

El Padre Triste.

Diego sat on the south side of the ancient adobe church of San Pedro. It was the time of day when the good fathers, whose lives had been passed at the now forgotten mission, were taking their customary siesta. It was Diego's time to be idle. He looked southward, over the almond trees just bursting into blossom over the stubby vines that the half-naked descendants of a once lordly race were training for the winter's vintage, over the garden patch and network of irrigating ditches over the great tawny desert of death, toward the land of his birth. The wind, a very mild breeze for February, whistled around the corner of the building. It came fresh from the Raton Mountains. It chilled him. He drew closer to his shelter. It chilled his heart also, and as he looked over the orchard decked with fragrant promise, he muttered the old proverb, 'Presto maduro, presto podrido (soon ripe, soon rotten)'. Evidently his mind was projected beyond the range of human vision.

With an involuntary expression came the thought of a name that he had not heard uttered for years—his own name, Diego. None of those with whom he had lived these three spring-times knew it; none save old Padre Sebastiano, his confessor, in whose breast a secret was as safe as in the grave. He also remembered that the name had been given him in honor of his patron saint, and that he was the descendant of a 'conquistador'. Degenerate as he was, he enjoyed recalling this fact.

'El corazon manda las carnes' (The heart bears up the body), but I can't endure this forever. I must speak to the fathers to night and take the vows.

Three months before, in the same month when the earth springs into life beneath the warmth of the returning sun, a wanderer drew rein at the gate of the Mission San Pedro. His face was haggard, his body weak after the long desert drive. His horse was in as lamentable a condition as its master. The stranger was young. He seemed almost boyish, even in the country where youth is but a sunrise glow between the child and the man. As he dismounted he staggered, reached toward the portal for support and fell in a swoon. It was not the first time that such an occurrence had happened at the lonely mission on the edge of the desert. The good fathers knew what to do in such cases, and they were no more faithful in their efforts because his scrape, dust-begrimed as it was, indicated the Hidalgo, than they would have been had the object of their solicitation been the humblest Indian in New Mexico.

When Diego came to himself weeks had passed. He strove to tell his story, but as often as he did so, Padre Sebastiano bid him be quiet and wait until his strength returned. So it chanced that on a summer's day, as he sat sadly in the courtyard listening to the trickling of the water, he felt a hand laid on his shoulder, and Padre Sebastiano, bending over him, said:

'Tell me, my son, what troubles you. You have never confessed, nor taken the blessed sacrament.'

'Not here, father; not here! come into the chapel and I will tell you all; but when you hear my story you will turn me out like an leproso.'

'Nay; say not so! The heart of the Mother is always compassionate and often, while you slept, my prayers have gone up for you to the holy San Pedro in whose glorious memory this humble mission was founded; but come.'

The old man led the way to the little chapel, frescoed by loving hands that has long since entered into eternal rest, whose altar was adorned with spoils of conquest and with relics and with relics from far distant Spain, and thence into the confessional where none might hear what passed between saint and sinner. Diego instinctively fell upon his knees and a shudder went through his will knit frame as he thus began:

'Father, pray for me. My sin is greater than I can bear. I cannot confess it, even here.'

'Proceed, my son. You have sinned, I trust you have repented. It cannot be that one so young, so fair as you, has sinned unto death.'

'I have, I have.'

'Tell me, and I will judge.' Thus encouraged the penitent continued:

'My name is Diego Dominguez by Agramonte. My home is, or rather was, in the Boulson de Mapimi, beside Laguna del Parres. You know the place, father—the fairest upon earth, where it is always spring, where the birds sing by night as well as by day, and where the air is always fragrant with the perfume of orange blossoms and of more distant mountain flowers. There I lived on my father's hacienda, and never once had serious thought of love or trouble. Thus time passed until I was nineteen years of age, when strange stories came to us of the wonderful railroad that was coming from the Rio Grande del Norte, and was already near the city of Chihuahua. I had read much of the 'maguina de vaho', but I wanted to see it for myself, and the pones who went away to work and came back jingling pones, when before they had never seen anything greater than an medio, only whetted my desire to travel.'

'Ah, my son,' said the old man, interrupting, 'the love of money is the root of all evil.' Nudi intravimus, nudi eximus.'

