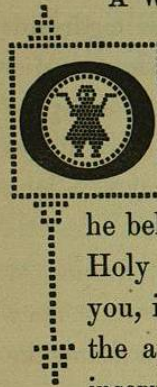


XVII

A WEDDING AT SAN ANTONIO



F the resident Padres at San Antonio, Tomás de las Peñas and Reyes Carrasco, Padre Tomás at least was no causationist. What he believed he believed, and that was the end of it. If Holy Church said a thing was good for you, it *was* good for you. Any failure in the application lay in yourself, or in the inscrutable wisdom of God, who often ordered things contrariwise to our expectation the better to increase the merit of belief. Holy Church had prerogatives of cursings and exorcisms and cuttings off, power against men and Legion and evil beasts. For it was not to be supposed that her children would be safe against persons and Powers of the Air, and be given over to the ravages of wildcats and bears.

There was a reason for you if you were so contumacious as to require one, though a greater

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merit if you were able to believe it, whether it looked reasonable or not. Further than that, San Antonio himself had preached to the fishes, and Padre Tomás preached to the bears.

Something may have been wanting in the administration, for the Padre preached in the Mission church while the bears visited the calf-pens by night. These depredations continuing, Padre Tomás went farther, and cut them off from the company of the elect, as you shall hear.

The Superiors of the Order of St. Francis of Assisi had a wonderful keenness for parts. They put a man to his best use with seldom a mistake in the selection. This accounts for their being at once the least covetous and most materially successful of Holy Brotherhoods. Padre Carrasco had a knack with cattle and the soil, Padre Tomás of the Stripes, a gift for the cure of souls. They got on admirably together, but, though their spirits seemed equal to their labors, it appeared at times that their bodies were ill set. Padre Carrasco was a lean man with a thoughtful cast; Padre Tomás was most mortifyingly rotund, comfortable, soft, and rosy. It was his particular

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affliction that if he ate no more than a handful of peas with cold water, it stuck to his ribs and made him fat. Such being the case, there was no merit in abstemiousness, and the Padre did not practice it. He was a strict ritualist, especially observant of high feasts and festivals, very tender in confessional, mild as to penances, much loved by his people. His project of arraig-ning the powers of the Church against the bears was favorably looked upon by the neophytes. Holy water was efficacious in so many things! Upon this conclusion the day chosen was that same one upon which Isidro and his party were riding in from Las Chimineas. Toward the end of afternoon all San Antonio was out in procession, priest and priest's boy, chasuble and stole, censers, candles, and banners, and, to crown all, a picture of the patron of the Mission in a gilt frame; after these the choir and several hundred Indians, more or less naked, interested and sincere.

The procession skirted the fields, winding to avoid wet pastures and unclean thickets; the candles starred out under the gloom of the

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bearded oaks, and paled again in the sun; blue smoke of incense curled across the meadows. The mellow voices of the choir set the time for the feet of the elder Indians, who shuffled and crooned melodiously behind them. Their bodies swung; they beat their hands together; it needed but a hint to set them off in the rhythmic ceremonial dances of their pagan times. Your native Indian is devoutly a lover of ritual; the neophytes of San Antonio were enjoying themselves highly. Padre Carrasco signed the cross in the air and sprinkled holy water on the tasseled grass. The voice of Padre Tomás rose solemn and unctuous.

"I adjure you, O bears, by the true God, by the Holy God, by the most blessed Virgin Mary, by the twelve apostles, and by our most reverend saint and patron, to leave the field to our flocks, not to molest them or come near them."

"*In nomine patris*," droned the procession behind him. Isidro and Jacinta came up with them at the northeast corner of the Mission inclosure.

Padre Tomás loved guests and the exercise

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of hospitality, but he had other affairs. He waved the party of riders aside and proceeded with his holy office. They fell in with children and dogs tailing the procession, and so rode to the Mission, saw the candles, censers, and effigy of the patron disposed and Padre Tomás restored to his normal use.

"Padre," said Escobar, when he had introduced himself and been well received, "I desire you to give lodgment to this lady." The Padre stared, seeing only a slim lad with a sullen air. "I wish, also, that she may be suitably clothed as becoming her condition, and in the morning you shall marry us."

