

CARMEL.

BY MAURICE F. EGAN.

I.

"Non sum dignus."

Looking at the narrow, headstrong stream which North-erners might be tempted to call a creek, but which the people of San Antonio dignify with the name of a river, James Delaney, with a very dim reminiscence of Lafontaine, perhaps, thought of a country snake which had lost its way in a village. The San Antonio is serpentine in the strictest sense of the term; it runs through a pecan grove only to lose itself amid a crowd of bath houses attached to the back gardens of the citizens. Making a sudden curve into a garden, it comes forth laden with the creamy petals of the camellia and the sunset-tinted leaves of the roses; then it darts behind a Mexican jacal and omorges, bearing the refuse of the family's mid-day meal. The sunlight makes it iridescent in one place and lime-like in another; it is a river of surprises, and it runs as wayward as black-eyed Dona Flora, who stands now, fan in hand, in the gallery of her house and looks anxiously at James Delaney.

James Delaney is thinking of the river, not of the lady, and his thoughts are not wholly sentimental. He is watching the velocity of the stream, and longing for the means to harness this powerful serpent. With capital he could start a paper-mill in this lazy, half-Spanish town. He could turn the mud houses of the half breeds into pleasant cottages, and make the vacant plazas crumble beneath the wear and tear of traffic. He does not know that all the capital in the world would not induce that lazy and happy Mexican to quit his beloved jacaleto, with its oven of black mud and its roof of sticks. He knows, however, only too well, that if improvements in San Antonio depend on his capital, that charming little place might remain lazy and beautiful until the end of time. He laughs a little as he awakens from his dream and remembers that a certain wallet in his left vest pocket holds exactly ninety-six dollars, and that sum is the lever with which he is to move San Antonio. It is all he has in the world, however.

This remembrance probably causes him to stretch out his arms, and to look complacently at the muscles which are vaguely indicated through his thin summer coat.

"Thank heaven," he said, "I have strength. That Delilah, hard study, has not destroyed my Irish vigor or made me less able to hew stone and draw water."

And he laughed again—a pleasant laugh, which made Dona Flora look at him.

James Delaney was not a particularly good-looking fellow nor a particularly ill-looking one. He had blue eyes, dark, deep, Irish eyes, which always smiled before his lips opened, a reddish moustache, hair a shade darker, and a tall, well-knit figure. His voice was delicious to the ear. There was a touch of the brogue in his speech which was very pleasant when heard amid the Southern twang or the nasal and drawling intonations of the Spaniards. He was what the French call an "un homme manqué." He had been spoiled by a system of education which unhappily, is very prevalent among Irish-Americans. His parents, poor, but industrious persons, had come to New York with him, a little child, in the year '50. They worked hard night and day to give their only child a suitable education. The other children, girls, had died young. James was intended for the priesthood, for which he had neither vocation nor inclination.

His father and mother, kind-hearted and well meaning souls in other things, could not understand why, after an expensive college course that left them almost penniless in their old age, he refused to enter the higher seminary. His confessor came to them and warned them that to force the young man would be almost a sacrilege; but the old people could not understand that. Sure his mother's cousin, Terrence McMahon—God rest his soul, the holy man—was as wild as a young colt before he went to Maynooth, and here was James—and a better son never lived—refusing to let his old parents have the comfort of seeing him celebrate Mass before they died. Dear old Mrs. Delaney's eyes filled with tears as she thought of this terrible disappointment. She could not bring herself to face it.

"Sure," she said, "your father and myself haven't had much time for prayin', we've been so busy workin' for you, James, and the only comfort we had was the thought that we'd have a holy priest of our own to help us make our souls. Oh, James, ma cushla, say that you'll not bring our gray hairs in sorrow to the grave."

His father did not say much. He sat in the evening in a little back room behind the shop, silent and grim; but his old pipe often went out, and the hand that held the paper, his favorite, trembled. That trembling, withered hand, in which the purple veins stood out from the sinews and wrinkled skin, troubled James' heart even more than his mother's pleading. Words spoken lose part of their force, but unspoken words touch a sensitive heart like red hot steel.

James Delaney's heart was very generous and sensitive. He had never been taught to be demonstrative, the Delaneys were a silent family, and James had been long away; but he could not resist the impulse to take his father's hand in his, and cry out—

"I can't, father, I can't!"

"Who asked you to do anything against your will?" said the man, his eyes twitching. "But don't say you can't, say you won't. I never thought that a grandson of Tom Delaney, who died for his religion and country, would come to this, but never mind," the old man's voice choked, "I'll say no more about it, remember this, James, I'll do no more for you."

Old Delaney was a man of few words. His son, with a feeling that was almost despair, understood that the iron had entered his heart.

"And sure," cried Mrs. Delaney, "what was the use of all the Latin and French, and them things with hard names, if you're not going to the seminary? We wouldn't have done amiss if we had kept you here in the shop, instead of slavin' hard to make you better than your neighbors. Ochlone! I wish we'd kept you here."

"I wish to heaven you had, mother!" said James, kissing his mother's cheek and going quietly up to his room in the attic.

He threw himself on the bed, and burst forth into wild prayers.

He cried out the "*Dominie non sum dignus*," a score of times. He was not worthy of the highest and holiest calling on earth—he did not dare aspire to be one of those anointed men. He had been weighed and found wanting. He had not been called or chosen. You can imagine what struggles, what temptations, what hopelessness beset a young and generous heart like this, striving to do right, yet, in the eyes of those he loves, a reprobate, a contemner of holy things. Late in the night he wrote a long letter to the Jesuit father who had counselled him. After that he fell asleep and dreamed that his dear old mother blessed him.

She loved him still in heart, but during the many days that followed, she made little sign of it. Old Delaney had commanded her to keep silence on the question at issue. Many times James caught her with a furtive tear in her eye, and sighs and ejaculations at intervals told him what was going on in his mother's mind. His father, always a silent man, seldom spoke to him now. James strove to help him in the shop; but there was little need for him there. His father's lips pressed themselves closely together, and one day they opened sarcastically to say that "a gentleman, with his head full of Greek and Latin, was out of place among molasses and mackerel."

After this, James betook himself to Virgil and Homer in the attic. But the parts wearied him. Dido might mourn and Penelope spin, but the daily papers and daily life had more charm for our collegian; yet few were less fitted for the daily routine of life than he.

He dared not suggest to his parents that he should study law or medicine. This to them would have seemed like an insult; besides, he shuddered at the thought of longer remaining a burden to them. What could he do? The silent reproach that met him every hour at home drove him mad. He could teach; but few pupils cared to come to a corner grocery store in the Bowery for lessons; he looked out for a place in a school, and discovered, like the old Italian, who states the fact in his ballata:

"The world with masters is so covered o'er
There is no room for pupils any more."