

The Roses Of Santa Maria

(By Patricia Meeley, in Ave Maria)

(Concluded)

'She is the Dona Rosita de Arturo, sole heiress of the wealthiest woman in Santa Maria, and the niece of the Padre Antonio at that quaint little church over yonder; and I found her quite by accident as I sat in the piazza this morning. Then she related her adventure.

'Don't build your hopes too high, warned Maurice wisely. 'You have no idea how conservative those patrician Spanish families are,—how they shrink from publicity and cling to their homes and kindred. I can be surprised if you gain the girl's consent to your proposition, and still more so if her family allows her to leave home under the care of a stranger.'

'I'll have her if I have to resort to kidnapping!' laughed Mildred, as she rose from the table. 'and now for the fray! I am going forth to board the Inness in her den. And I shall leave you here, for I fancy I shall be more successful in my mission without your aid.'

'Thank's for the compliment,' laughed Maurice, as he lit a cigar and lounged back in his chair, watching the graceful figure of his wife as she passed down the street bent on conquest. Surely, he thought, if any one could persuade the lovely Rosita to try her fortune in the world outside her little valley, that person was Mildred Trevanion.

His doubts, however proved to be well-founded; the girl shrank from publicity, had no desire for fame, and was devotedly attached to her home and family. Nothing daunted, Mildred renewed the attack day after day, urging her not to hide her talents,—to give to the world what God wishes the world, through her instrumentality, should have. But all her arguments proved futile until one day she remarked:

'Do you know, Dona Rosita, that it was your 'Virgin's roses, as you call them, that led me to Santa Maria? Do not seem that I was guided here to be the means of giving you to the world? For no woman to whom great talents have been given belongs to herself.'

The girl sighed regretfully as she answered: 'What you say may be true, Senora; but you must give us time to decide. I shall consult my uncle and my mother, and if they think that it is God's will, I shall go.'

Mildred was as sure of victory at that moment as she was when on the following morning the Senora de Arturo announced that they had decided to part with Rosita on condition that she sign no contract, and in no way bind herself to remain should she wish to return.

'We are loath to part with the child,' she said. 'The world is hard and cruel; but if we withheld our consent, the time might come when we should doubt the wisdom of our choice. Her home awaits her should she wish to return; and if the world claims her, we must let her go. But you will guard her; will you not, Senora? Long ago one whom we loved went forth from our valley to die of a broken heart, and so we are reluctant to see our child depart.'

'I promise you, Senora,' said Mildred, clasping both the older woman's hands between her own, 'that we will guard her as we would a dear sister.'

With a heavy heart Rosita bade farewell to home and kindred, and set forth with her new-found friends on her first journey into the unknown world. Jose's jaunty air deserted him, and he drove slowly, bent upon missing the train, and thus delaying the parting with the girl whom he had served and adored since her babyhood. At the station Mildred bade herself adieu to the little stage, apprehensive lest one of her numerous parcels be overlooked.

'Have a care with that package, Jose!' she warned. 'It contains one of your famous roses which is destined to grow in my garden. When you come to San Francisco to hear the Dona Rosita sing, the blossoms will remind you of home.'

Jose shook his head as he replied: 'Only in our valley will they grow, Senora; only there of all the world. You can't transplant the roses of Santa Maria.'

Jose's prophecy was fulfilled; for, despite the care of an expert gardener, despite the fact that Rosita herself nursed and tended the plant, it refused to grow beneath the gray skies of this strange land. And when at last it withered and died, the girl was indeed desolate; for now she felt that the last link that bound her to her home was severed.

She was an honored member of the Trevanion household, and fitted into her surroundings with the grace of one born to city life. A ready intuition taught her the uses of unfamiliar objects, and a native dignity commanded the respect of her acquaintances. A few months sufficed to perfect her well trained voice; and on her first appearance, the impulsive, music-loving population of San Francisco took her to heart. She sang in operas, in concert in the churches and for charity,

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and it seemed that the people could never hear enough of her wonderful voice. She was the idol of the hour. They loaded her with jewels, with invitations to social functions which her soul abhorred and they barked the stage with costly flowers, that only fed the longing in her heart for the roses of her childhood. Despite all their attentions, or perhaps because of them,—because of the contrast between their homage and the tender, protecting love of her own people,—she felt herself an alien among them. Like all who have attained to fame, she knew her position to be insecure—know that in a few short years, when she had dimmed her beauty and robbed her voice of its sweetness, their adulation would be changed to pity and she would be forgotten.

