

The Storyteller

THE STORY OF SANTOS.

You ask me to tell you a story, Caro. Before my master, the Senor Americano, went home (and he did not live long after that; for indeed, he had the tisis and his cough was bad) he called me to him one day. 'Santos,' he said, 'you have been a good and faithful servant, and I want to do something for you before I go away. I have sent for you so you can tell me how I may best help you.'

Then I opened my heart to the kind senor, and told him I wanted a bit of land, and a house of my own, and he said he would see about it, the good master!

A week later we drove out in the country, four miles from the railroad and store, till we came to some fields sloping down to the river, and the senor showed me the land he had bought for me. Then was my heart glad; and Pedro (your father, Caro) and I went to work with a will; and we built the little house where we soon went to live and where you were born. I found plenty to do in those days, what with picking cotton in the season and tending herds of cattle for the rancheros, and planting my own little garden, my time was all taken up.

I have said our house was on the banks of the beautiful Guadalupe—a lovely river that was rarely so deep but that it could be forded—its waters dashing over a stony bed; and winding in and out of the country—here surrounded by steep banks and rocky cliffs, and anon passing through low lying lands; everywhere bordered by magnificent trees or bushes of mesquite, the long branches and vines in some places dipping into the water, making a scene of fairy-like enchantment. I can see you, Caro, a little child, with bare brown legs, paddling in the water and shouting for joy as you tried to make believe fish. And then I see other scenes; the Sundays and fiestas when your grandmother and mother and you and I would walk down the river to where we had erected a little shrine to our Blessed Lady. I carved the figure, Caro, and your mother dressed it; perhaps those who go to the great cathedrals would say it was ugly and poor; but we did not think of that when we knelt down to say the 'Pater' and 'Ave,' for God and His Holy Mother seemed very near in our little temple whose roof was the blue sky. We had lived thus three happy years, when I got work to do for a German ranchero who had the large hacienda just above our field. A beautiful place it was, of hundreds of acres, and on the brow of the hill, right near the long, steep road that led from the river, was the ranchero's house, that looked more like an old mission building than anything else. It was built of stone, one storey high, nearly 100 feet long, and was covered with whitewash.

Here and there were small, square windows set deep in the stone, and all across the front of the house was a gallery, completely shut in by a beautiful vine, beyond this was the farmyard, and back of the house were the fields full of herds of cattle all enclosed in miles of barbed wire fence. Still further west were acres of land, on which grew the grape vines that were trained criss-cross over low-roofed arbors, for the chief work of the Senor Zoeller was the making of wine and butter.

I had added a boat to my stock about that time, and the ranchero wanted me to take his butter and wine down the river twice a week, and ship it to the city from the railroad station.

'You are the only Mexican I can trust to do it, Santos,' he said. 'Niccolo and Pietro and the other fellows would go to sleep on the way.'

The work was easy, and the master, though strict was always fair. One thing I have forgotten to tell you, Caro, that he was blind. A tall and powerful man, with a long gray beard, a patriarch, I once heard my old master, the Senor Americano, call him, he nevertheless could not see, nor could he have managed the ranchero if it had not been for his administrator and his daughter and only child, the Senorita Elsa.

She was not more than nineteen at that time, and motherless, but so sweet she was and good, I thought, even though in religion a heretic.

Tall she was like her father, and fair as a veritable Norse maiden, I heard the Senor Americano say, when she was only fifteen. He said many strange things, the senor!

It was the administrator I did not like, Caro—a bad man he was, I felt sure, and later I proved it. Where he came from nobody knew. Some said he had lived a life in the plains, and others that he had fled from England to escape the law; but that was only rumor. There he was, trusted by the Senor Zoeller, and, alas! by the fair Elsa.

Some one else did not like the administrator, Caro. Next to the Zoeller hacienda was another, five miles distant, owned by the Senor Enrique Hernandez. Alone he lived with only the ranch hands, and a cousin of your grandmother's, old Junata, to do the cooking and cleaning. His chief companion was his dog, and his best friend was his violin, on which he played till he seemed to draw the heart from you. I knew he loved the Senorita Elsa, and I knew the administrator loved her too. Worthy she was of the best, for in his own country the Senor Zoeller had been of the nobility; poverty, hard and bitter, had driven him in his young days to our corner of the world.

