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THE STUDENT OF VALENCIA. A SKETCH FROM THE CARLIST WAR.

CHAPTER I.

It was night, and the good city of Valencia was buried in sleep. The lamps had gone out; all was in profound obscurity; there was something almost fearful in the complete silence that reigned through the deserted streets, broken at long intervals by the measured step and monotonous watchword of the patrol.

The second hour of the midnight sounded from the convent of the Dominicans, in the square of Santo Domingo. Immediately there appeared a light in the window of an humble-looking house on one of the narrow streets close by, over the door of which was inscribed in large letters the word "Botelleria." It was a kind of tavern, where the young men of the city often held their gay, noisy meetings. Soon after the appearance of the light, ten individuals, wrapped in long cloaks, approached with cautious tread, and knocked softly at the door. A hoarse voice from within called out, "Who is there?"

"Friends," replied one of the company, in a low tone. The door opened, and a stout, short man, with black hair and beard, presented himself on the threshold.

"Ha, Senor Antonio," said he; "Saint Roche preserve you from the plague, but you have chosen a strange hour for your visit. How many are ye?"

"Ten."

"You are welcome."

They entered—ten students of the University of Valencia—for the most part dressed in close-fitting black frocks, with each a poniard in his belt. They threw their cloaks on the benches, and seating themselves round a table, one of them addressed him whom we have heard called Antonio:

"Well, Antonio, how are we to decide? You have appointed us to meet you at the tavern of Gregorio Mendez; we are here. What have you to say to us? What project have you to communicate?"

"I will tell you presently," replied Antonio;—some wine, Master Gregorio?"

The host obeyed; the table was soon covered with bottles and glasses. The glasses were filled—the bottles emptied; brows that were sad grew joyous, as the guests discussed history, literature, love and politics at random, as fancy led, and without order or aim. Antonio alone sat grave and silent, turning his piercing eyes from one to the other of the group with a look of intense thought and careful scrutiny. At length he rose, and there was immediate silence.

"Friends and brothers," said he, "are you not weary of the bold and aimless existence that all like us, poor scholars, drag on in Valencia? In listening, season after season, to those eternal disputations about nothing—those confused theories where God and his saints, anatomy and religion, botany and theology, are huddled together—do you not feel that it is a waste of life, a busy idleness, a miserable shadow of occupation, from which we can never expect to reap any better fruit than the barren reputation of a sophist and a pedagogue? For my part, I have long detested it. Let those who agree with me stand up."

The nine rose to their feet as one man; the speaker continued:

"Well, then, my brothers, weary of such a life and longing to do something becoming a man, I see before me one end, one glorious object alone, strong enough to rouse our torpid minds and to revive the vital warmth of our souls, chilled by the absence of any noble or expanded sympathy. Our beautiful, renowned old land, our lovely and noble mother, lies at our feet, sultry and oppressed. We behold each day our unhappy Spain, rent limb from limb, a helpless and bleeding prey to the cruel devastations of civil war. Two struggling royalties contend for power, at the cost of the blood and liberties of the people—Maria Christina here, Don Carlos there. Let us form an association against both these rivals; let our motto be—Neither for Christina nor yet Carlos; and let your rallying cry be, 'Liberty for Spain!'"

The voice of the student, full of the sublime inspiration of patriotism, kindled a like flame in the hearts of his companions. Again they rose, and with one voice raised the enthusiastic cry, "Neither Christina nor yet Carlos! Liberty for Spain!"

A party of the patrol was at that moment passing the street; they heard the shout that issued from the botelleria, and the officer knocked at the door, vociferating: "Open, in the name of the law!"

"We are discovered," exclaimed the students, in an anxious tone, as they instinctively turned towards Antonio for orders.

"We will defend ourselves as long as we can hold a dagger," said he, proudly; then addressing the terrified host, who stood trembling in a corner (not knowing what part to take) he inquired how many were at the door.

Gregorio looked out at a narrow aperture in the roof, and answered, "Twenty, at the least."

