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DELGADINA

a short novel by

RAMÓN J. SENDER

ONE OF THE MANY WOMEN attending the wake approached La Serrana and said to her, "Have you noticed what's happening to your dead brother's bed?"

They went into the mortuary bedroom. The headboard of the bed was carved in Renaissance style with two figures of Pan playing the flute and dancing inside a medallion in the center. The figures of Pan had goat horns and hooves.

"Don't you see? We could put him another bed, but that would be a waste of time because again demons would appear in the wood with all their horns and trumpets."

She insisted that before Penquero's body was laid there the bed did not have those evil figures on the headboard. "The wood was smooth and clean." Someone claimed to have seen how the polished wood formed sprouting buds and how suddenly those satanic figures appeared and took form—the horns, the hooves, the tails. . . .

Only women were in that room and most of them had rosaries dangling from their hands. One could hear the murmur of a voice and the name of Penquero. A *penquero* is the most humble ranch hand who takes care of the *pencos*, the animals abandoned by their mothers because of physical defects. They called him this by force of habit and without intending to offend him. Every shepherd is a penquero in his childhood, but the nickname had stuck with him as a token of humility and insignificance. Even after he herded sheep by the thousand and still later when he managed the ranch nobody remembered his real name, Paco Serrano.

They always tell stories at a wake. The women, tales of horror, and the men, rather risqué stories about women.

One could say what he pleased of the Serranos, but when the sister of the deceased cast a glance about, more than one woman shrank to her navel. The only thing they blamed her for that night—in whispers and behind her back—was that she didn't cry. Whoever heard of a wake without wailing? Surely the deceased was grieving in the other world.

An old woman with a black guitar across her knees drew the air in through her nose and said, "The Serranos aren't crying because they are pleased to see Penquero in the master's bed and all these people coming to look at him."

Around her rose a buzz of approbation.

Penquero had spent his whole life as a shepherd on the ranch of the rich Aranda family. His daughter Delgadina—now dead—had been seduced by the only son of the Arandas. But the boy had really been in love with her.

A great deal had happened. Now Delgadina's son was coming and going through the corridors with his spurs jangling.

For many years and with aspersive and vile intent they had been calling Penquero's daughter "Delgadina." Even now relatives of the Arandas (who could never abide the Serranos) persisted in their venomous allusions. The old woman with the black guitar began to recite a ballad with the rhythm of a Mexican corrido. It was a romance which had been circulating through those valleys for over four centuries. This romance was an offense to the memory of the deceased, to La Serrana, and also to the youth wearing spurs. A startled silence fell all around. Then there was a bit of nervous murmuring and finally the hush returned. The old woman sang:

*The good king had three daughters,
All beautiful and fair.
They called the youngest daughter
Delgadina there.
"O slender Delgadina,
I bid you be my love."
"O God, forbid that union,
The Virgin, too, above,
That I should ever be so
Enamoured of my sire."
Into the inmost chamber
The king bade her retire.
Just salted meat for dinner
They sent and nothing more,
And not a drop of water
For all she did implore.*

Here the old woman looked about apprehensively and seeing no member of the Serrano branch of the family in the room—the family of the deceased—she went ahead with the last four verses. The guitar provided a discreet harmony:

*Next morning from her window
The maiden did behold
Her mother down below her
Upon a throne of gold.
"O Mother, like a mother,
Bring water ere I'm lost.
I'm dying I'm so thirsty,
I'm yielding up the ghost."
"Be silent, bitch of Satan,
Be still, accursed bitch.
Seven years with you I've suffered,
Seven years betrayed, bewitched...."*

She paused again. Nearby a woman was explaining to her neighbors: "The one singing is a distant cousin of the Arandas. That's why she's so bold, and I say bully for her."

The old woman continued:

*The next day Delgadina
Looked out and she did spy
Her sisters spinning damask
Beneath the open sky.
"O sisters, be like sisters,
Bring water ere I'm lost.
I'm dying I'm so thirsty,
I'm yielding up the ghost."
"We'd rather pierce our needles
Clean through your lovely jaw."
Then Delgadina ventured
To look again and saw
Her brothers down below her
Hurling javelins on the lawn.
"O brothers, be like brothers,
Bring water ere I'm lost.*

*I'm dying I'm so thirsty,
I'm yielding up the ghost."
"We dare not, Delgadina,
We dare not come to you.
Our life would be damnation
If father ever knew."*

Alongside the singer other women nodded their heads understandingly, judiciously, compassionately.

*Then Delgadina clambered
To get a better view.
She saw her father pacing
Undecided what to do.
"O Father, like a father,
Bring water ere I'm lost.
I'm dying I'm so thirsty,
I'm yielding up the ghost."
"I'll bring it, Delgadina,
But keep your word, I say."
"Though I am loath to do so
Indeed, I will today."
"O hasten, little pages,
To Delgadina's side.
The first to bring her water
Shall have her as his bride;
The last who comes to aid her
Shall be forever damned."
Some went with gold and others
Brought chests with silver crammed.
The steeple bells were ringing,
Their knelling tolled on high.
The first to bring his treasure
Saw Delgadina die.
By Delgadina's bedside
The Heavenly Host abound;
And with a host of demons
Her father's bed is crowned.*

When the ballad was finished Efrain appeared in the doorway smoking his marijuana. He was an old friend of the deceased. "A right decent corpse, this Señor Paco the Penquero. May he rest in peace."

He said this as though pained by the romance.

Behind him in the doorway La Serrana and Paco also appeared. The boy wearing spurs asked who was reciting the romance of Delgadina. No one answered. "Are the Aranda hags afraid?" he asked defiantly. For the moment he gave up trying to find out who it had been and the three of them left again. The woman who had recited the ballad rolled a cigarette with trembling fingers and spilled half of the tobacco. "Some sonobiches gave them wind of it," she said.

Here and there they laughed and repeated the last lines of the romance:

And with a host of demons. . . .

Everybody was thinking about the demons with goats' hooves and horns that danced in the wooden oval of the headboard. Somewhat later La Serrana showed up again and repeated the question: "Who was singing?"

Someone repeated the last lines: "And with a host of demons. . . ."

These words were heard in every corner of the room as though repeated by an echo. "The truth of the matter," someone ventured, "is that Delgadina, Penquero's daughter, died up in the Pedrizas high country without benefit of religion. And they buried her in a sandpit."

La Serrana heard this and held her tongue. Paco, Delgadina's son, was moving about, pleased to see his grandfather in the Arandas' bed. He stopped in the doorway and La Serrana told him something. Then the young man slowly approached the old woman who had been singing, took the guitar from her hands, put it on the floor, and with no display of anger set first one foot and then the other on top of it. He crushed it. The old woman made the sign of the cross. Then Paco made her get up and led her into the mortuary bedroom.

Once there he said, "You don't offend me with your words, but you'll have to beg my grandfather's pardon."

She threatened to call the men of her family who were Arandas. Paco rubbed her nose against the shoes of the corpse and made her kneel. The old woman trembled under Paco's hand which he ground into her shoul-

der. When she was able to get free she returned to her corner and sat down. She sat there in silence, staring at the smashed guitar. She kept moving her lips but what she said was inaudible. In the distance, on the other hand, one could hear the whinny of a horse or the honk of an automobile horn. A gleam from the headlights of some automobile pierced through the low windows. De luxe cars driven by ranchers with manure on their dirty boots parked or departed. Some men stood out in front of the house where a great bonfire was burning. Around the fire they laughed and chatted and passed the bottle and chunks of roasted meat.

A murmur of prayers began in the mortuary chamber and spread to the neighboring rooms. All the women were praying except La Serrana who kept going back and forth, supervising everything and passing wine around.