'But, padre, it was not money that I was after. I wanted to see the world. So just, before 'la di adade noche buena' I started for Chihuahua. My mother blessed me with tears, and my father who knew my temper and inexperience, urged me to hasten back and take charge of the hacienda. Chihuahua was the largest city I had ever been in, and I wandered about the plaza for a day or two quite lost in the crowd. The Americanos were everywhere, and seemed to have plenty of

money, and to own everything, and when I thought how our beautiful Mexico had belonged to old Castile before an English man had set foot on the soil I hated the upstarts. I soon found friends who felt the same way that I did, and we picked quarrels with the gringos until the police interfered.

'One night, after I had been there about a week, we went to a landango. There I met my fate. I took my seat beside the most beautiful senorita that I had ever seen. She was not dark, like our Coahuila belles but her head glinted like the ripening wheat on the uplands, and her eyes were a deep dreamy blue and her form—well I lost my heart. She threw back the mantilla that covered her head and smiled at me. This gave me courage, and I asked her to dance. I can never forget the touch of her hand. It gave me a thrill that I had never before experienced. I felt it often during the next two weeks, but I have never known it since. The next dance she gave to one of my friends, and as they passed me she dropped a rose at my feet. Before the night was over I knew all about her. Her name was Maria Sepuveda and she was an heiress. Of course, she had been much sought after, but as yet had shown no decided preference for any one. This was my chance. I was as constant as her shadow. It she were at a landango, I was there also, and, when there was no landango, I would take my mandolin and stand beneath her window. In less than a week I had told her all about the beautiful Boulson de Mapimi, and, for you know we do things quickly in our country, I told her that I loved her and she promised—'

Diego paused. His passionate voice was choked with sobs. Padre Sebastiano stroked the bowed head, but did not speak. In a moment the young man resumed.

'Such happiness could not last forever. It was too great. One night, and I was to return home the next day, we were at a landango. A party of Americanos came in. One of them was a great man. He spent gold where I silver. He used to drink a great deal and to gamble a great deal more. The senoritas liked him too well; but I hated him. He would show his gold and diamonds, and was reported to be a powerful Hidalgo in his own land. Well, Maria and I had enjoyed one dance, and then this Americano asked her to dance with him, I did not think she would do it, but you know, 'No ay cerradura si se de oro la ganza' (there is no lock if the key be golden). So they went on the floor together. I saw him whisper sweet words in her ear just as I had done, and rattled the coins in his pocket, and my heart became hot within my breast. I wanted the next dance, but Maria paid no attention to me. She danced again with the gringo. When they came near me I scowled. He saw me and laughed a sneering laugh and said something in English. I did not understand the language, but I did know the word 'greaser.' Maria understood him. She turned toward me and laughed also. I could stand it no longer. I went outside into the cool air. It did not cool me. I heard the sound of music. It had no charms, for, now and again, as I looked in, I saw Maria still dancing with my enemy. For hours I waited. At length the Americano came out and walked toward their hotel. There were three of them. I followed like a cat. I could have followed that man to the end of the earth. By and by he stopped behind his friends to light a cigar. This was what I wanted. In an instant my knife was between his ribs. He fell with a groan. His friends ran back, and while they stopped to raise him I escaped in the darkness. I knew Chihuahua as well as they. I hurried up my friend Ramon, and told him all about it.

'Diego,' said he, 'they know you, and you have killed a great Hidalgo. You must get out of the city tonight—right away. You cannot go home, because the police will look for you there, and the United States will never let the matter rest.'

'What shall I do?'

'Take your horse and go across the river. They will never look for you in this country. Here is money. Your father will repay me.'

'In another hour I was on my way. I thought that I would go to Santa Fe. So I told Ramon; but the blessed mother brought me to your mission. Padre, will you turn me away?'

'God forbid, my son. But did you kill Senor Americano?'

'That I cannot tell. I meant to.'

'It is just as likely that you did not, if you struck him only once. These Americanos have many lives. Do you ever think of Maria now?'

'Oa, Padre, can I ever forget her? Sometimes I have the old love just as bad as I had it in Chihuahua, and sometimes I think that if she were here I could kill her, too.'

'You must put such thoughts away, my son. If you have killed a man your whole life must be one of repentance. Do you repent?'

'I do, indeed; and pray all the holy saints and fathers to intercede for me. Ora pro me.'

The confessor had been young himself, and knew the great world far better than did his companion. He did not speak the word that Diego wished to hear uttered, but gave him a kiss of peace, and said:

'Wait here; I go to consult with the brethren.'

The penitent knew that his secret was safe, but he wondered what Padre Sebastiano would say about his remaining in this asylum. He had not long to wait. The good man returned with the news that the exile might depart when he wished. The fathers, however, had learned to love him, and he was welcome to remain at the mission if he chose.