Suddenly a year had passed since she came among them, and now she stood on the threshold of her greatest triumph. She was to sing tonight before a most critical audience composed of the elite of the city and visiting members of the foreign diplomatic corps, together with a number of musicians of note. Dismissing the maid at the stage door, Mildred insisted on dressing the girl by her own hands. Ignoring all protests, she arrayed her in robes and jewels of regal splendor. Heavy ivory-tinted silk fell in classic folds about her slender figure, and in her throat and breast and on her dusky hair gleamed strands of priceless diamonds. Mildred stood back and eyed her handiwork in approval.

'You are adorable, my dear!' was her only comment; and the cheers with which the audience greeted the singer gave proof that it concurred in her judgment. 'Maurice,' called Mildred, softly, 'you may bring in the box now, I feared to let her see it before her appearance, lest it might answer her.'

Maurice appeared from the shadows with a huge cardboard box, which he carefully deposited on Rosita's dressing-table. But—alas! for their plans!—they had forgotten an intermission before the last song, during which a celebrated harpist was to play.

As Rosita entered the dressing-room, flushed with her conquest, a familiar fragrance smote her senses. With a glad little cry she tore open the box, and there on a bed of velvet mosses lay scores of long-stemmed Santa Maria roses, and in the midst of them a note from her mother.

'We rejoice in your triumph, she wrote in her romantic Spanish way; "but by day and by night we miss you. You were eyes to the blind queridos, and the little sick babies loved the touch of your hand. My home and my heart are desolate without you. There are none to sing the Virgin's praises, and the God in the Tabernacle is lonely for the sound of your voice.'

With trembling fingers, Rosita tore the jewels from her throat and breast and hair, and in their place she fastened the crimson roses. Just as her cue was given, she caught up an armful of the long-stemmed blossoms and pressed them to her heart as she crossed the stage, with no thought save of their resonance and beauty. The audience with the quick intuition of San Francisco audiences, scented a romance, by a single gesture, she silenced the orchestra which was playing the opening bars of the 'Jewel Song,' and accompanied sang 'The Song that Reached My Heart.' Not a sound broke the stillness of the vast auditorium save the exquisite voice of the singer; and if her eyes were wet, the listeners could scarce distinguish it for the tears that filled their own as she sang.

The song of home, sweet home,—the song that reached my heart, For a brief moment, at its conclusion, the house was hushed; and then storm after storm of applause shook it to its foundations. But all in vain. The stately figure in its regal robes had vanished and back in the wings a homesick girl was sobbing out her heart over a sheaf of crimson roses.

On descending for breakfast the following morning, the Trevanions found Rosita's place vacant, but a note beside Mildred's plate explained her absence. It ran thus:

My DEAR SENORA—I thank you a thousand times for your great kindness to me, and I bid you adieu. Forgive me that I do not say my farewell in person. You would but urge me to remain, and it would grieve me to refuse one who has shown me such kindness,—one to whom I have grown so fondly attached. I know what you would say, Senora; that I am wasting my talents. Why should I seek for fame and the applause of multitudes when my voice can be raised in the service of my Creator? There are hundreds here to sing for the amusement of the people, but in Santa Maria there is none to sing the praises of God save myself. You would tell me that the people love me. Believe me, Senora, it is the love of a child for a new toy. Today they love, tomorrow they will have forgotten; but down in Santa Maria there are hearts that never forget. The roses have brought me their message of love and longing for my return, and I go to my home, to my own dear people, whose blood flows in my veins, whose ways are my ways, whose joys and sorrows find an echo in my soul.

Why, dear Senora, should I remain in your dreary gray city, where the mists have chilled my heart when in Santa Maria the sun is shining, the roses are blooming, the blue waves are singing on the spining sands, and the fishing boats are dancing on the bright waters? The Virgin's roses are leading me as they led my people of old, and I shall arise and follow; for Our Lady was a mother, and she knows the sorrow in my mother's heart at the thought of her child star, from home and kindred. I know not if you have a mother, Senora—I have never heard you mention her name,—but if you have, you will not ask me to remain and break my mother's heart. Again I thank you for your care and kindness, and I pray the Holy Virgin to protect and keep you.