Paco took the glass which a servant brought him on a tray. The old women waved their mourning veils and dresses like so many bats and lowered their noses to show reverence for that hand of Delgadina which, according to rumor, had come out of the earth above her grave. One of the old women said that Santa Catalina de Alejandria had gone to the sandpit up on the mountain and scattered handfuls of rose petals over the tomb. It seemed that Santa Catalina was resting her hand on a "wheel or disk of knives and razors," as they said in another ballad of the early colonial times.

Suddenly the old woman started asserting that Delgadina was a saint, but still nobody repudiated the basis for the scandal—the calumnious relationship between father and daughter. All this just because Delgadina was young and beautiful and used to spend a lot of time up in the mountains alone with her widowed father. People with dirty minds talked.

The old woman who recited the romance of Delgadina was beginning to recover from the scare Paco had given her and recounted with exaggerated gestures how the "gentleman" had rubbed her nose against the dead man's feet and how she had threatened to call in the men of her family. The other old women listened and in whispers gossiped with their neighbors.

It was already midnight and still it hadn't occurred to anyone to sing an alabado—an improvised song of praise—in honor of the deceased. In place of eulogy thrived only whispered depreciation. Among the Arandas, of course.

Paco clenched an extinguished cigar between his teeth. Efrain approached him with an enormous lighter and tried to light it. Efrain dared not return to

the funeral chamber nor to look at the body. He was afraid and Paco teased him. "It won't be long till you follow him, Efrain, you son of a bitch."

Efrain only blubbered. "You should have respect for age, Paco. Remember that I knew your very own mother."

Paco continued—"The wood's already cut and dried to box you up with, Efrain. And the nails to close it with are already unpackaged and lying about somewhere." Efrain trembled as he smoked his marijuana.

About this time Juan Badinas came in from the corral, sidled over to Paco and said that if his grace saw fit he would sing an alabado in the room of the deceased. Paco looked at him suspiciously. Badinas was an old man with cold eyes and an intense face. Moreover, he had never held the deceased in the slightest esteem. Paco put an arm around his shoulder. "Suit yourself, but first let's have a drink."

Outside the house they had started two more bonfires and the ranchers huddled around to get warm. Others went through the back door into the kitchen where there was wine and ham. Afterwards they went in to view the body and then returned to the rear portal because the air inside the rooms, thick with fumes from the burned tapers and the murmur of prayers, made them a little dizzy. They ate hot chile peppers to stimulate their thirst and laughed, their chins gleaming with reflected fire.

From the right side of the house came the sound of prayer. All the ranchers agreed that it was a fine wake. "It's been years since we've seen one with so many people," someone said.

Some gringos who didn't understand Spanish also arrived, and Paco received them laughing and called them "old bastards." One of these men was the lawyer who years before had defended Penquero and saved him in the most dreadful moment of his life. He looked around like a frightened bird, afraid of finding the dead man in every nook and cranny of the house.

La Serrana, sister of the deceased, had gone to her room to rest a while. She sat down on the bed without turning on the light. Light from the bonfires was reflected on the windowpanes. In the distance she heard the voice of a mourner who was just finishing the first rosary. Thinking of her duties to the deceased she left her room again and entered the funeral chamber. In the corridor she saw Paco walking along with Juan Badinas.

Paco placed a low stool at the foot of the corpse's bed and Badinas, the

general foreman, sat down in such a way that poor old Penquero's patent leather shoes were just above his head, indeed, almost resting on it. The entire room was steeped in the black fluids of night. Candle lights flickered. At last the mourner stopped praying, kissed the cross on his rosary, and remained silent. Juan Badinas, who was holding a guitar across his knees, spoke:

"My alabado is not for Señor Penquero here present, but for his daughter, the Señora Delgadina who died over twenty years ago and for whom no one yet has had words of commendation. And well did she deserve them. Señora Irene Serrano (he corrected the name) was an example of virtue, and though I am the first to acknowledge it to this company with my head high, still my heart is filled with remorse."

From the opposite end of the room the professional mourner, an old man with a voice of stilted resonance, raised his hand to signal silence since the prayers were not yet finished. He continued speaking a sonorous prose that seemed to vibrate in his chest with vacillating rhythms and half rhymes. "Most holy God, almighty and immortal God, bestow upon the late Penquero the viaticum of Heaven and grant him haven in the eternal habitation of the righteous, the resting place of Carmel. May ancient skulls see once again through eyes renewed and then may bones within the grave arise together praising Thee, O Lord of highways and of the hopeless and of those who died but still unburied lie, of those who gave their lives upon the battlefields in Christian conflict with the Moors. Three stars there are, three Marys, three men crucified. The center one has blood, broken bones the others have; carnations has the center one, of our eternal God the son; living snakes the others have for arms and legs. The center one takes love; the others hatefulness and carnage. And in the house Saint Joseph is alone and playing the piano, the while Saint John draws near the palace of Pilate. O God, give shelter to this lamb from Thy most precious flock and receive him into Thy most glorious kingdom. Amen."

All the old women responded, "Amen."

Juan Badinas sat in his chair under the feet of the corpse, chewed his gum and waited.

Against the backdrop of the wake the prayer leader looked like a figure cut from paper with pinking shears and his profile dipped and jerked aright from time to time. Paco and La Serrana exchanged glances of misgiving think-

ing of the alabado that Juan Badinas was going to say. He had never been a friend of the deceased. What could he say in such a predicament?

People were crowding into the corridors. Word had gone around that Badinas was going to speak. A worried Paco looked out the door waiting for the rosary to end. On hearing the three amens and seeing the prayer leader cross himself, Juan Badinas cleared his throat and strummed a few chords on the guitar. But the mourner raised his hand, again giving to understand that he was not through, and continued: "For wayfarers lost within this night of shadows without protection and shelter from the windy corners and for skulls filled with remorse and for souls with shackles and fetters and the help of Satan (when he said this name he stamped on the floor as though he had trapped the devil underneath his boot) for those condemned because of trespass to mount the gallows, never to descend again, for those who leave the world at their pleasure and for those who die in madness, for the creature born of a mother undefiled, who comes to life ill-starred and for those who weep when first they see the light of the Lord. For wives abandoned in dishonor, for young men who have gone astray, for him who holds the dagger poised above his victim's throat, for him who has fallen among thieves, for the child of evil seed and for the three roses of the three incarnations, that of the father, son and holy spirit of the dominations, in Jesus' name, Amen."

Tall and rawboned, the hired prayer leader stood staring at the feet of the corpse before him. One old woman told her neighbor in alarm, "As plain as I see you, I saw Penquero open and close his eyes a moment ago."

"Bah," said another old woman, "You always have that impression in front of a corpse."

From the doorway Paco continued to stare at Juan Badinas. He still did not have the attention of everyone. Hands on hips he waited to begin his alabado. The general foreman strummed a couple of flourishes from the guitar and then with upraised face and drowsy eyes began:

"Ay Penquero, your daughter Irene, flower of field and fen, was gentle as virgin lambswool, ay whilom walked as vision and illusion to the people of this ranch, but our almighty Master wanted her to ornament his elevated spheres, and took her in the prime of life. Ay Penquero, your daughter Irene, virgin daughter of the spring, whom we all beheld upon the mountain crest as angel and as human being and also as beloved star of morning, ay, your

daughter Irene, your daughter, Penquero, now you will be with her soul to soul as your mortal bodies both are laid in earth. Ay Penquero, so you leave us in this vale of bitterness and in this land of misery. Ay Penquero, as now you lie before us as a gentleman upon the bed of honest men, ay my friend, how often did the people speak of you licentiously and lie about you without foundation. All this was hearsay, lunacy, for all of us knew that Delgadina was an angel and the most decent little woman in the county, better than all the others. Yes, my honorable friend, illustrious shepherd, behold those gathered here in reverence. We all knew you to be a decent fellow, yet all of us regarded you with rancour. I coveted the very air upon the mountain heights since she inhaled it, and all of us down here in the lowlands despised the valley because she never entered it, and she was the blossom of our hopes, and now we beg forgiveness of you both. Of you as a friend, of her as a venerated saint. Ay compadre Penquero, you who can. . . ."

