IN THE SMUGGLER'S CAVE.

A TALE OF THE SIERRA MADRE.

South of Monterey lies a bleak and dreary road across the mountains. This road used to be a dangerous one, infested by smugglers, robbers and wolves. Even the police refused to explore that region, and the road was left clear for marauders.

Many years ago a young Mexican, Jose Quederos, and his cousin Federigo Menillo, were traveling this road on horseback. They were gay, brave young men, anxious to play with edged tools. Gradually they came into a very lonely and desolate region, where the mountains rose high and bleak on each side of them. As the evening stole on they became silent, watched the sun set with a tremor of their hearts, and settled themselves with their pistols in their hands.

The night closed in upon them fast, and a white mist rose from the valley. They could no longer see the road. All at once their horses were stopped by a group of rough men who demanded their money. One of the robbers snatched the pistol from Menillo's hand, and stabbed him with a dagger. Quederos was so occupied in warding off the attack that he did not observe the fate of his cousin. The bandits were struggling to bind his arms, when suddenly a girl appeared at the corner of the road with a flaring lamp which she held high above her head.

"Manuela! Pope!" cried the girl in an authoritative voice, "do no more! It is the order of Don Pablo. It is the night of the Annunciation, and all life is to be spared."

But one of the robbers pointed silently to the body of young Menillo stretched upon the ground.

"He has perhaps only fainted from loss of blood," responded the girl. "Carry him to the tent and I will look after his wounds."

Two of the robbers marched Quederos between them, two carried Menillo's body, and the rest followed with the horses. The girl led the way for a mile or two and the whole band halted between the mountain-side and a huge boulder. The girl knocked thrice with a pause after each knock, the stone of the mountain seemed to swing back, and a path was seen, descending into the earth. They entered and came into a low, wide room hollowed out in the rock. The men crowded about a large fire in the centre and began to talk in a dialect unknown to Quederos.

Menillo was laid on a bundle of hay, and the girl began chafing his hands with the contents of a beautifully wrought bottle. In obedience to her gesture two men advanced, and, opening his shirt, found a long, uneven wound under the left breast.

"That is the hunchback's mark. There is no chance for his life, senora, for that knife is poisoned," the men cried.

She, however, patiently bathed the wound and stanched the blood, Quederos assisting her. At last the girl said in a low voice:

"He is dying."

"He is dead," returned Quederos.

It was too true. Menillo was beyond all human help.

In his anxiety Quederos had forgotten that he himself had been wounded; but now he fell to the ground, almost fainting. In an instant the two men bore him into another room, cooler, and handsomely furnished as a bedroom. Here they removed his clothing, skillfully dressed his wounds, and left him sleeping.

When he awoke a handsome old man sat before his bed reading a pile of letters. On the bed lay the papers and purse of Quederos. In an instant the old man had clutched the papers and property and fallen to his feet.

"Ah, my young friend," he exclaimed, "you are decidedly improving. I will leave you with Manuela; and these,"—waving the papers, and purse—"I shall keep for you till you are strong enough to need them."

The wounds were freshly dressed, and when he was once more comfortable in his bed he said to Manuela:

"What is Don Pablo doing with those papers and my purse?"

"I cannot hope that you will ever get them again," returned Manuela, coolly. "If he fails in getting the ransom demanded for you, you will never need them any more."

"Who is Don Pablo?" asked Quederos, feebly.

"He is known as the famous robber, 'El Diablo,'" the girl answered, sadly.

Quederos started up, but fell back again with a groan as his wounds opened afresh. Manuela quietly bound them up again without calling for aid. After a long silence he said:

"Senorita, do you like the life you lead here?"

"Like it?" cried Manuela, with horror in her face; "Santa Virgen! I loathe it! But what can I do? I can go nowhere without being tracked. And who would help El Diablo's daughter, and hide her from the knife of the hunchback?"

"I would," said Quederos solemnly. "My people are powerful, and rich; they will not leave me here long for want of a large ransom."

Manuela's face wore a terrified look as Quederos said those words. By a gesture she give him to understand that there were listeners all around them. From that time, during more than a month that Quederos lay ill in his bed, he was hardly heard to utter a word.

Manuela was tall and slight, with fine features and most beautiful soft eyes. Her dress was flowing, and her magnificent hair hung down her back almost to her feet, under a small silk cap ornamented with gold coins. Her hands were small and peculiarly pretty, and her feet were shod in soft satin slippers.

