

FORGIVEN.

Coming down the steep and slippery road which leads out of the village of La Horca, young Ramon, a bit of a lad, stopped to sing in front of the inn known as the posada del Arco. A little girl stood outside weeping bitterly. At Ramon's approach, however, her sobbing ceased, for in spite of the darkness of the night she had recognized him and springing eagerly forward said mysteriously under her breath:

"For God's sake; go away." "Why?" he asked. "Because," said Mercedes persistently, meantime seizing him by the arm. He strove to prevent her, but little and weak though she was, she turned him completely about and forced him away from the inn. "Don't be bad," she whispered. "They have shut me out and I am afraid. Don't let them see you; go." "But I am looking for my father," said Ramon. "Did you see him?" "Hush," said Mercedes, more frightened still. "I assure you I did not."

"You are very strange to-night. If you fear, let me stay." "No! I would fear still more; fear they might kill you."

"You must be crazy, Dita," said Ramon, shrugging his shoulders; but with a vague dread in his soul he took her advice and retraced his steps homeward.

The public square of La Constitucion seemed very wide and very dark, as he hurried across it. The night watchman was approaching from the other side, and Ramon, true to his shepherd instinct — for such he had been — gathered up a pebble and hid himself in a doorway. The old watchman passed by with his lance and lantern, and after the fashion of the muzzicons of other days, announced the time of night as the clock struck ten from the neighboring steeple. The words, of course were different, but it was a long drawn out plaint as he drawled: Ave Maria purissima. The night is overcast.

When the guardian of the peace had passed, and uttered his moaning cry further on, Ramon issued from his hiding place, and climbed the twelve steps at the end of the street. Because of their number they were called The Steps of the Apostles.

The wind was bitterly cold, as it swept the narrow plateau which separated the convent of Santiago from the ruins of the old fortress. Chilled to the bone, Ramon pulled over his ears the top of his goat skin, and stopping at the end of the plateau gave a shrill whistle to call his father. The baying of a hound was the only reply. The boy repeated the call several times, and then quite worried, entered the vast stables which were then in ruins. It was there that he and his father usually slept. He closed the door with an iron bar, and without going to the stone shelf which formed his bed, threw himself down on the ground, near where the mules were stalled, and in spite of his anxiety was soon sound asleep.

Early in the morning, blows against the stable door awoke him. He thought it was his father; but it was only an old beggar woman who lived somewhere in the ruins. "Ramon," she said, "I think your father is waiting for you, on the Steps of the Apostles."

Surprised at the message, Ramon sprang from the stable without closing it behind him, and hurried down to the street. The night wind had scattered the clouds, but although it was quite bright the street was deserted. "Father," cried Ramon; but no answer came. The boy hurried on. On the second step from the bottom was a sombre heap which he could not distinguish. Coming closer to look at it, he shrank back in horror and was about to flee. Then taking courage he cautiously approached, almost like a cat in his movements. A well known cloak of brown wool covered a human body; and stretching out his hand he looked around in terror for help; but no one came, and kneeling down he seized the cloak, lifted it, and with a shriek fell sobbing on his father's corpse.

Old Bernardo had no enemies. He had lost his wife a few years before, and was still mourning the death of his oldest son. Keeper of the abandoned convent, he had stopped some thefts at times, but not being a big enough man to harbor a grudge, had escaped being hated. The morning before, he had heard the Mass of Holy Thursday, and after the evening office had attended to the mules as usual, but quite against his custom, went out rather

late, saying he would soon return. After waiting two hours, Ramon, growing anxious, set out to seek him.

Faustino, the innkeeper, and Torribio, the courier, were going to pay him some money they owed him. Somewhat mysteriously, Torribio persuaded him to go down to the posada, where they were to meet Faustino. They found there also Pepe, Torribio's son.

The tragedy was brief. Standing with their backs against the wall Torribio and Pepe smoked silently. Filling a glass of aguardiente Faustino drank first and passed it to the others. Taking down his guitar meantime, he began to sing a jota, thrumming vigorously the while. Old Bernardo was the last to drink, and as he laid down the cup, Torribio seized him by the head, as if in sport, and bent it forcibly downwards. A knife glittered in the hands of young Pepe, and was hurled in Bernardo's neck. He died without a sigh. They washed away the blood and Faustino continued to sing and play late on in the night.

