

**BENITO PÉREZ
GALDÓS**

DONA PERFECTA

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Содержание

INTRODUCTION	5
CHAPTER I	9
CHAPTER II	11
CHAPTER III	18
CHAPTER IV	21
CHAPTER V	24
CHAPTER VI	27
CHAPTER VII	30
CHAPTER VIII	33
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	36

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INTRODUCTION

The very acute and lively Spanish critic who signs himself Clarin, and is known personally as Don Leopoldo Alas, says the present Spanish novel has no yesterday, but only a day-before-yesterday. It does not derive from the romantic novel which immediately preceded that: the novel, large or little, as it was with Cervantes, Hurtado de Mendoza, Quevedo, and the masters of picaresque fiction.

Clarin dates its renascence from the political revolution of 1868, which gave Spanish literature the freedom necessary to the fiction that studies to reflect modern life, actual ideas, and current aspirations; and though its authors were few at first, “they have never been adventurous spirits, friends of Utopia, revolutionists, or impatient progressists and reformers.” He thinks that the most daring, the most advanced, of the new Spanish novelists, and the best by far, is Don Benito Perez Galdos.

I should myself have made my little exception in favor of Don Armando Palacio Valdes, but Clarin speaks with infinitely more authority, and I am certainly ready to submit when he goes on to say that Galdos is not a social or literary insurgent; that he has no political or religious prejudices; that he shuns extremes, and is charmed with prudence; that his novels do not attack the Catholic dogmas—though they deal so severely with Catholic bigotry—but the customs and ideas cherished by secular fanaticism to the injury of the Church. Because this is so evident, our critic holds, his novels are “found in the bosom of families in every corner of Spain.” Their popularity among all classes in Catholic and prejudiced Spain, and not among free-thinking students merely, bears testimony to the fact that his aim and motive are understood and appreciated, although his stories are apparently so often anti-Catholic.

I

Dona Perfecta is, first of all, a story, and a great story, but it is certainly also a story that must appear at times potently, and even bitterly, anti-Catholic. Yet it would be a pity and an error to read it with the preoccupation that it was an anti-Catholic tract, for really it is not that. If the persons were changed in name and place, and modified in passion to fit a cooler air, it might equally seem an anti-Presbyterian or anti-Baptist tract; for what it shows in the light of their own hatefulness and cruelty are perversions of any religion, any creed. It is not, however, a tract at all; it deals in artistic largeness with the passion of bigotry, as it deals with the passion of love, the passion of ambition, the passion of revenge. But Galdos is Spanish and Catholic, and for him the bigotry wears a Spanish and Catholic face. That is all.

Up to a certain time, I believe, Galdos wrote romantic or idealistic novels, and one of these I have read, and it tired me very much. It was called “Marianela,” and it surprised me the more because I was already acquainted with his later work, which is all realistic. But one does not turn realist in a single night, and although the change in Galdos was rapid it was not quite a lightning change; perhaps because it was not merely an outward change, but artistically a change of heart. His acceptance in his quality of realist was much more instant than his conversion, and vastly wider; for we are told by the critic whom I have been quoting that Galdos’s earlier efforts, which he called *Episodios Nacionales*, never had the vogue which his realistic novels have enjoyed.

These were, indeed, tendencious, if I may Anglicize a very necessary word from the Spanish *tendencioso*. That is, they dealt with very obvious problems, and had very distinct and poignant significations, at least in the case of “Dona Perfecta,” “Leon Roch,” and “Gloria.” In still later novels,

Emilia Pardo-Bazan thinks, he has comprehended that “the novel of to-day must take note of the ambient truth, and realize the beautiful with freedom and independence.” This valiant lady, in the campaign for realism which she made under the title of “La Cuestion Palpitante”—one of the best and strongest books on the subject—counts him first among Spanish realists, as Clarin counts him first among Spanish novelists. “With a certain fundamental humanity,” she says, “a certain magisterial simplicity in his creations, with the natural tendency of his clear intelligence toward the truth, and with the frankness of his observation, the great novelist was always disposed to pass over to realism with arms and munitions; but his aesthetic inclinations were idealistic, and only in his latest works has he adopted the method of the modern novel, fathomed more and more the human heart, and broken once for all with the picturesque and with the typical personages, to embrace the earth we tread.”

For her, as I confess for me, “Dona Perfecta” is not realistic enough—realistic as it is; for realism at its best is not tendencious. It does not seek to grapple with human problems, but is richly content with portraying human experiences; and I think Senora Pardo-Bazan is right in regarding “Dona Perfecta” as transitional, and of a period when the author had not yet assimilated in its fullest meaning the faith he had imbibed.

II

Yet it is a great novel, as I said; and perhaps because it is transitional it will please the greater number who never really arrive anywhere, and who like to find themselves in good company *en route*. It is so far like life that it is full of significations which pass beyond the persons and actions involved, and envelop the reader, as if he too were a character of the book, or rather as if its persons were men and women of this thinking, feeling, and breathing world, and he must recognize their experiences as veritable facts. From the first moment to the last it is like some passage of actual events in which you cannot withhold your compassion, your abhorrence, your admiration, any more than if they took place within your personal knowledge. Where they transcend all facts of your personal knowledge, you do not accuse them of improbability, for you feel their potentiality in yourself, and easily account for them in the alien circumstance. I am not saying that the story has no faults; it has several. There are tags of romanticism fluttering about it here and there; and at times the author permits himself certain old-fashioned literary airs and poses and artifices, which you simply wonder at. It is in spite of these, and with all these defects, that it is so great and beautiful a book.

III

What seems to be so very admirable in the management of the story is the author’s success in keeping his own counsel. This may seem a very easy thing; but, if the reader will think over the novelists of his acquaintance, he will find that it is at least very uncommon. They mostly give themselves away almost from the beginning, either by their anxiety to hide what is coming, or their vanity in hinting what great things they have in store for the reader. Galdos does neither the one nor the other. He makes it his business to tell the story as it grows; to let the characters unfold themselves in speech and action; to permit the events to happen unheralded. He does not prophesy their course, he does not forecast the weather even for twenty-four hours; the atmosphere becomes slowly, slowly, but with occasional lifts and reliefs, of such a brooding breathlessness, of such a deepening density, that you feel the wild passion-storm nearer and nearer at hand, till it bursts at last; and then you are astonished that you had not foreseen it yourself from the first moment.

Next to this excellent method, which I count the supreme characteristic of the book merely because it represents the whole, and the other facts are in the nature of parts, is the masterly conception of the characters. They are each typical of a certain side of human nature, as most of our personal friends and enemies are; but not exclusively of this side or that. They are each of mixed

motives, mixed qualities; none of them is quite a monster; though those who are badly mixed do such monstrous things.

Pepe Rey, who is such a good fellow—so kind, and brave, and upright, and generous, so fine a mind, and so high a soul—is tactless and imprudent; he even condescends to the thought of intrigue; and though he rejects his plots at last, his nature has once harbored deceit. Don Inocencio, the priest, whose control of Dona Perfecta's conscience has vitiated the very springs of goodness in her, is by no means bad, aside from his purposes. He loves his sister and her son tenderly, and wishes to provide for them by the marriage which Pepe's presence threatens to prevent. The nephew, though selfish and little, has moments of almost being a good fellow; the sister, though she is really such a lamb of meekness, becomes a cat, and scratches Don Inocencio dreadfully when he weakens in his design against Pepe.

Rosario, one of the sweetest and purest images of girlhood that I know in fiction, abandons herself with equal passion to the love she feels for her cousin Pepe, and to the love she feels for her mother, Dona Perfecta. She is ready to fly with him, and yet she betrays him to her mother's pitiless hate.

But it is Dona Perfecta herself who is the transcendent figure, the most powerful creation of the book. In her, bigotry and its fellow-vice, hypocrisy, have done their perfect work, until she comes near to being a devil, and really does some devil's deeds. Yet even she is not without some extenuating traits. Her bigotry springs from her conscience, and she is truly devoted to her daughter's eternal welfare; she is of such a native frankness that at a certain point she tears aside her mask of dissimulation and lets Pepe see all the ugliness of her perverted soul. She is wonderfully managed. At what moment does she begin to hate him, and to wish to undo her own work in making a match between him and her daughter? I could defy anyone to say. All one knows is that at one moment she adores her brother's son, and at another she abhors him, and has already subtly entered upon her efforts to thwart the affection she has invited in him for her daughter.

Caballuco, what shall I say of Caballuco? He seems altogether bad, but the author lets one imagine that this cruel, this ruthless brute must have somewhere about him traits of loveliness, of leniency, though he never lets one see them. His gratitude to Dona Perfecta, even his murderous devotion, is not altogether bad; and he is certainly worse than nature made him, when wrought upon by her fury and the suggestion of Don Inocencio. The scene where they work him up to rebellion and assassination is a compendium of the history of intolerance; as the mean little conceited city of Orbajosas is the microcosm of bigoted and reactionary Spain.

IV

I have called, or half-called, this book tendencious; but in a certain larger view it is not so. It is the eternal interest of passion working upon passion, not the temporary interest of condition antagonizing condition, which renders "Dona Perfecta" so poignantly interesting, and which makes its tragedy immense. But there is hope as well as despair in such a tragedy. There is the strange support of a bereavement in it, the consolation of feeling that for those who have suffered unto death, nothing can harm them more; that even for those who have inflicted their suffering this peace will soon come.

"Is Perez Galdos a pessimist?" asks the critic Clarin. "No, certainly; but if he is not, why does he paint us sorrows that seem inconsolable? Is it from love of paradox? Is it to show that his genius, which can do so much, can paint the shadow lovelier than the light? Nothing of this. Nothing that is not serious, honest, and noble, is to be found in this novelist. Are they pessimistic, those ballads of the North, that always end with vague resonances of woe? Are they pessimists, those singers of our own land, who surprise us with tears in the midst of laughter? Is Nature pessimistic, who is so sad at nightfall that it seems as if day were dying forever? . . . The sadness of art, like that of nature, is a form of hope. Why is Christianity so artistic? Because it is the religion of sadness."

W. D. HOWELLS.

CHAPTER I

VILLAHORRENDA! FIVE MINUTES!

When the down train No. 65—of what line it is unnecessary to say—stopped at the little station between kilometres 171 and 172, almost all the second-and third-class passengers remained in the cars, yawning or asleep, for the penetrating cold of the early morning did not invite to a walk on the unsheltered platform. The only first-class passenger on the train alighted quickly, and addressing a group of the employes asked them if this was the Villahorrenda station.

