

# EL CRISTO DE LA VEGA.

By REV. JOSEPH NUNAN, in Donaboo's Magazine.

A WONDERFUL story centres round the church of Cristo de la Vega. A stone's throw from the walls of Toledo it stands, an edifice in no way prepossessing. I remember the first time I stood on the knoll overlooking it, and in response to my query a dark-skinned little maiden merely told me that it was "El Cristo de la Vega." My impression at the time was, that it was one of those little convents that are scattered so profusely throughout sunny Spain. Curiosity was not sufficiently aroused to give it close inspection.

I remained for some time seated on the hill, admiring the surrounding scenery. To say it was magnificent by no means does it justice. To my right, tortuously winding along, flowed the rapid river Tajo—*el río noble*, as the Spaniards love to call it—and beyond, like mighty giants, rose the rocky mountains of Toledo, behind which the brilliant sun was sinking. The sky was gorgeously painted. I have often admired the skies of Italy, but those of Spain are in nowise less beautiful, though less known. To my right spread a splendid valley, covered with trees, vines and vegetables. In front of me quietly slept the little church, and in the distance I beheld the celebrated "Fabrica de Armas," whose steel—the famous Toledo steel—is known the world over. I remained in contemplation of this august scene until the sun had set, when, flinging my long mantle over my shoulders, I leisurely returned to the city.

A few weeks passed, when I heard it said among my friends that Cristo de la Vega would soon have its annual feast. Upon my inquiring I was informed that it was one of the most popular devotions of the Toledoans.

"Haven't you ever visited the church?" inquired a young friend, well versed in Spanish legendary tales.

"No," I replied, "I have never entered it. I mistook it for a monastery."

"Then, of course, you don't know its story."

I admitted my ignorance, and he continued: "Well, if you give me your undivided attention for a few minutes I will repeat the tale as it has come down to us century after century. It is a pretty story, and the truth of it no one can gainsay, for the evidence still exists in the little church. You must go there yourself and be convinced that it is no airy Spanish fiction that I will now narrate to you."

Have you ever studied Spanish history? If so, you are well aware of the fact that the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries are justly called the golden age of Spain. Her power and influence were felt, you might say, in every part of the world. Her valiant soldiers swept everything before them. Her fleets and vessels waved her ensign on every sea. There was no daring enterprise, no adventure fraught with danger, that the Spaniard was not ready to undertake; and, in fact, the greater the difficulties and the more foolhardy the action, the quicker he would buckle on his armor and his sword to essay it. Ah! those were the days of chivalric and heroic deeds. How puny, how insignificant are the Spaniards of today compared to our illustrious forefathers!

Together with the wonders achieved in America, our noble soldiers in Flanders were daily adding glory to the Spanish name. Victory after victory followed our arms. It was during these exciting times that Diego Martinez and Inez Vargas lived in Toledo. Diego was the son of a poor but respectable family—a tall lad and brave as a lion. Inez, a young girl of sixteen summers, the sole joy of a widowed father, was a perfect type of a real Spanish-Arabian beauty, and you know what that means. Diego loved the fair child, and his love was reciprocated. Life was as sweet to them as a summer's dream. Daily they strolled along the bank of the Tajo, singing together, or wandered in the fertile valley, Diego gathering the fairest flowers for his smiling loved one. Every Sunday, side by side, they walked to the little church to hear the holy Mass chanted, and there, on her knees, Inez seemed like a being from above. Diego often found himself more absorbed in her than in the solemn sacrifice. How beautiful she is! he would say to himself, not one in all Toledo can compare with her.

This ideal existence they lived for some time, when one day the news came to Diego that he was ordered to the war in Flanders. His heart smote him when he thought of Inez. He would have loved to leave her. Where would he find courage to say farewell? Perhaps he would never return. Who knew but that his bones would lie hunched and mouldering on the plains of Flanders?