"Then that is but two for each," said Antonio; "not too many for brave men." And so saying he opened the door.

The alguazils rushed into the room, where the students awaited them with their naked poniards. The light was put out, and they fought in darkness; not a cry was uttered on either side. After a struggle of a few minutes, the students succeeded in making a clear way through the compact mass that pressed upon them, and found themselves free from obstruction in the open street. The greater part were wounded but slightly, and feeling that this conflict with the authorities had fully committed them to the extreme course proposed by Antonio, they took shelter in a monastery until morning, when they left Valencia by the Quarta gate, and took the road to the kingdom of Murcia.

CHAPTER II.

Antonio Peras was one of those fiery characters who seem endowed with the power of command by a force of their resistless will; a master spirit, he ruled the minds of his companions with the divine sceptre of genius. One idea—Spanish independence—possessed his soul, and governed every other thought. There were no perils, no torments, he would not have braved to see it realized. Nor was he a solitary instance of this feeling. Spain had beheld spring from her breast hundreds of resolute, patriotic men, who burned to free her from the double yoke of Maria Christina and Don Carlos. It was in the year 1834, and the famous "Constitution of 1813" had rallied around its standard a crowd of brave defenders, who soon organized regular troops of partisans among the wild sierras of the Peninsula. Antonio, in his quiet chamber at Valencia, could not listen with indifference to the ardent voices that rung from those men, demanding loudly that peace and prosperity should be restored to their tortured country. The deep wounds of his native land came before his eyes in his nightly dreams, and his waking thoughts dwelt long in the glowing hope of aiding to heal them, until there grew up in his warm heart a vehement desire for the liberation of his brethren.

From that moment the routine of study became dull and rapid to him; the professors were tiresome pedants, and his studies were insupportable. This antipathy, which he sought not to conceal, soon spread among his fellow-pupils of the University. Antonio found little difficulty in communicating to their souls the fire that devoured his own; and one day, when the college rule had broken in upon a discussion more detailed and enthusiastic than usual, the party had separated, appointing to meet again that night at the house of Gregorio Mendez. They were punctual to the rendezvous, of which we have already witnessed the result.

The students, with Antonio at their head, in a few days' march reached the kingdom of Murcia, and established themselves in one of the chains of mountains which traverse the country, from whence they began to make excursions into the neighborhood. Indignant partisans of the Constitution joined them from all sides, and soon formed a numerous band, of which Antonio Peras was unanimously chosen the chief. Six months had scarcely passed before the intrepid guerrillas became a formidable and well-known troop. They went about everywhere, and in that distracted country, where the authority of the laws was almost in abeyance, they exercised a very beneficial influence—sometimes they protected the villagers from the illegal exactions of the Queen's soldiers, and again perhaps recaptured wagons loaded with plunder by the hands of banditti who, under the name of Carlists or Christianos indifferently, carried ruin and devastation through the country. The poor peasants blessed them as friends and protectors, and their number augmenting daily, they no longer confined their incursions to the province of Murcia, but frequently advanced into that of Andalusia, where on such occasions they generally remained for several days.

Just on the frontier of the two provinces, in a delicious valley of the Sierra Nevada, near a quiet little hamlet, there dwelt a young girl named Margarita—one of the loveliest flowers that ever sprung from the glowing soil of Andalusia. When she passed through the village, with her dark hood half concealing her face, and her light step, graceful as the flight of a bird, every eye followed her, and when she was gone all the heads were withdrawn reluctantly from the doors and windows, because they could see her no longer.

Margarita was indeed very beautiful; and then she was so good, so mild! All the children of the village called her their little sister; and whenever they saw her they ran in troops to give her the flowers and wild fruits they gathered in the woods. In return she loved to provide charming little surprises for them, that made them think her the good fairy, the kind genie of their nursery stories. The youths loved her no

less than the children; and already many voices had chanted her name to the echoes of the Sierra Nevada—many eyes had wept hot tears beneath the village roofs, but Margarita was still alone.

