

"It would be a vile, cowardly murder! It would be infamous!"

"Caramba! Those are big words. And by what name, pray, would you call Quirino's action were he to discover us and kill us?"

"I should call it revenge. After all I was unfaithful to him."

"That is possible. But if you were, I was innocent, and yet I don't see that he will spare me any more than he will you. However, I have one hope left, and that is that we shall find means to leave Havana with your husband and reach France before this madman gets on our trail."

"I must first get married, and I am not that yet."

"You will be in four days, and four days are soon passed. But until then we must keep close, for it is a matter of life and death."

As Morales uttered these words the noise of a closing door made him start in his chair. His teeth chattered, his hands trembled, and great drops of perspiration started out on his bald forehead.

"Oh, my God!" he murmured. "Perhaps it is he! It is Quirino! Oh, may Our Lady of the Pillar and Saint James of Compostella have mercy on my soul. Pray, Carmen, pray. *Pater noster—Ave Maria—Credo in unum Deum.*"

Carmen herself turned pale, but her fright did not last long, for the innocent cause then entered the room.

It was the mulatto Berenice returning after taking Tancred back to the Lameda.

XVII.

HOW TO MARRY ONE'S SISTER.

Carmen followed to the letter the plan proposed by Morales in the preceding chapter, and the result fully justified the provisions of the *ci-devant* angler of the Manzaneros. Three days passed without bringing Tancred any news from his unknown enchantress—three days which he spent in a fever of love and impatience, neither eating nor sleeping, with Carmen's name on his lips and her rose, now faded and unsightly enough, on his heart.

On the fourth day a *cargador*, or stevedore, brought him a note which the man said he had received from a mulatto woman. Tancred dismissed him with a *douceur* that made him open his eyes, and feverishly tore open the paper. It contained but one line.

"To-night, at midnight, at the Lameda."

At the hour appointed the Frenchman met the mulatto at the rendez-vous agreed upon, was again driven off blindfolded, and in a few minutes he found himself face to face with Carmen, who was more charming and more radiant than ever. Tancred fell upon his knees before the girl.

"Oh, how I love you! What agonies of suspense I have endured!"

"I too love you," returned the girl, raising her lover, "and I have suffered as much as you."

The two sat side by side and engaged in a long, delicious, half-murmured conversation, which, however, it is not our intention to repeat. It is only necessary to say that Carmen gave her lover a sketch of her history and position. She was, she said, an orphan, and dependent on her brother, the seigneur Don Guzman Morales y Tullipano, a dispossessed Spanish nobleman who would, however, soon recover his rights. This brother was fearfully jealous of the honor of his name, and was not a man to pardon an error or ever to overlook a false step. He placed his sister under strict surveillance, which, however, she had managed to evade for the love of Tancred, and thanks to the connivance of her nurse Berenice. Don Guzman was engaged in administering the immense estates he and his sister owned in Cuba, previous to returning to Europe.

"Oh, Carmen! Carmen!" cried the young man passionately, "I would you were poor and of humble race!"

"For what reason?"

"My life is yours, I am bound up in you! But seeing you so great and so rich how shall I ever dare to ask your brother your hand, and even should I muster up courage enough to ask him what proof have I that he will accept me as his kinsman?"

"My brother cannot wish to see me die," returned Carmen, "and die I should were he to withhold his consent. My heart is yours, Tancred, and will never be any one's but yours. I am your wife in the sight of God."

One could almost have believed that these words were a signal, for hardly had they been uttered when a harsh voice was heard crying outside in a fury:

"There is a man hidden in this house—a man who would rob me of my honor! He shall never get out alive! Watch all the doors and windows! If he tries to escape shoot him! I will take care of his accomplice!"

"It is my brother!" ejaculated the girl in a terrified, despairing voice, "We are lost!"

"Not yet," returned Tancred, drawing his sword. "Your brother shall only reach you over my dead body. As long as I live I will defend you, Carmen."

"Defend me? You cannot! My brother is not alone! His servants are with him, armed! No, no! we are lost! My beloved, we will die together!"

As she spoke, Carmen threw herself sobbing into Tancred's arms, and in her terror clutched him convulsively so as to impede his movements.