'Only,' said the priest, 'if you stay you must earn your bread by the sweat of your brow. We hope that some day you will be one of us.'

In this manner it came about that Diego Dominguez Agramonte, who had always ruled and never served, went out to labor with the Pueblos, and when his 'peonada' was done he would come into the chapel and join in the vesper service like a true gentleman of Mexico that he was. The fathers had done all this to try him. They realized his worth, and soon promoted him to be superintendent of the business details of the little community. They gave him an unoccupied cell for his own use; but as often as they urged him to take the irrevocable vow, he would declare that as yet he was not worthy. He even affected, as far as possible, the habit of his superiors, and was foremost in deeds of charity and self-denial. The Indians regarded him as a lay brother; but he never smiled nor mingled in their amusements as did the others. So, not knowing his name, he passed to and fro among them as 'El Padre Triste.'

All this came to him as he basked in the sunlight. A shadow lay athwart him. Looking up he saw Padre Sebastiano. The laborer was at their toil. The air was full of fragrance of freshly turned earth and of bursting buds. Henceforth this world was his world. The past was buried. No more for him would the orange flowers bloom in the far away Boulson de Mapimi; no more would he dream of the golden-haired senorita of Chihuahua. He, too, would be a father, and these patient, dusky sons of the soil would be his children—his care.

'Padre,' said he arising, 'I am resolved. If you are willing, I will take the vow.'

'The saint is pleased! Diego, you are no longer my son, but my brother,' and with streaming eyes the priest hurried away to break the joyful news.

That night Diego lay down on his pallet with a feeling of blissful security such as he had never known before. Scarcely had he fallen asleep when he was aroused by a rude shake.

'Get up, Diego! A wagon has been over turned in the canyon on the road to Santa Fe. A messenger has just come from there. One man is badly hurt, and there is a woman in the party. The place is about fifteen miles from here, but you can ride fast and know what to do. Take a bottle of brandy with you, and whatever else you might need from the medicine chest. God speed you!'

With all his spiritual fervor the young man could not forget that he had once been an caballero. His horse, the same he had ridden to San Pedro, had grown fat and lazy in the corral, and El Padre Triste felt a savage glee as he dug in the spurs and galloped away over the untracked sand in the chill of the night. In half an hour the way became rocky. The mountains, at first a distant black band, now arose to the stars, an insurmountable barrier, save where the lithe stream that gave life to the mission had furrowed its way through perpendicular walls a thousand feet in height. The horse went warily. The darkness could almost be felt, and one false step might mean a death. Diego did not think of this. He was a wondering when these travelers came. Were they from Mexico, making a pilgrimage to the City of the Holy Faith? If so, could they by any chance recognize him? After all these years was he doomed to meet his just deserts?

He had plenty of time to ponder these things before the flickering light of a midnight campfire disclosed his journey's end. Voices reached him. The speech was his mother tongue. On the ground near the fire lay a man moaning, his comrades doing all in their power to alleviate his suffering. Near by, wrapped in blankets, was a sleeping form. Diego tied his horse and advanced toward the group. He did not see a familiar face. The watchers rose to meet him.

'Oh, padre, you are just in time. Jose is almost dead.'

'Not so, friends,' he replied in their own language; 'he's a long way from being a

dead man. Put on some wood and make a blaze.'

He poured some liquor down the throat of the writhing wretch, bound up the wounds and set, as best he could, the broken limb. All this took time, and as the fire burned more brightly and the noise of the conversation grew louder, the form in the blankets moved uneasily. Then the blankets were thrown back and a woman approached. Diego's back was toward her. He saw—nothing but duty.

'Diego!'

El Padre Triste bounded to his feet and turned. The hair that glistened like the ripening wheat on Mapimi uplands and the eyes of dark, dreamy blue were before him; but the smile was gone. In its place was an expression of astonishment.

'Senora Maria, how do you come here?'

'For you, Diego; I stood it as long as I could, and then—and then Ramon said he

thought you had gone to Santa Fe and I ran away to find you.'

'But, Senor Americano! If he had been alive you would never have thought of me,' Diego said bitterly.

'Diego,' the old smile crept around the lovely mouth—Diego, Senor Americano did not die. His wife came down to nurse him two weeks after you ran away. He is alive yet for aught I know. He just got a good lesson, and I—I wanted a little fun, you see. Won't you forgive me?'

'Mariquita!'

The next morning as Padre Sebastiano was looking toward the northwest he saw a cloud of dust approaching. It came nearer—a horse, and it carried two. Nearer yet. It was Diego. He was smiling, and behind him, in true errant fashion, rode a woman. The father, beside himself with amazement ran out to meet them, and he never quite recovered from the illusion which he received.