Bitterly he bewailed his fate, yet there was a secret hope in his heart that he might do brave things and crown his name with glory. He thought how happy Inez would be to hear his name spoken of with praise. "Martinez of Toledo did this in such a battle." "The great Martinez, almost single-handed, routed a whole regiment of the enemy." Such were his thoughts that day, and in truth, war was with him more than love.

The same evening he wended his way to the dwelling of Inez. From the street he heard her singing, singing as only an all-gay heart can sing. What music there was in her voice! To him it was far sweeter than the chant of an angel. He lifted the latch and entered.

"Why, Inez, how happy thou art!" he said.

"Oh! Diego, is it thou? While singing I was thinking of thee. Welcome."

"The evening is beautiful, Inez. Will thou take a walk with me in the valley?"

"Yes, with pleasure. But we must return in one hour. Father will be here."

and I must have supper prepared for him, and thee too, Diego, if thou wilt dine with us."

"No, not this evening, Inez, I cannot, for I must sup at home. But come, let us go."

Down the rocky, tortuous street they walked, past the city gates and onward to the gently-sloping meadow. You have seen the vega, how beautiful it is! What a wealth of beautiful flowers are scattered over it! How solemn stands the relic of the old Roman circus! How smoothly flows the noble river! What surroundings more picturesque! What skies more brilliant! I imagine that a meadow more lovely does not deck our mother earth.

Here to this lovely spot came Diego and Inez. How delightfully joyful she was! Not the semblance of a sorrow was in heart. She was as brimful of pleasure as a ray of the sun is with light. Diego strayed along, plucking as was his wont, sweet flowers for his love. Yet there was a thoughtful look upon his face that was seldom seen. He was thinking: how he could tell her of his departure on the morrow, but the words died ere they were spoken. Night was coming on and the hour was almost gone.

"Diego," she said, "we must be returning."

"Yes, love," he replied, handing her the bouquet, "and here is a trail offering to my divinity."

"Oh! how beautiful they are. Come, let us go to the church and say an Ave for the dead, and I will place these sweet flowers at the shrine of the Virgin as a present from thee. She is more worthy of them than I."

Up the hill they wandered to the church; and, as they entered, the bells began to ring the "hour of the dead."

In the gloom before the crucifix they knelt and prayed. A silence as of grave encompassed them. Darkness shrouded the altars and the pictures, and the only glimmer of light, feeble and flickering, came from the little oil lamp that hung before the tabernacle. For a short moment they knelt—she wrapped in prayer; he, filled with the thought of his last farewell to his beloved.

"Come, Diego, we must go," she said at last.

"Inez, I must speak with thee."

"Canst thou not do so on our way home?"

"No, here I must speak. It may be the last time. To-morrow I go to Flanders."

"What is it I hear thee say, Diego?" cried she, bewildered.

"Love, I am ordered to Flanders. My life as a soldier now begins."

"Dios mio! Dios mio!" she said, clasping her hands in sorrow. "Oh, I was so happy, and to think I will not see thee more. Listen to me, Diego, do not go."

And she placed her little hands upon his shoulders and pleaded, while her tears fell upon his breast. Embryo soldier that he was, he too, could not restrain himself, and there in the little church, alone in the darkness and silence, they wept together.

"My love, my love," he whispered, "I cannot. One year from this day I will return, and here at this very altar I will wed with thee."

"Will thou truly return and keep thy promise, Diego?"

"Yes, Inez, by my life."

"Will thou swear it?"

"Why, love, is not my word as strong as an oath?"

"No, no, swear that thou wilt come back and wed with me."

"Where dost thou wish me to do so?"

"Here at the foot of the holy image of Christ."

"It is well, love."

"Kneel thou and touch with thy right hand those sacred feet."

He did as she commanded.

"Diego," she said, "swarest thou by the cross of Christ that on thy return thou wilt wed with Inez?"

"Yes, I swear it," he solemnly uttered, and forth from the temple went the two young lovers.

Next day Diego set out for Flanders. Inez bade him a tearful farewell, and he, his heart strangely filled with love and war, kissed her tenderly.