The next morning, before daylight, they carried the corpse back of the houses, along a neglected pathway which was heaped high with ruins, and laid it on The Steps of the Apostles. Later on, some muleteers going to the fields, caught sight of it and turned aside. Before Ramon arrived, a dozen or more had seen it, but poor people do not like to be mixed up in affairs, and it is especially dreadful for them to be witnesses of a crime. Every one hurried away. At last the old woman bethought her of having Ramon discover the corpse. He at least would not be suspected of the murder.

More worried than his neighbors, the judge of the locality when told of what had happened, had the body of Bernardo carried to the old convent stable; he took care to find no trace, and no witness of the crime turned up. In the evening they carried the corpse to the graveyard and buried it under a little mound close to the ramparts. To comply with the requirements of the law an autopsy was first made near the grave. It was a mere formality. The body lay on the ground; a small crowd looked on, among them some children. A perfunctory examination satisfied the doctor. The law was carried out. The cause was unknown; probably an accident. Too close an investigation might be dangerous.

During the whole day Ramon remained in a dumb stupor, seated by the side of the dead or crouching near the ruined convent gate. He could hardly explain to the judge how his father had gone out the evening before and had not returned. He did not speak of the old woman who had called him, nor did he mention the terror of Mercedes. Fear had paralyzed him. But at the cemetery he stood unobserved behind the doctor, and when they uncovered the body he saw a long narrow purple gash in the neck, from which the blood had been washed away.

Ramon went back to his old work. Before his elder brother died he had been a shepherd. Bernardo had recalled him to La Horca, so as not to be alone. But now the village frightened the lad. Some friends of his father were good to him, however. Faustino, the inn-keeper, gave him a little money. He would even have employed him in the posada, but he heartily approved of Ramon's plan to leave La Horca, and without delay he had him accepted by Don Isidro, the richest cattle breeder of the country.

Ramon had no education. He knew a few prayers and could read a little. Mentally he was slow but deep. His heart had as yet known no mistrust of others, and he was ingenuous and candid with all. He was scarcely twelve; a pale lad with large thoughtful eyes. Evil had crossed his soul for the first time and was to trouble him till the end.

He was unable to explain to any one what had passed within him on that lugubrious Good Friday. From that out he never smiled; a dread of unknown enemies pursued him. At La Horca, it was agreed to speak of old Uncle Bernardo's death as an accident. Ramon thought so too, because every one seemed to be of that opinion. Only at night, when he could not sleep, or in the day time when he began to think, the pale face of his father appeared to him with the open wound.

On the plains of New Castile the vine and the sprouting wheat were already changing the russet and brown of the fields to green; the o-lives were lending a bluish tint to the slopes; and on the stony peaks a-

bove the shepherds were leading their flocks to browse not on the rich turf but on the lavender and wild thyme which sprouted there. At night dry walls of stone formed the enclosure for the sheep, and a chozo or hut without windows sheltered the shepherd. With him usually was a diminutive burror on which the man's clothes and gun and water and oil were packed. A few scraps of bread fried in oil furnished the ordinary food of the Spanish shepherd, who was as sober in his diet as were his brothers, the old nomads of Egypt.

A leathern jacket slung over his shoulder, a yellow tunic held by a broad cinchure of black wool, a red silk kerchief bound about the head which was topped by a round broad-brimmed felt hat, breeches of coarse brown stuff and gaiters, usually of the same color and slashed at either side, such was the dress of the shepherd in the days when Ramon was following his flocks on the hill-sides. He rarely went down to La Horca. Even on Sunday he was far away from the village. The bells bore appeals to him which he no longer heeded, for he no longer rose above his work. With the master shepherd and the shepherd's son, he remained in solitude. Together they traveled over the barren mountains; telling the hours by the progress of the stars, or the shadows of the sun on the rocks; ignorant of the world; speaking seldom even with each other, and only at times sending out to the echoes the slow monotonous chant which seemed but to put their own thoughts to sleep.

On the feasts of St. James, or Our Lady of Sorrows, at the procession of Holy Week, or Corpus Christi, Ramon came to La Horca. Along with the crowd he escorted the Cristo de la Humildad, or the Santisimo. Careless of what others were thinking, he looked with his large wondering eyes at the splendid professional cars draped in their rich laces and gorgeous silks; he shouted viva when the others did; and when the swallows started in hundreds around the towers of the old dismantled convent, their troubles seemed like this. But disturbed as he was, and incapable of analyzing his thoughts he felt the purifying influence of these festivities. In the evening, he sat upon the hill that was so familiar to him, and from a distance looked on at the fireworks which were set off in the public square.

