

CHAPTER IV.

And yet it was again weeks and weeks before she heard another word. In those weeks there were times when she hated José because he never once spoke of what she wished to hear. She could not speak herself--she could not ask questions; she could only wait--hungry and desolate. They would not even say--these people--whether he had gone to the King of America or not; whether he was at the other end of the world, or whether he was only in some other city. The truth was that José had innocently cautioned the others against speaking of one whom Pepita disliked to hear of.

"She does not like him," he said, sorrowfully. "Girls are like that sometimes. It makes her angry when one talks of him."

But slow as he was, he could not help seeing in time that something was wrong with Pepita. Sometimes she scarcely talked at all, and she did not flame up when Jovita grumbled; it seemed as if she scarcely heard. Her eyes had grown bigger, too, and there was a burning light in them. They always appeared to be asking something; often he found himself obliged to look up, and saw them fixed upon him, as if they meant to wrest something from him. The careless bird-like look had gone, the careless bird-like laughter and mocking. He began gradually to fancy she was always thinking of something that hurt and excited her. But then there was nothing. She had all she wanted. She had as many trinkets as the other girls; she had even more. She had so little work to do that she

had sought some outside her home to fill her spare moments, and she loved no one. There was not a man she knew who would not have come if she had smiled. What, then, could it be? And how pretty she was! Prettier than ever; prettier because of the burning look in her eyes, and--and something else he could not explain; a kind of restless grace of movement, as if she was always on the alert.

"Are you not pleased with Madrid any longer?" he asked her once.

"Yes," she answered.

"Do you want anything?"

"No."

"It seems to me," he said, slowly, and with much caution, "that you do not amuse yourself as you did at first."

"It is not so new," she said; "but there is still pleasure enough." And for a moment she kept her great eager eyes fixed upon him, and then she moved slowly toward him and touched him with a soft touch on his big clumsy shoulder and said: "You are a good brother! You are a good brother!"

"I have always loved you," he said, with simple pride. "When we were children, you know I always promised that you should see better days."

She had forgotten to count the weeks and days, or to take note of the changing seasons, when one hot day in the early summer he came in--José--with an innocent joy in his face.

He looked questioningly at Pepita two or three times and then coughed.

"You will not mind now," he said. "It is so long ago, and it is all over. Sebastiano has come back. He did not go to America; he is in Madrid to-day. He came to me in the street; he did not avoid me; he was rejoiced to see me. It appears that it is all well with him. Afterward Manuel told me. It appears there is a very pretty girl he met in Lisbon--she is here now. It is said he will marry her."

Pepita clinched her hands and stared at him with eyes that burned as never before.

"It is not true!" she said through her teeth. "It is not true!"

José fell back two steps.

"Not true?" he stammered. "Why not? They say so."

"A man who slays bulls as he does," she said, "does not forget a woman in a day."

José was lost in amazement.

"I thought you believed nothing but ill of him," he said. "What has happened? You are angry--angry."

"It is not true about the girl from Lisbon," she said. "It is a lie they amuse themselves with."

Never had innocent José been so thunderstruck. This was beyond his understanding. He was afraid to speak, and kept looking sidewise at her as he ate his soup; but she said no more.

"What has happened?" he said to himself over and over again. "Will she not allow him to marry another, though she does not want him herself?"

Later he went out again. It must be confessed that he went in the hope of seeing Sebastiano, or at least hearing of him. There was no difficulty in hearing of him. In the wine-shops and at the street corners he was being talked of in every group. Of what else could people speak who knew he had returned? How there would be sport--how there would be pleasure! Life began to wear a more vivacious aspect. And what had he not done since he had left Madrid? Such success--such adulation! The impression among his adorers was that the whole world had been at his feet. Here and there one could hear snatches of song of which his name was the refrain. It was only because he so loved his own people that he had refused the magnificent offers made by the King of America.

He had refused them; he had chosen to remain in Spain. He had come to Madrid. Soon he would appear before them again. He had even gained in strength and dexterity; and as to his good looks--ah! what a dashing, handsome fellow!

José had the good luck to see him again, even to speak to him. What fortune--what happiness! The honest fellow felt himself overjoyed. They were to be friends again.