"Weep not, Inez, I will return," were his last words.

The days and months passed by, and sad, in truth, was the heart of the lonely Inez. The smile that once dimpled her cheeks had fled, and no more did the sweet Castilian love songs tremble from her lips. Alone she wandered by the river or through the flowery meadow that once echoed with her buoyant laughter. There was a great void in her heart that only her sworn lover could fill. Daily at the set of the sun would she walk to the little chapel, and there at the foot of the Christ she was wont to pour forth the heavy sorrow that weighed upon her soul.

"Bring him back to me, O God! bring him back to me," was her once fervent prayer.

The year was rapidly drawing to a close. Eagerly did she await its departure. The morning of the eventful day at last arrived. She vested herself in her gayest garments and the old smile came back to her face. "He will come to-day," she kept repeating, "to-day my love will come." And she broke forth into a sweet song she had not sung for many a month. All day long she sat by the window, and watched and waited for the well-known face; but it came not. Her father returned from his day's toil and found her there with her arms folded, and head bowed, and the tears raining from her eyes.

"What now, my beautiful one?" he exclaimed. "What is it ails thee?"

"To-day he said he would come and he has not."

"Ah! Diego, Diego, thou art ever thinking of him, Diego! Diablo would suit him better. I never liked the looks of the boy!"

"Father, do not speak so, perhaps he is dead."

"Dead! no fear of it. If so, we would have heard. No, he is acting the gallant to some fair dame in Flanders, Inez Drive him from thy mind. I always said he was unworthy of thee. There are a thousand youths in the city a thousand times better than this vile soldier!"

"Father, speak not thus. For me there can be but one youth and one Diego."

"But thinkest thou that I can endure this incessant moaning? That I can stand quietly by and see my only child fading away like a delicate, uncared-for flower? I am an old man, Inez, but to restore the roses to thy cheeks, I myself will go to Flanders and bring back this—this—diablo, or I will let my dagger taste his heart's blood. Before heaven, I—"

"No father," said she, rising and placing her hand upon his mouth, "thou shalt not swear to commit such a deed. Let us leave him to Heaven, I promise I will weep no more."

"Promise that thou wilt think no more of him."

"Father, my loved father, I cannot."

"Then, at least, cease groaning, and fling away this detestable melancholy. Let us see, as of old, thy face lit with smiles. Ah! Inez, thou'rt the fairest lass in Toledo, thou art worthy to be the spouse of a king."

"But, I'm afraid," she smiled, "Diego will never be a king."

"Diablo! diablo!" the old man muttered. "Mil diablos! Inez, let me hear no more of him."

"As you wish, father."

The old man went to his room, whispering to himself: "Fusion! only a cold fish illusion, she will forget him soon."

But the father knew not the strength of a woman's love.

Another year and yet another hurried away, and still the soldier of Flanders did not appear. The war was ended, but where was Diego? His name did not figure in the list of the dead or wounded, and Inez knew it, but her faith in him was still unshaken. Hope continued to live in her bosom. Not a day in all these years did she relax her practice or visiting at sunset the little church, and praying to Him who hung on the cross.

Bring him back to me, O God! bring him back to me, was ever her whispering prayer.

During her second year there was no outward sign of her grief. She greeted her father with smiles and gaily chatted with him. Mention of the absent lover was never made. The old man was delighted. Once again she begins to be the Inez of other days; she has forgotten the ingrate—the father thought. He little imagined what was passing in her heart, or dreamt that the canker of love was slowly devouring it.

One cold and miserable day in January, such as Toledo only knows, in the third year of Diego's departure, the old man prepared himself and travelled to the great beyond. Inconceivable was Inez. In all Toledo she had not a bosom friend. In these past years she had shunned her acquaintances, and they had learned to fear her, and when the poor loving father was laid away in the grave she returned to her dwelling alone—a solitary being in the midst of the great city.