'Madre del Dios, padre, I am glad I did not take the vow.'

How The Whale Escaped.

A whale is seldom caught napping. When, however, one is waked from his afterdinner sleep by a passing vessel, he makes off from the intruder in great haste. The author of a recent book, 'With Russian Pilgrims,' has a good story to tell of a whale thus disturbed.

One day at sea, when I was chaplain on the Vancouver, a big whale created a sensation. The upper deck was covered with loungers for it was a lovely summer afternoon, and the deck chairs had their novel-reading occupants.

The whale was sleeping in the sunshine, and suddenly felt his tail tickled by the passing monster. He leaped bodily out of the water in his anxiety to hurry away. The fashionable crowd gave a shout; novels flew and chairs emptied themselves quickly, as every one rushed to the rail; but the whale dived, and an instant's voice said: 'Ma, did the whale jump out of the cabin window?'

Hubbard—'Simpkins has got over his nervous prostration.' Pease—'How can you tell? Hubbard—'Why, I met him on the street last night, and he wanted to borrow twenty dollars.'

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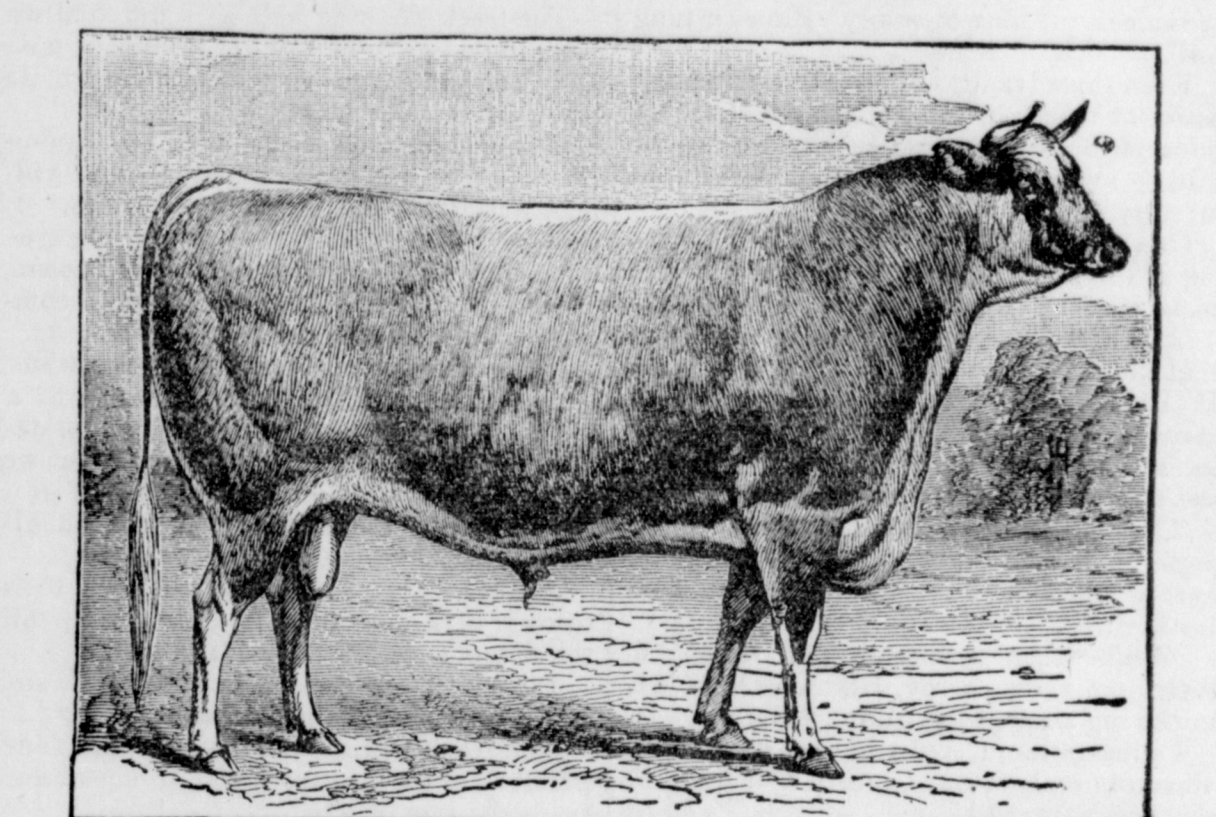
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