He had grown very robust. On feasts days he took part in the national game of ball in front of the gate of La Horca, and he threw the weight higher and further than anyone else. Among his rivals there was only one who could match him. It was Pelago, the second son of Torribio.

One evening — he was then seventeen years of age — Ramon had been playing for three hours before a curious crowd of onlookers. He had beaten everyone, even Pelago, and he was going away triumphantly, even in spite of his triumph, and inhaling the perfume of a red rose which he had taken from Mercedes. Two loungers were warming themselves against a wall in the last rays of the setting sun. "Look," said one, "there goes Bernardo's son. What a strapping fellow! How I pity his enemies." "What!" said the other; "he's too much of a coward to avenge his own father."

Ramon entered his hut, reeling like a drunken man. Only once in his life had he been shaken by a similar emotion. It was in the midst of a wild storm, when a thunderbolt fell at his feet. Night came. Stretched out in his hut, without thought and without strength, he was pursued by the pitiless phrase which he had heard the man utter. Then suddenly before him, on the earth, he thought he saw the corpse, wrapped in its brown covering and the gash in the neck was bleeding. He cried out with horror, and the startled sheep around him replied with terrified bleatings.

He was stifling in the hut. He went out and flung himself on a rock. The moonless heaven was twinkling with stars. The air was balmy with the perfume of the young wheat, and the burgeoning daffodils and lavender. He was alone and miserable, when all around him was bathed in infinite peace. He could not restrain his sobs, but in his heart, relieved though it was by a flood of tears, he was aware of a new feeling that had been aroused, whose strength terrified him.

All the past was now clear. In what dreams had he been living all these years? That wound! Evidently his father had been murdered; the men against whom Mercedes had long ago warned him had done the deed. Why was it that he had failed to connect all these facts, and how did others possess while it escaped him?

There was no complexity in the movements of his direct and straightforward nature. He was not a

boaster and he was ignorant of fear. He was unconcerned about consequences, and although he was slow he did not stop nor would he admit concealment or deceit. Imperfectly instructed, his conscience followed very simple principles, and once adopted his resolution was immutable. The stars began to wane in the skies and the bleating of the sheep gave the signal of the dawn. Ramon lifted the latch of the corral and let out the flock. Before he followed he turned towards La Horca, and with his staff extended toward the village he cried: "I am no coward, and I will avenge my father."

In all the wide world no one cared for Ramon but Mercedes. She had pity for him during all those dark years. Her delicate affection strove to supply what the poor orphan boy lacked. Her father, Faustino, was a man of too much importance to permit her to think of having Ramon as her novice or fiance. Did not Faustino possess a vineyard and a pair of mules, and what was Ramon but a poor shepherd of the hills! She was destined for Pelago, Torribio's second son. But her heart went out to Ramon. Often on Saturday, when the shepherd's wife brought provisions to her husband, Mercedes went with her and Ramon received her as the earth greets the spring-time, and everything in his being sung a strain of hope for the coming of these fleeting apparitions.

He had sent her bunch of poppies, a sign of hopeless appeal. And so on the Saturday following she was faithful to the trust. They seated themselves beside a ruined wall, and anticipating any question from Dita, Ramon abruptly asked: "Who killed my father? You know?"

"No," answered Mercedes, trembling with fear. "I do not. But why do you ask?"

He told her then of what had happened on the previous Sunday, and of his resolution not to be a coward. Dita's eyes glistened with terror, but at the same time with pride. "I understand you," she said; "but I know nothing of it, I suspect nothing. That evening, you remember, they had penned up in the yard of the posada of bulls that were going to the races of Almenara. There were many drovers there, and they went away in the early morning. At night two men came who concealed their faces — one of them looked like your father. I was outside and hid myself. When they entered they locked the door behind them and left me outside in the dark alone and terrified. Then you came. Only after they left could I enter. It was perhaps on returning home that morning that your father was killed."

"But who was with him when you saw him?"

"Oh I am not sure. I think it was Torribio."

Torribio, her father's friend! At that name the whole horizon of confused remembrances became clear before Ramon's eyes. He saw again the air of restraint at the cemetery, he understood certain insults that had been flung at Torribio in public, and nicknames that had been fixed on him. He felt like a criminal. Then other images and other words came up in his mind. He remembered the friendship of Torribio for Bernardo, and the kindness which he had himself experienced when left an orphan. Ramon could not then understand how a man could play double, and he stopped short, his mind all confused.