What could she do? Live alone in the bustling imperial city? No. The house was hers and her father had left her a comfortable sum of money. She bequeathed herself of a maternal aunt who lived in a little pueblo of Villasequilla. She wrote and told the old lady of the death of her parent, and requested her to come to Toledo and live with her. The aunt at once prepared and in a few days was with Inez.

"Aunt Josefa" said she, a few days after the arrival, "remember I already told you, you are mistress of the house. Without father or mother you must be both to me."

"In truth I will be, my sweet one," wiping away her tears, "are you not the child of my dear Matilda?"

"And act here as though you lived here always."

"Excuse me, Inez," admiring the young girl's handsome face, "but do you not think it is time for you to marry. At your age your mother was already wed."

"Dear aunt, I have not time to think of such things. But I beg of you never speak of this to me again."

"Love, you are not offended?"

"No, far from it. The subject is not pleasing to me, aunt Josefa."

"I will never mention it again, Inez," she said as she went to prepare the mid-day lunch.

There in the kitchen she thought and thought.

How beautiful she is, she soliloquized, yet what a strange girl. Not wed! What an idea! Ah! I have it. Those black-robed nuns yonder wished to have her. Yesterday I watched her going to the convent. And the old lady was thoroughly convinced.

Life passed along smoothly for the next few months, though after her father's death Inez became sadder than usual. She was more lonely than ever. Her aunt was truly kind and sympathetic, yet she could not fill her father's place. More frequently she strolled in the vega, more frequently she wended her way to the little church. The neighbors long since ceased to stare and wonder at her. They knew not her secret, and they imagined her strange conduct was due to some malady. Nor were there wanting young men and in the high ranks of life, too, who would willingly wed with her. But to all of them she turned a deaf ear. Would she give her hand without her heart?

It was a beautiful morning in July of the third year. Inez was slowly walking along the river's edge, close to the bridge of Alcantara. Life was just beginning to stir in the city above. The fishermen were busy arranging their nets, and some half a dozen women were loudly singing and industriously washing their soiled linen in the waters of the Tajo. From the bridge floated the tinkling sound of bells that were suspended from the necks of innumerable goats on their way to the city.

Under one of the arches of the bridge

was a young man, a soldier of Flanders, who had been in the city for some time. He was looking at Inez with a steady gaze, and she was looking at him with a steady gaze. They were both looking at each other with a steady gaze.

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Inez spied a knight seated upon a noble Andalusian stallion. His steel armor glittered in the rising sun. The great feather of his sombrero waved gently in the morning breeze. Inez came nearer. She noticed that his spurs were of gold, and likewise the hilt of his mighty sword. Both horse and rider seemed to be thoughtfully contemplating the river. He gave no heed to the sound of the footsteps of the maiden. "Tis some noble warrior, she thought; perhaps he can tell me of Diego."

She walked slowly to his side and was about to question him, when she beheld for the first time his face. A great wave of pleasure rushed through her being. Her heart throbbed as though it would break its bonds.

"Diego!" she cried, "Is it thou?"

The knight slowly turned in his seat, looked at her and calmly said:

"Well, I swear by Belzebub, I do not know who thou art."

Inez wildly stared at him, and with a loud cry that echoed and re-echoed along the banks of the river, she fell senseless upon the ground. The warrior called to the women along the beach and fiercely said to them:

"Take the maiden to her home, and cursed be the witches that make these innocent creatures mad by their evil counsels."

With that he gave the spurs to his horse and sped onwards to Toledo.

Inez had made no mistake. The gaily attired warrior was none other than Diego. He had fought bravely in the war of Flanders and was made a captain. As his rank in life increased, so did his desires. The king had heard of his wonderful bravery and his soldierly capabilities, and when Diego returned to Madrid he was knighted and became one of the grandees of Spain. Entering Toledo, seated upon his prancing steed, with his gold-hilted sword dangling at his side and his bright breastplate showing the dints of many a battle-stroke, Diego Martinez was not the humble and obscure soldier that departed from the city three years before.

