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The Kneeling Nun*

By ALFRED CARTER

Our Lady
Of Gracious Sorrow now has gone,
But once she came to fill a spot with light:
That once she left, recorded in the rock,
The image of her kneeling self.
There was a pilgrim on a hapless quest
To whom she gave her courage and her peace;
His doubts resolved, she fled again the earth,
And while he strove thenceforth to keep her grace
His mind recalled the mercy of her face.

Above him.
His life was common and his deeds
Were simple, yet his case had touched the mind
Of all who heard it in the after years;
The shepherds sought to keep alive that faith
Which spread a legend as beautiful as God.
Was it the Virgin who had thus appeared,
The one who counseled Juan Diego take
A wreath of roses as a sign from her
(Though roses would not grow in December?)

Was it she,
Who in her tender mercy came
To Juan Diego with her sign of grace
And asked the man to institute a church
In Mexico (although the Bishop laughed)—
And, when he loosed his cloak in which was wrapped
The gathered garland, awed the stolid men

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*In the cluster of granite boulders which spring from the plain as one draws near Silver City, New Mexico, is a famous monolith generally known as The Kneeling Nun. Poetry and prose have told the tales of the figure sculptured there. Perhaps the legends reveal a many pictured image of truth, like the shadows wrapping and unwrapping the rock in the course of the sun.—The Editor.

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Who found her image painted in the threads?  
They built in fear what she had kindly asked,  
And only Juan secured her love at last.

It must be  
She who kept from later harm  
The hapless Pedro who had lost his son;  
Pedro, who in his youth had run away  
To end his hopeless heritage of pain.  
Far from his home he found a river's course,  
Which after days of thirst seemed paradise;  
And all he knew was that his weeks of toil  
Had brought him south and west of Santa Fe  
Which he had left on one eventful day.

There had been  
No hope of mercy in the lash  
His drunken father used to scourge his flesh;  
And though the boy was willing in his chores,  
The lazy sot commanded feats of strength  
Beyond the frugal powers of the child.  
No penitente could have borne the pain  
With more compliance than this fragile boy,  
Until his mother, weeping at his plight,  
Urged with her tears his fleeing in the night.

He was gone  
Far past the danger of pursuit  
When morning came, but in his troubled heart  
He wondered if his mother would be made  
To suffer for himself the bitter blows  
That he would suffer had he stayed behind;  
And though he yearned to keep his mother safe,  
And almost turned about from his resolve,  
He could not (for his youth) dare to embrace  
The sodden flagellation he would face.
He reproached
Himself for having run away,
And when he thought upon her suffering
He prayed in anguish that she might be dead;
Crouched to the earth, he sobbed out that Dios
Himself would not have purchased with His flesh
The doubtful pleasures which the pain ensured.
The fear which gave him strength to run away
Was spent at last through hunger and through prayer:
Yet when he thought of home his heart was bare.

In the time
Which followed, Pedro tended goats,
Remained for years immersed in heavy work,
And seemed content until he met a girl
Who like himself fled lonesomeness and fear.
These two were wed, and wandered with their flock
Farther and far, to south and west, until
At last they settled near a running stream
Where willows let their looping branches hang
And where sound-ripples in the silence rang;

In a hut
Which they together built of earth
They raised the sons whose laughter and whose love
Imbursed their parents for their ardent life.
Pedro found happiness at last in that
He pleased himself, where once he worked through hate.
He had his troubles when the redmen came
To ask for food and shelter for the night;
He served their horses while they sacked his store,
And could but smile when they demanded more.

So it was
That, while they led a frugal life,
Poor Pedro found it difficult to save.
One time the flood-wave washed his corn away;  
Again, the bobcats in the cobalt night  
Had torn the ancient leader of his goats,  
And days on end he sought the scattered flock.  
One other time the herd so fled with fear  
That Pedro used his sons to give them chase;  
And all were found. But of Luis, no trace.

When they turned.
His search took Pedro, who had spent  
His youth in tramping through the broken hills,  
Into the foot-slopes, then the deeper range,  
And then to ledges built to dangerous heights:  
He found his farmer-life upon the plain  
Had robbed his breath somehow for mountain climbs;  
Here every hillock caused his heart to pound.  
Thus, while he searched and called Luis by name  
He cut a staff to save his spending frame.

It was not  
Because his judgment erred at last,  
But that his worry for his vagrant son  
Grew with the day, that made him try his might.  
"Perhaps," he thought, "if I make one more ledge,  
I find him somewhere with a broken leg;  
Or mebbe I find him in a trap  
Which someone set, to catch a mountain cat.  
I try a little farther: mebbe West:—"  
So onward trudged, and gave no thought to rest.

There was no  
Denial that his strength was spent  
When, after climbing to a steeper slope  
He eased his shaking legs against a rock.  
He loosed his shirt to let the breeze within  
And felt his heart-beat rise to racing pulse.
He sat, and some degree of strength regained.
He had not eaten: from his coat he drew
A pouch which proved to hold his meagre fare:
The sun-dried meal of acorns he found there.

Thus engrossed,
He kept his eyes alert the while
For any movement on the lower hills;
And while he chewed and watched and eased his back
Against the reaching spindle of a pine,
He told the rosary within his mind.
He felt the heavy movement of the wind,
And wondered at the beauty of the hills,
Which, in their rolling, as their ranks withdrew,
Shifted in shade from green to miming blue.

