

# **The Wooing of the Senorita**

Mary Austin

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MILLARD TRAVIS was a man of ideas; he was also very young. This was not so bad as it might have been, for his ideas were of the toy pistol sort, a nuisance to everybody, but only occasionally hurtful to the holder. The idea which made Travis particularly odious to his fellow men was less original than unexpected. He merely held that all this peep-show performance of modern affairs was a progression towards emptiness, that there was nothing sound or wholesome, but naked, unblushing savagery, and his vade mecum was "our progenitor, Adam."

As he was born in Boston of a long line of Doctor-of-Divinity and Professor-of-Moral-Science ancestry, it may be inferred that his opportunities for observation were limited. As may be also imagined his peculiar views had not endeared him to his friends. Miss Vandevanter went so far as to say she thought Adam must have been a stupid fellow, he had so few experiences. But then Miss Vandevanter lived in New York, where the tinsel glitter manifestations of this decried civilization are particularly seductive.

Travis's conceit, however, was polemical rather than personal, and he continued to conduct himself faultlessly by the canons of cultivated society, and fed his theories until they waxed big and obnoxious. Then lest he should grow inflated past all usefulness, fate pricked the bubble of his queer conceit, and the manner of his downfall is worth relating.

He had been holding forth at the club, where his ideas were neither popular nor well received, and had been told incontinently to shut up. It is not gratifying to talk to a man who thinks you would appear to better advantage in red paint and a breech-cloth. There was a visiting stranger at the club, a ruminative little man from the West, who might be conceived as forgiving himself the too evident rotundity of his vest because of its increased facilities for the display of gold link chain and jeweled fob. The Western man wanted to know if Travis had ever seen a Digger Indian, or a Comanche, or a Piute? Travis had not. He had a complacent acquaintance with the most notable institutions of this evanescent fabric of human affairs, but he had never seen raw humanity at home. He had never seen a Digger, nor a Piute.

"Wait until you do," said the man from the West.

This suggestion, tipped with an air of superior knowledge, had the immediate effect of closing the discussion, the club rejoicing greatly thereat.

When the other man has seen what you have only thought about, there is really nothing more to be said. Conning over this rebuff, Travis conceived the idea of putting his theories to the test of personal observation. A month later saw Travis on his way to California to engage in the study of raw humanity. He was bound for Los Vinos, a cattle ranch in the San Joaquin valley. He had met the owner of Los Vinos on an Atlantic steam-ship the summer before, the Californian being on his way to secure the co-operation of English financiers in his pet irrigation scheme.

Travis had procured him some fortunate introductions and the rancher had extended an invitation with all the effusion of Western landed interests toward Eastern capital. The Californian had told him that the work on his ranch was done by Indians. Travis was humble, and recognized his limitations. He would begin with the Indians

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at Los Vinos, who might be supposed to have suffered a diminution of their naturalness, and work himself into a state of sympathy with raw humanity.

He found Los Vinos with very little trouble, a cattle range skilfully gerry-mandered over the best grazing land in three counties. On the way there he saw Diggers and Piutes, he also smelt them and realized that a course of esoteric culture is not the best preparation for the study of aboriginal humanity. At Los Vinos he found Piutes and Greasers and degenerate half-breeds, not exactly what he came to see, but sufficiently raw for his purpose. It was snowing when the train pulled out of Boston, but at Los Vinos woolly clouds rolled up the canons from blossomy acres of white, mellowed and bordered with gold, and all intoxicating delights exhaled in the sensuous atmosphere. He declined the hospitality of the superintendent at the ranch house and sought bed and board with Juan Romero, head vaquero. Romero's house was an old stage station, a long low adobe structure set on the slope where the valley rises to meet the hills, some miles below the ranch headquarters and close to the stream that leaped whitening from the canon as far as it could or dared, to the plain below.

A row of poplars ran as far up the slope to the mountain as the stream ran down to the valley. Behind the house the water foamed and curdled under a twilight thicket of grape-vines, whose twisted stems, riding the ridge of the roof like some green old man of the sea, dropped pendulous fingers to the eaves of the low veranda that looked full on the glare of the leopard-colored plain.

