

# THE WOOING OF ALITA

Impetuous Love and Dashing Adventure in the Far Southwest

By ELIZABETH VORE

JOSÉ came down the path to the spring. He had on his riding-boots and spurs, and snapped off the heads of the scarlet sage blossoms ruthlessly with his whip as he leisurely descended the trail. His sombrero was pushed far back on his head, and the strong light of midday brought out in bold relief his swarthy features. His white teeth gleamed under his long mustache as he laughed softly to himself.

José's thoughts were pleasant evidently, and so engrossed was he with them that he did not see Alita until he came face to face with her on the narrow trail.

"*Carambo!*" cried José, and started back in astonishment. A pair of soft, luminous eyes were almost on a level with his, a warm, pulsating figure, lithe and graceful, stood breathless before him. It was the first time he had met Alita. A soft, dull red crept into his bronzed face; he could not remove his eyes from hers, lifted, with a startled smile in them, to his face. For a moment the two stood in surprised silence, giving back gaze for gaze, and then a hint of daring mingled with shyness crept into the girl's eyes.

"Am I so small a person that one cannot see me, thou great stupid? or hast thou no eyes, that thou comest ambling down the trail like a great bear to trample all who come thy way?"

José's eyes widened, and an audacious sparkle flashed suddenly into them. "Thou art not too small to be seen anywhere, *querita*, and once seen—" he caught his breath quickly, and the red in his face deepened—"never to be forgotten!"

The little maid drew herself up haughtily and threw back her pretty head. With a swift motion of her warm, ungloved hand she boxed the daring young cavalier soundly upon the ears.

"Thou wilt remember, thou great imbecile, after this, to speak caressing words only to those who have the right to hear them from thy lips, and not to strangers—*querita* indeed!"

José, crimson with rage and mortification under the stinging rebuke, which he felt was not entirely deserved, looked at her in silence for an instant, and as he looked something grew in his man's heart, stronger than anger, stronger than admiration—stronger than anything that hitherto the heart of José had known.

A smile slowly crept into his eyes, a softness was in his rich voice when he spoke. "I have learned a lesson, *señorita*, thou art an excellent teacher. Henceforth I shall speak caressing words only to one who hath the right to hear them, yet I vow that ere a month shall pass those scornful lips shall give me that right! I am José Manuello, last owner of the Ortiz Rancho, and thou art the daughter of my neighbor, the old Señor Costello, if I mistake not."

"I care not who thou art!" cried Alita, trembling with swift anger, her slumberous dark eyes flashing defiance full in his ardent face. "Thou art a braggart and a coward! Let me pass! I hate thee!"

"I am neither a braggart nor a coward, my small neighbor," said José coolly. "I am filled with regret, but I cannot let thee pass until thou hast taken back those words."

"I will pass!" cried Alita passionately, with a stamp of her small foot. She pushed forward defiantly close to the hillside, but José calmly put out his arm, barring the way.

Suddenly she raised frightened eyes to his face, and covering her face with her hands burst into tears. "Beast!" she sobbed.

José hung his head abashed, and stepped back. Graceless young giant that he was, shame overcame him.

"The way is open, little one," he said in a subdued voice.

Alita darted past him like a fawn. At a safe distance she turned with flaming cheeks and passionate, tearful eyes. "I hate thee!" she cried gaspingly. "Oh, I hate thee!"

José stood silent, regarding her with remorseful eyes.



"Thou Art a Braggart and a Coward! Let Me Pass! I Hate Thee!"

As she disappeared he drew in a deep breath, and picked up his whip from where it had fallen.

"*Jesu Maria*, but she is beautiful!" he said softly. "I shall win her. By the saints, I swear it!"