“We are in Villahorrenda,” answered the conductor whose voice was drowned by the cackling of the hens which were at that moment being lifted into the freight car. “I forgot to call you, Senor de Rey. I think they are waiting for you at the station with the beasts.”

“Why, how terribly cold it is here!” said the traveller, drawing his cloak more closely about him. “Is there no place in the station where I could rest for a while, and get warm, before undertaking a journey on horseback through this frozen country?”

Before he had finished speaking the conductor, called away by the urgent duties of his position, went off, leaving our unknown cavalier’s question unanswered. The latter saw that another employe was coming toward him, holding a lantern in his right hand, that swung back and forth as he walked, casting the light on the platform of the station in a series of zigzags, like those described by the shower from a watering-pot.

“Is there a restaurant or a bedroom in the station of Villahorrenda?” said the traveller to the man with the lantern.

“There is nothing here,” answered the latter brusquely, running toward the men who were putting the freight on board the cars, and assuaging them with such a volley of oaths, blasphemies, and abusive epithets that the very chickens, scandalized by his brutality, protested against it from their baskets.

“The best thing I can do is to get away from this place as quickly as possible,” said the gentlemen to himself. “The conductor said that the beasts were here.”

Just as he had come to this conclusion he felt a thin hand pulling him gently and respectfully by the cloak. He turned round and saw a figure enveloped in a gray cloak, and out of whose voluminous folds peeped the shrivelled and astute countenance of a Castilian peasant. He looked at the ungainly figure, which reminded one of the black poplar among trees; he observed the shrewd eyes that shone from beneath the wide brim of the old velvet hat; the sinewy brown hand that grasped a green switch, and the broad foot that, with every movement, made the iron spur jingle.

“Are you Senor Don Jose de Rey?” asked the peasant, raising his hand to his hat.

“Yes; and you, I take it,” answered the traveller joyfully, “are Dona Perfecta’s servant, who have come to the station to meet me and show me the way to Orbajosa?”

“The same. Whenever you are ready to start. The pony runs like the wind. And Senor Don Jose, I am sure, is a good rider. For what comes by race—”

“Which is the way out?” asked the traveller, with impatience. “Come, let us start, senor—What is your name?”

“My name is Pedro Lucas,” answered the man of the gray cloak, again making a motion to take off his hat; “but they call me Uncle Licurgo. Where is the young gentleman’s baggage?”

“There it is—there under the cloak. There are three pieces—two portmanteaus and a box of books for Senor Don Cayetano. Here is the check.”

A moment later cavalier and squire found themselves behind the barracks called a depot, and facing a road which, starting at this point, disappeared among the neighboring hills, on whose naked slopes could be vaguely distinguished the miserable hamlet of Villahorrenda. There were three

animals to carry the men and the luggage. A not ill-looking nag was destined for the cavalier; Uncle Licurgo was to ride a venerable hack, somewhat loose in the joints, but sure-footed; and the mule, which was to be led by a stout country boy of active limbs and fiery blood, was to carry the luggage.

Before the caravan had put itself in motion the train had started, and was now creeping along the road with the lazy deliberation of a way train, awakening, as it receded in the distance, deep subterranean echoes. As it entered the tunnel at kilometre 172, the steam issued from the steam whistle with a shriek that resounded through the air. From the dark mouth of the tunnel came volumes of whitish smoke, a succession of shrill screams like the blasts of a trumpet followed, and at the sound of its stentorian voice villages, towns, the whole surrounding country awoke. Here a cock began to crow, further on another. Day was beginning to dawn.

CHAPTER II

A JOURNEY IN THE HEART OF SPAIN

When they had proceeded some distance on their way and had left behind them the hovels of Villahorrenda, the traveller, who was young and handsome spoke thus:

“Tell me, Senor Solon—”

“Licurgo, at your service.”

“Senor Licurgo, I mean. But I was right in giving you the name of a wise legislator of antiquity. Excuse the mistake. But to come to the point. Tell me, how is my aunt?”

“As handsome as ever,” answered the peasant, pushing his beast forward a little. “Time seems to stand still with Senora Dona Perfecta. They say that God gives long life to the good, and if that is so that angel of the Lord ought to live a thousand years. If all the blessings that are showered on her in this world were feathers, the senora would need no other wings to go up to heaven with.”

“And my cousin, Senorita Rosario?”

“The senora over again!” said the peasant. “What more can I tell you of Dona Rosarito but that that she is the living image of her mother? You will have a treasure, Senor Don Jose, if it is true, as I hear, that you have come to be married to her. She will be a worthy mate for you, and the young lady will have nothing to complain of, either. Between Pedro and Pedro the difference is not very great.”

“And Senor Don Cayetano?”

“Buried in his books as usual. He has a library bigger than the cathedral; and he roots up the earth, besides, searching for stones covered with fantastical scrawls, that were written, they say, by the Moors.”

“How soon shall we reach Orbajosa?”

“By nine o’clock, God willing. How delighted the senora will be when she sees her nephew! And yesterday, Senorita Rosario was putting the room you are to have in order. As they have never seen you, both mother and daughter think of nothing else but what Senor Don Jose is like, or is not like. The time has now come for letters to be silent and tongues to talk. The young lady will see her cousin and all will be joy and merry-making. If God wills, all will end happily, as the saying is.”

“As neither my aunt nor my cousin has yet seen me,” said the traveller smiling, “it is not wise to make plans.”

“That’s true; for that reason it was said that the bay horse is of one mind and he who saddles him of another,” answered the peasant. “But the face does not lie. What a jewel you are getting! and she, what a handsome man!”

The young man did not hear Uncle Licurgo’s last words, for he was preoccupied with his own thoughts. Arrived at a bend in the road, the peasant turned his horse’s head in another direction, saying:

“We must follow this path now. The bridge is broken, and the river can only be forded at the Hill of the Lilies.”

“The Hill of the Lilies,” repeated the cavalier, emerging from his reverie. “How abundant beautiful names are in these unattractive localities! Since I have been travelling in this part of the country the terrible irony of the names is a constant surprise to me. Some place that is remarkable for its barren aspect and the desolate sadness of the landscape is called Valleameno (Pleasant Valley). Some wretched mud-walled village stretched on a barren plain and proclaiming its poverty in diverse ways has the insolence to call itself Villarica (Rich Town); and some arid and stony ravine, where not even the thistles can find nourishment, calls itself, nevertheless, Valdeflores (Vale of Flowers). That hill in front of us is the Hill of the Lilies? But where, in Heaven’s name, are the lilies? I see nothing but stones and withered grass. Call it Hill of Desolation, and you will be right. With the

exception of Villahorrenda, whose appearance corresponds with its name, all is irony here. Beautiful words, a prosaic and mean reality. The blind would be happy in this country, which for the tongue is a Paradise and for the eyes a hell.”

Senor Licurgo either did not hear the young man’s words, or, hearing, he paid no attention to them. When they had forded the river, which, turbid and impetuous, hurried on with impatient haste, as if fleeing from its own hands, the peasant pointed with outstretched arm to some barren and extensive fields that were to be seen on the left, and said:

“Those are the Poplars of Bustamante.”

“My lands!” exclaimed the traveller joyfully, gazing at the melancholy fields illumined by the early morning light. “For the first time, I see the patrimony which I inherited from my mother. The poor woman used to praise this country so extravagantly, and tell me so many marvellous things about it when I was a child, that I thought that to be here was to be in heaven. Fruits, flowers, game, large and small; mountains, lakes, rivers, romantic streams, pastoral hills, all were to be found in the Poplars of Bustamante; in this favored land, the best and most beautiful on the earth. But what is to be said? The people of this place live in their imaginations. If I had been brought here in my youth, when I shared the ideas and the enthusiasm of my dear mother, I suppose that I, too, would have been enchanted with these bare hills, these arid or marshy plains, these dilapidated farmhouses, these rickety norias, whose buckets drip water enough to sprinkle half a dozen cabbages, this wretched and barren desolation that surrounds me.”

“It is the best land in the country,” said Senor Licurgo; “and for the chick-pea, there is no other like it.”

“I am delighted to hear it, for since they came into my possession these famous lands have never brought me a penny.”

The wise legislator of Sparta scratched his ear and gave a sigh.

“But I have been told,” continued the young man, “that some of the neighboring proprietors have put their ploughs in these estates of mine, and that, little by little, they are filching them from me. Here there are neither landmarks nor boundaries, nor real ownership, Senor Licurgo.”

The peasant, after a pause, during which his subtle intellect seemed to be occupied in profound disquisitions, expressed himself as follows:

“Uncle Paso Largo, whom, for his great foresight, we call the Philosopher, set his plough in the Poplars, above the hermitage, and bit by bit, he has gobbled up six fanegas.”

“What an incomparable school!” exclaimed the young man, smiling. “I wager that he has not been the only—philosopher?”

“It is a true saying that one should talk only about what one knows, and that if there is food in the dove-cote, doves won’t be wanting. But you, Senor Don Jose, can apply to your own cause the saying that the eye of the master fattens the ox, and now that you are here, try and recover your property.”

“Perhaps that would not be so easy, Senor Licurgo,” returned the young man, just as they were entering a path bordered on either side by wheat-fields, whose luxuriance and early ripeness gladdened the eye. “This field appears to be better cultivated. I see that all is not dreariness and misery in the Poplars.”

The peasant assumed a melancholy look, and, affecting something of disdain for the fields that had been praised by the traveller, said in the humblest of tones:

“Senor, this is mine.”

“I beg your pardon,” replied the gentleman quickly; “now I was going to put my sickle in your field. Apparently the philosophy of this place is contagious.”

They now descended into a canebrake, which formed the bed of a shallow and stagnant brook, and, crossing it, they entered a field full of stones and without the slightest trace of vegetation.

“This ground is very bad,” said the young man, turning round to look at his companion and guide, who had remained a little behind. “You will hardly be able to derive any profit from it, for it is all mud and sand.”

Licurgo, full of humility, answered:

“This is yours.”

“I see that all the poor land is mine,” declared the young man, laughing good-humoredly.