What a vise seemed to be clasped upon his brain. Weak and open to impressions, he saw himself driven to a terrible duty, while, at the same time, he cursed the power that led him on.

Mercedes knew much more than she had told, for often in her presence the village folk had accused Torribio and blamed the apathy of Ramon. In her heart she condemned Torribio and by a sort of pride, a flighty, but cruel caprice of a child, she was not sorry to have opened the eyes of Ramon.

In the narrow theatre of hidden lives there are at times terrible dramas enacted. Dita arose to go. Ramon still sitting, gazed at the departing day. The sun like a furnace touched with fire the purple horizon. From the flaming glory of the illumined clouds, bright days leaped out and set the heavens ablaze. The plain, silent and dim, looked on at the dying day.

The bars of fire disappeared; the conflagration was extinguished. The space began to be shrouded in gloom. In the wheat the crickets began to chirp. Ramon arose sadly. "Something has gone out in my soul," he said, and glancing a farewell at Dita, he went away, alone into his desolate solitude.

Ramon had now begun to hate. Of a sudden a fierce passion had taken possession of his soul. To the peace which had been the happiness of his youth there had succeeded that inward tumult which one must conquer often in order to enjoy the triumphal tranquility which is the joy and the

glory of souls that have passed through trials.

One passion awakens another, and to that explosion of hate other feelings no less violent responded, which appalled him. A commoner nature would not have suffered their overpowering impulse, but would have given way forthwith to their brutal tyranny. Ramon had that ideal candor of the Castilian, which needs faith as a guide, and which a sort of enthusiasm must direct through its transports. Although knowing little of human affairs, yet at the end of the road on which he was entering he saw the scaffold. But in his eyes vengeance became a sort of duty to which he was obliged to sacrifice his life. To souls like his, if rightly guided, sublime purposes are reserved. Even when led astray, they accept great martyrdoms and achieve great successes.

Mercedes, less deep than he, did not see the abyss into which she had dragged her lover; otherwise she would have paused. In arming Ramon against Torribio, she was looking rather to her own deliverance, and from that out, practiced all the coquetry of which she was capable to displease Pelago.

Pelago loved her. For a long time there had been in his heart an unconscious jealousy of the shepherd. He now began to understand the reason, in his baser fashion and without any ideal for his hatred, and resolved to put an end to Ramon.

On the following Sunday, the flock had been corralled in the village. Ramon, unoccupied, was strolling about. Other lads were with him; the usual sports began. Instead of a ball they began throwing an iron bar. More spectators gathered. Pelago passed by and they called him. Ramon shuddered when he saw him approach, but resolved to quit the game in a moment. He played listlessly. Pelago made the best throws. Proud of his luck, he began to twist Ramon, and the others joined him.

"What are you thinking of, Ramon?" they cried.

"Pshaw!" said Pelago, "he's love-sick."

"Son of an assassin, cease," shouted Ramon, his fists clenched in anger. A deadly pallor came over Pelago; he lifted the iron bar which he held in his hands and flung it at his rival.

Ramon shifted his position to avoid the weapon and with a leap he was on Pelago, as he flung him to the earth, falling upon him at the same time. With his left hand, Ramon clutched his adversary's throat, and their hands sought their knives. Without words, and without thought, they writhed in each other's grip, frightful, horrible, both of them; no longer men, but savage and furious brutes.

With a supreme effort, Pelago freed his hand and seizing Ramon's head, held off death for an instant. With a panting voice, he was just able to say: "Do you wish to know the murderers of your father? My father, my brother and Faustino, the father of Mercedes."

Ramon's hand descended and killed the viper. When he arose the crowd had fled. His brain swam; he sat down upon a stone beside him. His mind came back to him slowly, as if after a wild debauch, and as his soul gradually calmed, an overwhelming sadness took possession of him — the bitter fruit of satisfied passion.

On the morrow Torribio followed the remains of his son to the cemetery. He had not been there since the day he had stood above the corpse of Bernardo. That inexorable justice which dominates the world had struck him. With bent head and broken heart he heard the earth fall on the coffin now lowered in the grave. The glances of those around were cold and seemed to mock him. In his inmost soul he said: "It is merited."

