

The Gypsy's Prophecy.

CHAPTER I.

On a certain day in August, in the year 1816, there dismounted at the door of the office of the Captain-General of Granada, from a lean and sorry-looking donkey with a rope fastened around its neck for a bridle, a gypsy some sixty years of age, clad in rags, and of grotesque appearance, by profession a sheep shearer, and by name Heredia, who coolly said to the soldier on guard that he desired to speak to the Captain-General.

Needless to say that this request met with a prompt refusal from the sentinel, and excited the laughter of the orderlies, and much doubt and hesitation on the part of the aide-de-camp, before it was known to His Excellency Senor Don Eugenio Portocarrero, Count of Montijo, at the time of our story Captain-General of the ancient Kingdom of Granada. But as this nobleman was very good-natured, and had heard a great deal about Heredia, who was famous for his wit, for his shrewdness at making a trade, and for his propensity for taking possession of the goods of others—with the permission of the cheated owner—he gave orders that the gypsy should be admitted to his presence.

The latter proceeded to His Excellency's office, taking a step backward for every two steps he took forward, which was his manner of walking on ceremonious occasions, and when he had entered the room he knelt down and exclaimed—

'Long life to the Holy Virgin, and long life to your lordship, who is master of the universal world.'

'Rise; leave off your flattery, and tell me what it is you want,' responded the count, with assumed sternness.

Heredia, at these words, assumed a serious air, and said boldly—

'Well, then, I have come for the thousand reals.'

'What thousand reals?'

'The thousand reals—promised some time ago, by proclamation, to the person giving information of the whereabouts of Parron.'

'What! Did you know Parron?'

'No, senor.'

'Well, then—'

'But I know him now.'

'What do you mean?'

'It is very simple; I went in search of him. I found him, I know where he is—and I demand the reward.'

'But are you certain that you have found him?' cried the captain-general, his curiosity getting the better of his incredulity.

The gypsy burst out laughing, and answered—

'Why, of course! Your lordship is thinking to yourself, perhaps—'This gypsy is trying to impose upon me like all the rest.' May God refuse me pardon for my sins if what I say is not the truth. Yesterday I saw Parron.'

'But do you know the importance of what you are saying? Do you know that for three years past the officers of the law have been searching for this monster, this sanguinary bandit, whose identity has never been discovered, whom no one has ever yet seen? Do you know that not a day passes in which he does not rob, in different places in the Sierras, travellers whom he afterwards murders—for he says the dead tell no tales—and that this is the only way in which he can be sure of always escaping detection and arrest? Do you know, in short, that to see Parron is to meet death face to face?'

The gypsy laughed again and said:

'And does not your lordship know that a gypsy can do what no one else on the face of the earth can do? Can any one tell when our laughter or our tears are real? Has your lordship ever heard of a fox as cunning as we are? I repeat, general, that I have not only seen Parron, but I have spoken with him.'

'Where?'

'On the Tozar Road.'

'Give me the proofs of it.'

'Listen, my lord. A week ago yesterday morning my donkey and I fell into the hands of a band of robbers. They bound me hand and foot and carried me with them over rocks and precipices until we reached an open spot in which they had their encampment. A dreadful suspicion tortured my mind: 'Can these be the followers of Parron?' I kept saying to myself, 'for if they are there is no hope for me; they will murder me to a surety, for that devil is determined that the eyes that have once looked upon his face shall never look upon anything in this world again.'

'I was making these reflections to myself when a man, richly and showily dressed, presented himself before me, and, slapping me on the shoulder, said with a gracious smile:

'Friend, I am Parron.'

To hear this and to fall flat upon the ground were one and the same thing.

The bandit burst out laughing.

'I rose, pale with terror, threw myself on

my knees before him, and exclaimed, in as persuasive a voice as I could command, 'Blessed be your soul, king of men! Who could fail to know you by that royal bearing that heaven has given you! Oh, that mortal mother should bear such a son! Let me embrace you, my child. May the poor gypsy die unabsolved if he has not been longing to meet you and to kiss that imperial hand and tell you your fortune. I am one of your followers, too. Do you want me to show you how to trade dead donkeys for living donkeys? Do you want to learn how to sell your old horses for colts? Do you want me to teach French to a mule?'

The Count of Montijo could not refrain from laughing heartily at the gypsy's words. Presently he asked—

'And what answer did Parron make to all this? What did he do?'

'He did just what your lordship is doing—he laughed heartily.'

'And you?'

'I, senor, I laughed too; but at the same time tears as big as oranges ran down my whiskers.'

'Go on with your story.'