As they were thus conversing, they turned again into the high-road. The morning sunshine, pouring joyously through all the gates and balconies of the Spanish horizon, had now inundated the fields with brilliant light. The wide sky, undimmed by a single cloud, seemed to grow wider and to recede further from the earth, in order to contemplate it, and rejoice in the contemplation, from a greater height. The desolate, treeless land, straw-colored at intervals, at intervals of the color of chalk, and all cut up into triangles and quadrilaterals, yellow or black, gray or pale green, bore a fanciful resemblance to a beggar’s cloak spread out in the sun. On that miserable cloak Christianity and Islamism had fought with each other epic battles. Glorious fields, in truth, but the combats of the past had left them hideous!

“I think we shall have a scorching day, Senor Licurgo,” said the young man, loosening his cloak a little. “What a dreary road! Not a single tree to be seen, as far as the eye can reach. Here everything is in contradiction. The irony does not cease. Why, when there are no poplars here, either large or small, should this be called The Poplars?”

Uncle Licurgo did not answer this question because he was listening with his whole soul to certain sounds which were suddenly heard in the distance, and with an uneasy air he stopped his beast, while he explored the road and the distant hills with a gloomy look.

“What is the matter?” asked the traveller, stopping his horse also.

“Do you carry arms, Don Jose?”

“A revolver—ah! now I understand. Are there robbers about?”

“Perhaps,” answered the peasant, with visible apprehension. “I think I heard a shot.”

“We shall soon see. Forward!” said the young man, putting spurs to his nag. “They are not very terrible, I dare say.”

“Keep quiet, Senor Don Jose,” exclaimed the peasant, stopping him. “Those people are worse than Satan himself. The other day they murdered two gentlemen who were on their way to take the train. Let us leave off jesting. Gasparon el Fuerte, Pepito Chispillas, Merengue, and Ahorca Suegras shall not see my face while I live. Let us turn into the path.”

“Forward, Senor Licurgo!”

“Back, Senor Don Jose,” replied the peasant, in distressed accents. “You don’t know what kind of people those are. They are the same men who stole the chalice, the Virgin’s crown, and two candlesticks from the church of the Carmen last month; they are the men who robbed the Madrid train two years ago.”

Don Jose, hearing these alarming antecedents, felt his courage begin to give way.

“Do you see that great high hill in the distance? Well, that is where those rascals hide themselves; there in some caves which they call the Retreat of the Cavaliers.”

“Of the Cavaliers?”

“Yes, senor. They come down to the high-road when the Civil Guards are not watching, and rob all they can. Do you see a cross beyond the bend of the road? Well, that was erected in remembrance of the death of the Alcalde of Villahorrenda, whom they murdered there at the time of the elections.”

“Yes, I see the cross.”

“There is an old house there, in which they hide themselves to wait for the carriers. They call that place The Pleasaunce.”

“The Pleasaunce?”

“If all the people who have been murdered and robbed there were to be restored they would form an army.”

While they were thus talking shots were again heard, this time nearer than before, which made the valiant hearts of the travellers quake a little, but not that of the country lad, who, jumping about for joy, asked Senor Licurgo’s permission to go forward to watch the conflict which was taking place so near them. Observing the courage of the boy Don Jose felt a little ashamed of having been frightened, or at least a little disturbed, by the proximity of the robbers, and cried, putting spurs to his nag:

“We will go forward, then. Perhaps we may be able to lend assistance to the unlucky travellers who find themselves in so perilous a situation, and give a lesson besides to those cavaliers.”

The peasant endeavored to convince the young man of the rashness of his purpose, as well as of the profitlessness of his generous design, since those who had been robbed were robbed and perhaps dead also, and not in a condition to need the assistance of any one.

The gentleman insisted, in spite of these sage counsels; the peasant reiterated his objections more strongly than before; when the appearance of two or three carters, coming quietly down the road driving a wagon, put an end to the controversy. The danger could not be very great when these men were coming along so unconcernedly, singing merry songs; and such was in fact the case, for the shots, according to what the carters said, had not been fired by the robbers, but by the Civil Guards, who desired in this way to prevent the escape of half a dozen thieves whom they were taking, bound together, to the town jail.

“Yes, I know now what it was,” said Licurgo, pointing to a light cloud of smoke which was to be seen some distance off, to the right of the road. “They have peppered them there. That happens every other day.”

The young man did not understand.

“I assure you, Senor Don Jose,” added the Lacedaemonian legislator, with energy, “that it was very well done; for it is of no use to try those rascals. The judge cross-questions them a little and then lets them go. If at the end of a trial dragged out for half a dozen years one of them is sent to jail, at the moment least expected he escapes, and returns to the Retreat of the Cavaliers. That is the best thing to do—shoot them! Take them to prison, and when you are passing a suitable place—Ah, dog, so you want to escape, do you? pum! pum! The indictment is drawn up, the witnesses summoned, the trial ended, the sentence pronounced—all in a minute. It is a true saying that the fox is very cunning, but he who catches him is more cunning still.”

“Forward, then, and let us ride faster, for this road, besides being a long one, is not at all a pleasant one,” said Rey.

As they passed The Pleasaunce, they saw, a little in from the road, the guards who a few minutes before had executed the strange sentence with which the reader has been made acquainted. The country boy was inconsolable because they rode on and he was not allowed to get a nearer view of the palpitating bodies of the robbers, which could be distinguished forming a horrible group in the distance. But they had not proceeded twenty paces when they heard the sound of a horse galloping after them at so rapid a pace that he gained upon them every moment. Our traveller turned round and saw a man, or rather a Centaur, for the most perfect harmony imaginable existed between horse and rider. The latter was of a robust and plethoric constitution, with large fiery eyes, rugged features, and a black mustache. He was of middle age and had a general air of rudeness and aggressiveness, with indications of strength in his whole person. He was mounted on a superb horse with a muscular chest, like the horses of the Parthenon, caparisoned in the picturesque fashion of the country, and carrying on the crupper a great leather bag on the cover of which was to be seen, in large letters, the word Mail.

“Hello! Good-day, Senor Caballuco,” said Licurgo, saluting the horseman when the latter had come up with them. “How is it that we got so far ahead of you? But you will arrive before us, if you set your mind to it.”

“I will rest a little,” answered Senor Caballuco, adapting his horse’s pace to that of our travellers’ beasts, and attentively observing the most distinguished of the three, “since there is such good company.”

“This gentleman,” said Licurgo, smiling, “is the nephew of Dona Perfecta.”

“Ah! At your service, senor.”

The two men saluted each other, it being noticeable that Caballuco performed his civilities with an expression of haughtiness and superiority that revealed, at the very least, a consciousness of great importance, and of a high standing in the district. When the arrogant horseman rode aside to stop and talk for a moment with two Civil Guards who passed them on the road, the traveller asked his guide:

“Who is that odd character?”

“Who should it be? Caballuco.”

“And who is Caballuco?”

“What! Have you never heard of Caballuco?” said the countryman, amazed at the crass ignorance of Dona Perfecta’s nephew. “He is a very brave man, a fine rider, and the best connoisseur of horses in all the surrounding country. We think a great deal of him in Orbajosa; and he is well worthy of it. Just as you see him, he is a power in the place, and the governor of the province takes off his hat to him.”

“When there is an election!”

“And the Governor of Madrid writes official letters to him with a great many titles in the superscription. He throws the bar like a St. Christopher, and he can manage every kind of weapon as easily as we manage our fingers. When there was market inspection here, they could never get the best of him, and shots were to be heard every night at the city gates. He has a following that is worth any money, for they are ready for anything. He is good to the poor, and any stranger who should come here and attempt to touch so much as a hair of the head of any native of Orbajosa would have him to settle with. It is very seldom that soldiers come here from Madrid, but whenever they do come, not a day passes without blood being shed, for Caballuco would pick a quarrel with them, if not for one thing for another. At present it seems that he is fallen into poverty and he is employed to carry the mail. But he is trying hard to persuade the Town Council to have a market-inspector’s office here again and to put him in charge of it. I don’t know how it is that you have never heard him mentioned in Madrid, for he is the son of a famous Caballuco who was in the last rebellion, and who was himself the son of another Caballuco, who was also in the rebellion of that day. And as there is a rumor now that there is going to be another insurrection—for the whole country is in a ferment—we are afraid that Caballuco will join that also, following in the illustrious footsteps of his father and his grandfather, who, to our glory be it said, were born in our city.”

Our traveller was surprised to see the species of knight-errantry that still existed in the regions which he had come to visit, but he had no opportunity to put further questions, for the man who was the object of them now joined them, saying with an expression of ill-humor:

“The Civil Guard despatched three. I have already told the commander to be careful what he is about. To-morrow we will speak to the governor of the province, and I—”

“Are you going to X.?”

“No; but the governor is coming here, Senor Licurgo; do you know that they are going to send us a couple of regiments to Orbajosa?”

“Yes,” said the traveller quickly, with a smile. “I heard it said in Madrid that there was some fear of a rising in this place. It is well to be prepared for what may happen.”

“They talk nothing but nonsense in Madrid,” exclaimed the Centaur violently, accompanying his affirmation with a string of tongue-blistering vocables. “In Madrid there is nothing but rascality. What do they send us soldiers for? To squeeze more contributions out of us and a couple of conscriptions afterward. By all that’s holy! if there isn’t a rising there ought to be. So you”—he ended, looking banteringly at the young man—“so you are Dona Perfecta’s nephew?”

This abrupt question and the insolent glance of the bravo annoyed the young man.

“Yes, señor, at your service.”

“I am a friend of the senora’s, and I love her as I do the apple of my eye,” said Caballuco. “As you are going to Orbajosa we shall see each other there.”

And without another word he put spurs to his horse, which, setting off at a gallop, soon disappeared in a cloud of dust.

After half an hour’s ride, during which neither Senor Don Jose nor Senor Licurgo manifested much disposition to talk, the travellers came in sight of an ancient-looking town seated on the slope of a hill, from the midst of whose closely clustered houses arose many dark towers, and, on a height above it, the ruins of a dilapidated castle. Its base was formed by a mass of shapeless walls, of mud hovels, gray and dusty looking as the soil, together with some fragments of turreted walls, in whose shelter about a thousand humble huts raised their miserable adobe fronts, like anaemic and hungry faces demanding an alms from the passer-by. A shallow river surrounded the town, like a girdle of tin, refreshing, in its course, several gardens, the only vegetation that cheered the eye. People were going into and coming out of the town, on horseback and on foot, and the human movement, although not great, gave some appearance of life to that great dwelling place whose architectural aspect was rather that of ruin and death than of progress and life. The innumerable and repulsive-looking beggars who dragged themselves on either side of the road, asking the obolus from the passer-by, presented a pitiful spectacle. It would be impossible to see beings more in harmony with, or better suited to the fissures of that sepulchre in which a city was not only buried but gone to decay. As our travellers approached the town, a discordant peal of bells gave token, with their expressive sound, that that mummy had still a soul.