He continued with this strange prayer filled with echoes crudely musical. While he talked he strummed the guitar not altogether rhythmically, and at the close of each phrase his voice fell in utter sorrow and distress. People clustered in the doorways. La Serrana listened to him thinking about the five dollars which Badinas had owed Penquero all his life. From the distant kitchens came the cries of a woman, whether of laughter or lament one could not tell.

The alabado continued:

"Compadre Penquero who art in heaven with her, tell her to forgive us as God forgave you, Penquero. You and your Señor Aranda whom you filled with lead, and who in that bed breathed his last, and me since I was first to speak calumny and falsehood of Delgadina. I, knowing that from January to January the whole year round she was as pure and undefiled as gold or ice or the first wool of the lamb. I bore false witness against you up in the mountains. Others did it from blindness. The blindness born of hatefulness and passion among the young men of the valleys. And envy among the old men and women on the ranches. But I was the first to throw dirt in your face, to spit poison in ignominy and wrath. When Señora Irene died I saw the heavens open and send forth a shining ray. Upon my eyes, Penquero, the merest ray of Heaven gave me the light of life. My hair turned white, the heart within me utter black, and though I was a stripling, still I walked like an old man. Since then I can't say whether I've been dead or alive. On this

memorable day my footsteps have brought me here, and on the threshold and at the foot of this noble bed, like a brother here I am, all for your daughter's sake and from my deep respect. Here I am, Delgadina, consecrating your memory. Behold me kneeling here, and see how black I am inside. Yesterday I was like a serpent, today like a gentle lamb. Behold me here, Delgadina, humbly submissive and sincere. Your forgiveness, Delgadina, is what I implore."

He fell to his knees and people looked at him in fascination.

La Serrana thought: "This is all very good, but why didn't he pay back the five dollars he owed my brother?"

Someone must have trampled the cat's tail in the doorway and there was a startled miaow. Everybody looked at the dead body. Even Juan Badinas who kneeling, awaited the forgiveness of Delgadina, involuntarily jerked around and looked over his shoulder toward the bed behind him. One woman explained out loud, "It wasn't the corpse but the cat."

Paco, somewhat moved, answered Juan Badinas. "Well spoken. But it was unnecessary because nobody believed the evil things that were said. In any case, I know that she is within me here—he thumped his chest—and from here she forgives you. From here she forgives everybody. All—he added under his breath—but one."

"Who's that?" Badinas asked dramatically.

Nobody answered. A couple of women whispered in the silence of the mortuary room. "Badinas is the cowboy of the sheepfold."

La Serrana looked about. People returned her glance with anxiety. There was someone whom Paco would not forgive. Who could it be? Paco spoke to Juan Badinas who was still kneeling. "Get up. The man I won't forgive is far away. And he will not come."

He helped him get to his feet. At that moment another old rancher went forth to the center of the room and began to speak. "Gentlemen of the wake, you who have listened to Badinas, I have come to swear before Christ and the three Marys that it was I who first spoke against the honor of that little girl and recited the old ballad of the king and Delgadina."

He raised his fist in the air, suddenly opening it with the fingers clutching, and said: "May the Eternal punish me. May the pits of Hell be opened underneath my feet. It was I who suffered sleeplessness because of the child Irene, only I. For her maidenish name, for her soul and for her body. For her eyes

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and her face and the grace of her hands, for the earth on which she trod, and for her gentle sayings. Every night I dreamed that I would be her lover. Because her loves were more in Heaven than on earth I slandered your daughter and you, Penquero. Enjoy your rest on this noble bed and contemplate here your grandson who wears silver spurs and a band on his hat. May you possess eternal life as I should wish it for myself."

He looked as though he were going to kneel, but he didn't.

Two other ranchers in the room looked ready to intervene, but Paco, suspecting that they were drunk, led them outside.

One of them said, referring to the alabados, "Those two are lying, because I am the sonobiche who invented the evil testimony against Delgadina. And this other guy here will witness for me and vouch for my word."

Paco said, "Enough of this. The only son of a bitch here is Efrain."

Efrain was smoking his marijuana in the doorway and saying, "Such a lie, Paco, and about an old friend of your mother."

To make peace the chief mourner coughed, raised his eyes to the ceiling, stamped his foot on the floor, and from his corner once again began: "*Vade retro*, Satan, for the Son of God was ever more powerful."

Before beginning the second rosary he also, in faltering verses, spoke his alabado: "Our deceased Paco, renowned here in this land of lambers, human justice has paid back its respect to you and divine justice will unlock the doors of Heaven unto you. *Vade retro*, Satan, for the Son of God was ever more powerful. Your daughter, the lovely maiden Delgadina, renowned among the saints in Heaven, awaits you rejoicing. Fronds of palm with bands of gold and little bells of silver herald your arrival at the gates to the celestial mansions. *Vade retro*, Satan, for the Son of God was ever more powerful."

Every time he said the name of Satan he stamped his foot and sometimes he stamped it so hard that the candle flames flickered. Paco returned to the passageways where the men were continuing to drink and Badinas and the other two cowboys went out after him. The mourner's resonant voice could still be heard. The four men, hands on each other's shoulders and a bit drunk, went outside and formed a circle around one of the bonfires.

They joined in with the songs of the others. They were sad songs. Juan Badinas wiped away a tear with the back of his hand, adding his rusty voice to that of the chorus. The bonfire lighted the scene. One of the young men

nudged Juan Badinas with his elbow. "The truth of the matter is that you owed the deceased five dollars."

"You are lying, brother, for just last week I won that amount at cards and I didn't bother to collect. It is just as though I had returned the debt with my own hand."

There had been no witnesses, and nobody believed him. La Serrana had gone back to her room. Seated on her bed in the dark, she saw the ranch hands who were singing sad songs in muted voices outside. And Badinas. And Paco who a little later came back into the house.

LA SERRANA thought about her late brother's life and about her own. Much had happened. Twenty years before Penquero was living with his daughter up in the Pedrizas highlands. The two of them alone in a cabin closer to the moon than to the earth. And causing talk among the serpents of the low country. Penquero's daughter had blue eyes and skin that was golden brown, a comely figure and a tiny mouth. Evil tongues, thinking about her beauty and about the lonely life she lived with her father, began to slander her. The name Delgadina which the cowboys had given her was full of malice. Poor Penquero. Shepherds are likely to have bad reputations. They are either very simple or very vicious. Penquero was neither simple nor vicious, but people talked.

And some of them believed.

The girl was almost always alone in the cabin, especially during the summer months. Her father would go up to the crests with the flocks and stay there for months at a time. Sometimes he came down with an old mule to replenish provisions. His dog, an ugly and dirty animal called Dandy, preceded him. He would arrive half an hour before his master. Penquero's first words to his daughter were always the same: "Didn't Dandy tell you what I've brought you?"

On seeing the dog arrive, the girl would put water on to heat and get soap and a towel ready because the first thing Penquero wished to do was to wash up and shave.

Irene used to say that the dog had announced that her father was bringing raspberries. She liked those wild raspberries very much.

Penquero's sister, La Serrana, remembered those days like something that

had just occurred. And far distant she heard the prayers of the wake. She had lived in the city and worked in a factory. Cousin Efrain, who—when he wasn't in jail—lived next door, once told her that folks on the Aranda ranch called Irene by the wicked name of Delgadina. A name that was pretty but indecent. Efrain was wont to lie, but in this case he told the truth and she thought that if she were to live with her brother at the Pedrizas mountain cabin then people wouldn't talk so much. "This has happened," she thought, "because the cowboys get into their heads the idea of the loneliness of father and daughter. And their filthy imagination does the rest."