"Carmen, Carmen," whispered the young man, "for heaven's sake let me go! I shall

need all my strength! Let me go or we are lost!"

But Carmen, to all appearance bewildered with terror, only held on the tighter, and the chevalier, not daring to remove her by force, cursed from the bottom of his heart the feminine terrors which rendered him powerless.

At this moment the door opened and Morales appeared, with a haughty, pitiless mien that boded ill for the Frenchman. Under his right arm he carried a naked sword, and in his left hand a long pistol.

On seeing his sister fainting at the officer's feet with her arms clasped around him, a sinister smile lit up Morales's cadaverous face. He stopped short at the door in a theatrical attitude.

"What!" he cried, fiercely, rolling his eyes, "this is all that the descendant of one of the oldest houses of Spain cares for her honor! Oh, that such a humiliation should have been reserved for me! I have but one sister, over whom I have watched like a father! I believed her to be pure as the angels in heaven, chaste as the blessed Madonna, and now I find her in the arms of a lover!"

"Senior!" Tancred broke out vehemently, "you are insulting the most angelical being that ever trod this earth! Insulting her in a most cowardly manner and without any cause!"

"Silence!" thundered Morales. "Your turn will come shortly! Carmen!" he continued, "you belong to a family in which disgrace can only be washed out in blood. As the head of that family I hold from God the right and the power to judge and condemn you. I do judge you, and I find you guilty. I have pronounced your sentence from which there is no appeal. Commend your soul to God, Carmen, for you must die!"

On hearing these terrible words the girl raised her head from her lover's shoulder.

"My brother," she exclaimed in a scarcely audible voice, "have mercy on me!"

"I have no mercy for a guilty, shameless girl," sternly returned Morales.

"Brother, I swear to you before God, I swear to you by the memory of our mother, that I am innocent!"

"And I swear it on my honor," added Tancred.

"Silence!" cried Morales once more. "I have already told you that your turn will come!"

"Then, cruel and blinded man," returned the Frenchman, "if you must have blood, here I am, defenceless in your hands; kill me, but spare your sister, who, I swear to you again, is guiltless."

"Oh, brother, believe him!" cried Carmen. "I am pure and innocent, but if nothing but blood will satisfy you, take mine and spare my beloved, for he has respected the honor you wish to avenge!"

"You shall both die!" exclaimed Morales with a melodramatic gesture.

Carmen fell on her knees with outstretched hands, in the attitude in which she had greeted her brother on the night of the first interview with Tancred.

"Don Guzman," she sobbed out, "God placed you at the head of our family and gave you the right of life and death over me, but over me alone. You have not the right to kill my husband!"

Morales started back in well-feigned amazement.

"Your husband!" he cried. "Your husband! What is that you are saying?"

"It is the truth!"

"That is impossible! You are not married! This man is a stranger!"

"We plighted our troth in the sight of Heaven. Before God I have sworn to be his, and before God he has sworn to be mine."

"And we are ready to renew these sacred vows before a priest," put in Tancred.

Morales smiled contemptuously. He drew himself up in front of the Frenchman, the head thrown back, chest inflated, and one hand on the hip.

"Do you know who I am?" he asked contemptuously, eyeing Tancred from head to foot. And without giving the other time to answer he continued.

"Do you know that I am the high and puissant lord Don Guzman Morales y Tullipano? Do you know that the Tullipanos date from the year eight hundred and are of better race than the King?"

"I know it," replied Tancred.

Once more Morales started back in astonishment. Thrice he raised and let fall his long arms in token of increasing amazement.

"You know it," he continued, "and you have the audacity to pretend to the hand of a daughter of our house?"

"Yes, senior."

Morales drew a long breath.

"Who are you?" he asked. "Are you at least a gentleman?"

"Certainly. I belong to an old and noble family."

"Your country?"

"France."

"Your name?"

"Tancred de Najac."

"Profession?"

"Officer of His Majesty's frigate 'Thunderer.'"

Morales made a slight bow.

"Hm! France is a country for which I certainly have a great respect. Its nobility are illustrious, indeed. And the navy is an honorable calling. But I am not acquainted with you, senior, and your mere word is insufficient. Can you give me a proof that what you say is the truth?"

"I cannot, certainly, just at present."