It was called Orbajosa, a city that figures, not in the Chaldean or Coptic geography, but in that of Spain, with 7324 inhabitants, a town-hall, an episcopal seat, a court-house, a seminary, a stock farm, a high school, and other official prerogatives.

“The bells are ringing for high mass in the cathedral,” said Uncle Licurgo. “We have arrived sooner than I expected.”

“The appearance of your native city,” said the young man, examining the panorama spread out before him, “could not be more disagreeable. The historic city of Orbajosa, whose name is no doubt a corruption of Urbs Augusta, looks like a great dunghill.”

“All that can be seen from here is the suburbs,” said the guide, in an offended tone. “When you enter the Calle Real and the Calle de Condestable, you will see handsome buildings, like the cathedral.”

“I don’t want to speak ill of Orbajosa before seeing it,” said the young man. “And you must not take what I have said as a mark of contempt, for whether humble and mean, or stately and handsome, that city will always be very dear to me, not only is it my mother’s native place, but because there are persons living in it whom I love without seeing them. Let us enter the august city, then.”

They were now ascending a road on the outskirts of the town, and passing close to the walls of the gardens.

“Do you see that great house at the end of this large garden whose wall we are now passing?” said Uncle Licurgo, pointing to a massive, whitewashed wall belonging to the only dwelling in view which had the appearance of a cheerful and comfortable habitation.

“Yes; that is my aunt’s house?”

“Exactly so! What we are looking at is the rear of the house. The front faces the Calle del Condestable, and it has five iron balconies that look like five castles. The fine garden behind the wall belongs to the house, and if you rise up in your stirrups you will be able to see it all from here.”

“Why, we are at the house, then!” cried the young man. “Can we not enter from here?”

“There is a little door, but the senora had it condemned.”

The young man raised himself in his stirrups and, stretching his neck as far as he could, looked over the wall.

“I can see the whole of the garden,” he said. “There, under the trees, there is a woman, a girl, a young lady.”

“That is Senorita Rosario,” answered Licurgo.

And at the same time he also raised himself in his stirrups to look over the wall.

“Eh! Senorita Rosario!” he cried, making energetic signs with his right hand. “Here we are; I have brought your cousin with me.”

“She has seen us,” said the young man, stretching out his neck as far as was possible. “But if I am not mistaken, there is an ecclesiastic with her—a priest.”

“That is the Penitentiary,” answered the countryman, with naturalness.

“My cousin has seen us—she has left the priest, and is running toward the house. She is beautiful.”

“As the sun!”

“She has turned redder than a cherry. Come, come, Senor Licurgo.”

CHAPTER III

PEPE REY

Before proceeding further, it will be well to tell who Pepe Rey was, and what were the affairs which had brought him to Orbajosa.

When Brigadier Rey died in 1841, his two children, Juan and Perfecta, had just married: the latter the richest land-owner of Orbajosa, the former a young girl of the same city. The husband of Perfecta was called Don Manuel Maria Jose de Polentinos, and the wife of Juan, Maria Polentinos; but although they had the same surname, their relationship was somewhat distant and not very easy to make out. Juan Rey was a distinguished jurisconsult who had been graduated in Seville and had practised law in that city for thirty years with no less honor than profit. In 1845 he was left a widower with a son who was old enough to play mischievous pranks; he would sometimes amuse himself by constructing viaducts, mounds, ponds, dikes, and trenches of earth, in the yard of the house, and then flooding those fragile works with water. His father let him do so, saying, "You will be an engineer."

Perfecta and Juan had ceased to see each other from the time of their marriage, because the sister had gone to Madrid with her husband, the wealthy Polentinos, who was as rich as he was extravagant. Play and women had so completely enslaved Manuel Maria Jose that he would have dissipated all his fortune, if death had not been beforehand with him and carried him off before he had had time to squander it. In a night of orgy the life of the rich provincial, who had been sucked so voraciously by the leeches of the capital and the insatiable vampire of play, came to a sudden termination. His sole heir was a daughter a few months old. With the death of Perfecta's husband the terrors of the family were at an end, but the great struggle began. The house of Polentinos was ruined; the estates were in danger of being seized by the money-lenders; all was in confusion: enormous debts, lamentable management in Orbajosa, discredit and ruin in Madrid.

Perfecta sent for her brother, who, coming to the distressed widow's assistance, displayed so much diligence and skill that in a short time the greater part of the dangers that threatened her had disappeared. He began by obliging his sister to live in Orbajosa, managing herself her vast estates, while he faced the formidable pressure of the creditors in Madrid. Little by little the house freed itself from the enormous burden of its debts, for the excellent Don Juan Rey, who had the best way in the world for managing such matters, pleaded in the court, made settlements with the principal creditors and arranged to pay them by instalments, the result of this skilful management being that the rich patrimony of Polentinos was saved from ruin and might continue, for many years to come, to bestow splendor and glory on that illustrious family.

Perfecta's gratitude was so profound that in writing to her brother from Orbajosa, where she determined to reside until her daughter should be grown up, she said to him, among other affectionate things: "You have been more than a brother to me, more than a father to my daughter. How can either of us ever repay you for services so great? Ah, my dear brother? from the moment in which my daughter can reason and pronounce a name I will teach her to bless yours. My gratitude will end only with my life. Your unworthy sister regrets only that she can find no opportunity of showing you how much she loves you and of recompensing you in a manner suited to the greatness of your soul and the boundless goodness of your heart."

At the same time when these words were written Rosarito was two years old. Pepe Rey, shut up in a school in Seville, was making lines on paper, occupied in proving that "the sum of all the interior angles of any polygon is equal to twice as many right angles, wanting four, as the figure has sides." These vexatious commonplaces of the school kept him very busy. Year after year passed. The boy grew up, still continuing to make lines. At last, he made one which is called "From Tarragona to Montblanch." His first serious toy was the bridge, 120 metres in length, over the River Francoli.

During all this time Dona Perfecta continued to live in Orbajosa. As her brother never left Seville, several years passed without their seeing each other. A quarterly letter, as punctually written as it was punctually answered, kept in communication these two hearts, whose affection neither time nor distance could cool. In 1870, when Don Juan Rey, satisfied with having fulfilled his mission in society, retired from it and went to live in his fine house in Puerto Real, Pepe, who had been employed for several years in the works of various rich building companies, set out on a tour through Germany and England, for the purpose of study. His father's fortune, (as large as it is possible for a fortune which has only an honorable law-office for its source to be in Spain), permitted him to free himself in a short time from the yoke of material labor. A man of exalted ideas and with an ardent love for science, he found his purest enjoyment in the observation and study of the marvels by means of which the genius of the age furthers at the same time the culture and material comfort and the moral progress of man.

On returning from his tour his father informed him that he had an important project to communicate to him. Pepe supposed that it concerned some bridge, dockyard, or, at the least, the draining of some marsh, but Don Juan soon dispelled his error, disclosing to him his plan in the following words:

“This is March, and Perfecta's quarterly letter has not failed to come. Read it, my dear boy, and if you can agree to what that holy and exemplary woman, my dear sister, says in it, you will give me the greatest happiness I could desire in my old age. If the plan does not please you, reject it without hesitation, for, although your refusal would grieve me, there is not in it the shadow of constraint on my part. It would be unworthy of us both that it should be realized through the coercion of an obstinate father. You are free either to accept or to reject it, and if there is in your mind the slightest repugnance to it, arising either from your inclinations or from any other cause, I do not wish you to do violence to your feelings on my account.”

Pepe laid the letter on the table after he had glanced through it, and said quietly:

“My aunt wishes me to marry Rosario!”

“She writes accepting joyfully my idea,” said his father, with emotion. “For the idea was mine. Yes, it is a long time, a very long time since it occurred to me; but I did not wish to say anything to you until I knew what your sister might think about it. As you see, Perfecta receives my plan with joy; she says that she too had thought of it, but that she did not venture to mention it to me, because you are—you have seen what she says—because you are a young man of very exceptional merit and her daughter is a country girl, without either a brilliant education or worldly attractions. Those are her words. My poor sister! How good she is! I see that you are not displeased; I see that this project of mine, resembling a little the officious prevision of the fathers of former times who married their children without consulting their wishes in the matter, and making generally inconsiderate and unwise matches, does not seem absurd to you. God grant that this may be, as it seems to promise, one of the happiest. It is true that you have never seen your cousin, but we are both aware of her virtue, of her discretion, of her modest and noble simplicity. That nothing may be wanting, she is even beautiful. My opinion is,” he added gayly, “that you should at once start for that out-of-the-way episcopal city, that Urbs Augusta, and there, in the presence of my sister and her charming Rosarito, decide whether the latter is to be something more to me or not, than my niece.”

Pepe took up the letter again and read it through carefully. His countenance expressed neither joy nor sorrow. He might have been examining some plan for the junction of two railroads.

“In truth,” said Don Juan, “in that remote Orbajosa, where, by the way, you have some land that you might take a look at now, life passes with the tranquillity and the sweetness of an idyl. What patriarchal customs! What noble simplicity! What rural and Virgilian peace! If, instead of being a mathematician, you were a Latinist, you would repeat, as you enter it, the *ergo tua rura manebunt*. What an admirable place in which to commune with one's own soul and to prepare one's self for good works. There all is kindness and goodness; there the deceit and hypocrisy of our great cities are

unknown; there the holy inclinations which the turmoil of modern life stifles spring into being again; there dormant faith reawakens and one feels within the breast an impulse, vague but keen, like the impatience of youth, that from the depths of the soul cries out: 'I wish to live!'"

A few days after this conference Pepe left Puerto Real. He had refused, some months before, a commission from the government to survey, in its mineralogical aspects, the basin of the River Nahara, in the valley of Orbajosa; but the plans to which the conference above recorded gave rise, caused him to say to himself: "It will be as well to make use of the time. Heaven only knows how long this courtship may last, or what hours of weariness it may bring with it." He went, then, to Madrid, solicited the commission to explore the basin of the Nahara, which he obtained without difficulty, although he did not belong officially to the mining corps, set out shortly afterward, and, after a second change of trains, the mixed train No. 65 bore him, as we have seen, to the loving arms of Uncle Licurgo.