La Serrana liked to live in the city, but decided to go to the Pedrizas mountain cabin to preserve the good name of her brother and of her niece. This was the first reasonable thing she had done in her life.

To get up there from the ranch it was necessary to ride horseback the whole day through arroyos and canyons. A young man from the ranch accompanied La Serrana to show her the way. The first thing she did on reaching the cabin was to ask Delgadina where her father was. The child indicated the high crests of the sierra. It was four hours without a path to those elevated plains where the flocks pastured during the summer and they did not come down until autumn when the leaves were turning yellow.

While the girl talked her aunt looked at her and said to herself, "She's as straight as a reed, she has a forthright look about her and refined movements and the slimmest little waist in the country." Recalling the awful ballad of Delgadina, she added, "She could be a king's daughter."

And with a wry grimace she asked: "You know what I would do if we were living in the times of Billy the Kid? Raise a gallows on every corner of the ranch. Yes, on the Aranda ranch. Why? I know why. I know who I'd have dancing the polka with his feet in the air."

La Serrana was scandalized by the poverty of the household furnishings. Fortunately she had brought clothing and kitchen utensils. At night La Serrana heard the noises of the countryside, and the creaking of the walls as the wood cooled frightened her. "How can you stand to live so alone? Aren't you afraid?"

"Yes," said the girl, "but I endure it."

"This fear," said La Serrana, "is what makes your eyes so big and so beautiful, my daughter."

Irene did not know that anyone called her Delgadina. Her name was

pretty: Irene Serrano. She and her father did not know the ballad of Delgadina because they came from another valley where it was not sung. The two of them were like characters from ancient stories.

Penquero was the best shepherd in Cíbola. Neither of them realized that a fatal destiny awaits everything that somehow approaches a facet of perfection. Lightning seeks out the straightest and tallest tree in a forest. Misfortune can live only in the shadow of happiness and at its expense. But they were living without preoccupation and securely, trusting innocently in they knew not what.

Two or three times La Serrana went down to the ranch. Soon enough she realized that her niece would never marry in those valleys. Everyone was secretly enamored of her and scandalized in public. And many of them actually believed their own malicious gossip. When La Serrana mulled this over after going to bed, it took her a long time to fall asleep.

The day Penquero came down from the mountains he was astonished to see his sister. He looked at her with pleasure and said slowly, "This is just the companionship Irene has needed ever since her mother died."

Penquero forgot about his jokes, but he did bring Irene some wild strawberries. La Serrana broached the idea of their going into the village once in a while, if only to attend Mass on Sundays. Penquero refused. The solitude in which Penquero had spent his life had made him taciturn and incorrupt. At times he spoke to God and to Dandy—the miserable cur—in the same language. He did not talk to anyone else. When he heard his sister insist that the child ought to go down to the village sometime Penquero appeared to accede. "She shall go down sometime, but with me."

La Serrana thought: "Perhaps this will make a bad impression, and it might be better for her never to go down at all." She was thinking about the meanness of the cowboys.

The next day Penquero returned to the mountains to tend his flocks. When the two women were alone, La Serrana said, "He is a rustic man and he doesn't know anything about life."

La Serrana combed her niece's hair every day. Irene's hair obsessed and confused her. It wasn't blond, nor was it brunette. Nor could one call it chestnut. It seemed more like something vegetable than human. La Serrana was enraptured with the beauty of her niece. She dressed her in her own city clothes and she looked at her with true wonder and admiration.

At that time there were many cowpunchers who dreamed about Irene. Some because they had seen her, others for having heard about her. (Also, sad to say, because the romance of Delgadina gave the girl a certain satanic aura.) From down at the Aranda ranch one could see on the horizon that elevated valley where the father and daughter lived. And sometimes looking up to the highlands with melancholy, a cowpuncher would tell himself:

*Slender Delgadina,
Delgadina is her name.*

The lines of the ballad reverberated in the ears of many who worked on the ranch.

A year went by without their going to the village. La Serrana was bored and talked of returning to the city. She thought that she despised her brother, but in the final analysis she was not bold enough to run counter to his wishes.

One morning the son of the owners arrived at the Pedrizas cabin in the heights. A boy seventeen years old. "Very handsome, clean-cut," thought La Serrana when she saw him. This expression—clean-cut—seemed elegant to her and she applied it only to important people. The young man told her he had been hunting and had lost his way.

A lie, thought La Serrana. He came here because of Irene. The young man hitched his horse to the post and looked around. "It really is a pleasant spot. And what about Señor Serrano?"

She liked the young man's looks and the way he said "Señor Serrano" instead of Penquero.

"He's up in the sierra with the sheep."

"When will he be down?"

"Who knows? He might come in tonight. He might not come for a month."

La Serrana told herself: "He's a handsome lad. His name is Pepe."

Close-cut leggings clung tightly to the powerful calves of his legs and at the opening of his shirt one could see the adolescent, almost feminine chest.

"Well, to tell the truth, I don't know what to do, whether to wait for him or not."

It was obvious that he was trying to wangle an invitation. Irene kept moving about preparing a drink of water and honey. When she handed it to Pepe, he said, "Thank you, Delgadina."

La Serrana corrected him. "My niece's name is Irene, not Delgadina."

The youth kicked his boot against a post to loosen the dry mud, blushed and said: "I know that, but Delgadina is a nice name for any girl who is slender and well-formed."

From what La Serrana had heard at the ranch, Pepe was a good boy, perhaps a bit lazy and lacking in character, but then at his age and being so rich, why did he need to have character?

"The fact is I'd stay around a few days to wait for Señor Paco, but I don't dare. That is to say, I'd hesitate, with you two unmarried ladies all alone."

"Are you afraid of us?"

"Out of consideration for you," he laughed. "Just a little consideration. Did you say your brother might wait for a month?"

"Or two." He still seemed to hesitate, this Pepe.

At last La Serrana told him, "You may stay here if you wish. Anyway, this is your father's land. And the house. It all belongs to you. But be careful," she joked imprudently, "this high country has a bad reputation."

The boy began to laugh again, but this laughter cut La Serrana to the quick and she glared at him severely. He too became serious and rather than answering he scratched his cheek with the riding crop. Then he asked Irene: "Don't you get bored up here?"

Irene didn't know the word *boredom* in either Spanish or English. Her aunt explained it to her. Half amused and half astonished, Pepe exclaimed: "The dickens! You're bound to be content if you don't even know boredom by name."

La Serrana apologized for Irene saying that she hadn't gone to school, and Pepe became deeply thoughtful—What could school give a girl like this to whom nature has given everything?

He asked Irene, "Would you also invite me to stay here?"

"When my aunt's around my say-so doesn't count," she said.

She started to carry armloads of dried grass to the side of the house saying that whenever anyone came up from the ranch she had to notify her father with a bonfire. When he saw the smoke, her father always came down to the cabin.

La Serrana said, "Don't light the fire."

The girl hesitated with the matches in her hand.

"I said no!"

Don Pepe found things much to his liking there. He said he hated the

regular routine of towns and ranches. He favored the city or the solitude of the sierra.

"Do you want Don Pepe to stay?" La Serrana asked her niece.

"I don't know," she answered prudently.

La Serrana apologized for Irene and said that she was a little bit wild and not accustomed to dealing with people. Don Pepe instead of answering began to lavish praise on everything he saw—the high mountain peaks with their eternal snow, the nearby ravine, the pine groves. La Serrana asked him if he wanted to take a look around. She excused herself beforehand, saying she wouldn't go along since she was too old to be clambering around such places. "However," she added, "Irene will accompany you and look for mushrooms for our supper this evening. There are lots of them in the forest. You ought to take along a couple of baskets and get enough to last the week. You can be of help if you go with her."

They went to the forest. The air was golden and La Serrana watched them disappear among the trees and told herself: "Nothing is more beautiful than youth." However she was still doubtful and she added: "Life measures out to each what he deserves, but I haven't gotten anything."