'He then extended his hand to me and said:

'Friend, you are the only man of brains that has ever fallen into my hands. All the others have the confounded trick of trying to move me to pity, of shedding tears, of uttering complaints, and doing other stupid things that put me in a bad humor. You are the only one who has made me laugh, and if it were not for those tears—'

'Senor, they are tears of joy,' I answered.

'I believe it. The devil knows that this is the first time I have laughed in more than seven years. It is true that I have not wept either. But let us put an end to this. Hey, boys!'

In the twinkling of an eye I was surrounded by a cloud of blunderbusses.

I thought myself lost. 'Heaven protect me!' I cried.

'Stop!' exclaimed Parron to his men.

'You are not wanted for that yet. I have called you in order to ask you what you have taken from this man.'

'A donkey without trappings.'

'And money.'

'Three dollars, seven reals.'

'Very well; leave us.'

They all withdrew.

'Now tell me my fortune,' said the robber, holding out his hand to me.

I took it, reflected for a moment, saw that this was a case for frankness, and said to him in all the sincerity of my heart—

'Parron, sooner or later, whether you take my life or whether you grant it to me, you will die by the hangman's hand.'

'That I know already,' responded the bandit, with the utmost composure. 'Tell me when.'

I began to consider.

'This man,' I said to myself, 'will grant me my life; to-morrow I shall reach Granada and lodge information against him. The day after they will seize him; then he will be committed for trial.' 'You ask when!' I said aloud. 'Well, then, it will be some time in the course of next month.'

Parron shuddered, and I shuddered too, knowing that I might pay for my vanity as a prophet with a bullet through the brain.

'Well, then, gypsy,' answered Parron slowly, 'you will remain in my hands; if in the course of next month I am not hanged, I will hang you as surely as my father was hanged. If I die before the expiration of that time, you shall go free.'

'Many thanks,' I said in my own mind.

'You will grant me my life after I am dead.'

And I regretted that I had made the time so short.

'As he had said, so it was done. I was conducted to the robbers' cave, where I was at once put under lock and key, and Parron mounted his mule and rode hastily away through the forest.'

'Now I understand,' said the Count of Montijo. 'Parron is dead, the robbers have set you free, and you have come with the information.'

Quite the contrary, general. Parron is alive, and now comes the most tragic part of my story.

CHAPTER II.

A week passed by, during which I did not again see the robber chieftain. As far as I could ascertain he had not returned to the cave since the afternoon on which I had told him his fortune—a thing of which there was nothing strange, according to what one of my keepers told me.

'You must know,' he said to me, 'that the captain goes occasionally to visit the lower regions, and does not return until the notion takes him. At any rate we know nothing of his doings during his long absence.'

By this time, by dint of entreaties and in payment for telling them their fortunes—that they were none of them to be hanged, and that they would all reach a good old age—I had succeeded in persuading the robbers to take me out of the cave every afternoon and tie me to a tree, for the heat of my prison was suffocating.

It is needless for me to say, however, that

I had always a pair of sentinels by my side.

One evening, about six o'clock, the robbers who had gone out on duty that day, under the orders of Parron's lieutenant, returned to the camp, bringing with them a poor reaper, somewhere between forty and fifty years of age, whose hands were tied behind his back in the way we see in pictures of our Lord, and whose lamentations were heart-rending to listen to.

'Give me my twenty dollars!' he cried.

'Ah, if you knew how hard I earned them. A whole summer spent reaping under the hot sun! A whole summer spent far away from my native village, far from my wife and children! This was the way I saved up the sum on which we were to live during the winter! And when I was going back to them, longing to embrace them, and to pay the debts the unhappy creatures have incurred to live, how am I going to lose the money that is for more treasure? Have pity on me, gentlemen! Give me back my twenty dollars! Give them to me, I entreat you, by the sorrows of the Holy Virgin!'

A burst of mocking laughter greeted the unhappy father's supplication.

I shuddered with horror, where I stood bound to the tree, for we gypsies, too, have wives and families.

'Don't be crazy!' cried one of the bandits to the reaper. 'You are a fool to trouble yourself about your money, when you have more serious matters to think of.'

'What do you mean?' said the reaper, not comprehending how there could be a greater misfortune than that his children should be left without bread.

'You have fallen into the hands of Parron!'

'Parron! I don't know who he is. I never heard his name before. I come from a great distance. I am from Alicante, and I have been reaping in Seville.'

'Well, my friend, "Parron" means death. Everyone who falls into our hands must die. Make your last will, therefore, in two minutes, and in two minutes more commend your soul to God. Ready! Present! You have just four minutes.'

'And I will make use of them. Listen to me for pity's sake.'

'Speak.'