The chief of the vaqueros welcomed Travis to this ancient hostelry with the air of an hidalgo, and the Senora Romero was very good to him. The proprietor of Los Vinos was still abroad and the superintendent was a man of many cares. Travis purchased a saddle and a sombrero and resigned himself to the impulse of the hour.

He spent the first two weeks hunting fleas and learning to like villainous messes of chile con carne. At the end of that time he had become accustomed to both, and all but forgotten previous states of existence. He rode with the vaqueros after he had learned to manage their vicious little broncos, and had borne with becoming humility the amusement his fashionable-riding-school ignorance of the art provoked. He liked the wild rush through the chaparral and the hazardous scurrying down steep hillsides, and exulted in the bellowing melee of the rodeo. Much more he delighted to sleep unhoused between the earth and sky. A new sense stirred within him in the wakeful pauses of the night, a sense of gladsome multitudinous existences peopling the sentient earth. The domestic life he found less interesting, it was so undeniably dirty; but there were phases of it that filled him with unmixed delight.

The women, for instance, were charming. That the most charming were found sooner or later to be of doubtful origin was to be regretted, but the most aboriginal, if she were anything less than middle-aged, seldom failed of the picturesque. He was never weary of watching the Senora Romero and the felicity of her compromises between the indolent instincts of race and what she felt to be due to her position as wife of the man who could rope and tie more cattle in a day than any man in Los Vinos.

In the fourth week of his enchantment, when the grape vines were misty with bloom, came to Los Vinos the Senorita De Silvierra. She said she was Spanish. She was the daughter of a tamale man in San Jose, and bore some unexplained relation to Juan's wife, to whom she had come on a visit. The Senora Romero, it may be remarked in passing, belonged to that race who had not found it incompatible with a state of undiluted human nature to draw rations from the government. But that could hardly account for the general irresistibility which Travis acknowledged in her young relative. Brown, passive, and inscrutable, she held him with a charm that escaped definition, just as the soft illusions of her speech eluded his tongue trained to the prim syllabification of Bostonese. After the Senorita came he rode less often with the vaqueros and cared less interestedly for the indolent simplicity of life in the wickiups. After the Senorita came he neglected his correspondence and began to learn the vernacular.

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The great valley smiled for a brief season and lay still, fainting under the stress of summer suns. All day the light beat down the hollow of the valley, and pulsed back to the translucent dome, but Travis no longer noted the recurrent phases of the day. Long afternoons the Senorita sat on the veranda with her interminable drawn-work, while Travis smoked cigarettes, which the Senorita rolled for him, and found his appreciation of the curves of her lithe young body in no wise diminished by the cut of her greasy frock, with half the buttons off. When the light failed the Senorita tinkled the strings of her guitar, while the wind shook small mysterious patterings and more mysterious silences out of the poplar trees, and the warm earth turned duskily to the yellow California moon, which is not projected on a glassy sky, but hangs full orbed upon the verge of space.

About this time Travis began to take his Sunday dinner with the superintendent at the ranch house. On Sundays there came to Romero's, in the unmitigated ugliness of cheap calicoes and "store clothes," the youth of Los Vinos, and the Senorita was very glad to see them. She laced her soft young curves into her only pair of stays under a pink and purple frock, and became at once ordinary and unlovely. There came also from Tuniwai, beyond Salt Creek, one Hawker, a villainous half-white, gross and indolent, but not without good points, or what passed for such at Los Vinos; an audacious air, a skin less swart than might have been expected, and a talent for existing without labor.

Now mark the inconsistencies of human nature. Los Vinos admired Hawker in proportion as the white strain was uppermost, and in like degree Travis found him odious, especially as the half-breed began to discover an attitude of mind that, considering the errand on which he had come, the Bostonian had no manner of right to resent. It is one thing to entertain the belief that society is used up and another to find yourself regarded as the product of its effete-ness. Travis acknowledged a diminished personality in the presence of the Senorita, but he did not want Hawker to tell her so.

