

**TALES OF
CALIFORNIA
YESTERDAYS**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649717552

Tales of California Yesterdays by Rose L. Ellerbe

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ROSE L. ELLERBE

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"She's a fairer picture herself than any she will ever paint," said—

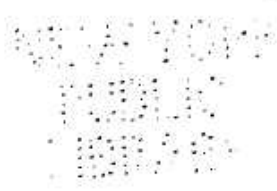
In the Shadow of the Mission (page 42)

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TALES OF CALIFORNIA YESTERDAYS

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Cover Design and Illustrations by Howard Willard
Typography by Taylor's Printery



Warren T. Potter
Publisher and Bookmaker
Los Angeles, California

114

CONTENTS

	Page
Three Cooks of San Gabriel	9
The Faith of His Mother	18
Padre Salvador's Miracle	28
In the Shadow of the Mission	42
A Tooth—and a Tooth	52
The Bluff of Don José Morales	64
The Word of a Californian	74
Siege of La Cajetin	87
For Lack of a Peachblow Silk	99
"The Hawk and the Chickens"	108
The Fate of His Race	116
Simple Tony	125
Ambitious Marta	134
Faith Triumphant	147
The Candle of Good San Antonio	160
The Boss of the Ranch	172
The Departure of José Juan	187
The Grave of Señora Valdez	196

McClelland 12 Feb. 1923

Permission to reprint these little tales has been courteously granted by the Illustrated Weekly Magazine of the Los Angeles Times, Argonaut, Sunset, Out West, Youth's Companion, and other periodicals. Credit is also given to the Sunset Magazine for the drawings in the stories of The Bluff of Don José Morales and "The Hawk and the Chickens."



Three Cooks of San Gabriel

THE long, low dining-room of San Gabriel Mission, with its deep-set windows and earthen floor, was comfortingly cool and dark, contrasted with the white glare of the noonday sun outside and the quivering heat that blanketed the plains and danced between them and the mountain heights. Padre Zalvidea, at the end of the long table, pushed away his filled plate and leaned against the rawhide back of his great chair.

"We must decide upon a cook," he said, with emphasis; "Andrés is still too much of a savage to prepare civilized food."

"Yes," Padre Sanchez answered his superior meekly, "he is still an Indian, but——" and a worried expression crept over his placid face.

"You see," the dignified Father Superior turned to his guests—Señor Villavencia, a little old man, wearing the order of the king upon his breast, and a gaily caparisoned officer fresh from Mexico. "You see, there are but three women at this establishment and—they are all cooks!"

A chorus of laughter rose about the table.

"It is no laughing matter," Father Sanchez spoke almost testily, "when there are but three women in a community and two of them are disgruntled——"

"It overworks the confessional, eh?" and the old soldier chuckled. "But is there no choice? Are they equally good cooks—these three fair ones?"

"They are all good cooks, no doubt," Padre San-

chez admitted, "and yet——" the good father heaved a sigh.

"It is a delicate matter, then, the choice. But—why not a trial? Let each one serve a dinner, and we, your guests, will pass judgment." Señor Villavencia patted his fat hands in glee over his own brilliant suggestion.

"That might help us in our difficulty, brother," and Padre Zalvidea turned hopefully to his confrere.

"It might," the younger priest admitted; but his tone was doubtful.

"Something must be done. We cannot put up with this bungler longer. At least, the question will be settled," urged Father Zalvidea.

"Yes—very well." But it was plain that Father Sanchez, to whom was left the management of domestic affairs, was skeptical.

"I intended to go on to Monterey tomorrow," the young officer spoke. "But—I know something of what a dinner should be, perhaps; and a day or two more or less will not matter. The dispatches will keep—if you will accept me as one of the judges." A faint trace of condescension was in his manner. What did these musty Franciscan friars and this old sergeant of the frontier know of dinners?

"Thanks." Padre Zalvidea may have concealed a shade of sarcasm in his grave politeness. "And we will send to *el Pueblo de Los Angeles* for Alcalde Ramirez. He is the best judge of a meal in the department of the Californias," he continued, and the rest joined in his laughter—for Alcalde Ramirez weighed three hundred pounds and was known from Monterey to San Diego for his table feats.

An Indian servant was dispatched for the three

women. A few moments later, old Margarita, her face deeply tooled and blurred by time, but her eyes still flashing with unconquered fire, entered the room and, after saluting the fathers with reverence, took her seat on the wooden bench near the door. Then came Carmen, a plump young matron with a *rebosa* tossed lightly over her heavy crown of black hair. She was soon followed by Eulalia Perez, tall, still of face and light of step.

Padre Sanchez explained the proposed trial, while the women listened with keenest interest and the two guests studied the candidates critically. When it was made entirely plain what was desired, old Margarita broke into contemptuous laughter.

"I—who have cooked for the Viceroy of Mexico, himself—I have nothing to fear from these," she shrilled.

"My mother taught me all she knew," Carmen broke out, with an angry glare at her rivals, "and the Holy Fathers know well what a cook she was!"

"Yes, yes," Father Sanchez interposed soothingly. "Candelria served us well—God rest her soul! And you, Eulalia?" and he turned to the one who, with downcast face, had remained silent.

"I will do as well as I may, *padre*," she returned, deferentially.

Straws were brought; the young officer prepared and held them. The first lot fell to old Margarita, the second to Carmen. The women withdrew in a silence that broke into a patter of exclamations and excited laughter as they passed out the door.

The next day an air of expectation pervaded the whole great establishment of San Gabriel. More than the usual quota of Indian servants hung about