It was quite late when he found himself walking homeward over the white road again. He had drunk wine enough to make him feel quite gay; and as he went he sang now and then a verse of a song about the joys of the bull-fight.

When he was about half-way home he thought he heard behind him the sound

of rapid feet--light feet running. He stopped and looked back. What was it he saw, or thought he saw? Was it a small dark shape which flitted instantly into the shadow of the trees? It looked like a woman who did not wish to be seen. Well, he would not look, then. What was the use of giving her trouble? He tramped on, perhaps a little more slowly. It was late for a woman to be out on the lonely road alone. It must be past midnight. Then the thought came to him that perhaps she wished to pass him. In that case he might look the other way, on the opposite side of the road. In fact, he crossed to the other side to leave the way clear, and went on good-naturedly, singing his song loudly and all out of

tune. Yes, he had been right. Soon the footsteps drew nearer; the shadow within the shadow slipped past--ran swiftly. But by that time they were nearing his home, and there was a stretch of road unshaded by anything. The shadow hesitated, darted across the white space, and José, seeing it in the full light, uttered a cry, and started in pursuit. In but a few moments he had reached it and held it by the arm, feeling all the slender body breathless and panting.

"Pepita!" he cried. "It is you?"

She let the mantilla drop from her face and stood and looked at him.

"Yes," she answered, "it is Pepita; and you need not ask--I will not tell you. I have been to--to look at something--and I will tell you nothing."

He put his hand up and rubbed his forehead violently. Then he let it drop.

"I shall not ask," he said. "You would do no wrong. You are a good girl; but--"

"You think I have gone mad," she said, with a sudden change of voice and a piteous little shiver. "Who knows? Perhaps some one has cast the evil-eye upon me. But I have done no harm, and I shall do none."

"No," he said, rather stupidly. "You would do no harm. Let us go in, then."

And without another word they went into the house, Pepita to her bed to be awake and gaze at the darkness, José to sit with his head in his hands and thinking a thousand wild thoughts until he fell asleep.

He could not know that where he had been she had been also; that when the snatches of song had been sung she had heard them; that when the people had talked of Sebastiano she had listened; that when Sebastiano had stood in the bright light she had stood in the shadow and watched. She had not thought of danger or of being discovered. She had only thought of one thing and listened for one thing--and once she had heard this thing discussed by some chattering young chulos.

"She is a pretty young girl," they said. "Not as pretty as that other, but handsome enough. She was a little devil, that other. But it is a mistake for a man like him to marry. How can a man feel free to risk his life gayly when he has a woman hung about his neck?"

"He will not," she whispered, growing hot all over. "No, he has not forgotten. I have given the little heart and the flowers and candles. And he could not forget while I--He will come back."

She struggled with the passionate persistence of a child. Since she would not give him up, he was hers.

But she did not know what to do. There was nothing but to wait in this fever of strange misery and unrest, which grew more cruel every day; and at the bull-fight if he would only look--perhaps--yes, if he saw her face, he would understand and come.

In the days before the great entertainment took place she was like some little savage creature at bay. She could scarcely bear to hear the voices of those who spoke to her. Once she went into the church and threw herself upon her knees as usual, but when she looked up her eyes were fierce.

"If he does not come," she cried to the waxen Virgin, "I will pray to you no more--no more."

She knew that it was blasphemy, but she did not care; and before she went home she bought a sharp little knife and hid it in her breast.

"This," she whispered, "this--if it is true about the girl from Lisbon; but it is not true."

For many years afterward the day of the great bull-fight was remembered. No one who saw it forgot it as long as he lived. Affairs used to date from it in the minds of many.

A year had passed since that first brilliant day when Pepita had gone forth in her first festal dress. She remembered it all as she dressed herself on this other morning. The same day seemed to have come again; the same sunshine and deep blue sky. There were the same flowers nodding their heads; Jovita was grumbling a little in her haste, just as she had done then; and in the looking-glass there was the same little figure in the bright attire--the soft black hair, the red rose, the red mouth. As she looked, a sudden triumph made her radiant.

"I have not grown ugly," she said.