"Ah! And how is that?"

"I am a stranger here, no one in Havana is aware of my official position, and consequently I can give you no reference as to my identity."

"That is unfortunate—very unfortunate—extremely unfortunate! But you say you are an officer of the 'Thunderer'?"

"Yes, senior, I am."

"Well, if that is the case you will have your commission. Let me see it and I am satisfied. And since I must, in order to avoid bloodshed, and to efface the stain on our honor, I will give you Carmen's hand."

"Senior," returned Tancred in dismay, "I know beforehand that you will doubt my word."

"Why so? What incredible story are you going to tell me now?"

"My commission—"

"Well, what of it?"

"I have not got it."

"What do you mean, you have not got it?"

"I carried it in a small pocket-book that I always wore about me and which I have lost."

Morales's face wore a hideous grin. "Decidedly your story is too clumsy for belief. I would have passed it over from a gentleman, for a gentleman could have given me satisfaction. But I never forgive an impostor. You shall have the time to address a prayer to your patron saint, if you have one," and Morales leveled his pistol at Tancred's head.

"So you do not believe me?" asked the Frenchman with the air of a man who had resigned himself to his fate.

"No! A hundred times no! I do not believe you!"

"Well, senior, take my life. But you will have cause to regret your cruel and fatal mistake, for you will soon know that I am telling the truth."

Carmen threw herself between the two.

"He shall know it this instant!" she cried, drawing from her bosom the little wallet she had found on Tancred on the night of his accident in the *Caña du Paseo*.

"Here, brother, take this! Read it and judge for yourself!"

Morales unfolded the paper his sister held out to him and cast his eyes over it. As he read his face softened, and when he had finished it he handed it with a bow to Tancred, who was completely dumfounded at the turn matters had taken in his favor.

"Monsieur the Chevalier," said Morales, "when I think I am in the right I make straight for my aim whatever obstacles may be in the way. That is my character. But when I find that I am in the wrong no one is more ready to acknowledge it than myself. This is the position in which I now find myself. Monsieur the Chevalier, I confess that I used you harshly and I beg to apologise. I regret extremely having used strong language to you. If my apologies are not sufficient, we each have his sword, and I shall be happy to give you any satisfaction you may think fit."

"No, no!" cried Carmen, once more clinging to her lover. "You must not accept his offer. I forbid you! I beg you not to do so! He is my brother! You must respect him! You must learn to love him! If your sword were to spill one drop of his blood I should never forgive you."

"Do not be uneasy, my beloved," said the Chevalier, returning his sword to its scabbard. "Your brother has nothing to fear from me." Then turning to Morales he continued: "I have nothing to forgive, senior, and your apologies are quite unnecessary, for your language was addressed, not to me, but to a stranger whom you suspected and by whom you fancied you were offended. Only allow me, now that you can have no doubt as to my identity, to claim the promise you made just now."

"Oh!" said Morales, "that is understood. Carmen is yours. After this night's scandal you could leave this house only as a dead man or a married man."

"Then," cried Tancred, radiant with joy, "my marriage with Carmen—"

"Will take place at once. I am not a man to live an hour longer with a stain on my escutcheon. Oh, I know what you are about to say. My sister is innocent; you have been the most discreet and respectful of lovers! I am willing to believe it. I do believe it. But the stain is there, none the less; it must be effaced, and at once."

Tancred was in bliss. Carmen modestly hung her head, doubtless to hide the tell-tale sparkle of her eyes.

Morales lost no time in summoning Berenice, who made her appearance in evident alarm as to what was about to happen.

"As every thing has turned out well," he said to her, as she stood humbly before him, "I shall say nothing, though you deserve to be publicly whipped and branded. But it is of no use saying any more about it. Send the servants to bed—"

"Yes, senior."

"And go to the neighboring convent, where you will ask for the prior on a matter of the highest importance and which cannot be delayed. If you send him my name he will see you at once. Tell him that I am waiting for him. Bring him here, and light the tapers in my sister's oratory."

"Yes, senior."

"Now go, and make haste about it. Show as much energy and alacrity in obeying me now as you have done in disobeying me."