The age of our hero was about thirty-four years. He was of a robust constitution, of athletic build, and so admirably proportioned and of so commanding an appearance that, if he had worn a uniform, he would have presented the most martial air and figure that it is possible to imagine. His hair and beard were blond in color, but in his countenance there was none of the phlegmatic imperturbability of the Saxon, but, on the contrary, so much animation that his eyes, although they were not black, seemed to be so. His figure would have served as a perfect and beautiful model for a statue, on the pedestal of which the sculptor might engrave the words: "Intellect, strength." If not in visible characters, he bore them vaguely expressed in the brilliancy of his glance, in the potent attraction with which his person was peculiarly endowed, and in the sympathy which his cordial manners inspired.

He was not very talkative—only persons of inconstant ideas and unstable judgment are prone to verbosity. His profound moral sense made him sparing of words in the disputes in which the men of the day are prone to engage on any and every subject, but in polite conversation he displayed an eloquence full of wit and intelligence, emanating always from good sense and a temperate and just appreciation of worldly matters. He had no toleration for those sophistries, and mystifications, and quibbles of the understanding with which persons of intelligence, imbued with affected culture, sometimes amuse themselves; and in defence of the truth Pepe Rey employed at times, and not always with moderation, the weapon of ridicule. This was almost a defect in the eyes of many people who esteemed him, for our hero thus appeared wanting in respect for a multitude of things commonly accepted and believed. It must be acknowledged, although it may lessen him in the opinion of many, that Rey did not share the mild toleration of the compliant age which has invented strange disguises of words and of acts to conceal what to the general eye might be disagreeable.

Such was the man, whatever slanderous tongues may say to the contrary, whom Uncle Licurgo introduced into Orbajosa just as the cathedral bells were ringing for high mass. When, looking over the garden wall, they saw the young girl and the Penitentiary, and then the flight of the former toward the house, they put spurs to their beasts and entered the Calle Real, where a great many idlers stood still to gaze at the traveller, as if he were a stranger and an intruder in the patriarchal city. Turning presently to the right and riding in the direction of the cathedral, whose massive bulk dominated the town, they entered the Calle del Condestable, in which, being narrow and paved, the hoofs of the animals clattered noisily, alarming the people of the neighborhood, who came to the windows and to the balconies to satisfy their curiosity. Shutters opened with a grating sound and various faces, almost all feminine, appeared above and below. By the time Pepe Rey had reached the threshold of the house of Polentinos many and diverse comments had been already made on his person.

CHAPTER IV

THE ARRIVAL OF THE COUSIN

When Rosarito left him so abruptly the Penitentiary looked toward the garden wall, and seeing the faces of Licurgo and his companion, said to himself:

“So the prodigy is already here, then.”

He remained thoughtful for some moments, his cloak, grasped with both hands, folded over his abdomen, his eyes fixed on the ground, his gold-rimmed spectacles slipping gently toward the point of his nose, his under-lip moist and projecting, and his iron-gray eyebrows gathered in a slight frown. He was a pious and holy man, of uncommon learning and of irreproachable clerical habits, a little past his sixtieth year, affable in his manners, courteous and kind, and greatly addicted to giving advice and counsel to both men and women. For many years past he had been master of Latin and rhetoric in the Institute, which noble profession had supplied him with a large fund of quotations from Horace and of florid metaphors, which he employed with wit and opportuneness. Nothing more need be said regarding this personage, but that, as soon as he heard the trot of the animals approaching the Calle del Condestable, he arranged the folds of his cloak, straightened his hat, which was not altogether correctly placed upon his venerable head, and, walking toward the house, murmured:

“Let us go and see this paragon.”

Meanwhile Pepe was alighting from his nag, and Dona Perfecta, her face bathed in tears and barely able to utter a few trembling words, the sincere expression of her affection, was receiving him at the gate itself in her loving arms.

“Pepe—but how tall you are! And with a beard. Why, it seems only yesterday that I held you in my lap. And now you are a man, a grown-up man. Well, well! How the years pass! This is my daughter Rosario.”

As she said this they reached the parlor on the ground floor, which was generally used as a reception-room, and Dona Perfecta presented her daughter to Pepe.

Rosario was a girl of delicate and fragile appearance, that revealed a tendency to pensive melancholy. In her delicate and pure countenance there was something of the soft, pearly pallor which most novelists attribute to their heroines, and without which sentimental varnish it appears that no Enriqueta or Julia can be interesting. But what chiefly distinguished Rosario was that her face expressed so much sweetness and modesty that the absence of the perfections it lacked was not observed. This is not to say that she was plain; but, on the other hand, it is true that it would be an exaggeration to call her beautiful in the strictest meaning of the word. The real beauty of Dona Perfecta's daughter consisted in a species of transparency, different from that of pearl, alabaster, marble, or any of the other substances used in descriptions of the human countenance; a species of transparency through which the inmost depths of her soul were clearly visible; depths not cavernous and gloomy, like those of the sea, but like those of a clear and placid river. But the material was wanting there for a complete personality. The channel was wanting, the banks were wanting. The vast wealth of her spirit overflowed, threatening to wash away the narrow borders. When her cousin saluted her she blushed crimson, and uttered only a few unintelligible words.

“You must be fainting with hunger,” said Dona Perfecta to her nephew. “You shall have your breakfast at once.”

“With your permission,” responded the traveller, “I will first go and get rid of the dust of the journey.”

“That is a sensible idea,” said the senora. “Rosario, take your cousin to the room that we have prepared for him. Don't delay, nephew. I am going to give the necessary orders.”

Rosario took her cousin to a handsome apartment situated on the ground floor. The moment he entered it Pepe recognized in all the details of the room the diligent and loving hand of a woman. All was arranged with perfect taste, and the purity and freshness of everything in this charming nest invited to repose. The guest observed minute details that made him smile.

“Here is the bell,” said Rosario, taking in her hand the bell-rope, the tassel of which hung over the head of the bed. “All you have to do is to stretch out your hand. The writing-table is placed so that you will have the light from the left. See, in this basket you can throw the waste papers. Do you smoke?”

“Unfortunately, yes,” responded Pepe Rey.

“Well, then, you can throw the ends of your cigars here,” she said, touching with the tip of her shoe a utensil of gilt-brass filled with sand. “There is nothing uglier than to see the floor covered with cigar-ends. Here is the washstand. For your clothes you have a wardrobe and a bureau. I think this is a bad place for the watch-case; it would be better beside the bed. If the light annoys you, all you have to do is to lower the shade with this cord; see, this way.”

The engineer was enchanted.

Rosarito opened one of the windows.

“Look,” she said, “this window opens into the garden. The sun comes in here in the afternoon. Here we have hung the cage of a canary that sings as if he was crazy. If his singing disturbs you we will take it away.”

She opened another window on the opposite side of the room.

“This other window,” she continued, “looks out on the street. Look; from here you can see the cathedral; it is very handsome, and full of beautiful things. A great many English people come to see it. Don’t open both windows at the same time, because draughts are very bad.”

“My dear cousin,” said Pepe, his soul inundated with an inexplicable joy; “in all that is before my eyes I see an angel’s hand that can be only yours. What a beautiful room this is! It seems to me as if I had lived in it all my life. It invites to peace.”

Rosarito made no answer to these affectionate expressions, and left the room, smiling.

“Make no delay,” she said from the door; “the dining-room too is down stairs—in the centre of this hall.”

Uncle Licurgo came in with the luggage. Pepe rewarded him with a liberality to which the countryman was not accustomed, and the latter, after humbly thanking the engineer, raised his hand to his head with a hesitating movement, and in an embarrassed tone, and mumbling his words, he said hesitatingly:

“When will it be most convenient for me to speak to Senor Don Jose about a—a little matter of business?”

“A little matter of business? At once,” responded Pepe, opening one of his trunks.

“This is not a suitable time,” said the countryman. “When Senor Don Jose has rested it will be time enough. There are more days than sausages, as the saying is; and after one day comes another. Rest now, Senor Don Jose. Whenever you want to take a ride—the nag is not bad. Well, good-day, Senor Don Jose. I am much obliged to you. Ah! I had forgotten,” he added, returning a few moments later. “If you have any message for the municipal judge—I am going now to speak to him about our little affair.”

“Give him my compliments,” said Pepe gayly, no better way of getting rid of the Spartan legislator occurring to him.

“Good-by, then, Senor Don Jose.”

“Good-by.”

The engineer had not yet taken his clothes out of the trunk when for the third time the shrewd eyes and the crafty face of Uncle Licurgo appeared in the door-way.

“I beg your pardon, Senor Don Jose,” he said, displaying his brilliantly white teeth in an affected smile, “but—I wanted to say that if you wish to settle the matter by means of friendly arbitrations—Although, as the saying is, ‘Ask other people’s opinion of something that concerns only yourself, and some will say it is white and others black.’”

“Will you get away from here, man?”

“I say that, because I hate the law. I don’t want to have anything to do with the law. Well, good-by, again, Senor Don Jose. God give you long life to help the poor!”

“Good-by, man, good-by.”

Pepe turned the key in the lock of the door, saying to himself:

“The people of this town appear to be very litigious.”

CHAPTER V

WILL THERE BE DISSENSION?

A little later Pepe made his appearance in the dining-room.

“If you eat a hearty breakfast,” said Dona Perfecta to him, in affectionate accents, “you will have no appetite for dinner. We dine here at one. Perhaps you may not like the customs of the country.”

“I am enchanted with them, aunt.”

“Say, then, which you prefer—to eat a hearty breakfast now, or to take something light, and keep your appetite for dinner.”

“I prefer to take something light now, in order to have the pleasure of dining with you. But not even if I had found anything to eat in Villahorrenda, would I have eaten any thing at this early hour.”

“Of course, I need not tell you that you are to treat us with perfect frankness. You may give your orders here as if you were in your own house.”

“Thanks, aunt.”

“But how like your father you are!” said the senora, regarding the young man, as he ate, with real delight. “I can fancy I am looking now at my dear brother Juan. He sat just as you are sitting and ate as you are eating. In your expression, especially, you are as like as two drops of water.”

Pepe began his frugal breakfast. The words, as well as the manner and the expression, of his aunt and cousin inspired him with so much confidence that he already felt as if he were in his own house.