No, she had not grown ugly. She was too young and strong for that, and excitement had flushed her into new brilliance.

When she found herself seated among the fluttering fans of rainbow colors, that moment's glow of exultation left her. Strangely enough, she could not help thinking of the empty church and the waxen figure before which she had knelt, and then of the nights when she had stood watching by the wall, and then of the sharp little knife in her breast. And then came the clamor of the music and the grand entry of the moving stream of color and glitter dazzling her eyes. No; just at first she had not the power to look. Could it be she--Pepita--who felt dizzy and could not see? who could distinguish nothing in the splendid panorama of the triumphal march? And what clamor, what excitement there was on every side! "What bulls! What men!" they were saying about her.

Only she seemed, in the midst of all the loud-voiced eagerness and delight, to sit alone, a cold little figure vaguely tormented by the gayety and the voices and the color of fluttering fans and ribbons and costumes. The deep rose had fled from her face; she sat with her hands wrung on her knee and waited for one moment to come.

The great bull ran bellowing around the arena; little beribboned darts were flung at him and stuck in his shaggy shoulders; brilliant cloaks were flaunted in his face; taunting cries mocked him. He charged hither and thither in blind fury, scattering men and horses, who only returned again to the attack.

"It takes too long," communed Pepita, "It takes too long."

And then the voices began to call for Sebastiano. "Sebastiano! Sebastiano!" on every side--even the grand ladies and their cavaliers clapping their hands and calling also. The beauties in the high places were always ready to see him come, and to give him a welcome when he risked his life to amuse them.

He stepped forth in his rich dress and with his gallant bearing, a more beautiful and gay figure than ever, it seemed the excited people thought. He had grown finer, without doubt, they said. His face was a little pale, but that only made more beautiful his long dark eyes, under their dense, straight, black lashes. It was the women who said this, and

who saw the richness of his dress, the colors of his devisa, the close curl of his crisp hair, the grace of his movement. The men saw his superb limbs, his firm step, his quick glance, his bright sword.

"Come, little slayer of bulls," they shouted, "and show us what you would have taught the people of America."

And it appeared they were not to be disappointed in their expectation of sport. They saw that when he stood before the bull and made a little mocking bow of salute, he looked into its small, furious eyes with a smile, as it drew near--a bellowing black mass, snorting and throwing up the dust. It was as ready to begin as he. It rushed upon him, and he was gone. He played with it, led it on, defied it, eluded it. The flashing sword seemed to become a score of glittering blades; the people shouted--rose in their seats--leaned forward--laughed--mocked the bull--cried out praises of sword and man and beast--of each leap--each touch of the steel's point.

"He plays with it as if it were a little lamb," they cried. "Sebastiano! Sebastiano!"

Of what use to tell what must be seen in all its danger to be understood? The joy and exultation rose to fierce fever-heat, the cries swelled higher, faces flushed and eyes sparkled and flamed, while the brilliant figure darted, leaped, attacked, played with death as it had done scores of times before.

Only Pepita sat without color or applause--only Pepita's fan was motionless amidst all the fluttering--though her breast moved up and down, and the throbbing in her side was like the beating of a hammer. She was speaking to herself, though her lips were closed; she was speaking to Sebastiano.

"He will look soon," she was saying. "He will look as he did that first day. My eyes will make him look. They will force him to it. Listen! it is Pepita whose eyes are on you. You must feel them. You have not forgotten. No. And it is Pepita--Pepita!"

All the strength of her body and soul she threw into her gaze--all the fire of her young wildly beating heart and throbbing pulses.

"You must hear," she said. "Pepita! Pepita!"

And unconsciously she leaned forward so that her white face and great eyes, and the little black head with the rose burning in its hair, stood out among the faces of those about her.

And he looked up and saw her, and their eyes met; and without knowing she started to her feet.

No one knew, no one but herself saw, how it happened: even she did not understand until all was past. Their eyes met, as they had done on the

day a year before. No, not as they had done then, but with a strange new look. Sebastiano started; the arena swam before him; there was a second--a fatal second in which he saw only a small face without color and the red rose which was the color of blood. Then there was a roar near him--a roar among the people--a wild shriek from the women. The bull was upon him; he made a misstep, and was caught, amid the shrieks and bellows, and flung inert far out upon the hoof-trodden dust with the blood pouring from his side.