At last a lull seemed to fall on the company. Only two or three of the men appeared. Manuela came oftener to see him and stayed longer. Quederos asked her the reason of the dead silence in the cave. She informed him in a whisper that the whole party had gone to meet a troop of travelers, laden with precious things, and that meanwhile her father was negotiating with Quederos's friends for his ransom.

During a few days the lovers (for such they had become) had an interval of quiet happiness. But one awful day the chief returned. Instantly she left Quederos's side and went to the outer room to receive her father.

His face was stern and his voice was harsh as he gave orders to the servants. He kissed Manuela in an absent way; his thoughts were evidently far away. Left alone he began to mutter aloud to himself.

"Things are going terribly against us. The whole band is lost unless help can reach them soon. Then that precious prisoner of ours is being searched for; and his people, instead of paying his ransom, have set half the country after us. If anything happens, his life shall pay for it, ransom or no ransom——"

A slight movement of the curtain disturbed Don Pablo. He strode across the room, lifted the curtain, and looked around.

"Manuela!" he cried—"where in the name of the foul fiend are you?"

"Preparing your supper, mi padre," answered a distant voice, and presently Manuela appeared, bringing the meal.

He seized her by the wrists and scanned her face fiercely by the firelight. She was a trifle pale, but her clear, bright eyes returned his look unflinchingly. She served her father, removed the dishes and seemed absorbed in his welfare. But her mind was in a whirl. Something must be done and that soon. She had overheard enough to know that the band was in great danger, mainly through the active exertions of Quederos' family. But her father was especially watchful of her movements that evening and it was not until she heard his snores that she was able to say a word to her lover. He rose and dressed, as she bade him, through trembling from weakness in every limb. When he was ready she tied a colored handkerchief round his head, placed a bundle of cloth over his shoulder, and opening a door, of which he had till then been ignorant, led him along a dark pathway. Then they emerged into a curved passage, lighted at intervals with torches. Sometimes they thought they heard voices, and Manuela would gently push Quederos into a recess. But no one disturbed them, and after a long journey they came to the mouth of the cave.

Manuela let her lover out, and bade him a tender farewell.

"But surely you are coming with me?" he cried, "I had rather die than leave you to meet your father's anger alone."

"No, no," she said. "The only thing you can do to keep me is to come back with a great band of armed men. By that time I shall have placed my father in safety, and shall be ready to go with you. But do not betray my father," she added quickly. "Say only that I am in bondage in a cave."

Then, with a kiss, and an assurance that he would soon return for her, they parted; and Quederos was on his journey home.

Don Pablo meanwhile had waked from his sleep and sought his guest's room. But the bird had flown. Mad with rage he turned to his daughter's room and tumbled over the two servants snoring on the floor. Manuela was not to be found.

"Fools, blind pigs!" he cried to the servants as they stood trembling before him; "do you not see that both the prisoner and my daughter have made their escape while you have been sleeping?" Then, having beaten them, he tied them by their wrists to two rings in the walls, from which their feet could hardly touch the ground, and then disappeared in the darkness.

In the curved passage Don Pablo suddenly confronted Manuela coming towards him.

"Where is Quederos?" he said sternly.

"Gone to his home," Manuela said, quietly.

"Traitress that thou art!" cried Don Pablo. "Take what thou deservest!" and he gave her a blow in the face that felled her to the ground. In a moment more his knife glittered in the torchlight, and he stabbed Manuela mortally.

By a superhuman effort she gasped: "Save thyself and thine; he promised to give thee two days to escape; I have not betrayed thee——" and with a groan she fell back dead.

For a long time Don Pablo stood as though paralyzed with horror. But there was no time to be lost. He stretched and composed Manuela's limbs, took off the gold coins hanging in her hair and all the jewels on her person. Then he hurried away.

"Dogs," he said, as he cut down the slaves, "remove the treasures quickly; the hell-hounds are upon us."

In a few hours the little company had escaped, leaving a withered branch marked with a cross and a dagger across the mouth of the cave.

The cave was empty, and only the torches in the curved passage flared upon the mutilated face of Manuela.

Fired with rage and hatred, Quederos and his troops captured the robbers and the smugglers. They were taken to the city of Mexico and tried and sentenced.

Amidst the peaks of the Sierra Madre not far from Monterey stands a small, black cross bearing the name of Manuela. When they found her in the passage of the cave, Querodos and his men buried her tenderly among the mountains she loved so well, and only the little cross marks the spot where lies the mortal remains of the smuggler's daughter.

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