Beneath him
Almost did the cliffside break,
Its fearsome jutting strung from ledge to ledge
Until the talus, fan-spread at the base,
Broke roundly out into the peneplain.
The sight permitted from the precipice
Was unimpeded to the farther hills;
Here Pedro, as he cuddled food and prayer,
Rested and watched the ridges in his ken
For any sign of movement, or of men.

It was then
He turned to face the falling sun;
He saw the waving grasses scout the wind.
The tops of trees approving of its puffs,—
And there, with stronger movement whirling, dust
Was scattered by some creature of the plain.
Its size was doubtful and its shape unknown,
Yet Pedro felt that this might be his son:
He saw the brownness of his youngster's coat;
He called; he waved; the blood surged in his throat.
In his head
And in his limbs a heavy tide
Of numbing weakness fled his strength away;
He tried in vain to hold himself erect—
He strove to catch the pine-root as he fell—
His vaulting senses knew the awful fall
As but a curve in a mortal thrill:
He scarce had time to cry aloud "Pordios!"
When all the torture in his head increased
And as he struck, revolted, and so ceased.

How long
He lay unheeded on the rock
He could not tell; but when he stirred at length
And with a palling shudder raised his head,
He believed that he had found another earth
And that a woman whose aspect he saw,
So stilly gazing from a pinnacle
(As if she were an image from a church),
Had urged a blessing on his horrid fall
And borne his body to a greater Hall.

He lay still
A moment, then unheeding sat,
Forgetful of his fall and of his plight:
His running senses carried to his brain
The awesome record of a glory-light
Which wrapped the quiet woman as she stood
In brilliance brighter than the argent sun.
He blinked, confounded, as he marked the way
In which her crimson garment softly fell
And was itself alight within her spell.

In her arms,
Which lightly crossed before her breast,
She held a garland twisted from the rose;
Beneath the dark rebozo on her head
Her crimson gown was richer in the light;  
She wore a coronet upon her brow  
Which seemed to be no substance, but was bright.  
Then, as she touched her temples with her hand,  
There crept electric in the light which broke  
The sight of her full heart beneath her cloak.

Poor Pedro,  
Frightened, knew then full despair,  
For first Luis and then himself was gone:  
His home would fall, without their lending strength.  
He knelt, inconsolate, upon a stone  
And stared at that he never thought to see;  
Then as she neither moved again nor spoke,  
He found the courage to relieve his mind  
Of doubts and prayers and questions all in one:  
He scarcely knew his voice to be his own.

"Pieta,  
Madre Mia," he implored.  
"Oh, Holy Mother, give me back my life,  
For I have need of it to find my son.  
Thou hadst a Son, whose heart once bruised thine own,  
And yet thou lost him not, as mine has gone;  
Thou hadst a sorrow, which God helped thee bear;  
Thou hadst a husband, which my wife has none  
Unless my strength is given me once more—  
I beg thee, Mother, for my heart is sore."

He stopped then,  
In fear that she would take offense  
For his rash speaking and assuming much;  
He struck his hands together near his brow  
And crouching quickly, made a silent prayer.  
The more he thought, the more his fear increased  
That he had but offended with his speech;
He closed his eyes and in his thoughts reviewed
The quiet accents of his simple life.
But now his sins were grown to major strife:

There was none
Who in a lifetime had done less
Than he to make his will accord with God;
He must resolve—but that it was too late!
He could no longer hope to ask for life...
“And I am only wicked when I seek
A chance to mend my carelessness in grace.”
It seemed to Pedro that his strength was small,
His problems many, and his way unseen:
He turned for guidance to the Virgin Queen.

In silence,
Fearfully, he raised his head:
She spoke, her accent and her mood subdued
While round her dazzling grew the ghostly light
Until his eyes were burning and his brain.
“Thy son is safe, good Pedro, as thou art;
At home he waits the coming of thy tread.
Attend thy chores, and let thy age forebode
To wander lest some fell mischance ensue.”
She stopped; and he cast down his eyes anew—

Then he stood;
And fearful that his bones were broke,
He tried his arms and flexed his legs about.
He beat his ribs, but knew his body sound;
And when he turned his tortured gaze again
Upon the spot the glorious Virgin lit
He stumbled back; there was no woman there!
And, awful wonder! there no promontory
From which the Damsel blessed him as she spoke.
Was he deceived? Was this some cruel joke?
He doubted;  
He felt convinced; his doubts returned—  
And even as his mind refused to dwell  
Upon the miracle which must have been,  
He rushed his steps across the rocky folds  
And paced his homeward way across the hills.  
A sharp ascent cut down his broken haste;  
The canyon breezes struck his fevered cheek;  
He paused, and looking backward cried aloud  
And sank to earth, and felt his spirit cowed.

For Pedro,  
Athwart the ridges, saw at length  
The craggy butte which he had fallen down;  
And from the spot where he had lain at last  
And where the Guadaloupe Virgin stood,  
Against the sky a shaft of rock arose  
Which theretofore had never yet been known.  
In shape it seemed some prayerful kneeling nun  
Who sought the cliffside as an altar-place  
Wherefrom to ask of God his healing grace.

Thenceforward  
Pedro, through the closing dark  
Strode on, a thrilling splendor in his blood;  
For in his mind the firm conviction grew  
That he, like Juan Diego, had been blessed,  
His work exalted and his faith secured  
Forevermore. He used the sequent years  
To prove the legend of the Virgin's care—  
And though some doubted, his was ardent faith  
Which faltered not, nor lapsed, nor stopped with death.