Two years an orphan, she lived in her little cottage, on the produce of a small farm that had been left for her use by her parents, under the care of a trusty person. She saw no one; the children only came now and then to play under her window, but there came no lover to give her his arm for a walk on holidays—no dances—no love! In vain a hundred eyes had told her she was beloved—a hundred lips that she was beautiful; she only answered by a sad smile, which passed over her face without resting on it, so that at length the young men lost hope, and loved her in silence, while all the girls asked one another in surprise, "What does she mean?—What is the matter with our Margarita?"

It was truly passing strange that a girl so beautiful and so beloved should live in such complete solitude. While the young girls of her age were gay and joyous, and the guitar called them to the dance every evening near her cottage, she sat pensive and lonely at her open window, breathing the perfumed air that came from the fields and gardens, or speaking to her pet birds which hovered among the branches of her little porch.

Margarita, however, was not always thus melancholy. There were moments when a rosy tinge gathered on her pale cheek—when her glance, usually so sad, was bright and sparkling, her step more firm, and her countenance more animated. Then, too, she took more care of her dress, she put on her richest skirt, her best-fitting bodice, her neatest slippers, and arranged in shining braids the long tresses which commonly fell unconfined under her hood. Then she was more lovely than ever, and the young people of both sexes wondered in vain why she did so—Sometimes they were to follow her, as she then always bent her steps towards the hills; but she climbed the steep side of the mountain so lightly and quickly that they soon lost sight of her entirely. But a shepherd, returning from that side to the village, had often seen her on her knees by the side of the old black cross, planted in the rock near the summit of one of the sierras—that was all. The shepherd had not dared to disturb her devotions, but had merely crossed himself and gone on his way. Therefore they finally set down Margarita's walks to the account of a vow, and sought no further. Thenceforth amidst her compatriots Margarita was free as a bird in space—no lip demanded an account of her motives, no eye followed her beyond the slope of the hill. And so things went on for about five months.

CHAPTER III.

It was night, one of those exquisite nights illuminated by the soft moonlight of Spain, when all nature seems lulled to rest by the sweet murmur of the zephyr as it waves the trees in the graceful disinclination, and shakes the hidden perfume from the bosom of the hidden flowers. A living calm lay all around. In the distance the Guadaluquivir lifted its deep, solemn voice, like the slow roll of a funeral drum, with which there mingled the clearer song of a riuulet as it hurried along its pebbly bed, the gentle murmur of the sleeping birds, and the light rustling of the forest leaves, all forming a sublime concert in the listening ear, broken only by the owl's cry answered by the echo from rock to rock.

If a shepherd crossed the mountain then, at the foot of the old black cross, he might have seen a fair, pale young girl and a youth with a carbine resting on his arm, kneeling before it absorbed in fervent prayer. The maiden was Margarita, the youth, Antonio, the student of Valencia. No longer the pale scholar, with ardent eye and impetuous word, but the resolute man, accustomed to command and be obeyed—his eagle glance flashed with the fire of energy and decision, and thoughts lofty and profound had traced their furrows on his broad forehead.

Antonio was the first to rise, putting on a black velvet cap which he held in his hand during his prayer, and regarding the young Andalusian who was praying still, he waited leaning against the rock. In his look and posture there was something that would have drawn tears from a spectator—there seemed to pass in his soul a violent struggle between fear and love.

"Will she hear me?" said he to himself—"Will she consent to exchange the tranquil happiness of her valley for the wild wandering life of a partisan chief, a guerrillero, exposed to a violent death every hour? Yet, oh! I feel that she must be entirely mine, or I cannot live!... I have suffered too much these five months, seeing her but for short moments of ecstasy, and tortured by days—long days of absence, surrounded by enemies who seek my life. My God! I cannot."

His brow grew more and more gloomy as he gazed on her kneeling figure, and a low groan escaped him. Margarita rose.

"Antonio!" said she in a low voice.

"Margarita! my life, my treasure!" he cried starting from his reverie, and clasping her to his heart.