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Down by the river the Indians were working at the dam. José was pleased to see the progress they were making. Looking up he saw Father Grevera coming down the trail to the river. José's face lighted with surprise and pleasure; he lifted his hat to his confessor as the old man approached, leaning somewhat heavily upon his stick. He had confessed his sins of omission and commission to him since, a lad in his first trousers, his good mother, breathless but determined, had marched him into the priest's presence. To the memory of her was due, now, some of the reverence that sat well upon his too-reckless face, as he stood with his head bared awaiting the approach of the father.

"Good-morning, my son! Is it well with thee?" said the priest as he came up to him.

José placed his sombrero back upon his head and extended a strong, brown hand.

"It is well, father," he said respectfully. "Thou seest—with a wave of his hand—that the work is progressing; the dam will soon be finished, for the men work with a will."

"It is well, my son," said the priest gravely; "for I fear there are more serious matters on hand than the damming of the river."

Something in his tone struck José strangely. "What is it?" he said abruptly. "You came to tell me something, father."

"Thou art right, my son," he said without further waiting. "I came from the Mission since daybreak to warn thee and others that an insurrection is impending among some of the neighboring tribes. It will be well for the Mexicans and Indian women and children

to flee to the Mission, should there be an outbreak."

For some moments the young man and the priest talked in undertones, and then, plans being arranged, José said:

"You will come up to the house, father, and old Nita will make you some of her famous tortillas. Some coffee or wine will refresh you after your long ride." Then, motioning to the Indians, he said: "Come and receive the father's blessing."

One by one they filed up, dusky and perspiring from laboring in the hot sun, and knelt at the good priest's feet, while he laid his hand upon them and pronounced the blessing they craved.

José stood silently until the scene was ended. It impressed him with the same feeling of reverence and awe that it always had for him. Hot-blooded and reckless though he was, the superstitions of childhood were strong upon him, and the religion in which he had been brought up was not a thing to hold lightly.

A half-hour later he was seated with Father Grevera under the big oak in front of the adobe house, the house of his grandfather, the old Señor Manuello, to which he had returned only recently from Mexico. José was a sad wanderer, who had liked adventure and travel better than the quieter pleasures in the home of his father.

"It is good to see thee back, my son," said the confessor, regarding him with appreciative eyes. "Thy place is here, now that thy father hath joined the saints. Thy people need thee. A boy should not be grudged his playtime, but a man may not shirk his duty, and thou art a man—and the last of the Manuellos."

"*Si, padre*," replied José with a new gravity. His face had grown thoughtful.

"I expect much of thee," continued the old priest. "Thy father and thy grandfather each in his day occupied the most prominent position of any Mexican in the country. Thou hast stepped into their shoes, and must also be the

*padrone* of thy people, their leader, their example, their friend. It is a great responsibility," said the old man with a solemnity that José had never heard in his voice before.

"It is," said the young man soberly. "I am unfitted for it."

"All these things are taken into consideration, my son. If thou art not fitted for thy place, thou wilt be fitted for it in time, never fear. Thou shouldst take a wife, José; it is not well for a young man to be alone."

José blushed like a school-girl. The hot blood that crimsoned his face softened its bold outlines; a half-shamed look was in his handsome eyes.

"I have seen her, father, the girl I intend to marry, or no other."

"Softly—softly," said the old priest, smiling. "Hot-headed boy, remember that a woman must be wooed first. But perchance thou hast wooed her?"

"I have told her that within a month she shall be my betrothed," said José steadily. It never occurred to him to keep the truth from his confessor.

"May I ask her name, my son?" asked the old man, regarding him kindly.

"I do not know her name, *padre*; she is the daughter of my neighbor Costello," said José, laughing a little in sudden embarrassment.

"Ah!" exclaimed Father Grevera. His face became luminous with satisfaction. "My little Alita! Dost thou tell me with such composure that thou hast dared woo my little pomegranate blossom before thou hast even known her name? Young blood! Young blood!" The old man sighed softly and looked away toward the blue mountains, an unconscious smile on his aged lips.

"Young blood!" he said again, fixing his eyes upon the young man's face. "But we all were young once, my son, and this time I shall not reprove thee, the