She returned to the cabin and slipped fresh sheets on Penquero's bed in case the owner's son should stay overnight. She talked to herself as she did this. "You only live once. And youth fades away like a dream. I know what I'm doing, sending them off to the forest. All I'm doing is giving them a chance. May God do more if He sees fit."

La Serrana usually didn't mention God except in extreme cases like this.

She thought that in the pine grove, a place as intimate and silent as a bedroom, the two young people could only talk of love. But it wasn't right to assume that a boy and girl would experience the same eager yearnings as a mature woman. "I'm different," she thought. "I'm used up by life and I'm accustomed to living in the city and seeing what goes on between men and women."

The boy and girl came back at dusk with their baskets full of mushrooms and strawberries and with a thousand things to relate. La Serrana understood at once that they were in love although they would not have said so.

With ruddy cheeks Irene kept talking. "We saw a wild creature with three little ones trailing behind. Pepe wanted to kill them, but I told him not

to since the sound of gunfire carries so far in the forest that father would surely hear it and wonder what was happening down at the cabin."

"That's why I didn't shoot," he said.

The mountain air, the shock of surprise and such strange and sudden emotions made them both seem a bit delirious when they talked. Pepe said that it might not be a bad idea for him to stick around a few days waiting for Penquero. Then he corrected himself. "I mean Señor Serrano."

And he blushed again.

Nightfall came suddenly as it does in the mountains. In Penquero's bed Pepe listened to the distant howling of the coyotes. The next day he got up and started doing household chores. He cut wood into chunks of every size—for the kitchen range where they prepared the meals, for the great stove they used in winter. Cutting wood he perspired and took off his shirt. With a certain female satisfaction La Serrana observed him from the porch. Pepe kept moving about playing the role of manly protector to both women. In the middle of the afternoon La Serrana sent them back to the forest again. Before they left, her aunt arranged a tress of Delgadina's hair revealing her left ear and she put a flower in her bosom. "Don't hurry back. Nothing matters more than your happiness." She pushed her toward Pepe who had gone on ahead and was waiting for her at the foot of a tree, two empty baskets in his hand.

When they reached the edge of the forest Pepe said he felt as though he didn't care about anyone in the world but her. "All night long," he said, "I was thinking of you. Hearing the coyotes, I envied them, for the year around they inhabit the sierra and from their lairs they watch you when you go into the forest."

When they returned to the cabin some three hours later her face was aflame and his, on the contrary, was pallid and his lips were dry. La Serrana looked at them trying to divine something. Delgadina said that she had seen a butterfly with two heads. Pepe had also made discoveries and when he mentioned a huge bird that laughed in the forest, the girl told its name and explained its habits which she understood full well.

Both of them chatted with La Serrana, deeply grateful for her complicity, though they never made mention of it. So the days went by.

One afternoon La Serrana drew Pepe aside and talked to him as if she were short of breath: "You're you, aren't you? A man. And you like her. All

right, you've heard the things they tell down in the valley. But you're not like those cowboys and the other people who live in a dunghill. You're still green behind the ears and your mother's milk is on your lips. You don't have to condemn anybody because life hasn't yet filled your heart with smut."

She was going to say more but could not because she was crying. Pepe understood what she meant and he too was deeply moved.

Irene's room had been decked out as for a wedding by La Serrana. She put curtains at the window, a shade on the old kerosene lamp, hung two framed prints which she had brought from the city and left a manicure set which seemed to her the last word in sophistication.

The young man continued to sleep in the old shepherd's room. During the day, though, the lad and his girl didn't part for a moment.

Before they left on their outings La Serrana would say: "You are lovely, youthful and in love. More than in love, you are betrothed. More than betrothed. You are much more than merely betrothed."

Sometimes Pepe felt ill at ease around this apparently reasonable woman who spoke so mysteriously, never saying all she intended. His blood burned for Delgadina and they went not to the woods but further now on horseback. Once when they were sitting together beside a deep ravine and looking down at the bottom Pepe told her, "Delgadina, I wish that I could run away with you and go somewhere far beyond the eyes and voices of people."

"We are already there. No one can come here."

Each longed for the other with a hunger that was neither sated nor diminished, and which seemed to increase day after day. There beside the abyss she looked at the heavens and he looked at her. They watched the animals big and little passing by. High above them the sparrow hawk and across the ravine and far away a deer. In the depths of the ravine was a brook where the gray beaver swam.

They were silent and Delgadina sometimes dreaded that fathomless silence.

Whenever they went home La Serrana led Delgadina aside and made her repeat all the things they had talked about. From the interest La Serrana manifested one could gather that she too had fallen in love with Pepe. In fact, though, she was enamored of their love for each other.

The young people lived only for each other. They would devour whatever La Serrana put before them and then be off on horseback again. Pepe

had his mount well trained. He would ask if Delgadina were beautiful and the horse would move its head up and down. They both laughed. Sometimes the horse seemed to be laughing, too.

A curious change seemed to be coming over them. Pepe became very jovial, but Irene as easily turned morose, and once she said, "I've been thinking that my aunt is quite a good woman, but a bit of a witch. A nice witch, I should say."

Once of an afternoon they lay sleeping beside a sandpit where there were fresh deer tracks—a mother deer had passed there with her fawn. When she awoke, Delgadina noted with surprise that a cactus was growing at her head, a vertical cactus with horizontal arms like a cross in the cemetery. It was not uncommon to find cacti like that one. And Pepe was still asleep. The cross cast a funereal shadow behind itself. The cactus was nearly black and the very fact that this black cross was the work of circumstance seemed to portend danger. Irene declared that when she died she wanted to be buried there. He embraced her and said that if his parents opposed the wedding he would do something drastic.

It was a long time before Penquero came down from the crests and meanwhile the lovers wouldn't move a step except together. La Serrana cooked their meals for them and then laughed or wept alone, joyful and tender.

At last when La Serrana figured that her brother was about to come down she set fire to the heap of dried grass. Two hours later Dandy arrived, and when La Serrana saw him she told Pepe that it would be more prudent for him to leave without waiting for the shepherd. She would talk with him and meanwhile he could arrange to return a few days later. The boy climbed on his horse and took off at a gallop.

Delgadina went to her room and a little later her father arrived. La Serrana advised the shepherd that the owner's son had come and that unable to wait longer he had returned to the ranch. The shepherd looked around him suspiciously. "When did you say he arrived?"

"Early in the morning. A little later I lit the bonfire to notify you."

"He rode his horse, didn't he?"

She nodded.

"And nobody else came while I was gone?"

"No."

The penquero approached his sister, grabbed her by the arm. "The boss's

boy has been here more than two weeks. Why are you lying? What are you trying to hide?"

She didn't say anything. She knew that there were signs to give her away, the horse manure, for example. Irene went over to her father's side, kissed his hand, and trembling with emotion told him that Pepe wanted to marry her. "All right," said the shepherd quietly. "That's all right. I don't need to know anything more. I know what you're trying to hide, sister."

The shepherd cut himself twice while he shaved and one could hear him cursing and muttering as he stanching the blood. The following day before returning to the sierra with his flock Penquero told his sister, "Young Aranda's word isn't worth more than this"—the shepherd spat to one side—"but until a youth becomes of age his parents are responsible for his actions. So we will see."

He went back to the mountains. Before he left he spoke again of going to the city and taking Irene with him. He wanted to visit his cousin Efrain and furthermore he had plans for the girl. He would not say what his plans were.

A couple of weeks later he came down again and said that he had to go to the ranch and that he would take his daughter with him. La Serrana groomed Irene and when she and her father departed the girl on the horse's rump looked like a little princess.

Down at the ranch Penquero hoped vainly as often before that Juan Badinas would invite him to play cards. The foreman did not invite him. He considered Penquero too lowly to hobnob with the overseers.

