

"That is a good name, too. Is she going on board, or does she stay ashore?"

"She stays ashore. Yes, sir," said Jose Benito, his voice breaking with sobs as he looked down at the child, who was still clinging to his hand.

"Who are you little girl?" asked the sailor, kindly.

"I am Maria," she said.

Under his rough exterior, Antonio carried the tender heart of a child. Although he swore valiantly at the crowd of weeping women, he pitied every single one of them, and the passionate sobs of this little girl came near making him cry as he had not cried since the day, years before, when he left the paternal cottage to begin the life of a sailor of the seas.

Maria was a lovely child. Her large brown eyes, glistening with tears, looked up imploringly into the sailor's face. She clung with all her strength to the boy's hand, and as Antonio tried gently to draw her away she threw herself at his feet, and, clasping her little hands, begged him not to separate her from Jose.

Here was a nice situation. The passengers, with the exception of the boy, were all on board, and the last boat was waiting for Antonio. He could hear the creaking of the chains as the sailors weighed anchor. There was not a moment to lose, and still Maria clung to him with all the frenzy of childish grief. Put her away roughly he could not.

"You must kiss your brother good-bye and run home, little girl. There is no help for it," he said.

"She is not my sister," said Jose Benito.

"You poor little thing, who are you, then?" asked the sailor. "And why do you care so much for this boy?"

"I am Maria," sobbed the child.

Poor Antonio was in despair.

"The fact that you are Maria does not help matters in the least," he said, desperately. Then, turning to the boy—

"Here, you, Jose, or Benito, or whoever you are, tell me who is this little girl, and be quick about it. She is dressed better than you are. Who is she?"

"She is Maria; that is all I know, sir," said the boy, still sobbing. "She lives in the house where I lived. They say she is the niece of the lady there; but nobody cares for her."

"Poor little thing," said Antonio, drawing his rough hand over his eyes. "You can come aboard, little one," he added; "there are women who will look after you, and when you grow up, if you still love your friend, you can marry him. But if we wait here any longer the captain will scold us. Will you come, Maria?"

"Yes, yes," said the child, eagerly, smiling through her tears. "Jose Benito is all I love in the world, for he is the only one who loves me. The others hate the sight of me. Oh, I know it all the time."

As Antonio seized the two children to hurry them into the boat, a woman came running down the pier.

"Maria! Maria!" she called. Her voice was loud and angry.

The little girl trembled with terror. If Antonio had not caught her in his arms she would have fallen to the ground.

"Is this child yours?" he asked, scowling at the woman.

"She belongs to my mistress, and I have orders to take her away from this fool of a boy," replied the woman. She was dressed like a servant, and her face was as repelling as her harsh, ugly voice.

"I have no right to keep her," said the sailor fiercely, "but I must say that leaving her with you is like throwing a cinder in the jaws of a shark."

"Wretch!" screamed the woman; "but then who could expect anything decent and civil from an ugly sailor like you?"

"If I am as ugly as you are may the Lord have mercy on me!" replied Antonio. He kissed the weeping child and sprang into the boat.

"Good-bye, Maria. I will come back some day," called Jose Benito as the boat left.

"Good-bye, Maria," called Antonio. And as he saw the woman with the ugly face dragging the child away he muttered a malediction between his teeth, and swore by all the saints in the calendar that if there was any justice in Galicia that woman would end on the gallows.

Years came and went. The suns of twelve summers had scorched the old pier at Corunna, when one morning a ship's boat, rowed by two sailors, grated its keel on the beach, and a young man, the only passenger, sprang lightly ashore.

He was a tall, graceful young fellow with wavy auburn hair, frank blue eyes, and a handsome face, but his garments were old and threadbare. His trousers were of coarse, gray cloth, and too long for him; his coat, shiny with much usage, was buttoned up to his throat as if to conceal the lack of starched linen; his straw hat, broad-brimmed like those worn on the South American plains, was frayed at the edges, and his heavy shoes were covered with patches, although they had been polished until they shone like a mirror. The utter poverty of his appearance combined with its cleanliness and neatness was extremely pathetic.

The young man stood still for a moment running his eyes over the different streets which led from the water, as if striving to recall old memories. Then turning into one of them he bent his steps toward the main street of the town. The main street was where all the life of the small seaport centred. Here were the handsomest houses, and before one of the largest the stranger stopped and timidly rang the bell.

"Does the widow Sanchez live here?" he asked, as a servant opened the door.

"Yes, she lives here," was the curt reply.

"Told her that Jose Benito wishes to see her," said the young man.

Without asking the stranger to enter, the servant turned away, when from the interior of the house came a sweet, eager voice:

"Jose Benito! Can it be true?"