There was a long pause; then Antonio said sadly—

"Margarita, the moment is near when we must part; day approaches, and I must leave you to return, alone, to my comrades who await me—alone my heart weeping blood because I can see you no longer..... Ah, it is fearful!" and he pressed his hand to his pallid brow, while Margarita, with her arms twined round him, strove to read his thoughts in his downcast eyes.

"Oh, speak, Antonio," said she; "it pains me to see you sad! If you are suffering, has not my heart a right to share it with yours?"

Antonio was silent—at length, with an effort he said, in a tone so grave that the maiden started—

"Margarita, you remember the day I first met you.... It was in one of my excursions with my brethren in arms..... From that moment my thoughts, my life, my future—all were yours.—I came again—you were still there.... I drew near, as to a shrine, and prayed on my knees for one look, one word—you deigned to love me, my Margarita. Since then, every day spent away from you has been a torture. I tremble to think that such sufferings should still be my fate. Will you relieve me from them? Will you follow me, Margarita, to part no more? Fra Juan, of Granada, is with my band even now; this coming dawn, if you will, shall unite us for ever."

Margarita stood as if stunned for a moment; with her eyes fixed on the old black cross, she seemed to demand counsel from Heaven. Suddenly, the report of fire-arms rang among the hills, and the Andalusian shuddered, but did not speak.

"Decide, Margarita," said Antonio with assumed calmness, "that shot is a signal to warn me of the approach of the Christianos, and I fear would hear your answer before I go."

Throwing herself on her knees, and pressing her lips to the old cross, the maiden veiled in silence for a moment, then raising her head she extended her hand to her lover with a look that spoke her deep abiding trust and devotion.

"Mine, mine for ever!" cried the guerrilla wildly; and raising her in his arms he bounded like a chamois over the mountain side, till he reached its foot, where behind a grey old rock a horse was waiting for him; he placed his precious burden on its back, sprang into the saddle and disappeared at the top of his speed.

The next day there were tears in the valley. The little children sought Margarita in her cottage, and when they found her not, they sat weeping at her door, praying the good God to give them back their "little sister Margarita." The village matrons lamented as if each had lost a beloved child; the youths were gloomy and sad, asking each other, "Have you seen her? What could have happened her?" During several days of painful suspense, they searched in vain the most secret recesses of the mountain.—A month—two months passed by; no tidings! They then believed that she had fallen a prey to some wild beast, and the village maidens put on mourning for her. There was no other news in the valley; only some one said that the Christianos had shown themselves several times in the neighborhood, and that in the province of Murcia there had been two or three skirmishes between them and the troop of Constitutional partisans which, it was reported, had become established among the crags of the Sierra Morena.

CHAPTER IV.

One day a threatening storm hung over the whole province of Murcia. The wind howled and whistled through among the rocks, or buried itself, moaning drearily, in the ravines and caverns of the Sierra. The horizon wore an angry red, and the thunder clouds seemed brooding on the forests of the mountains. Looking from a distance you would have thought that there were tongues of flames resting on the peaks of the Sierra Morena. Although nature was thus groaning in the agony of anticipated convulsion, there were men who did not share her sufferings, who, beneath the impending tempest, laughed and drank with the best will in the world. Little they cared that the sky thundered, and the earth trembled; they shouted and stamped as if in wild unison with both; little they heeded the tempest that burst above their heads, hurling down rocks and trees from their hold; they found a strange charm in this blending of hurricane and laughter, and an escape from the weary tameness of ordinary existence in the shock and clamor of the elements. Strange beings they, truly! but then, consider, they were Spaniards. Under each wild shaggy breast there beat a heart kindled by the Andalusian sun; their lips were a thirst for wine and kisses, their ears for laughter, song and uproar; and so they made merry amidst the growl of the thunder. These men were the soldiers of Antonio, the student of Valencia—the lover of Margarita, the guerrilla chief. "But," you will say, "where are they? Under what

sky? A deep cavern serves for their retreat—their sky is that which hangs frowningly over the peaks of the Sierra Morena. But, let me advance a few steps to examine. Do you see that enormous mass of rock, where the great stones are piled up like fortifications with battlement and embrasures?—that is the passage to the cave—come on—do not fear. Though they bear the carbine and pignard, Antonio's band are fine, generous fellows.