The next day Penquero went to the city with his daughter. Pepe and the girl had a secret agreement. They would meet on the plaza at such-and-such an hour. Uncle Efrain, whom they were going to visit, lived near the old plaza.

The shepherd and Delgadina went by bus and Pepe drove his father's car.

Delgadina had been decked out by her aunt. She wore a hat with a ribbon hanging down behind and gloves that were blue. These were the first gloves she had ever owned.

Penquero had made plans for his daughter, counting on the help of Cousin Efrain. So far as the shepherd was concerned, his cousin was a man of the world capable of living in the city without any need to work on the dirty ranches of the high country. Years before Efrain had managed to place one

of his relatives in the house of a Miss Burke, a rich old woman from the East.

For Penquero everything about the city was confused, nebulous, resplendent.

Wonder-struck, Efrain watched them arrive. They had come without warning. There was room enough for everybody; that much was certain. The moment Delgadina saw her father's cousin, she surmised that he was even poorer than they.

No sooner had they left their baggage than the girl wanted to go to the courthouse square she had seen from the bus. A park was there and in the center of the park an ancient cannon. Penquero wanted to talk privately with Efrain who looked absent-minded. And so the girl walked out the door. Then she wandered away to look around.

Between Efrain's house and the plaza was a broad and ascending avenue. Here the houses were close together, each one buttressing the others. Many people lived on this street. "They are all doing useful work in the community," thought Delgadina admiringly, but the street was always deserted.

Delgadina could not imagine how people in the city lived and she went up the street slowly, looking at both sides. She was hoping to see Pepe on the little plaza where they had promised to meet.

This street had no name and people referred to it vaguely as River Street. So far as Delgadina was concerned the street was a lordly thoroughfare to the courthouse square. There was nothing in the world more civilized or worthy of admiration than this River Street.

Around Efrain's house were many others, where people of all classes lived. There was also a kind of bar or cabaret of the most abject sort presided over by a flush-faced woman who always wore yellow. This woman was a great friend of Efrain, and she had recently been in the hospital.

The neighborhood church was also poor and it had a sign bent around a corner of the building. On one side it read TAVERN and on the other, ACLE. Sometimes people made a mistake and went there looking for a glass of wine.

These houses were ugly, but Delgadina found them beautiful. At the time Uncle Efrain was not working. His wife had not died as Delgadina assumed, but had run off with somebody else, and since then the husband had been smoking marijuana, drinking, and doing odd jobs. Even though the patrons of the bar all spoke Spanish, the bar had an English name which was also

misspelled, RIBERSIDE. It was the B which belonged in TAVERNACLE, the little church. Efrain said that it was natural his wife should run off because she had the feet of an unleashed bitch. When Penquero asked him what sort of work he was doing, he replied, "Whatever comes along."

A number of rich people in the city had tried to redeem him, above all, Miss Burke, the rich spinster on the plaza who liked to do acts of charity.

The second time that Delgadina went to the plaza she met Pepe. She wanted to hug him then and there, but he said, "Not here, Delgadina. You have to be careful here because people are watching."

All Delgadina wanted to do was to walk down main street on his arm looking in the windows of the business establishments and revelling in the distinction with which she imagined she trod on the neatly delineated sidewalks. In the blond woman's bar Penquero asked Cousin Efrain if Delgadina could stay to work in Miss Burke's house. Efrain affected an air of intrigue and said, "We will see."

And he ordered another glass of wine. That's what he said in answer to every question Penquero put to him: We will see. And he never did anything. He wanted to bring the girl to the bar to introduce her to the blond woman who seemed to be interested in her. The shepherd realized that this was no place for his daughter and he refused to bring her.

Delgadina, when not with Pepe, walked around the neighborhood and approached River Street—her great adventure. One day she saw a couple of horses and mounted policemen at the upper end of the street. Once a week the chief of police sent them for a turn around River Street just to fulfill the "act of presence."

In the silence the horses' hooves made a somewhat impressive clatter.

Delgadina looked down the deserted street imagining that those two policemen ought to be dangerous. The horses continued to descend with a great deal of stomping and arrogance. From the corner Delgadina watched them without understanding. She stood staring down the empty street and before the policemen reached her she ran into the house, locked the door from the inside, and started watching from a window.

Efrain and Penquero as usual were in the bar with the blond woman. After the horses passed Delgadina considered going there but her father had forbidden it. She observed that the mounted policemen had stopped in the

intersection, undecided what to do next. Finally they turned around and went up River Street again.

Before she could unravel so many enigmas, Delgadina saw Pepe arriving. They went to main street and arm-in-arm walked by the luxury shops. Then Pepe took her to a photographer's studio and had her picture taken; he had always wanted a good portrait of her. To justify her escapades Irene told her father that she was going to the neighborhood Catholic church.

That very afternoon Penquero and his cousin accompanied the blond woman to a ranch to see if there were sufficient pasture land for raising cattle. They took Penquero along as the expert. Delgadina and Pepe took the occasion to go see a movie. She had never seen one before and everything was new and awesome. He teased her tenderly and kissed her in the darkness.

When Delgadina returned home she realized that her father and Efrain had been quarreling. Efrain had the eyes of a madman and time after time repeated, "I didn't tell you to come. And moreover I'm not an employment agency." Then again he proposed that Delgadina should stay in the city and assured him that the blond woman in the bar would look after her.

Penquero was greatly disillusioned. The following day he returned to the ranch with his daughter. Pepe drove alongside the bus which was carrying Delgadina and her father. The two sweethearts kept looking at each other and winking behind her father's back.

It was also Sunday when they reached the ranch and Penquero approached Juan Badinas hoping that the latter would invite him to play cards with the foremen. To Penquero this meant the consummation of his life as a shepherd.

But Juan told him brutally, "If you think your having lent me five bucks entitles you to hobnob with the overseers, then I'm telling you you're damned mistaken."

For Penquero had lent him the money a year before. The shepherd stopped talking and went back to the sierra with his daughter. Twenty-four hours later Delgadina was again with her aunt in the cabin in the high valley. She told her a thousand incidents, each one of them extraordinary. Concerning Efrain, she said that he was forever in a bad humor and La Serrana explained to her that he would come to a bad end since marijuana snarls and befuddles the principal nerves in a man's brain.

When Delgadina told her aunt about Pepe's promises of marriage, she became pensive. Some days later a peon arrived with a letter from Pepe:

I spoke to my father about you and he got mad and is sending me to Denver. I am going to study medicine and work to become independent. Come to Denver with your aunt and when you arrive we'll get married in spite of my family. Both of us and your aunt, too, can live on what my father is sending me. Talk to your father. Convince him. If he's against it, don't worry. Come by yourself. It'll be easy for you to run away, I'd say, one day when he's way up in the hills with the herd, especially with the help of your aunt. I can't live here in Denver or anywhere else without you.

With the letter in hand La Serrana, happy and full of spirit, decided to talk seriously with her brother. When Penquero came down from the mountains he read the letter through a couple of times. "Neither of them is ripe for marriage."

He added that Pepe's father would be certain to refuse and that this would put Penquero in a tight spot. Pepe could not do a thing since he was underage and if there should be trouble, it would be because La Serrana had abetted the young people secretly. Penquero called his sister a dishonorable woman and asserted that she had come to Pedrizas in an evil hour. "It is too late for regrets now, Brother," she said.

Penquero looked blankly at her. "Too late?"

She nodded her head and the shepherd understood. He stood there silently a moment with his eyes downcast, then he seemed to react and get a hold on himself. "All right. If young Aranda's father is a man he'll do what he should."

He harnessed the mule and left for the ranch. When he got there he realized that the trip had taken two hours longer than usual. He also found out that young Don Pepe Aranda already had left for Denver. This disappointed him, but he decided that perhaps it was well this way.

He told the servants that he was going to talk with the master about the cottonseed cake he needed to buy to feed the livestock during the winter; however, minutes after being admitted to see him, they heard raised voices.