“Do you know what Rosario was saying to me this morning?” said Dona Perfecta, looking at her nephew. “Well, she was saying that, as a man accustomed to the luxuries and the etiquette of the capital and to foreign ways, you would not be able to put up with the somewhat rustic simplicity and the lack of ceremony of our manner of life; for here every thing is very plain.”

“What a mistake!” responded Pepe, looking at his cousin. “No one abhors more than I do the falseness and the hypocrisy of what is called high society. Believe me, I have long wished to give myself a complete bath in nature, as some one has said; to live far from the turmoil of existence in the solitude and quiet of the country. I long for the tranquillity of a life without strife, without anxieties; neither envying nor envied, as the poet has said. For a long time my studies at first, and my work afterward, prevented me from taking the rest which I need, and which my mind and my body both require; but ever since I entered this house, my dear aunt, my dear cousin, I have felt myself surrounded by the peaceful atmosphere which I have longed for. You must not talk to me, then, of society, either high or low; or of the world, either great or small, for I would willingly exchange them all for this peaceful retreat.”

While he was thus speaking, the glass door which led from the dining-room into the garden was obscured by the interposition between it and the light of a dark body. The glasses of a pair of spectacles, catching a sunbeam, sent forth a fugitive gleam; the latch creaked, the door opened, and the Penitentiary gravely entered the room. He saluted those present, taking off his broad-brimmed hat and bowing until its brim touched the floor.

“It is the Senor Penitentiary, of our holy cathedral,” said Dona Perfecta: “a person whom we all esteem greatly, and whose friend you will, I hope, be. Take a seat, Senor Don Inocencio.”

Pepe shook hands with the venerable canon, and both sat down.

“If you are accustomed to smoke after meals, pray do so,” said Dona Perfecta amiably; “and the Senor Penitentiary also.”

The worthy Don Inocencio drew from under his cassock a large leather cigar-case, which showed unmistakable signs of long use, opened it, and took from it two long cigarettes, one of which he offered to our friend. Rosario took a match from a little leaf-shaped matchbox, which the Spaniards ironically call a wagon, and the engineer and the canon were soon puffing their smoke over each other.

“And what does Senor Don Jose think of our dear city of Orbajosa?” asked the canon, shutting his left eye tightly, according to his habit when he smoked.

“I have not yet been able to form an idea of the town,” said Pepe. “From the little I have seen of it, however, I think that half a dozen large capitalists disposed to invest their money here, a pair of intelligent heads to direct the work of renovating the place, and a couple of thousands of active hands to carry it out, would not be a bad thing for Orbajosa. Coming from the entrance to the town to the door of this house, I saw more than a hundred beggars. The greater part of them are healthy, and even robust men. It is a pitiable army, the sight of which oppresses the heart.”

“That is what charity is for,” declared Don Inocencio. “Apart from that, Orbajosa is not a poor town. You are already aware that the best garlic in all Spain is produced here. There are more than twenty rich families living among us.”

“It is true,” said Dona Perfecta, “that the last few years have been wretched, owing to the drought; but even so, the granaries are not empty, and several thousands of strings of garlic were recently carried to market.”

“During the many years that I have lived in Orbajosa,” said the priest, with a frown, “I have seen innumerable persons come here from the capital, some brought by the electoral hurly-burly, others to visit some abandoned site, or to see the antiquities of the cathedral, and they all talk to us about the English ploughs and threshing-machines and water-power and banks, and I don’t know how many other absurdities. The burden of their song is that this place is very backward, and that it could be improved. Let them keep away from us, in the devil’s name! We are well enough as we are, without the gentlemen from the capital visiting us; a great deal better off without hearing that continual clamor about our poverty and the grandeurs and the wonders of other places. The fool in his own house is wiser than the wise man in another’s. Is it not so, Senor Don Jose? Of course, you mustn’t imagine, even remotely, that I say this on your account. Not at all! Of course not! I know that we have before us one of the most eminent young men of modern Spain, a man who would be able to transform into fertile lands our arid wastes. And I am not at all angry because you sing us the same old song about the English ploughs and arboriculture and silviculture. Not in the least. Men of such great, such very great merit, may be excused for the contempt which they manifest for our littleness. No, no, my friend; no, no, Senor Don Jose! you are entitled to say any thing you please, even to tell us that we are not much better than Kaffirs.”

This philippic, concluded in a marked tone of irony, and all of it impertinent enough, did not please the young man; but he refrained from manifesting the slightest annoyance and continued the conversation, endeavoring to avoid as far as possible the subjects in which the over-sensitive patriotism of the canon might find cause of offence. The latter rose when Dona Perfecta began to speak to her nephew about family matters, and took a few turns about the room.

This was a spacious and well-lighted apartment, the walls of which were covered with an old-fashioned paper whose flowers and branches, although faded, preserved their original pattern, thanks to the cleanliness which reigned in each and every part of the dwelling. The clock, from the case of which hung, uncovered, the apparently motionless weights and the voluble pendulum, perpetually repeating No, no, occupied, with its variegated dial, the most prominent place among the solid pieces of furniture of the dining-room, the adornment of the walls being completed by a series of French engravings representing the exploits of the conqueror of Mexico, with prolix explanations at the foot of each concerning a Ferdinand Cortez, and a Donna Marine, as little true to nature as were the figures delineated by the ignorant artist. In the space between the two glass doors which communicated with the garden was an apparatus of brass, which it is not necessary to describe further than to say that it served to support a parrot, which maintained itself on it with the air of gravity and circumspection peculiar to those animals, taking note of everything that went on. The hard and ironical expression of the parrot tribe, their green coats, their red caps, their yellow boots, and finally, the hoarse, mocking words which they generally utter, give them a strange and repulsive aspect, half serious, half-comic.

There is in their air an indescribable something of the stiffness of diplomats. At times they remind one of buffoons, and they always resemble those absurdly conceited people who, in their desire to appear very superior, look like caricatures.

The Penitentiary was very fond of the parrot. When he left Dona Perfecta and Rosario conversing with the traveller, he went over to the bird, and, allowing it to bite his forefinger with the greatest good humor, said to it:

“Rascal, knave, why don’t you talk? You would be of little account if you weren’t a prater. The world of birds, as well as men, is full of praters.”

Then, with his own venerable hand, he took some peas from the dish beside him, and gave them to the bird to eat. The parrot began to call to the maid, asking her for some chocolate, and its words diverted the two ladies and the young man from a conversation which could not have been very engrossing.

CHAPTER VI IN WHICH IT IS SEEN THAT DISAGREEMENT MAY ARISE WHEN LEAST EXPECTED

Suddenly Don Cayetano Polentinos, Dona Perfecta's brother-in-law, appeared at the door, and entering the room with outstretched arms, cried:

"Let me embrace you, my dear Don Jose."

They embraced each other cordially. Don Cayetano and Pepe were already acquainted with each other, for the eminent scholar and bibliophile was in the habit of making a trip to Madrid whenever an executor's sale of the stock of some dealer in old books was advertised. Don Cayetano was tall and thin, of middle age, although constant study or ill-health had given him a worn appearance; he expressed himself with a refined correctness which became him admirably, and he was affectionate and amiable in his manners, at times to excess. With respect to his vast learning, what can be said but that he was a real prodigy? In Madrid his name was always mentioned with respect, and if Don Cayetano had lived in the capital, he could not have escaped becoming a member, in spite of his modesty, of every academy in it, past, present, and to come. But he was fond of quiet and retirement, and the place which vanity occupies in the souls of others, a pure passion for books, a love of solitary and secluded study, without any other aim or incentive than the books and the study themselves, occupied in his.

He had formed in Orbajosa one of the finest libraries that is to be found in all Spain, and among his books he passed long hours of the day and of the night, compiling, classifying, taking notes, and selecting various sorts of precious information, or composing, perhaps, some hitherto unheard-of and undreamed-of work, worthy of so great a mind. His habits were patriarchal; he ate little, drank less, and his only dissipations consisted of a luncheon in the Alamillos on very great occasions, and daily walks to a place called Mundogrande, where were often disinterred from the accumulated dust of twenty centuries, medals, bits of architecture, and occasionally an amphora or cubicularia of inestimable value.

Don Cayetano and Dona Perfecta lived in such perfect harmony that the peace of Paradise was not to be compared to it. They never disagreed. It is true that Don Cayetano never interfered in the affairs of the house nor Dona Perfecta in those of the library, except to have it swept and dusted every Saturday, regarding with religious respect the books and papers that were in use on the table or anywhere else in the room.

After the questions and answers proper to the occasion had been interchanged Don Cayetano said:

"I have already looked at the books. I am very sorry that you did not bring me the edition of 1527. I shall have to make a journey to Madrid myself. Are you going to remain with us long? The longer the better, my dear Pepe. How glad I am to have you here! Between us both we will arrange a part of my library and make an index of the writers on the Art of Horsemanship. It is not always one has at hand a man of your talents. You shall see my library. You can take your fill of reading there—as often as you like. You will see marvels, real marvels, inestimable treasures, rare works that no one but myself has a copy of. But I think it must be time for dinner, is it not, Jose? Is it not, Perfecta? Is it not, Rosarito? Is it not, Senor Don Inocencio? To-day you are doubly a Penitentiary—I mean because you will accompany us in doing penance."

The canon bowed and smiled, manifesting his pleased acquiescence. The dinner was substantial, and in all the dishes there was noticeable the excessive abundance of country banquets, realized at the expense of variety. There was enough to surfeit twice as many persons as sat down to table. The conversation turned on various subjects.

“You must visit our cathedral as soon as possible,” said the canon. “There are few cathedrals like ours, Senor Don Jose! But of course you, who have seen so many wonders in foreign countries, will find nothing remarkable in our old church. We poor provincials of Orbajosa, however, think it divine. Master Lopez of Berganza, one of the prebendaries of the cathedral, called it in the sixteenth century *pulchra augustissima*. But perhaps for a man of your learning it would possess no merit, and some market constructed of iron would seem more beautiful.”

The ironical remarks of the wily canon annoyed Pepe Rey more and more every moment, but, determined to control himself and to conceal his anger, he answered only with vague words. Dona Perfecta then took up the theme and said playfully:

“Take care, Pepito; I warn you that if you speak ill of our holy church we shall cease to be friends. You know a great deal, you are a man eminent for your knowledge on every subject, but if you are going to discover that that grand edifice is not the eighth wonder of the world you will do well to keep your knowledge to yourself and leave us in our ignorance.”

