered the rope as she directed, until she was seated upon the stone. Then I lifted the filled bucket to the curb, and took out a folding metal cup which I carried in my pocket, to make at least a pretense of drinking.

All the time Don Carnelo was in the greatest distress. Despite my warnings, he leaned over the curb, peering into the well.

"Eloisa!" he called. "Are you safe? Will you not go mad?"

"I am safe, Carnelo, with the child sitting comfortably upon my lap—and I shall not go mad. If you can see, look down."

I, too, bent over the curb. There was visible only a little circle of light, where the sky was reflected in the water. But just then I happened to turn my cup so that the polished metal reflected a ray of sunlight directly into the well.

"What is the light?" Dona Eloisa called, with a little catch in her breath. "It is all luminous here."

"It is the reflection from my metal cup, señor," I explained.

"Ah, well," she answered. "Take courage, Carnelo. And now you must leave—this is adding to our danger."

If we were watched, we certainly were putting to naught all Dona Eloisa's careful preparations to get into the well unobserved; so I led the way back to the house. Don Carnelo secured the shotgun and the tortillas, and we walked to the arroyo. But once under cover of the high banks, we broke into our best speed.

We must have gone five miles when Don Carnelo suddenly stopped. He seemed like a new man as he turned to me, he was so cool and collected.

"It is needless for me to go on," he said. "The peons have by this time spread the alarm. Troops will be here as quickly as I could bring them. It is no new thing to hide in a well, and I must be there if the Indians search it. I do not know where you will be safest, señor—probably going ahead, alone. Often the Yaquis have spared Americans. It is the Mexicans they hate."

This was true, but I did not know the mountain trails. Moreover, it seemed my place was with Don Carnelo, to give him such aid as I could. "I will go with you," I said.

He handed me the gun, in order to have his hands free to part the bushes. "For a time, step where I do," he said. "We must cover our trail."

Then, despite his weakness of the hours before, Don Carnelo proved he was a brave man and a skilled woodman. He moved swiftly and unceasingly, but we always seemed to be under cover. Once we saw the top of a row of black heads passing on the other side of a ridge we were skirting. Once we made a wide detour to avoid an Indian who was dressing a calf he had killed. They were indeed all round us.

When night was falling we crawled into a thicket on the side of the mountain. Following Don Carnelo's action, I parted the leaves and looked out. There below us stood the ranch-house. Near the well were camp-fires, surrounded by sitting and reclining Indians. There was no paint, no feathers, no disorder—just a quiet group of sturdy figures in white cotton shirts and trousers. Some were cooking, and they frequently went to the well for water. We could hear the pulley creak.

The sound stirred me strangely. I seemed to see Dona Eloisa on her narrow seat, with the little Tito clasped in her arms, pressing back against the damp wall every time the dripping bucket passed her. And what could that child know about "the honor of the Bacas?" Why would he not cry out and betray

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