The elder Aranda was saying: "Penquero, you're an honest man, but your sister is a witch and she'll not trap me with her tricks. If the girl is

going to be a mother, my son is underage and therefore not responsible before the law."

The shepherd answered. His voice was soft and it did not go beyond the room. "It isn't for my sister or for me, Señor Aranda. It's for my daughter who's worth more than the rest of us put together." And he started to explain everything anew as though the owner had not understood.

The interview was long and difficult. Penquero's voice could not be heard, but Aranda's was strident and it made the windowpanes rattle. One could hear him mention something about an operation—an abortion—which he wouldn't mind paying for. Then Penquero insulted him. Old Aranda responded with stronger insults. There was a great commotion. One could hear the armchair being shoved aside and Aranda's footsteps as he ran to the door. At the same time shots rang out. Six shots. Old Aranda's body was riddled through and until the police arrived household servants kept the shepherd cornered.

From time to time Penquero would say: "Don't trouble yourselves, for I don't intend to defend myself or try to escape."

Police arrested the shepherd who would answer neither yes nor no to the magistrate's questions.

A number of details of the crime put him at a disadvantage. For example, old Aranda died from the second shot but after he had already fallen to the ground Penquero fired four more times. According to the defense attorney that ruined his chances of acquittal.

Naturally Pepe went home when he heard about his father's death. He wanted to go up to the sierra, but his mother was gravely ill and he had to remain at her side. If Pepe left, the ranch servants spied on him and reported to his mother where he had gone and how long he had stayed. They talked too much and without respect for the unfortunate Delgadina and the son who was going to be born. There were even those who dared recall the romance of the Moorish king with relation to the paternity of the child and everybody was scandalized again. Pepe got involved in several incidents of this sort and he fought with a cowboy and threw him off the ranch.

This was the only proof of vigor Pepe ever showed, either then or perhaps throughout his life. Thereafter the people told with astonishment how the young Aranda had dared to defend the daughter of his father's assassin.

Penquero was sentenced to death, but the punishment was commuted to thirty years imprisonment.

Delgadina did nothing but cry. She gave birth to the child without assistance, save from her aunt. She never heard from Pepe again. In the days before her confinement she used to go to the sandpit with the crosslike cactus and gaze at the impression which her body and Pepe's had left in the sand.

For eight days following her labor Delgadina kept repeating constantly that she did not want to live. And then she died. Delgadina's death seemed the last shred of evidence to the ranchers. God was punishing the daughter after having shut her father away from the society of men. The father was old and he would not leave jail either—so they thought—except feet first.

Don Pepe went back to Denver after Delgadina's death and no one knew anything about him. Sometimes queer rumors reached the ranch. Some said that he had taken to drink and debauchery and others to the contrary affirmed that he was a brilliant lad and highly respected by everyone. A few tried to insinuate that something was wrong with his mind.

No one requested a Christian burial for Delgadina and the ranchers themselves at La Serrana's suggestion dug a grave at the foot of the crosslike cactus and put her there.

Said La Serrana: "If men don't want to put a cross upon her grave, then God has put it there. This cactus is the cross which God has given her."

Then people started to say that one of Delgadina's hands had stayed atop the sand, and that the hand was always fresh and alive and that it waved good-bye to passersby. On it—so they said—she still wore the ring which Pepe had bought her.

La Serrana took the baby boy down to the ranch. Pepe's mother, who was still sick, wanted to see him and when she saw his face, she said, "Another innocent victim. God help us."

A few days later they baptised him with the name of Paco Aranda. The sick mother wrote to Denver calling her son, but Pepe replied that the only person on the ranch who mattered to him was no longer alive.

The widow recognized at once that the baby had the facial features of the Aranda family and that he was her grandson. She was tired of her own bitterness and seeing that she herself was ill, she was inclined to understand-

ing. She asked La Serrana to stay at the ranch to take care of the child and declared that this was not the son of the devil, as they were wont to say, but the offspring of two innocent lovers.

These evidences of good sense on the part of the widow looked to people like a display of senile decadence. The Arandas were in decline. There were those who said the clan would end in utter degeneration, which was not strange considering how "the people hereabouts inbreed too much."

The fact that Pepe, the heir, studied medicine in Denver and did not return to the ranch seemed to indicate a lack of nerve and energy for running the ranch.

Gradually La Serrana was imposing her will over the household. She felt strong, and once when she was talking with the servants she said she had the master of the ranch in her arms. The child had been recognized legally and La Serrana's authority was growing so much that when the mistress had grown old and senile and the administrator wrote to Denver, Pepe answered that they should listen to La Serrana and obey her as though she owned the place. People could not believe it.

Old Penquero remained in prison. No one knew anything about him. Sometimes La Serrana went to visit him secretly, but she did not so much as pronounce his name at the ranch. Nor did anyone dare to inquire about him. The old servants used to whisper in the corners. Pepe finished school in Denver and established himself as a doctor there. He had no desire to return to the ranch.

Old Aranda's widow died at the ranch. For many years La Serrana had been signing checks for the employees; this finally consummated her authority—to the amazement of all, especially those who were old. After the elderly widow's death the administrator received an order from Pepe to sell fifty acres of irrigable land. La Serrana wrote the doctor telling him, "This is property belonging to Delgadina's son and yours. With the rent you can do whatever you like, but you won't touch the patrimony of your son."

Pepe did not answer her and the sale was never completed.

La Serrana reflected: "Delgadina had what I will never have. She knew what it was to be loved by a man who is young and handsome. She died, but first she had her glory as a woman."

Several times La Serrana had written Don Pepe saying that it was a shame

for Delgadina's grave to be in the mountains and that the child Paco would be bound to resent it later on. Don Pepe responded in alarm with long telegrams forbidding anyone to touch the grave until he returned.

One day he did return. People continued to talk.

*They buried then the lover
In a sandpit far away;
The hand they left above'er
As a signal so they say . . ."*

Don Pepe's visit was sensational. He spent three days completely alone up in the sierra. On the fourth day, just as he had arranged, a caravan of sundry people arrived, among them a couple of masons and a priest complete with basin, aspergillum, rochet, stole and tapers. The act of consecrating Delgadina's grave was memorable because everybody from the ranch attended, including Juan Badinas who despised Penquero and his family.

After the benediction the masons enclosed the area a quarter of an acre around, leaving in the center that crosslike cactus and the grave. When the work was done, Don Pepe told the priest, "You all are witnesses that when I die I want to be buried here beside Delgadina."

Don Pepe returned to Denver without passing by the ranch which he hated.

For years after this nobody knew anything about him. La Serrana received some news but she did not communicate it to anyone. The Pedrizas' livestock was transferred to another valley and nobody lived in the log cabin where Delgadina had dwelled. Some people said the deer were wont to celebrate their reunions in the cabin. La Serrana asked in amazement—"What kind of reunions?"

Delgadina's son was growing up. La Serrana talked to him about his mother every day and made him pray before the picture in his bedroom. It was the portrait Pepe had taken of Delgadina when they were in the town. From that picture an artist in the city had made an oil portrait which came to occupy the dining room wall—the most important place in the house.

Delgadina's son kept growing as country people do, dirty and strong. La Serrana let him have his way with everything. She spoke to him with admiration of his grandfather who was in prison. To La Serrana, imprisonment wasn't necessarily anything shameful. She always dressed in her Sunday

best when she went to visit her brother, and although she never told a soul where she was going, everybody guessed.

One of little Paco's first adventures in life was the journey to the capital to see his grandfather. He never forgot the sullen and severe expression the old man wore. Naturally whenever they went to pay him a visit, none of them could avoid devoting their best memories to poor Delgadina.

Paquito had a toy revolver and he said he would kill the remaining Arandas with it. The grandfather smiled sadly and advised his sister not to let the boy say such things in front of people.