“Far from thinking that the building is not handsome,” responded Pepe, “the little I have seen of its exterior has seemed to me of imposing beauty. So there is no need for you to be alarmed, aunt. And I am very far from being a savant.”

“Softly; softly,” said the canon, extending his hand and giving his mouth a truce from eating in order to talk. “Stop there—don’t come now pretending modesty, Senor Don Jose; we are too well aware of your great merit, of the high reputation you enjoy and the important part you play wherever you are, for that. Men like you are not to be met with every day. But now that I have extolled your merits in this way—”

He stopped to eat a mouthful, and when his tongue was once more at liberty he continued thus:

“Now that I have extolled your merits in this way, permit me to express a different opinion with the frankness which belongs to my character. Yes, Senor Don Jose, yes, Senor Don Cayetano; yes, senora and senorita, science, as the moderns study and propagate it, is the death of sentiment and of every sweet illusion. Under its influence the life of the spirit declines, every thing is reduced to fixed rules, and even the sublime charms of nature disappear. Science destroys the marvellous in the arts, as well as faith in the soul. Science says that every thing is a lie, and would reduce every thing to figures and lines, not only *maria ac terras*, where we are, but *coelumque profundum*, where God is. The wonderful visions of the soul, its mystic raptures, even the inspiration of the poets, are all a lie. The heart is a sponge; the brain, a place for breeding maggots.”

Every one laughed, while the canon took a draught of wine.

“Come, now, will Senor Don Jose deny,” continued the ecclesiastic, “that science, as it is taught and propagated to-day, is fast making of the world and of the human race a great machine?”

“That depends,” said Don Cayetano. “Every thing has its *pro* and its *contra*.”

“Take some more salad, Senor Penitentiary,” said Dona Perfecta; “it is just as you like it—with a good deal of mustard.”

Pepe Rey was not fond of engaging in useless discussions; he was not a pedant, nor did he desire to make a display of his learning, and still less did he wish to do so in the presence of women, and in a private re-union; but the importunate and aggressive verbosity of the canon required, in his opinion, a corrective. To flatter his vanity by agreeing with his views would, he thought, be a bad way to give it to him, and he determined therefore to express only such opinions as should be most directly opposed to those of the sarcastic Penitentiary and most offensive to him.

“So you wish to amuse yourself at my expense,” he said to himself. “Wait, and you will see what a fine dance I will lead you.”

Then he said aloud:

“All that the Senor Penitentiary has said ironically is the truth. But it is not our fault if science overturns day after day the vain idols of the past: its superstitions, its sophisms, its innumerable fables—beautiful, some of them, ridiculous others—for in the vineyard of the Lord grow both good fruit

and bad. The world of illusions, which is, as we might say, a second world, is tumbling about us in ruins. Mysticism in religion, routine in science, mannerism in art, are falling, as the Pagan gods fell, amid jests. Farewell, foolish dreams! the human race is awakening and its eyes behold the light. Its vain sentimentalism, its mysticism, its fevers, its hallucination, its delirium are passing away, and he who was before sick is now well and takes an ineffable delight in the just appreciation of things. Imagination, the terrible madwoman, who was the mistress of the house, has become the servant. Look around you, Senor Penitentiary, and you will see the admirable aggregation of truths which has taken the place of fable. The sky is not a vault; the stars are not little lamps; the moon is not a sportive huntress, but an opaque mass of stone; the sun is not a gayly adorned and vagabond charioteer but a fixed fire; Scylla and Charybdis are not nymphs but sunken rocks; the sirens are seals; and in the order of personages, Mercury is Manzanedo; Mars is a clean-shaven old man, the Count von Moltke; Nestor may be a gentleman in an overcoat, who is called M. Thiers; Orpheus is Verdi; Vulcan is Krupp; Apollo is any poet. Do you wish more? Well, then, Jupiter, a god who, if he were living now, would deserve to be put in jail, does not launch the thunderbolt, but the thunderbolt falls when electricity wills it. There is no Parnassus; there is no Olympus; there is no Stygian lake; nor are there any other Elysian Fields than those of Paris. There is no other descent to hell than the descents of Geology, and this traveller, every time he returns from it, declares that there are no damned souls in the centre of the earth. There are no other ascents to heaven than those of Astronomy, and she, on her return, declares that she has not seen the six or seven circles of which Dante and the mystical dreamers of the Middle Ages speak. She finds only stars and distances, lines, vast spaces, and nothing more. There are now no false computations of the age of the earth, for paleontology and prehistoric research have counted the teeth of this skull in which we live and discovered the true age. Fable, whether it be called paganism or Christian idealism, exists no longer, and imagination plays only a secondary part. All the miracles possible are such as I work, whenever I desire to do so, in my laboratory, with my Bunsen pile, a conducting wire, and a magnetized needle. There are now no other multiplications of loaves and fishes than those which Industry makes, with her moulds and her machines, and those of the printing press, which imitates Nature, taking from a single type millions of copies. In short, my dear canon, orders have been given to put on the retired list all the absurdities, lies, illusions, dreams, sentimentalities, and prejudices which darken the understanding of man. Let us rejoice at the fact.”

When Pepe finished speaking, a furtive smile played upon the canon's lips and his eyes were extraordinarily animated. Don Cayetano busied himself in giving various forms—now rhomboidal, now prismatic—to a little ball of bread. But Dona Perfecta was pale and kept her eyes fixed on the canon with observant insistence. Rosarito looked with amazement at her cousin. The latter, bending toward her, whispered under his breath:

“Don't mind me, little cousin; I am talking all this nonsense only to enrage the canon.”

CHAPTER VII

THE DISAGREEMENT INCREASES

“Perhaps you think,” said Dona Perfecta, with a tinge of conceit in her tones, “that Senor Don Inocencio is going to remain silent and not give you an answer to each and every one of those points.”

“Oh, no!” exclaimed the canon, arching his eyebrows. “I will not attempt to measure my poor abilities with a champion so valiant and at the same time so well armed. Senor Don Jose knows every thing; that is to say, he has at his command the whole arsenal of the exact sciences. Of course I know that the doctrines he upholds are false; but I have neither the talent nor the eloquence to combat them. I would employ theological arguments, drawn from revelation, from faith, from the Divine Word; but alas! Senor Don Jose, who is an eminent savant, would laugh at theology, at faith, at revelation, at the holy prophets, at the gospel. A poor ignorant priest, an unhappy man who knows neither mathematics, nor German philosophy with its *ego* and its *non ego*, a poor dominie, who knows only the science of God and something of the Latin poets, cannot enter into combat with so valiant a champion.”

Pepe Rey burst into a frank laugh.

“I see that Senor Don Inocencio,” he said, “has taken seriously all the nonsense I have been talking. Come, Senor Canon, regard the whole matter as a jest, and let it end there. I am quite sure that my opinions do not in reality differ greatly from yours. You are a pious and learned man; it is I who am ignorant. If I have allowed myself to speak in jest, pardon me, all of you—that is my way.”

“Thanks!” responded the presbyter, visibly annoyed. “Is that the way you want to get out of it now? I am well aware, we are all well aware, that the views you have sustained are your own. It could not be otherwise. You are the man of the age. It cannot be denied that you have a wonderful, a truly wonderful intellect. While you were talking, at the same time that I inwardly deplored errors so great, I could not but admire, I will confess it frankly, the loftiness of expression, the prodigious fluency, the surprising method of your reasoning, the force of your arguments. What a head, Senora Dona Perfecta, what a head your young nephew has! When I was in Madrid and they took me to the Atheneum, I confess that I was amazed to see the wonderful talent which God has bestowed on the atheists and the Protestants.”

“Senor Don Inocencio,” said Dona Perfecta, looking alternately at her nephew and her friend, “I think that in judging this boy you are more than benevolent. Don’t get angry, Pepe, or mind what I say, for I am neither a savante, nor a philosopher, nor a theologian; but it seems to me that Senor Don Inocencio has just given a proof of his great modesty and Christian charity in not crushing you as he could have done if he had wished.”

“Oh, senora!” said the ecclesiastic.

“That is the way with him,” continued Dona Perfecta, “always pretending to know nothing. And he knows more than the seven doctors put together. Ah, Senor Don Inocencio, how well the name you have suits you! But don’t affect an unseasonable humility now. Why, my nephew has no pretensions. All he knows is what he has been taught. If he has been taught error, what more can he desire than that you should enlighten him and take him out of the limbo of his false doctrines?”

“Just so; I desire nothing more than that the Senor Penitentiary should take me out,”—murmured Pepe, comprehending that without intending it, he had got himself into a labyrinth.

“I am a poor priest, whose only learning is some knowledge of the ancients,” responded Don Inocencio. “I recognize the immense value, from a worldly point of view, of Senor Don Jose’s scientific knowledge, and before so brilliant an oracle I prostrate myself and am silent.”

So saying, the canon folded his hands across his breast and bent his head. Pepe Rey was somewhat disturbed because of the turn which his mind had chosen to give to an idle discussion jestingly followed up, and in which he had engaged only to enliven the conversation a little. He thought

that the most prudent course to pursue would be to end at once so dangerous a debate, and for this purpose he addressed a question to Senor Don Cayetano when the latter, shaking off the drowsiness which had overcome him after the dessert, offered the guests the indispensable toothpicks stuck in a china peacock with outspread tail.

“Yesterday I discovered a hand grasping the handle of an amphora, on which there are a number of hieratic characters. I will show it to you,” said Don Cayetano, delighted to introduce a favorite theme.

“I suppose that Senor de Rey is very expert in archaeological matters also,” said the canon, who, still implacable, pursued his victim to his last retreat.

“Of course,” said Dona Perfecta. “What is there that these clever children of our day do not understand? They have all the sciences at their fingers’ ends. The universities and the academics teach them every thing in a twinkling, giving them a patent of learning.”

“Oh, that is unjust!” responded the canon, observing the pained expression of the engineer’s countenance.

“My aunt is right,” declared Pepe. “At the present day we learn a little of every thing, and leave school with the rudiments of various studies.”

“I was saying,” continued the canon, “that you are no doubt a great archaeologist.”

“I know absolutely nothing of that science,” responded the young man. “Ruins are ruins, and I have never cared to cover myself with dust going among them.”

Don Cayetano made an expressive grimace.

“That is not to say that I condemn archaeology,” said Dona Perfecta’s nephew quickly, observing with pain that he could not utter a word without wounding some one. “I know that from that dust issues history. Those studies are delightful and very useful.”