Sitting on the veranda with the company adjusting its behavior to the half-breed's opinion of his deserts, he experienced the disgust of a masquerading monarch who finds his incognito more of a disguise than he intended. It was then that he remembered his proxy host, whom up to this time he had somewhat neglected. The superintendent had been nine years at Los Vinos and had but one opinion of the inhabitants, he said. When Travis thought of Hawker he was inclined to agree with him, but he remembered the Senorita and withheld judgment.

Events of late had not softened the asperity of the superintendent's temper. From time to time marked discrepancies in the count of the Los Vinos herds were found to correspond with the appearance in the market of hides and cattle bearing a mutilated brand. And the nuisance did not abate, notwithstanding the whole population of Los Vinos bent itself with alacrity to hunting down the culprit.

When Travis had been two months at Los Vinos, Romero took another boarder, a shy, silent man who had received permission to prospect the Los Vinos grant for minerals. Travis was at first drawn towards the stranger, but the event proved him a man of no discrimination, for before a week was out he fellowshipped with Hawker like a brother. Travis returned to the veranda, his cigarette, and his Senorita.

One of those unnumbered languorous days the stranger disappeared in the vaporous distance down the valley toward Summerfield. When he came again he wore the badge of a sheriff's deputy, and the sheriff was with him. They dropped wearily from their saddles in the white, palpitant glare of afternoon, before the dismantled bar room at Romero's, where Travis and the superintendent had worn out the morning with cribs and cigars.

Travis surveyed their grim and war-like aspect with humorous appreciation not unmixed with personal satisfaction, for the much sought-for cattle thief whom they had come to arrest was none other than the half-breed, Hawker. Half an hour later, leaving them to their plans, Travis, passing out of the low dim room, came suddenly on Hawker and the Senorita crouched listening under the window. A dismayed sense of the situation translated itself from eye to eye with the swiftness of thought.

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The sheriff's strident voice reached them through the open window, and the water gurgled continuously among the rocks. How the recollection of those long afternoons of inconsequent dalliance smote him in the vulgar complacency of the girl's confidence in her power over him.

She was not looking at him, but at her lover in triumphant assurance. The half-breed, calculating the chances between jealousy and fear, watched him with his hand thrust backward in a menace the Bostonian did not understand. Ten steps away his host plotted with the officers of the law to rid himself of a nuisance, and Travis was a party to his intention. In common courtesy he could do no less than raise his voice in alarm. He saw himself withheld from this by the Senorita's interpretation of his attitude toward her, doubly withheld by the half-breed's mocking distrust of his intention.

The Bostonian walked out of the dilemma as instantly as he had walked in, suddenly aware, as he went, of the rank smell of rawhide crisping in the sun, and Romero's flea-bitten dogs sprawling on the kitchen floor. Hawker let down his bridle rein from a broken trellis among the vines, and stepped cautiously down the deep wash of the stream that furrowed the plain far below the summer limit of its waters.

If the sheriff and his party had looked back as they climbed the long slope of the hill to Tuniwai, they might have seen the diminished figure of a horseman spurring rapidly across the vari-colored plain. Travis did not meet them, two days later, when they rode back bootless, weary, and profane. Important business, so Romero said, had called him home.

Travis's friends all declared him much improved by his brief sojourn in the West.

He never mentioned this episode to any one, not even to Miss Vandeventer, whom he married the following winter; perhaps because he cannot for the life of him tell what he has done. He is troubled at times over his breach of good faith to his host, but he does not know how he could have consoled the Senorita, having robbed her of her lover. If she has married him since, no doubt he has made her suffer for having permitted a rival's devotion to reach the point of making her husband his debtor for life.

At all times he sees himself compounding a felony; but he need not trouble himself about his breach of good faith with the superintendent. If he had raised the alarm the half-breed would probably have shot one or both of them, a contingency that has not occurred to him.

Shortly after his return Travis wrote some clever sketches of California life which were much admired, but from beginning to end there was not one word in them of the dirty but adorable Senorita de Silvierra.

M. Austin.