Farewell! ROSITA. Mildred Trevanion's voice trembled with emotion as she read the pathetic little letters and her eyes were wet as she said: 'I never knew my mother, Maurice. She died when I was a baby. But, if she were living, not all the wealth and applause of the world could keep me from her. Maurice stroked her soft hair in silence for a moment, then he smiled tenderly down into the tear wet eyes as he quoted Jose's words: "Only in our valley will they grow, Senora; only there of all the world. You can't transplant the roses of Santa Maria."

It was dusk on the second day of Rosita's journey when the train pulled into Palmerston, pausing long enough for the exchange of a few passengers. Jose had gone hours ago; so hailed a cabman, Rosita bade him drive her into the valley of Santa Maria. At the foot of the hill she dismissed him and made her way along the familiar highway by the waning light of a crescent moon float in the western sky. Now, and again she heard the sound of voices raised in song or the tinkling notes of a guitar; but as night advanced the lights died out from the wayside houses, and no sound broke the silence save here and there a dog's sharp bark, that changed to a joyful whine of welcome as its owner recognized the wayfarer.

The town lay wrapped in slumber as she approached her home. She decided not to arouse the household, so she quietly passed up the broad stairway, and gained her own room unnoted. It was just as she had left it; and even in the darkness she could find all the little personal belongings which had stamped it as her own. The salt air blowing in through the open windows carried her face, and the fragrance of the roses thrilled her like the clasp of friendly hands.

Morning dawned, flooding the valley with golden light, waking to new life and beauty the bright waters and the shining strand. Here and there about the town, spirals of blue smoke curled thitherly upward, adding their pungent fragrance to the clear, sweet air. Down on the beach fishermen passed to and fro in wait of preparation; then one or two launched their slender, brown-sailed boats into the deep. Slowly the old Padre climbed the worn steps of the church to ring the Angelus bell. It was a task he loved; and yet, since Rosita left them, it awakened sad memories and sadder forebodings in his heart. Would the voice which had answered the bell in the past be turned from the service of the Virgin for the sake of the stranger's gold? Would the robes and applause of a great city wean the child's heart from those who loved her, and make her careless of her Faith, as wealth and fame had made many another who set forth with ideals and aspirations as high as hers? He put these thoughts from him as a distraction, and bowed his head in prayer as he rang the Angelus. And then his heart stood still for joy.

From the balcony of the great house across the piazza a golden voice flung forth its challenge to the birds,—rang out rich and clear and exquisitely sweet in the Magnificat.

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That pean of exultation learned from the lips of the Queen of Heaven. The vale of Santa Maria lay hushed and expectant until the last note of that glorious voice died into silence; then from hill and valley, from bay and town, rose a mighty cry of welcome that thrilled the depths of the singer's soul. Turning, she vanished through the long window behind her, and fled along the corridor and down the stairway into her mother's arms. It was worth the dreary months of exile to see the happiness in that face as Rosita whispered that for her earth held no spot so fair as home. Together, they turned to greet the neighbors who flocked in from every side, their faces radiant with welcome. Rosita knelt for the blessing of her uncle, the Padre, and kissed his hand in the old familiar way; then, arising, with smiling lips and tear-wet eyes, she greeted her own dear people. No oration she had received in the great city of her triumph had ever touched her heart as did the devotion of these simple folk who flocked about her, not because her voice pleased them, or her beauty charmed them, but because they loved her now as they had done in her babyhood.

As I lunged up his silver-headed umbrella over my head, he took my hand, his mouth curved in a charming smile. For a moment he knelt at her feet, pressing her fingers to his lips; then, arising, he waved his hand in a comprehensive gesture that silenced the hum of voices as he exclaimed:

'It is even as I told Senora Trevanion. You can't transplant the roses of Santa Maria; for, behold, the fairest flower of them all blooms once more upon her native soil!'

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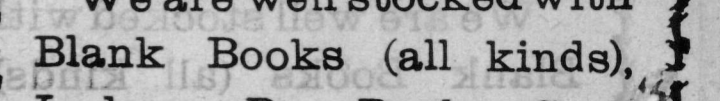
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