'I have six children—and an unhappy widow I shall call her, since I am going to die. I see in your faces that you are more cruel than wild beasts. Yes, more cruel, for beasts of the same species do not devour one another. Ah, forgive me! I don't know what I am saying. Gentlemen, some of you may be a father. Is there no one among you who is a father? Do you know what it is for six children to spend a winter without bread to eat? Do you know what it is for a mother to see the children of her love die before her eyes, saying, "I am hungry"—"I am cold"? Gentlemen, I only want to live for their sakes! What is life for me? A series of labors and privations! But I must live for my children's sakes! My children! Children of my soul!'

And the father dragged himself along the ground and raised his face to the robbers. Such a face! It looked like the faces of the saints thrown by Nero to the tigers, according to the way the priests describe them in their sermons.

'The bandits must have felt something stir within them, for they looked at one another, and seeing that the same thought had occurred to them all, one of them ventured to speak it aloud.'

'And what did he say?' asked the captain-general, profoundly moved by the gypsy's story.

He said, 'Gentlemen, Parron will never know of what we are going to do.'

'Never, never,' responded the bandits, in trembling accents.

'Be off with you, good man,' then said one of their number, in whose eyes the tears were standing.

I, too, made signs to the reaper to lose no time in taking himself off.

The unfortunate man rose slowly to his feet.

'Quick—be off with you!' they all repeated, turning their backs on him.

The reaper mechanically stretched out his hand.

'Are you not satisfied cried one? 'Well, if he does not want his money! Be off—be off. Don't put us out of patience!'

The poor father turned away weeping, and soon disappeared from view.

Half an hour passed, spent by the robbers in swearing to one another never to reveal to their captain the fact that they had granted a man his life, when suddenly Parron made his appearance, bringing back with him the reaper seated behind him on his mare.

The robbers drew back in terror at the sight.

Parron dismounted quietly, took down his double-barrelled gun, and pointing it at his comrades, said—

'Fools! scoundrels! I don't know why it is that I do not kill you all! Quick! give this man the twenty dollars you robbed him of!'

The robbers took the twenty dollars and gave them to the reaper, who threw himself

at the feet of the personage to whom the bandits all yielded obedience, and who had so good a heart.

Parron then said to him—

'God be with you! But for your information I should never have found them out. You see now that you dis-trusted me without reason. I have fulfilled my promise—you have your twenty dollars. Off with you, then?'

The reaper embraced him repeatedly, and went away joyfully.

But he had not gone fifty paces before his benefactor called to him again.

The poor man hastened to retrace his steps.

'How can I serve you?' he asked, anxious to be of use to the person who had restored his family to happiness.

'Do you know Parron?' Parron said to him.

'I don't know him.'

'You are mistaken,' replied the bandit. 'I am Parron.'

The reaper looked at him in amazement. Parron then levelled his gun and discharged both barrels into the body of the reaper, who fell in a heap on the ground.

'Curse you!' were the only words he uttered.

Notwithstanding the terror that darkened my vision, I noticed that the tree to which I was fastened shook slightly and that my bonds were loosening.

One of the balls had rebounded from the reaper's body and struck the cord by which I was fastened to the tree, severing it.

I concealed the fact that I was free, and waited for an opportunity to make good my escape.

Meantime, Parron, pointing to the reaper, said to his followers—

'Now you may rob him! You are fools! wretches! To allow that man to go as he did, shouting along the highways! If instead of me the soldiers had chanced to meet him, and had learned from him what had taken place, he would have led them to our hiding place, as he led me, and we should now all be prisoners! See what are the consequences of robbing without killing! But enough of preaching. Take and bury the body before it stinks.'

While the robbers were digging the grave and Parron sat down with his back turned to me to take some refreshments, I retreated cautiously, step by step, from the tree, and lowered myself into the nearest ravine.

Night had now fallen. Protected by the darkness, I hurried quickly out on the other side, and by the light of the stars descried my donkey peacefully grazing there, tied to an oak tree. I got on his back and never drew rein until I arrived here.

'Therefore, your lordship, give me the thousand reals, and I will give you in return the description of Parron, who has kept my three dollars and a half.'

The gypsy gave the bandit's description, received the promised reward, and went out of the office, leaving the count amazed at what he had heard.

It now remains to be seen whether the prophecy of Heredia with regard to Parron's future fate was fulfilled or not.

CHAPTER III.

A fortnight after the scene we have just described, at about nine o'clock in the morning, a crowd of idlers had gathered in the streets of San Juan de Dios and San Felipe, in the aforesaid city of Granada, to witness the assembling of two companies of militia, who were to set out at half-past nine in search of Parron, concerning whose hiding place and appearance, as well as those of the companions of his evil deeds, the Count of Montijo had at last received authentic information.

The curiosity and the excitement manifested by the people were extraordinary—and no less extraordinary was the solemnity with which the soldiers took leave of their families and friends before starting on their important undertaking.