Don Pepe never went back to the ranch. He was a city man and although he was well enough esteemed as a doctor, nonetheless there was more talk of his caprices than of his professional success.

One thing old Penquero never fathomed was why Juan Badinas testified against him at the trial and tried to aggravate his responsibility. Ten years after the event Penquero still regretted it and asked if Badinas continued on the ranch. La Serrana said he was but that she could fire him if he wished. He declined. "He's too old now to look for work anywhere else."

In spite of Penquero's generous disposition Badinas' resentment only seemed to become more virulent and bitter with the years. It was something which Penquero could not comprehend. "The only harm I ever did him was to lend him five dollars once."

The child grew to be violent and terrible. Little girls on the ranch made the cross to him as to the Devil.

All the employees except Juan Badinas used to gather in the old dining room on Saturday where they recited the rosary beneath the oil portrait of Delgadina who seemed to dominate the room with her angelic countenance. La Serrana sat in an arm chair directly underneath the portrait. And she felt happy as she half closed her eyes. Age and a sense of victory had made her reasonable.

Suitors started courting La Serrana. She said, "They all offer me their poor but honest names in order to become rich and shameless within twenty-four hours." Because she lacked female vanity she told the maids herself that the men did not even notice her until they discovered that she was signing checks for the ranch.

One of those who made advances was Juan Badinas. La Serrana did not snub him. Wagging tongues soon had it that they were seen together in the

darkness of the night. Be that as it may, La Serrana never allowed him the slightest intervention in the affairs of the ranch and he continued to perform his customary duties as general foreman.

Paquito had to go to school, but he did only what the law required. His companions arrived by car or truck or bus, so Paquito went horseback. School was not very far away. Paquito's horse had an English name, Dappled, since it was spotted. Horse and rider understood each other and got on well together.

Of course Dappled caused a sensation among the little boys and especially among the little girls. The overabundance of automobiles had almost caused the horse to disappear and Dappled and its rider were a spectacle.

One day a little girl asked him, "Is it true that your mother is buried in a dump?"

The lad snatched hold of her skirt and ripped out a patch so large that the girl was standing with her thighs and something more exposed to the air.

In spite of everything the ballad of Delgadina was heard from time to time down at the ranch and some inspired cowboys had added verses which they sang to the guitar, alluding to Delgadina by her first and last names:

*On March thirteen she perished,
Penquero's fair Irene.
And in the mountain valley
Her graveyard may be seen.*

Her burial up there became the biggest part of the scandal even though the sandpit was consecrated and enclosed.

On his birthday Paquito invited his school friends to a party with cake and candles and a rodeo in which the ranch hands participated and competed for prizes solemnly awarded by La Serrana. Boys who were about fourteen years old liked the party because they were permitted to smoke and drink wine.

Once Juan Badinas tried to sit beside La Serrana and help distribute the prizes. She did not know what to do, yet dared not throw him off the platform with everybody looking. Paquito saw what was happening and told Badinas, "Everyone has his place on the ranch and this isn't yours."

"Why?"

"For various reasons, but mainly because I say so."

Badinas saw something in the boy's eye that made him leave without replying.

When he finished high school, Paquito did not care to go to any university. A little later his grandfather finished serving his sentence—it had been reduced for good behavior—and was released from prison. "Every misfortune has its end," said La Serrana as she drove her brother back to the ranch.

"Not every misfortune, for there are some that can never be remedied," replied Penquero, remembering his daughter.

La Serrana invited her brother's old acquaintances to call on him. Many of them showed up. There was wine, but no gaiety. Some of them continued to regard Penquero merely as the rustic shepherd who had killed his patron in a fit of rage. Badinas did not come and this ruined the party for Penquero.

The old shepherd went to the city to visit Efrain again, but he found nothing which interested him there and when he returned to the ranch he tried to establish some sort of relationship with Juan Badinas. This man refused to recognize him as an equal, let alone a superior.

He was aging rapidly. He spent the winter just sitting in the sun on a porch facing south. Nobody came to see him. Paco was everywhere. On Sundays Badinas and his cronies played cards but they never invited Penquero.

Toward the end of the winter Penquero took sick. Nonetheless he appeared to rally for a few days and then La Serrana told Badinas and his friends to play cards with him in the afternoon. At last Penquero got to play with the foremen. When they left he asked La Serrana if Badinas had come of his own free will or because she had ordered him to. La Serrana told a white lie.

Penquero died without Badinas' repaying the five dollars.

ON THE NIGHT OF THE WAKE La Serrana was still thinking about the money as she heard Badinas sing his alabado.

Outside of La Serrana's room the night was nearly vanquished and dawn was near. One could still hear the drone of prayers in the funeral chamber and laughter from the kitchen or outside the house around the bonfires.

Paco retired to his room completely exhausted. He entered without switching on the lights, but the gleam of headlights came through the windows as cars continued arriving and departing.

On the nightstand was a photograph of his mother, young and beautiful. Although he could not see it in the dark, the glare of headlights sometimes produced a brightness which made the glass and the metallic frame sparkle. He could hear the mourner repeating, "Most holy God, almighty and immortal God, deliver us from evil."

Beside the door Paco noticed an elongated object of stern, symmetrical design—the coffin. He was afraid. Why did they put the coffin in his room? Then he realized that they had to put it somewhere and they did not want to leave it out in the corridors in full view of everyone. His grandfather's body hadn't impressed him much, but the coffin, yes, and he backed out of the room. Then he went to the dining room, which was likewise still dark and he did not want to switch the light on.

In the doorway he met his aunt, who told him, "This wake isn't just a wake for my brother, but much more—the wedding of your father and your mother, your own baptism, the interment of your mother, and all the honors which were denied to her in life."

She took her nephew's hand. "Something just occurred to me. Let's bring the funeral flowers in here and put them underneath your mother's portrait."

The day began to dawn gray and cloudy. Some of the cowboys who were sleeping around the bonfires woke up. Others who had moved on to the portal were still snoring.

Paco returned to the funeral chamber. Everyone was in his place, the women and a few men were fingering their rosaries and responding mechanically to the hired mourner, not the same one, but a smaller man with a wrinkled face. They called this old man El Lechuzo, the owl-man. Since it was a wake in a wealthy household every mourner was ready to do his bit.

El Lechuzo sang more than he prayed and when he referred to the bells of Judgment Day, he simulated their sound with his mouth, and he called the dead man Penquero without compunction. He did it so innocently that Paco never thought to take offense.

Things grew brighter with the dawn. Through the windows towards the north the sky showed violet. Paco kept coming and going. Sometimes his feet led him toward his room, but when he reached the door he would remember the coffin and retrace his footsteps. It sickened him to see it. The mourner came to that place in his litany where he had to say, "Stella matutina. . . ."

And sure enough there was a little star in the northern window and he was looking at it. Unawares he repeated himself twice, and likewise the people answered twice, "Ora pro nobis."

Everything seemed to lighten as the day dawned. Paco entered the adjoining room which was still full of women in mourning. The smashed guitar littered the floor and Paco picked it up and carried the pieces over to the fireplace, a little sorry for what he had done. The guitar was consumed in a burst of flame. He saw through the corridor that La Serrana was directing people who arrived with wreaths and bouquets not to the funeral bedroom but to the dining room and she was making the Arandas pile them at the foot of Delgadina's portrait.

Paco smiled to himself and thought, "My aunt doesn't want to forget and she is right. I'll never forget either."

Paco thought that he was beginning to feel different with the light of day. During the night he had been thinking that Penquero would be rewarded in the other life among the angels and luminaries. Now in the morning light he was thinking that there is no life eternal and that everything ends in the grave. They would heap the earth above Penquero and grass would cover him. And remembering La Serrana who did not want to forget, he felt a lump in his throat. He wanted the time for the burial to arrive so they would take the coffin from his room.

—translated from the Spanish by Morse Manley