In his grief he wished to pursue the assassin in the courts. Faustino dissuaded him. It was a simple accident, a quarrel of young men. Pelago had been the aggressor. A trial, besides, might lead to unpleasant revelations. Better remove Ramon from La Horca; if needs be, Pepe, Pelago's brother, would see to the affair later.

Ramon went back to his sleep. How gladly would he have given himself up to justice! How willingly he would have died! Was this life — this base struggle of appetites, this conflict of brute force? A pitiless logic ruled his rude soul. It seemed to him that duty accomplished should have brought him peace, and yet he lived in mortal agony. But perhaps the sacrifice of his peace was the expiatory offering which his father demanded. And he made the offering.

Overwhelmed by the murder he had committed, he had paid no attention at first to the last words Pelago had uttered. Suddenly the bitter words cut into his soul. Pelago!

Ah! Mercedes and himself had wished to find out the guilty ones. What a punishment for their curiosity, and what a future was theirs if the wretch whom he had slain told the truth!

He would find it all out. One night he went down to La Horca; he passed the posada del Arco, and then crossing a wall, entered by a secret door the house of the old apothecary, Don Eusebio. Don Eusebio knew all the stories of La Horca. At first he did not recognize this ghost that so suddenly appeared before him. When Ramon spoke the old man quivered with fear.

"Come," said Ramon, calmly; "tell me how they killed my father."

The good man in his alarm strove to equivocate. But yielding to a will stronger than his own, he began, without useless details related the story of Bernardo's death.

Hobbes, the philosopher, calumniate the wolf when he likens man to it. The animal appetite is limited by its needs, but human passions would overleap all barriers if it were not for man's self-love. Because of scepticism, or cowardice, or egoism men avoid extremes. Egoism is more efficient than the police in making the world habitable. But when unbridled passion finds a temperament strong enough to follow it, or too feeble to control it, it is not easy to predict when it is going to stop. Ramon was strong enough to go whithersoever his hate might lead, but his heart, however, was not of the kind that despised and detested others.

He thought himself obliged to punish these three murderers; and when passion is guided by prejudice there is nothing so relentless. Their superior power did not daunt him. He would lose his life perhaps, but what matter? It was worth little. Only one sacrifice cost him something; it was that of the affection of Mercedes, which was sweet and tenacious of its place in his soul; it had been the hope and the rest of his shattered heart. But he had made that sacrifice also, hard as it was, and had abandoned the hope of ever being loved by her. And, nevertheless, although this renunciation made him suffer, even forcing her to cry out in agony, he felt in the depths of his soul a mysterious satisfaction on account of it, and in his trouble he asked himself why sorrow and misfortune follow upon satisfied passion, and why sacrifice, although it caused pain, brings a heavenly joy.

One day his master called him, and gave him his dismissal. Ramon was too much compromised by his affair with Pelago. One murder would provoke another, and in the end the shepherd, who was the weakest, would be the sufferer. He must go away from the danger. However, his master did not abandon him, but sent him to Cuenca on the mountains to a cousin who would employ him. Ramon was dumfounded by this decision. Without looking at the few duros which his master gave him, he took them and set out for the hills.

For simple people whose whole world is a hamlet, home is inexpressibly dear. Patriotism is more intense the less extended is the territory for which it is concerned. In fact, for poor people exile causes homesickness that is sometimes almost fatal.

Ramon leaving the street, took a little by-road that went by the yards back of the houses. Near a low, ruined wall he stopped, and after hesitating a moment took up first one pebble, then two, then three, and threw them against a closed shutter. Soon the window opened, and the pale face of Mercedes appeared. There was a smile of joy on her countenance as she hurried across the small courtyard and came to the wall where Ramon was calling her.

How she had suffered and wept since the death of Pelago! and how she had prayed! She knew her religion, and since she began to suffer she had begun to understand it. Does one ever understand it before that? The prayer so dear to Spaniards, which she had so often recited, she comprehended now, and felt its melancholy eloquence, and it was with inexpressible sincerity she said to the Virgin: "To thee do we cry, poor banished children of Eve; to thee do we cry, mourning and weeping in this valley of tears."

She placed her hands on the wall which separated her from Ramon, and looked him in the eyes.

"Is there anything new?" she asked. Ramon signified that there was. "Is it glad or sad?" she inquired. Ramon shook his shoulders. "Is there ever anything glad for me?" he asked. His teeth were set and tears filled his eyes as he plucked feverishly at the grass which was sprouting on the wall.

"Are you pursued?" (Continued on Page Twelve.)

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