Such was the terror which the name of Parron had spread throughout the whole of the ancient kingdom of Grahada.

'We are now going to form in line,' remarked one of the soldiers to a companion, and I don't see Corporal Lopez.'

'That is in truth strange, for he is always the first to arrive when we are going in search of Parron, whom he hates with his whole soul.'

'Why, don't you know what has happened?' said a third soldier, joining in the conversation.

'Hello! It is our new comrade. How are you getting on in the company?'

'Admirably!' returned the person addressed.

The latter was a man with a very pale countenance, whose distinguished bearing accorded ill with his private's garb.

'You were saying—' said the first speaker.

'Ah, yes! that Corporal Lopez is dead,' responded the pale soldier.

'What is that you are saying, Manuel? Impossible! I saw Lopez this morning. I was as close to him as I am now to you.'

The person called Manuel answered coldly—

'Well, half an hour ago Parron killed him.'

'Parron? Where?'

'Here! In Granada! The body was discovered on the Dog's Hill.'

These words were followed by a silence, which Manuel broke by whistling a patriotic song.

'That is the eighth soldier in six days!' exclaimed a sergeant. 'Parron seems determined to exterminate us. But how does he happen to be in Granada? Were we not going in search of him to Sierra de Loja?'

Manuel left off whistling and said, with his accustomed indifference of manner:

'An old woman who was a witness to the crime states that after he had killed Lopez he declared that if we went to look for him we should have the pleasure of finding him.'

'Well, comrade, you are blessed with a wonderful amount of coolness! You speak of Parron with an air of contempt—'

'Why, what more is Parron than a man?' replied Manuel haughtily.

'Form in line!' several voices here cried simultaneously.

The two companies formed in line, and the calling of the roll began.

At this moment the gypsy, Heredia, chanced to pass by, and stopped, like everyone else, to admire the fine appearance presented by the soldiers.

Manuel, the new recruit, was noticed to tremble slightly and fall back a little as if to conceal himself behind his companions.

At the same moment Heredia's glance lighted upon him, and giving a cry and a spring as if he had been bitten by a snake, he took to his heels and fled in the direction of the street of San Jeroaimo.

Manuel levelled his musket and took aim at the gypsy.

But one of the soldiers threw up the muzzle of the gun as he pulled the trigger, and the ball fell harmlessly to the ground.

'He is mad! Manuel is mad! One of the soldiers has lost his reason!' cried out the spectators of the scene.

And officers, sergeants, and peasants surrounded the soldier, who struggled violently to set himself free, and whom, therefore, they bound all the more securely, overwhelming him with questions, reproaches, and insults, to none of which he responded by so much as a word.

Heredia meantime had been arrested in the Plaza of the University by some passers-by, who seeing him run after hearing the shot fired supposed that he had committed some crime.

'Take me to the office of the Captain-General,' said the gypsy. 'I must speak with the Count of Montijo.'

'What Count of Montijo are you talking about?' his captors responded. 'Here are the soldiers, and they will know what to do with you.'

'It is all one to me,' responded Heredia. 'Only take care that you don't let Parron kill me.'

'Parron! What is the man talking about?'

'Come with me and you shall see for yourselves.'

So saying, the gypsy caused his captors to lead him before the captain of the militia, and, pointing to Manuel, said—

'Commandant, that is Parron, and I am the gypsy who gave his description two weeks ago to the Count of Montijo.'

Cries of 'Parron! Parron is taken! Parron was a soldier!' were heard on all sides.

'There can be no doubt about it,' the commandant was meantime saying to himself, as he read the description furnished by the Captain-General. 'How stupid we have been! But who could have thought of looking for the bandit chief among the soldiers who were going to capture him?'

'What a fool I was!' Parron was at the same time saying to himself, as he looked at the gypsy with a gaze like that of a wounded lion; 'he is the only man whose life I have ever spared! I deserve what has happened to me!'

The following week Parron was hanged. The gypsy's prophecy, then, was literally fulfilled.

'Which, be it observed, does not mean that we are to believe in the infallibility of such prophecies; much less that Parron's conduct in killing every man who happened to fall into his hands was deserving of approval. It signifies merely that the ways of Providence are inscrutable to human reason—a doctrine than which, in my opinion, none could be more orthodox.'

THE END.

Can This Be True?

A special agent of the National Bureau of Labor Statistics, who had just returned from an official investigation of labor in Pennsylvania, in a conversation is reported as giving utterance to the following, which, if true, reveals a surprising state of affairs: 'Show me a place in Russia where the people are miserable and starving, and I will match it in Pennsylvania. Show me a community in Europe where the poor have lost all hope and are only waiting for death to release them from their sufferings, and I will match it in Pennsylvania.'