Berenice left the room hanging her head. "Monsieur the Chevalier," continued Morales seating himself in one corner of the room, "there is nothing to prevent you talking freely to Carmen. I am only here for the sake of propriety, which no one respects more than I.

but I shall not be in your way. My sister is your betrothed and in a few minutes will be your wife."

"Ah, senior," cried Tancred energetically, "how can I ever express my gratitude?"

"Hush, hush!" said Morales grandly, "not another word on the subject. You owe me no gratitude. Perhaps I should have accepted you as my brother-in-law with the utmost satisfaction, if you had asked me for my sister's hand. But you did not. Under the present circumstances I am not giving you my sister, I am letting you take her, which is not at all the same thing. To save my outraged honor I had to choose one of two things, either your death or your marriage, and I chose the latter, because it was the most complete and least perilous satisfaction, that is all."

"I understand you, senior. But I am none the less grateful, for instead of receiving my death-blow at your hands I receive perfect happiness. If my life did not belong to Carmen I would willingly give it for you."

Morales wiped two unreal tears from his eyes. "Come," said he, feigning to obey an irresistible impulse, "you are certainly a noble young man, and I regret nothing of what has happened. You are worthy of me. Everything is forgotten. Come to my arms, my brother! Come to my arms!"

And the two embraced with the greatest fervor.

Carmen in the meantime sat silent and thoughtful. Notwithstanding her complete triumph, notwithstanding the success of all her plans, she felt sorry, humiliated at seeing the gentleman whose name she was about to assume play with such good faith his dupe's part in the comedy she had prepared. She thought Morales was going too far. But he had not done yet.

"My dear chevalier," said he, "the situation is agreeably changed. I no longer take you on sufferance. I accept you willingly, and I believe from the bottom of my heart that I would have chosen you for my sister's husband. In a few moments your happiness will be complete. I will not insult you by bringing up pecuniary matters at such a time—between people like us there is no necessity for such talk. I shall never marry and my sister will inherit all I possess. Between her, yourself and myself all things shall be in common. What belongs to one belongs to all—that is decided."

"Senior," returned Tancred, "you are too generous. I do not know if I ought to agree to this."

"You must. Mere delicacy will compel you to do so. You would hurt my feelings by refusing, and you would hurt Carmen's feelings too. I swear to you, on the faith of a hidalgo, that if you were richer than me I should have no scruple in using your fortune as though it were mine."

"Well, senior, if this is the case I agree."

"And you will remember your promise. You will never forget it?"

"Never!"

"That is right. Not another word on the subject."

A low knock was heard at the door.

"Is it you, Berenice?" asked Morales.

"Yes, senior."

"Come in and let us hear how you have acquitted yourself of your task."

"Senior, the reverend father has arrived, and the tapers are lit in the oratory."

"Where is the holy man?"

"In the oratory."

"We will join him in one moment. Come, Carmen, do not keep the reverend father waiting."

"Give me one minute, brother," said the girl tripping out of the room and throwing a Parthian glance at Tancred as she disappeared.

Before the minute had passed Carmen returned. On her glossy black hair she had placed a wreath of pure white roses, a fitting emblem, which she had doubtless prepared beforehand for the occasion. She was more intensely beautiful than ever and Tancred mechanically gave her his arm as one in a dream. The soft pressure of her hand on his wrist alone assured him that he was not dreaming.

At one end of a small room which had been converted into an oratory, a hearty-looking monk was kneeling before a hastily improvised altar on which a score of lights were twinkling.

During the day Berenice had been despatched to a neighboring convent to make arrangements for the presence of the prior shortly after midnight for the purpose of celebrating a marriage, and as there was nothing unusual in this, in the then state of society in the island, the worthy father was found at his post when required.

As Morales, Carmen and Tancred entered the oratory, the monk rose and lost no time in commencing the nuptial ceremony.

Tancred and Carmen pronounced the solemn "I will."

"In the sight of God I pronounce you man and wife," said the prior. "*Crescite et multiplicamini.* Go and be happy."

"My children, my dear children," cried Morales pathetically, as he wiped away an invisible shower of tears, "Heaven bless you both! Come to my arms, for I must press you to my heart."

"My husband," whispered Carmen in Tancred's ear, "I love you."

"I am dreaming," murmured Tancred. "I am dreaming."

(To be continued.)