

## THE PENITENTES.

**O** H! what a dreadful picture! exclaimed Oscar, lifting a photograph from the pile at which he had been looking. "Did you see any people like that?"

Oscar's father and mother had just returned from a long visit to New Mexico, and the photographs were among the mementos they had brought home: Oscar and his mother were now looking them over together.

"Yes, dear," she replied, "and it is a very unpleasant sight to see people beating themselves in that way."

"I think they're very silly to do it. Won't you tell me about them?"

"Yes, Oscar, I will tell you, but it is not a very pleasant story."

"These men are Mexicans who belong to a sect of Roman Catholics, and are called 'Penitentes.' You can easily see that the name signifies 'repentant.' They really believe that if they inflict terrible torture upon themselves their sins will be forgiven. They have not yet learned that Christ died for their sins, and they have only to accept him as their Saviour in order to be forgiven."

"What are some of the things they do to torture themselves?" asked Oscar.

"In the first place, when they join the society they are obliged to endure great suffering; but their hardest practices are gone through at Easter time. On Good Friday they dress themselves in white cotton trousers, their feet, backs, arms, and chests bare. Two crosses are planted on the ground an eighth of a mile apart. A heavy cross is placed on the shoulders of each Penitente, and he drags it back and forth between the two standing crosses. If one faints or sinks from exhaustion, the companion following behind walks over him, dragging his heavy cross after him."

"I do not like to tell you any more, dear; it makes my heart ache to think of those poor people."

"Oh! please tell me more. What do they do next?" begged Oscar.

"Do you really like to hear about them, Oscar? I do not see how you can endure it."

"Well, I don't think it is a very nice story," but I like to know about the people who live in my own country," he replied.

"I suppose you are right. After they have borne their crosses, the Penitentes go into their lodge to rest, returning in a short time to prepare for another exercise, which they call 'Bearing the crown of thorns.'

"A young man is chosen, and on his back between the shoulders is bound a bunch of thorny cactus. Another, bearing a large wooden doll representing the Infant Jesus, heads the procession. Then follows the man with the crown of thorns on his shoulders, and behind him are grouped the Penitentes. The procession moves slowly over the same track between the two standing crosses. One of their number plays a weird strain on a fife, repeating it over and over until it becomes a most doleful wail."

"Behind the Penitentes follow a large company of old men, women, and children. When the music ceases the procession stops and the followers fall on their knees, with their heads bent forward almost to the ground, and remain so until the music is again heard, and the procession moves forward two or three rods. When the music again ceases, the procession stops and the followers drop into the same position as before. And so they keep on, moving from one cross to another and returning."

"As they approach either cross, they circle around it, bowing as in adoration, and the young man with the cactus between his shoulders leans with his back to the cross and throws his entire weight on the cactus resting against the cross. Sometimes he faints from exhaustion and the loss of blood."

"In the picture they seem to be whipping themselves," said Oscar.

"Yes, they beat themselves with a whip of soap-weed. The leaf of the soap-weed plant is about a foot long and two or three inches wide, with a point like a needle. These leaves are braided into whips, with the sharp points protruding from every part."

"Did you see all these things?" asked Oscar.