“You,” said the Penitentiary, putting his toothpick into the last of his back teeth, “are no doubt more inclined to controversial studies. An excellent idea has just occurred to me, Senor Don Jose; you ought to be a lawyer.”

“Law is a profession which I abhor,” replied Pepe Rey. “I know many estimable lawyers, among them my father, who is the best of men; but, in spite of so favorable a specimen, I could never had brought myself to practise a profession which consists in defending with equal readiness the *pro* and the *contra* of a question. I know of no greater misjudgment, no greater prejudice, no greater blindness, than parents show in their eagerness to dedicate their sons to the law. The chief and the most terrible plague of Spain is the crowd of our young lawyers, for whose existence a fabulous number of lawsuits are necessary. Lawsuits multiply in proportion to the demand. And even thus, numbers are left without employment, and, as a jurisconsult cannot put his hand to the plough or seat himself at the loom, the result is that brilliant squadron of idlers full of pretensions, who clamor for places, embarrass the administration, agitate public opinion, and breed revolutions. In some way they must make a living. It would be a greater misfortune if there were lawsuits enough for all of them.”

“Pepe, for Heaven’s sake, take care what you say,” said Dona Perfecta, in a tone of marked severity. “But excuse him, Senor Don Inocencio, for he is not aware that you have a nephew who, although he has only lately left the university, is a prodigy in the law.”

“I speak in general terms,” said Pepe, with firmness. “Being, as I am, the son of a distinguished lawyer, I cannot be ignorant of the fact that there are many men who practise that noble profession with honor to themselves.”

“No; my nephew is only a boy yet,” said the canon, with affected humility. “Far be it from me to assert that he is a prodigy of learning, like Senor de Rey. In time, who can tell? His talents are neither brilliant nor seductive. Of course, Jacinto’s ideas are solid and his judgment is sound. What he knows he knows thoroughly. He is unacquainted with sophistries and hollow phrases.”

Pepe Rey appeared every moment more and more disturbed. The idea that, without desiring it, his opinions should be in opposition to those of the friends of his aunt, vexed him, and he resolved

to remain silent lest he and Don Inocencio should end by throwing the plates at each other's heads. Fortunately the cathedral bell, calling the canon to the important duties of the choir, extricated him from his painful position. The venerable ecclesiastic rose and took leave of every one, treating Rey with as much amiability and kindness as if they had been old and dear friends. The canon, after offering his services to Pepe for all that he might require, promised to present his nephew to him in order that the young man might accompany him to see the town, speaking in the most affectionate terms and deigning, on leaving the room, to pat him on the shoulder. Pepe Rey, accepting with pleasure these formulas of concord, nevertheless felt indescribably relieved when the priest had left the dining-room and the house.

CHAPTER VIII IN ALL HASTE

A little later the scene had changed. Don Cayetano, finding rest from his sublime labors in a gentle slumber that had overcome him after dinner, reclined comfortably in an arm-chair in the dining-room. Rosarito, seated at one of the windows that opened into the garden, glanced at her cousin, saying to him with the mute eloquence of her eyes:

“Cousin, sit down here beside me and tell me every thing you have to say to me.”

Her cousin, mathematician though he was, understood.

“My dear cousin,” said Pepe, “how you must have been bored this afternoon by our disputes! Heaven knows that for my own pleasure I would not have played the pedant as I did; the canon was to blame for it. Do you know that that priest appears to me to be a singular character?”

“He is an excellent person!” responded Rosarito, showing the delight she felt at being able to give her cousin all the data and the information that he might require.

“Oh, yes! An excellent person. That is very evident!”

“When you know him a little better, you will see that.”

“That he is beyond all price! But it is enough for him to be your friend and your mamma’s to be my friend also,” declared the young man. “And does he come here often?”

“Every day. He spends a great deal of his time with us,” responded Rosarito ingenuously. “How good and kind he is! And how fond he is of me!”

“Come! I begin to like this gentleman.”

“He comes in the evening, besides, to play tresillo,” continued the young girl; “for every night some friends meet here—the judge of the lower court, the attorney-general, the dean, the bishop’s secretary, the alcalde, the collector of taxes, Don Inocencio’s nephew—”

“Ah! Jacintito, the lawyer.”

“Yes; he is a simple-hearted boy, as good as gold. His uncle adores him. Since he returned from the university with his doctor’s tassel—for he is a doctor in two sciences, and he took honors besides—what do you think of that?—well, as I was saying, since his return, he has come here very often with his uncle. Mamma too is very fond of him. He is a very sensible boy. He goes home early with his uncle; he never goes at night to the Casino, nor plays nor squanders money, and he is employed in the office of Don Lorenzo Ruiz, who is the best lawyer in Orbajosa. They say Jacinto will be a great lawyer, too.”

“His uncle did not exaggerate when he praised him, then,” said Pepe. “I am very sorry that I talked all that nonsense I did about lawyers. I was very perverse, was I not, my dear cousin?”

“Not at all; for my part, I think you were quite right.”

“But, really, was I not a little—”

“Not in the least, not in the least!”

“What a weight you have taken off my mind! The truth is that I found myself constantly, and without knowing why, in distressing opposition to that venerable priest. I am very sorry for it.”

“What I think,” said Rosarito, looking at him with eyes full of affection, “is that you will not find yourself at home among us.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“I don’t know whether I can make myself quite clear, cousin. I mean that it will not be easy for you to accustom yourself to the society and the ideas of the people of Orbajosa. I imagine so—it is a supposition.”

“Oh, no! I think you are mistaken.”

“You come from a different place, from another world, where the people are very clever, and very learned, and have refined manners, and a witty way of talking, and an air—perhaps I am not making myself clear. I mean that you are accustomed to live among people of refinement; you know a great deal. Here there is not what you need; here the people are not learned or very polished. Every thing is plain, Pepe. I imagine you will be bored, terribly bored, and that in the end you will have to go away.”

The expression of sadness which was natural in Rosarito’s countenance here became so profound that Pepe Rey was deeply moved.

“You are mistaken, my dear cousin. I did not come here with the ideas you fancy, nor is there between my character and my opinions and the character and opinions of the people here the want of harmony you imagine. But let us suppose for a moment that there were.”

“Let us suppose it.”

“In that case I have the firm conviction that between you and me, between us two, dear Rosarito, perfect harmony would still exist. On this point I cannot be mistaken. My heart tells me that I am not mistaken.”

Rosarito blushed deeply, but making an effort to conceal her embarrassment under smiles and fugitive glances, she said:

“Come, now, no pretences. But if you mean that I shall always approve of what you say, you are right.”

“Rosario,” exclaimed the young man, “the moment I saw you my soul was filled with gladness; I felt at the same time a regret that I had not come before to Orbajosa.”

“Now, that I am not going to believe,” she said, affecting gayety to conceal her emotion. “So soon? Don’t begin to make protestations already. See, Pepe, I am only a country girl, I can talk only about common things; I don’t know French; I don’t dress with elegance; all I know is how to play the piano; I—”

“Oh, Rosario!” cried the young man, with ardor; “I believed you to be perfect before; now I am sure you are so.”

Her mother at this moment entered the room. Rosarito, who did not know what to say in answer to her cousin’s last words, was conscious, however, of the necessity of saying something, and, looking at her mother, she cried:

“Ah! I forgot to give the parrot his dinner.”

“Don’t mind that now. But why do you stay in here? Take your cousin for a walk in the garden.”

Dona Perfecta smiled with maternal kindness at her nephew, as she pointed toward the leafy avenue which was visible through the glass door.

“Let us go there,” said Pepe, rising.

Rosarito darted, like a bird released from its cage, toward the glass door.

“Pepe, who knows so much and who must understand all about trees,” said Dona Perfecta, “will teach you how to graft. Let us see what he thinks of those young pear-trees that they are going to transplant.”

“Come, come!” called Rosarito to her cousin impatiently from the garden.

Both disappeared among the foliage. Dona Perfecta watched them until they were out of sight and then busied herself with the parrot. As she changed its food she said to herself with a contemplative air:

“How different he is! He has not even given a caress to the poor bird.”

Then, thinking it possible that she had been overheard by her brother-in-law, she said aloud:

“Cayetano, what do you think of my nephew? Cayetano!”

A low grunt gave evidence that the antiquary was returning to the consciousness of this miserable world.

“Cayetano!”

“Just so, just so!” murmured the scientist in a sleepy voice. “That young gentleman will maintain, as every one does, that the statues of Mundogrande belong to the first Phoenician immigration. But I will convince him—”

“But, Cayetano!”

“But, Perfecta! There! Now you will insist upon it again that I have been asleep.”

“No, indeed; how could I insist upon any thing so absurd! But you haven’t told me what you think about that young man.”

Don Cayetano placed the palm of his hand before his mouth to conceal a yawn; then he and Dona Perfecta entered upon a long conversation. Those who have transmitted to us the necessary data for a compilation of this history omit this dialogue, no doubt because it was entirely confidential. As for what the engineer and Rosarito said in the garden that afternoon, it is evident that it was not worthy of mention.

On the afternoon of the following day, however, events took place which, being of the gravest importance, ought not to be passed over in silence. Late in the afternoon the two cousins found themselves alone, after rambling through different parts of the garden in friendly companionship and having eyes and ears only for each other.

“Pepe,” Rosario was saying, “all that you have been telling me is pure fancy, one of those stories that you clever men know so well how to put together. You think that because I am a country girl I believe every thing I am told.”

“If you understood me as well as I think I understand you, you would know that I never say any thing I do not mean. But let us have done with foolish subtleties and lovers’ sophistries, that lead only to misunderstandings. I will speak to you only in the language of truth. Are you by chance a young lady whose acquaintance I have made on the promenade or at a party, and with whom I propose to spend a pleasant hour or two? No, you are my cousin. You are something more. Rosario, let us at once put things on their proper footing. Let us drop circumlocutions. I have come here to marry you.”

Rosario felt her face burning, and her heart was beating violently.

“See, my dear cousin,” continued the young man. “I swear to you that if you had not pleased me I should be already far away from this place. Although politeness and delicacy would have obliged me to make an effort to conceal my disappointment, I should have found it hard to do so. That is my character.”

“Cousin, you have only just arrived,” said Rosarito laconically, trying to laugh.

“I have only just arrived, and I already know all that I wanted to know; I know that I love you; that you are the woman whom my heart has long been announcing to me, saying to me night and day, ‘Now she is coming, now she is near; now you are burning.’”

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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