It was customary for the administrator to go once a week to the city, 30 miles distant, to attend to the

master's buying and selling; but there came one spring day when, to my surprise, he suggested that I should go in his stead. Just at that time your grandmother was sent for to visit her sick sister, five miles back in the country, so it was decided for you and your mother to go with her, Caro, and for the house to be closed in our absence.

I had expected to be gone four days; but the good Lord Who watches over us ordained otherwise. On arriving in the city, I found the man to whom my master sold all his wine and butter had been called away unexpectedly, and would not be back for a week, so, as there was nothing for me to wait for, I decided to return home.

I took the evening train, and, alighting at the little station, started to walk the four miles home. I was trudging alone in the late twilight, when I heard the sound of approaching carriage wheels on the hard road, and presently a small covered wagon dashed rapidly past me. Late as it was, and quickly as it passed, I could have sworn that the sole occupant was the Senorita Elsa. For a moment I stood still, haunted by a deep foreboding. Was the master ill, or anything wrong at the hacienda? It was too late to stop the senorita, so I hurried on until a mile further the mystery, as I thought, was solved. The river, which I had now reached, had become a raging torrent, sweeping down through the hills that lay to the northward. It was a spring freshet, which seemed with every rush of the waters to be increasing in volume.

At this point the banks were so high that it had not yet overpassed its bounds; but my house, a half mile beyond, was on the lowland close to the river. I ran the whole half mile, and arrived on the high, steep hill above the river and close to the Senor Zoeller's house, breathless, panting, with despair in my heart. Yes, my little house was gone. I could but raise my heart in thankfulness that the flood found it empty, when the sound of voices reached me, and, drawing near to the house, in a moment I had forgotten my own loss in what I heard.

Two figures, my blind master and the administrator, were standing on the brow of the hill in front of the gallery, the administrator with a hand on the senor's arm, evidently holding him back.

'It is madness, sir,' he was saying; 'the river is a flood, you can do nothing, the Fraulein Elsa is in Santos' boat, so far in safety; and there is no other boat near in which we could follow her.'

'Let me go,' cried the old man; 'boat or no boat, I cannot leave my only child to perish alone.'

From my position behind a tree I looked down at the river. By that time it was brilliant moonlight, and in the clear southern atmosphere everything stood out almost as distinctly as by daylight. I stared and rubbed my eyes—the Senorita Elsa in my boat! Neither were anywhere in view, and my eyesight then, Caro, was as keen as an Indian's. Pity for the blind old man moved me to rush forward; but I must get at the bottom of this, so I held back.

'The boat has come to the bend in the river,' said the administrator, 'and the flood is not so serious as some I have seen. Have courage, Herr. Let me lead you back to the house, and then I will get my horse and ride down the river and summon help to rescue the fraulein as soon as I can.'

My poor master! He suffered himself to be led back to the house and put in a chair on the gallery. He groaned and wrung his hands, talking in his German tongue that I knew not a word of, Caro.

What could I do? The ranch hands had evidently all gone either up or down the river, no one was near to help me—no one by to corroborate the evidence of my eyes that the Senorita Elsa was not and had not been on the river.

I stole after the administrator, who went at once to the field to get his horse. Suddenly the whole thing flashed on me. It was truly the Senorita Elsa I passed on the road, and she was flying to some point where she could meet this man and marry him. He, meanwhile, had deceived the blind man into thinking his child was adrift on the raging flood; and now he was about to mount his horse and ride away, leaving the good senor helpless, broken-hearted, and alone! It was the work of a moment for me to spring forward and seize the wretch by the collar.

'You villain!' I said, under my breath; and then in my excitement I had recourse to Spanish, pouring forth my anger and contempt, as I shook him again and again, like the puppy he was.

I was strong, but the administrator was wily, and he had evidently been trained in fighting. His horse stood under a tree, saddled and bridled, another proof that the whole thing was planned beforehand, and the incident of the flood used at the last moment to heighten the deception. With a sudden and rapid twist he shook himself free from my grasp, giving me a blow which sent me reeling backward. In a second he was on his horse, and, galloping across the fields, was soon out of sight. During our short encounter he had uttered no word, probably thinking like a wise man, that it was best to save his breath for the combat. To follow him was useless; and then I thought of the unhappy senor; better let him believe his child was dead than to have him know she could desert him and deceive him so.

I hurried back to the gallery, and the master knew my step. He showed no surprise at my unexpected return. All was too strange and terrible on that fateful night. I comforted him and calmed him as well as I could. Long after, Caro, it did me good to know that