"Who goes there?" cries the sentinel on the rock—liberty is the watchword.

"Liberty?"

"Pass, friend."

Now, we have turned that corner; we are in the cavern. What a noise—what laughter—good heaven! Judging from the interior, one would never expect to find such gaiety within.—Antonio's men were assembled around a table covered with goblets and wine flasks flushed with drinking and mirth; pieces of thick rope steeped in pitch, served for torches. Antonio was among them; a plume floated from his cap, a silver-handled pignard hung at his girdle; beside him, half leaning on his shoulder, was the graceful form of Margarita. But the fair girl was changed into almost a new creature. Her brow, no longer shaded by the dreamy melancholy of the valley, was radiant with life and gaiety; her dress might have been the envy of a donna of Seville, with its beautiful corsage of the richest velvet, its azure skirt and sparkling ornaments. A very halo of happiness beamed from her brilliant eyes; her glowing cheek, her laughing ruby lips, her every emotion; never was she so lovely as in the midst of those rough mountain warriors, like a rich diamond amid unpolished ingots, a pure bright star shining through pale and lurid fires, as she mingled gaily in their mirth, touched her glass with theirs, laughed and sung with them as if she had never known the name of sadness. But Antonio was by her side, and she felt that she had never lived till then. The revel grew more noisy, some glasses, too enthusiastically, clinked together, had been broken; some of the party who would drink to every toast proposed by everybody, had rolled under the table amidst the shouts of their comrades. Antonio, however, struck the table smartly, and there was instant silence. He proposed a toast, and his full voice echoed through the cavern.

"To the Constitution of '13, which we will die to defend!"

"To the Constitution of '13," cried a chorus of voices; glasses were filled and emptied, and voices rose in wild excitement:

"Now, liberty for Spain!"

"Drink! drink!"

"And to our beautiful Queen Margarita!"

"Drink it all round!"

Suddenly a shot rang from without, and the sentinel rushed in, crying, "To arms!"

The retreat of the guerrillas was discovered. Then you might have seen those men, a moment ago so uproarious, start silently to their feet, and so each one to take down his carbine from its place on the wall of the cave, return, and form without a word. They were so well used to sudden alarms, that they were no more disturbed than if it were their usual desert. Ready, they awaited the orders of their chief. Antonio looked at Margarita, and smiled half sadly as she too seized her carbine and placed herself, cool and determined, at his side. Then he pointed to the entrance. The men understood his gesture, and defiled in good order. Antonio and Margarita exchanged one glance that spoke a volume of feeling, and followed the guerrillas. A minute more, and a frightful discharge of musketry announced that the conflict had begun; it was followed by a fierce struggle that almost drowned the noise of the elements. The Christianos had, unobserved, gained possession of every pass leading from the cavern. They had an overwhelming force, and the partisans were cut off to a man. When the smoke had cleared away, there remained, on the side of the guerrillas none but a woman. Oh, she was sublime! Pale, resolute with the courage of despair, she stood, before a bleeding corpse, a carbine in her hands, her eyes flashing like those of a lioness guarding her young, her fingers clinched wildly on the gun, she seemed still resolved to defend the very dead. The Christianos approached, she raised her carbine—twenty shots were fired together at her devoted heart. When next the smoke rose into the air, there was no longer anything on the mountain side to oppose the progress of the victors—Margarita was dying on the bosom of Antonio.

The rumor of this fight soon spread through the neighborhood. Some dwellers of the Sierra Nevada having chanced to pass by the spot, perceived two bodies, riddled with balls, locked in close embrace. They raised them up, and in one of them recognised Margarita and Andalusia.—With tears they bore her to her native village, and buried her at the foot of the old black cross