"But," they said in the wine-shops at night, "when they took him up, though they thought him gasping in death, he had not lost himself; and as they carried him out they came upon a girl--the one who is called 'the pretty sister of José'--her brother was taking her away. She looked like one dead three days; and Sebastiano--there is a man for you!--tore the devisa from his shoulder and dropped it at her feet; and she snatched it up--all wet with his blood--and thrust it in her breast, and dropped like a stone. It is said that he loved her, and she had a devil of a temper and treated him badly. He is a good fellow--her brother José--and wept like a child for Sebastiano, and has begged to be allowed to nurse him, and Sebastiano will have it so."

"I am strong as an ox," José had said, weeping. "I can watch like a dog. I want neither sleep nor food, if it comes to that; and once when one of my comrades fell from a scaffold I was the only one who could nurse him without killing him with the pain. He will tell you that I nursed him well, and was never tired."

"Let him stay," said Sebastiano.

In his struggle with death, which lasted so long, it was always the large form and simple, anxious face of José he saw when he knew what passed around him, and even when the fever brought him delirious visions he was often vaguely conscious of his presence. For himself, he did not know whether he was to live or die; but one night he found out.

It was a beautiful night which came after a long day in which those about his bed had looked at him with pitying eyes, and at last a priest had come and absolved him of his sins, and left him with a solemn, kindly blessing, with a soul clear of stain and ready for paradise.

He had fallen asleep afterward, and had dreamed not of heaven but of earth, of a red rose in soft black hair, and of a passionate little face whose large eyes glowed upon him.

And suddenly he was wide awake, and found his dream a living truth.

José was no longer in the room. The moonlight made everything clear, and upon the floor beside him knelt Pepita, her eyes fixed upon his.

"Dios! Dios!" he murmured.

"Hush!" she said. "Do not speak. It is Pepita. Look at me. They said that perhaps to-night you would die. I have prayed until I can pray no more, and when I came to José the tears were falling from his eyes, and he said perhaps you would not see the day. Then I showed him the little knife hidden in my breast, and told him if he did not let me come to you alone I would not live. I said I could force you to remain on earth. I love you--I love you. It has all happened, that which you said would happen; and when the devisa fell at my feet I hid it in my breast with the other which was there before. And because I love you so, you cannot die. I will do anything you say I must do. I am Pepita, and I give myself to you. I would give my blood and my life and my soul for you. Every night I have waited by the wall in the hope that you would come. I have watched you when you did not see me. If you had not come I should have killed myself; if you die, I will drive the knife to its hilt in my heart. I can love more than those women who love so easily and so often. I knew nothing about it when I was so proud and mocked you. I know now. Mother of God! it is like a thousand deaths when one cannot see the face one wants. What hunger night and day!--one is driven mad by it!"

She bent more closely over him, crushing his un wounded hand against her heart--searching his soul with her look.

"They said there was a girl in Lisbon whom you loved," she said. "I knew it was a lie."

"Yes," he whispered, "it was a lie. Kiss me on the mouth."

His arm curved itself around her neck, and the red lips which had mocked melted upon his own.

"Did you suffer?" he murmured.

She began to sob like a child, as she had sobbed at the feet of the Virgin.

"I told you that you would suffer! It was the same thing with me. Saints of Heaven! human beings cannot bear that long. I shall not die, and I will make you forget the pain. Stay with me, and let me see your eyes and touch your lips every hour, that I may know you are Pepita, and that you have given yourself to me."

"I will stay through all the day and night," she answered. "They cannot make me go away if I do not wish it. They always give me my way. I have always had it--the Virgin herself has given it to me."

It seemed this was true. In a few months from then the people who strolled in the Public Garden on Sunday looked at a beautiful young couple who walked together.

"There are two who are mad with love for each other," it was said.

"Sebastiano and his wife. She is the one he threw his devisa to when he thought himself a dead man. They used to call her 'the pretty sister

of Jose."