"So true, Senorita, that I am here to prove it," said the young man, lifting his tattered straw hat as a beautiful young girl appeared in the doorway.

"Where is Jose Benito? Where is he!" she exclaimed.

"Here, Senorita," he replied, with a graceful bow.

"You! But—but Jose Benito was a boy when—" she hesitated.

"Yes, Senorita, he was a boy when Maria bade him good-bye, but that was twelve years ago."

"When I bade him good-bye! True, it was years ago," she said with a weary sigh.

"You, Senorita—are you Maria?"

"I am Maria."

"I am Maria!" Those were the very words you said when poor old Antonio asked your name."

"Yes, yes, I remember. Are you, then, Jose Benito? I am sure of it now," cried the girl, her lovely face radiant with delight.

She seized his hand and drew him into a small reception room near the door. "It is such a long time since we parted," she said, catching her breath. As she looked at his handsome face her cheeks were covered with blushes.

"Yes, Senorita, twelve long weary years," he replied without raising his eyes.

"Senorita! Why do you address me as Senorita? Am I not always Maria to you?"

The young man could not refrain from seizing and pressing the little hand which she extended to him. Then drawing away from her, he said sadly:

"In those days long ago Jose Benito was a boy and Maria a little child. Now Jose Benito is a man, but as poor as when he wept at parting with the child who is now a beautiful woman."

"Supposing you are poor that is nothing," she said, blushing. "I know by your dress that fortune has not been kind to you before you told me; but for all that, dear old friend, you have improved. You talk better and have better manners than many a man who has gold in his purse."

Jose Benito's handsome face flushed crimson.

"Still, after so many years a man ought to bring money to show for his work," he said with a sigh.

"Your hands are soft and white, still I am sure you have been industrious," she said, smiling sweetly.

He made no reply; he did not even raise his eyes to her face.

"Tell me, where is that sailor with the ugly face, who was going to carry me away with him?" she asked.

"He had an ugly face, it is true, Senorita, but he had a good heart. Poor old Antonio was a noble man."

"Oh, yes, I remember how kindly he spoke to me. Where is he?"

"Ah, Senorita, who can tell? In so many years the wind blows a sailor in all directions."

"Poor old man! I should like to see him again," she said.

There was a rustling in the hallway, and a tall, elderly woman entered the room, followed by two girls, who resembled her so much that it was evident that they were her daughters. All three were richly dressed in trailing silk attire and covered with jewellery, in striking contrast to Maria, who wore a cheap cotton gown with no ornaments.

"What is this? Who is this man, Maria?" exclaimed the woman in a sharp, disdainful voice.

Before Maria could reply, Jose Benito came forward.

"In this Senora Sanchez?" he asked politely.

"That is my name," replied the woman, tossing her head proudly.

"I am Jose Benito," he said.

"May the saints have mercy on us!" she exclaimed. Then turning to her daughters, she added:

"What do you think of this good-for-nothing?"

"That he has come back as poor and as shiftless as he went away," said Petra.

"And as big a fool," added Ramona, with a scornful laugh.

"Yes, more stupid than ever," said their mother, "look how he stands there like a log. He scarcely hears what we say."

"And you, what are you doing here alone with this man," asked Petra, turning toward Maria.

"I was only wishing him welcome," said the poor girl, blushing violently.

"You cannot call this fellow a man," said Ramona, looking at him with a contemptuous toss of her head.

"I should think Maria would remember too well the trouble she had for saying good-bye to that boy to ever wish to set eyes on him again," exclaimed Petra. "That cost her not only a good whipping, but three days' solitary confinement on bread and water."

"What is the matter with you. Why are you staring at my daughter in such an impudent fashion?" exclaimed Witow Sanchez, addressing the young man, who stood gazing at Petra, his eyes blazing with indignation. "And let me tell you," she added, "if this bold girl Maria was punished for saying good-bye to you, she will be punished still more now for talking to you here alone. She will not only receive a sound scolding, but whenever my daughters and myself go to the promenade she will be looked in her room that we may not return to find her disgracing herself talking with a beggar."

"The Senorita Maria is not to blame, Senora. It was I who," began the young man.

She interrupted him.

"That makes no difference. She had no right to listen to you. And as for you, the sooner you take yourself away the better."

"Senora, I must wait until you read this," said the young man, handing her a letter. "Had I not been ordered to bring it to you, I should not have entered your house without your permission."

"I am glad you have decency enough to apologise. Give the letter to me. Who sent it?"

"It is from my master."

"Who is your master?"

"A generous, noble-hearted man, Senora; and a very rich man too. He found me on board ship and he pitied me for my poverty and misfortunes. He offered to take me as his servant and I was only too glad to accept."