Isidro thought it well to be forward with any business once decided upon. He saw a hundred doubts, questions, protests, trembling in the Padre's countenance. He went on to forestall them. "No doubt there are many things, Padre, which seem to you to want explaining, but the first account of this matter I owe the Father President at Carmelo, to whom I am bound. After that I shall be pleased to make all things clear. For myself, I want nothing of you but a

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meal; we have eaten nothing since morning." This was to Padre Tomás a predicament as serious as for a maid to be riding about in man's clothing; moreover, a matter within his province, and remediable. He felicitated himself that he had planned something by way of addition to his evening meal, — a little matter of stuffed fowl, a dish of curried eggs, a pastry of wild strawberries.

Isidro's plan to marry the girl he had known only as El Zarzo was not so much out of hand as it appeared. It had come out of him all at once like a shot, but there had been a night's meditation back of it. Once out, it was sure to be followed up in fact, for the youngster had great respect for his own judgments, and honored them with the act as often as possible. His attitude toward women was informed by the evidence of his time, — that they did not know very well how to take care of themselves. The girl was pure, — he was sure of that, — but in the common estimate besmirched; that was hardly fair, and Isidro loved fairness; otherwise he would hardly have allowed Mascado his horse and a rope. In much the same spirit he lent the

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girl the succor of his name. He had a high and mighty notion that scandal could not stick on the skirts of an Escobar. Well, not if he was at hand to see to it. As for the girl, she was hardly in case to be consulted, having no one to take her part, equally no one to forbid the banns; and, being a girl, probably did not know what was best for her.

So far, good; he had yet to face his dedicate calling and the will of Saavedra, in whose jurisdiction he stood. That checked him; but as he had never felt the need of a wife, the obligation of having one sat lightly, and he reflected that there had been those who had arrived at saintship through a virgin marriage. He was honest enough toward Saavedra to admit that virgin it must be until he had heard the Superior's will in the matter. He looked to the sacrament to restore the girl's esteem, but he glozed over the inference that, as a good Catholic, if marriage made no impediment to his priestly career, the girl would still be bound. If he did not have her himself, no other could. If he thought of this at all he was not visibly moved to commiserate her estate;

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by which you will perceive that there was more in the youth's heart, whether it was in his head or not, than he was rightly aware. Of all his contraptious obligations, that of providing for the girl stood uppermost; so he out with his proposal, and the thing once shaped, stood to it.

Padre Tomás was more than fluttered by the circumstance. He had a very simple way of arranging marriages among the neophytes, — every year he stood the marriageable youths and maidens in two lines, and if neither found any objection to the party opposite, he married them then and there, after which he delivered a homily. He had prepared one for this occasion overnight, but found himself put out of calculation by the high airs of Escobar, and the confession before communion of both parties. They had a difficulty just at the last, for the girl had no name by which she could properly be married. But as she was sure upon the point of baptism, and well grounded in the Christian observances, — Isidro's work, — it was settled by registering her under the name of her foster father, Lebecque, with the place left vacant for her Christian name until Isidro had

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come back from the hut of the Grapevine, where he purposed going.

Escobar had half an hour with his wife in the Mission garden before he set out. The elevation of the sacrament was still upon him, that and the consciousness of having behaved much more handsomely than could reasonably have been expected of him. It lent him sufficient grace to get smoothly through with what might have been an embarrassing interview with a very pretty girl whom he had known as a boy, married without consulting, and was about to desert without compunction. The girl hardly came off so well, being in bondage, poor child, to a harder master than the marriage vow. But she was very pretty, as Isidro found space in the preoccupation of his affairs to admit. The clothes that had been provided for her were all that the Mission afforded, — in fact the holiday dress of the Señora Romero, wife to one of San Antonio's three soldiers, — a chemise of white linen, a neckerchief of fine drawn work, a cloth skirt, and the universal rebozo. The smoke-black hair was drawn back under a comb, and revealed the slow, soft oval of the cheek and chin,

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so fine and transparent and richly warmed, running into the pale brownness of the brow, the black, deep-lighted eyes, invariably fine in her type, under the delicately meeting brows. She had a trapped look, — the look of a small hunted thing at bay, and the curve of the mouth was pitiful. Isidor admitted the haggardness as well as the good looks, but it struck no spark out of him.

"Wife," he said, for in fact he knew not what else to call her, "you seem to have fallen into good hands. The Señora Romero is no doubt an excellent lady. This leads me to believe you will be quite comfortable while I am about other affairs. I will go first to Peter Lebecque; there must be things which he should say to me necessary to your proper establishment. Also I must see Father Saavedra, for my leave-taking was something uncourteous. I doubt not the good Padre thinks me mad or dead. After that I cannot tell what will become of me, but you, being my wife, need have no concern. I will come again and see you safely and honorably bestowed, but the manner of it I cannot at this time tell. It

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will be somewhat as circumstance and the Father President direct. In the mean time, I commend you to God and Our Lady, to St. Francis our patron, and to the hospitality of Padre Tomás."

This was the substance of his speech, delivered at length in the pomegranate walk of San Antonio's garden. Jacinta was dumb under it. Such was not the custom of bridegrooms; this much she would have known without the excellently voluble discourse on the nature of marriage bestowed upon her by the corporal's wife with the wedding clothes. She was the daughter of a proud, sensitive man and a sensitive, passionate woman, and, with her forest breeding, had the instinct of a wild pigeon for straight cuts. So she arrived at some very mortifying conclusions. First, that by her boy's trappings, which she had never thought to question, she had lost esteem of very many people, among them Escobar; next, that much as he disapproved of those, she was much more acceptable to him as Peter Lebecque's lad than as what she now showed to be; most of all, that not now or at any time had he acknowledged one pulse of the hot tide that

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flooded her at the mere thought of him. She had lain all night with quick heart, clinched hands, and a maze of thought in which one thing only seemed clear, — the wild creature's instinct to seek cover and dissemble, never to let him know; the phrase had an echo to it as of some far receding wave in the crypts of consciousness, — the heartbreak of Ysabel crying in her child. All her energies were bent on that. She would have liked to run away into the hills, to the free life where she might never have word of Escobar, but she knew that she would run back again in sheer hunger for a sight or sound of him. One question she allowed herself in the Mission garden; all the pride of the Castros rose up and braved her for it.

"Señor," she said, "when we rode with Mariano's sheep toward Pastería you told me that you were to become a priest and priests may not marry."

"Why, as to that," said the young man, still going smoothly on in the consciousness of irreproachable intent, "the Church is very explicit as to continuing in the married estate, but many

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of the apostles, I understand, and of the saints not a few, have been married before taking orders, notably St. Paul and St. Peter and Santa Cecilia; but that is a matter within the province of the Father President."

"And what will become of *me*?" was the cry that rose in the girl's heart and broke in a thin bubble upon her lips; she went dumb, — answered by nods only, with dropped eyes and folded hands. Isidro commended her discretion, when the poor child was only miserable. He kissed her hand at parting and found it chill.

To say that Padre Tomás was astounded to see the bridegroom ride away on his wedding morning was to say only half. He was even affronted, and stood choking and staring to receive Escobar's last instructions, delivered with the smooth, courteous air which sat so well on the personable youth. No doubt, thought the Padre, it was commendable to show one's self subservient to the Superior of the Order, and continence was a virtue; but if all men practiced it, how else would there be souls to save and God be glorified in

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the multitude of his saints? Padre Tomás was reputed to have contributed something to that end.

Jacinta lay on her bed shaken with dry sobbing. Hot flushes sickened through her as she recalled the Señora Romero's pointed advice and sly allusions. In the weeks that followed she was likely to learn the use of blushes and tears and other woman's gear.

Isidro rode straight, with Arnaldo at his back, to the place of the Grapevine, reaching it on the afternoon of the second day's riding. He meant to have some plain talk with the old trapper, get a name for his wife and some satisfaction for his chafed dignity over the affair of Juan Ruiz, in which you will remember Lebecque was named a witness.

Trusting to Arnaldo's knowledge of trails, they left the traveled road, *el camino real* of that time, and went easily by a scanty wooded hill and a wide mesa, windy and high. This saved horseflesh, but gained them nothing in time, for, arriving early in the afternoon, they found Lebecque from home. Isidro sat in the shade of the