In the ceaseless strife of Flanders he had forgotten his love in Toledo, nay, even her name escaped his memory. Yet, when he returned to his native place these recollections of the past came back vividly to his mind. He steeled his heart against them. He, the famous soldier, the noble Don Diego Martinez, could not marry a poor peasant's daughter. He would make an alliance with some maiden of noble birth. And as to Inez—well, none knew of his vow to wed with her, nor would anyone give credence to the report. Such were his reasonings and they satisfied his sordid soul. It was in the midst of these reflections that Inez beheld and spoke to him under the arch of the bridge of Alcantara. For a moment his heart was touched, but the ever-present whisperings of fame and fortune crushed the passing remorse.

A few days after Inez went to the house of Diego. She entreated, she begged and, weeping, besought him to fulfil his oath. His heart was obdurate. Coldly he looked upon her and haughtily said:

"Inez, once and for all, remember that the Captain Don Diego is not Diego Martinez. So, farewell to thee."

Raising her weeping eyes, she answered: "To thee I pledged my troth, to me thou gavest thy oath. We shall weigh both in the scales of justice."

Don Pedro de Alarcon was the royal governor of Toledo. He was an old man and as valiant as he was just. In his youth he had fought bravely for his native land, and, like Diego, was knighted for his courageous deeds. At this time he was holding court in Toledo. The great hall was thronged

with judges, lawyers and spectators, listening with patience to the many complaints that were made.

The lawyers pleaded their cases and awaited the sentence of Don Pedro. The busy scribes were writing with furious haste. Some of the gray haired judges were quietly dozing and the spectators passing comments one to the other.

A woman with hair dishevelled, her eyes red with weeping, entered the chamber-hall and cried aloud: "Justice, judges, justice, Don Pedro."

She cast herself at the feet of the governor, who, quieting the confusion, tenderly raised her from the ground and asked her: "Woman! what is it you wish?"

"I look for justice, sir."

"And what do you desire of me?"

"To restore to me a broken jewel."

"Of what jewel do you speak?"

"Sir, my heart."

"Did you not give it away?"

"No, your Excellency, I loaned it."

"Have you witnesses?"

"None."

"And promises, were there any?"

"Yes, ere leaving Toledo he took an oath to return it to me."

"Who is he?"

"Diego Martinez, now noble and Captain."

"Guard! bring to me the Captain and he shall fulfil his oath." A perfect silence fell upon the hall. The drowsy judges and the spectators looked on this strange scene with bated breath. Some minutes after, raising the tapestried curtain that overhung the door, the summoner cried: "The noble Captain Don Diego."

He passed along the crowd with head thrown back and pride and fury gleaming from his eyes.

"Are you the Captain Don Diego?" asked Don Pedro.

"I am, your honor."

"Do you know this girl?"

"Three years or more ago, yes?"

"Did you swear to wed with her?"

"No."

"Will you swear that you did not so swear?"

"Yes."

"Then go in peace."

"He lies, Don Pedro, he lies," exclaimed Inez weeping with shame.

"Woman, do you know what you say?"

"I say he lies and I swear it."

"Have you no witnesses?"

"No, not one."

"Captain, depart and excuse us that we should doubt your honor."

With a smile of deep satisfaction, Diego bowed low to the judges and walked towards the door. Inez, when she saw him departing, cried out between her tears:

"Recall him, I have a witness. Call him back, sir."

The Captain returned. Don Pedro seated himself. The crowd remained silent.

"I have a witness," said Inez. "One who will speak the truth."

"Who is he?"

"A man who heard our words and looked on us from above."

"Was in some balcony?"

"No, my lord, he was on a place of misery, where later on he died."

"You say, then, he died?"

"No, he lives."

"As God lives, you are mad. Who was he?"

"El Cristo de la Vega."

At the mention of the Redeemer's name, judges and spectators arose, raised their hats and bended their knees. In the deep silence that followed this announcement surprise and fear filled the hearts of those present. Diego, shamed and confused, cast down his eyes. The governor whispered to the judges and then said aloud: