



Maria Concepción

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DRAWINGS BY ROSS SANTEE



MARIA CONCEPCIÓN walked carefully, keeping to the middle of the white, dusty road, where the maguey thorns and the treacherous curved spines of organa cactus had not gathered so profusely. She would have enjoyed resting for a moment in the dark shade by the roadside, but she had no time to waste drawing cactus needles from her feet. Juan and his *jefe* would be waiting for their food in the damp trenches of the buried city.

She carried about a dozen living fowls slung over her right shoulder, their feet fastened together. Half of them fell upon the flat of her back, the balance dangled uneasily over her breast. They wriggled their benumbed and swollen legs against her neck, they twisted their stupefied, half-blind eyes upward, seeming to peer into her face inquiringly. She did not see them or think of them. Her left arm was a trifle tired with the weight of the food basket, and she was hungry after her long morning's work.

Under her clean bright-blue cotton rebozo her straight back outlined itself strongly. Instinctive serenity softened her black eyes, shaped like almonds set far apart, and tilted a bit endwise. She walked with the free, natural, yet guarded, ease of the primitive woman carrying an unborn child. The shape of her body was easy, the

swelling life was not a distortion, but the right, inevitable proportions of a woman. She was entirely contented, calmly filled with a sense of the goodness of life.

Her small house was half-way up a shallow hill, under a clump of perutrees, a wall of organa cactus inclosing it on the side nearest the road. Now she came down into the valley, divided by the narrow spring, and crossed a bridge of loose stones near the hut where Maria Rosa the bee-keeper lived with her old godmother, Lupe, the medicine-woman. Maria Concepción had no faith in the charred owl bones, the singed rabbit fur, the messes and ointments sold by Lupe to the ailing of the village. She was a good Christian, and bought her remedies, bottled, with printed directions that she could not read, at the drug-store near the city market, where she went almost daily with her fowls. But she often purchased a jar of honey from young Maria Rosa, a pretty, shy child only fifteen years old.

Maria Concepción and her husband, Juan Villegas, were each a little past their eighteenth year. She had a good reputation with the neighbors as an energetic, religious woman. It was commonly known that if she wished to buy a new rebozo for herself or a shirt for Juan, she could bring out a sack of hard silver pesos for the purpose.

She had paid for the license, nearly a year ago, the potent bit of stamped paper which permits people to be married in the church. She had given money to the priest before she and Juan walked together up to the altar the Monday after Holy Week. It had been the adventure of the villagers to go, three Sundays one after another, to hear the banns called by the priest for Juan de Dios Villegas and Maria Concepción Guterrez. After the wedding she had called herself Maria Concepción Guterrez de Villegas, as though she owned a whole hacienda.

She paused on the bridge and dabbled her feet in the water, her eyes resting themselves from the sun-rays in a fixed, dreaming gaze to the far-off mountains, deeply blue under their hanging drift of clouds. It came to her that she would like a fresh crust of honey. The delicious aroma of bees, their slow, thrilling hum poured upon her, awakening a pleasant desire for a crisp flake of sweetness in her mouth.

"If I do not eat it now, I shall mark my child," she thought, peering through the crevices in the thick hedge of cactus that sheered up nakedly, like prodigious bared knife-blades cast protectingly around the small clearing. The place was so silent that she doubted if Maria Rosa and Lupe were at home.

The leaning *jacal* of dried rush-withes and corn-sheaves, bound to tall saplings thrust into the earth, roofed with yellowed maguey-leaves flattened and overlapping like shingles, sat drowsy and fragrant in the warmth of noonday. The hives, similarly constructed, were scattered toward the back of the clearing, like small mounds of clean vegetable refuse. Over each

mound there hung a dusty golden shimmer of bees.

A light, gay scream of laughter rose from behind the hut; a man's short laugh joined in. "Ah, Maria Rosa has a *novio!*" Maria Concepción stopped short, smiling, shifted her burden slightly, bending forward to see more clearly through the hedge spaces, shading her eyes.

Maria Rosa ran, dodging between beehives, parting two stunted jasmine-bushes as she came, lifting her knees in swift leaps, looking over her shoulder and laughing in a quivering, excited way. A heavy jar, swung by the handle to her wrist, knocked against her thighs as she ran. Her toes pushed up sudden spurts of dust, her half-unbraided hair showered around her shoulders in long crinkled wisps.

Juan Villegas ran after her, also laughing strangely, his teeth set, both rows gleaming behind the small, soft black beard growing sparsely on his lips, his chin, leaving his brown cheeks girl-smooth. When he seized her, he clenched so hard that her chemise gave way and slipped off her shoulder. Frightened, she stopped laughing, pushed him away, and stood silent, trying to pull up the ripped sleeve with one hand. Her pointed chin and dark-red mouth moved in an uncertain way, as if she wished to laugh again; her long black lashes flickered with the tiny quick-moving lights in her half-hidden eyes.

Maria Concepción realized that she had not stirred or breathed for some seconds. Her forehead was cold, and yet boiling water seemed to be pouring slowly along her spine. An unaccountable pain was in her knees, as though pieces of ice had got into them. She was afraid Juan and Maria Rosa

would feel her eyes fixed upon them, and find her there, unable to move. But they did not pass beyond the inclosure, or even glance toward the gap in the wall opening upon the road.

Juan lifted one of Maria Rosa's half-bound braids and slapped her neck with it, playfully. She smiled with soft, expectant shyness. Together they moved back through the hives of honey-comb. Juan flourished his wide hat back and forth, walking very proudly. Maria Rosa balanced her jar on one hip, and swung her long, full petticoats with every step.

Maria Concepción came out of the heavy darkness which seemed to envelop her head and bind her at the throat, and found herself walking onward, keeping the road by instinct, feeling her way delicately, her ears strumming as if all Maria Rosa's bees had hived in them. Her careful sense of duty kept her moving toward the buried city where Juan's chief, the American archæologist, was taking his midday rest, waiting for his dinner.

Juan and Maria Rosa! She burned all over now, as if a layer of those tiny fig-cactus bristles, as insidious and petty-cruel as spun glass, had crawled under her skin. She wished to sit down quietly and wait for her death without finishing what she had set out to do, remembering no more those two strange people, Juan and Maria Rosa, laughing and kissing in the sweet-smelling sunshine. Once, years before, when she was a young girl, she had returned from market to find her *jacal* burned to a pile of ash and her few pesos gone. An incredibly lost and empty feeling had possessed her; she had kept moving about the place, unbelieving, somehow expecting it all to take shape again before her eyes,

restored unchanged. But it was all gone. And now here was a worse thing. This was something that could not happen. But it was true. Maria Rosa, that sinful girl, shameless!

She heard herself saying a harsh, true word about Maria Rosa, saying it aloud as if she expected some one to answer, "Yes, you are right." At this moment the gray, untidy head of Givens appeared over the edges of the newest trench he had caused to be dug in his field of excavations. The long, deep crevasses, in which a man might stand without being seen, lay criss-crossed like orderly gashes of a giant scalpel. Nearly all the men of the small community were employed by Givens in this work of uncovering the lost city of their ancestors. They worked all the year through and prospered, digging all day for those small clay heads and bits of pottery for which there was no use on earth, they being all broken and covered with earth. They themselves could make better ones, perfectly stout and new. But the unearthly delight of the *jefe* in finding these things was an endless puzzle. He would fairly roar for joy at times, waving a shattered pot or a human rib-bone above his head, shouting for his photographer to come and make a picture of this!

Now he emerged, and his young enthusiast's eyes welcomed Maria Concepción from his old-man face, covered with hard wrinkles, burned to the color of red earth under the countless suns of his explorer's life.

"I hope you 've brought me a nice fat one." He selected a fowl from the bunch dangling nearest him as Maria Concepción, wordless, leaned over the trench. "Dress it for me, there 's a good girl. I 'll broil it."



Maria Concepción

Maria Concepción took the fowl by the head, and silently, swiftly drew the knife across the throat, twisting off the head with the casual firmness one might use with the top of a beet.

"Dios, woman, but you have valor!" said Givens, watching her. "I can't do that. It makes me creep."

"My home country is Guadalajara," answered Maria Concepción, without bravado. "There we have valor for everything."

She stood and regarded Givens condescendingly, that diverting white man who had no woman to cook for him, and, moreover, appeared not to feel any loss of dignity in preparing his own food. He knelt now, eyes squinted tightly, nose wrinkled, trying to avoid the smoke, turning the roasting fowl busily on a stick. Juan's *jefe*, therefore to be humored, to be placated.

"The tortillas are fresh and hot, Señor," she murmured. "By permission, I will now go to market."

"Yes, yes, run along; bring me another to-morrow." Givens turned his head to look at her again. Her grand manner reminded him of royalty in exile. He noticed her unnatural paleness. "The sun is too hot, eh?" he asked.

"Sí, Señor. Pardon me, but Juan will be here soon?"

"He should be, the scamp. Leave his food. The others will eat it."

She moved away; the blue of her rebozo became a dancing spot in the heat vibrations that appeared to rise from the gray-red soil. Givens considered her exceptionally intelligent. He liked to tell stories of Juan's escapades also, of how often he had saved him, within the last five years, from going to jail, or even from being

shot, for his varied and highly imaginative misdemeanors.

"I am never a minute too soon," he would say indulgently. "Well, why not? He is a good worker. He never intentionally did harm in his life."

After Juan was married, he used to twit him, with exactly the right shade of condescension, on his many infidelities to Maria Concepción. He was fond of saying, "She'll discover you yet, young demon!" which would please Juan immensely.

Maria Concepción did not think of telling Juan she had found him out, but she kept saying to herself, "If I had been a young girl like Maria Rosa, and a man had caught hold of me so, I would have broken my jar over his head." Her anger was all against Maria Rosa because she had not done this.

Less than a week after this the two culprits went away to war, Juan as a common soldier, Maria Rosa as his *soldadera*. She bowed her neck under a heavy and onerous yoke of duties: she carried the blankets and the cooking-pots, she slept on stones or dry branches, she marched ahead of the troops, with the battalion of experienced women of war, in search of provisions. She ate with them what was left after the men had eaten. After battles she went out on the field with the others to salvage clothing and guns and ammunition from the slain before they should begin to spoil in the heat.

This was the life the little bee-keeper found at the end of her runaway journey. There was no particular scandal in the village. People shrugged. It was far better for every one that they were gone. There was a popular belief among her neighbors that Maria

Concepción was not so mild as she seemed.

When she learned about her man and that shameless girl she did not weep. Later, when the baby was born, and died within four days, she did not weep. "She is mere stone," said old Lupe, who had offered all her charms for the preservation of the little life, and had been rebuffed with a ferocity that appalled her.

If Maria Concepción had not gone so regularly to church, lighting candles before the saints and receiving holy communion at the altar every month, there might have been talk of her being devil-possessed, her face was so changed and blind-looking. But this was impossible when, after all, she had been married by the priest. It must be, they reasoned, that she was being punished for her pride. They decided this was the true reason: she was altogether too proud.

During the two years that Juan and Maria Rosa were gone Maria Concepción sold her fowls and looked after her house, and her sack of hard pesos grew. Lupe had no talent for bees, and the hives did not prosper. She used to see Maria Concepción in the market or at church, and afterward she always said that no one could tell by looking that she was a woman who had such a heavy grief.

"I pray God everything goes well with Maria Concepción from this out," she would say, "for she has had her share of trouble."

When some idle person repeated this to the deserted woman, she went down to Lupe's house and stood within the clearing, and called to the medicine-woman, who sat in her doorway stirring a jar of fresh snake's grease and rabbit blood, a cure for sores:

"Keep your prayers to yourself, Lupe, or offer them for others who need them. I will ask God for what I want in this world."

"And will you get it, you think, Maria Concepción?" asked Lupe, titling cruelly, and smelling the mixture clinging to the wooden spoon. "Did you pray for what you have now?"

Afterward every one noticed that Maria Concepción went more often to church, and less to the village to talk with the other women as they sat along the curb, eating fruit and nursing their infants, at the end of the market-day.

"After all, she is wrong to take us for her enemies," said grave old Soledad, who always thought such things out. "All women have these troubles. Well, we should suffer together."

But Maria Concepción lived alone. She was thin, as if something was gnawing her away inside, her eyes were sunken, and she spoke no more than was necessary. She worked harder than ever, and her butchering knife was scarcely ever out of her hand.

Juan and Maria Rosa, tired of military life, came home one day without asking permission of any authority whatever. The field of war had unrolled itself, a long scroll of vexations, until the end had frayed out within twenty miles of Juan's village. So he and his *soldadera*, now as lean as a wolf, and burdened with a child daily expected, set out with no ostentation and walked home.

They arrived one morning about daybreak. Juan was picked up on sight by a group of military police from the small *cuartel* on the edge of town, who told him with impersonal cheerfulness that he would add one to

a group of ten waiting to be shot next morning as deserters.

Maria Rosa, screaming, and falling on her face in the road, was taken under the armpits by two guards and helped briskly to her own *jacal*, now sadly run down. She was received with professional calm by Lupe, who hastily set about the business obviously in hand.

Limping with foot weariness, a layer of dust concealing his fine new clothes, got mysteriously from somewhere, Juan appeared before the captain of the *cuartel*. The captain recognized him as the chief digger for his good friend Givens. He despatched a note in haste to that kindly and eccentric person.

Shortly afterward, Givens showed up at the *cuartel*, and Juan was delivered to him, with the urgent request that nothing be made public about so humane and sensible an operation on the part of military authority.

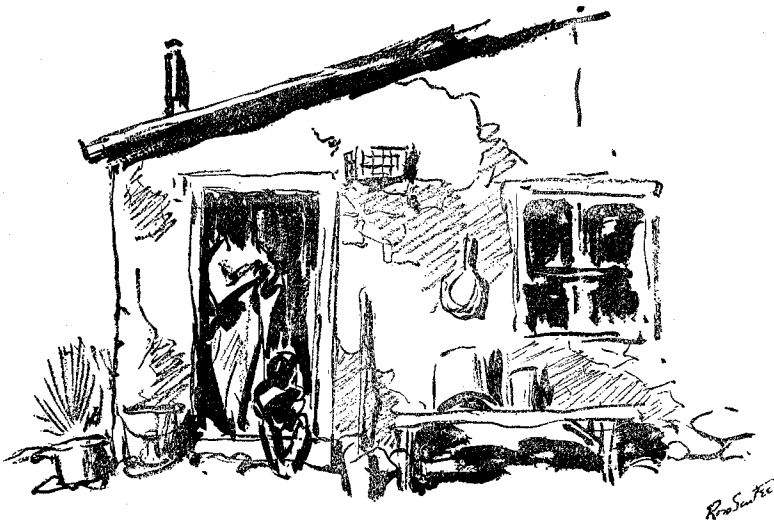
Juan walked out of the rather stifling atmosphere of the drumhead court, a definite air of swagger about him. His hat, incredibly huge and

embroidered with silver thread, hung over one eyebrow, secured at the back by a cord of silver dripping with cobalt-blue tassels. His shirt was of a checkerboard pattern in green and black, his white cotton trousers were bound by a belt of yellow leather tooled in red. His feet were bare, the beautifully arched and muscled feet of the Indian, with long, flexible toes.

He removed his cigarette from the corner of his full-lipped, wide mouth. He removed the splendid hat. His black hair, pressed damply to his forehead, sprang up suddenly in a cloudy thatch on his crown.

"You young devil," said Givens, a trifle shaken, "some day I shall be five minutes too late!"

Juan bowed to the officer, who appeared to be gazing at a vacuum. He swung his arm wide in a free circle upsoaring toward the prison window, where forlorn heads poked over the window-sill, hot eyes following the lucky departing one. Two or three of them flipped a hand in response, with a gallant effort to imitate his own casual and heady manner.



He kept up this insufferable pantomime until they rounded the first sheltering clump of fig-cactus. Then he seized Givens's hand, and his eyes blazed adoration and gratitude.

"With all my life, all my life, I thank thee!" he said. "It is nothing to be shot, *mi jefe*,—certainly you know I was not afraid,—but to be shot in a drove of deserters, against a cold wall, by order of that—"

Glittering epithets tumbled over one another like explosions of a rocket. All the scandalous analogies from the animal and vegetable worlds were applied in a vivid, unique, and personal way to the life, loves, and family history of the harmless young officer who had just set him free. But Juan cared nothing for this; his gratitude to his *jefe* excluded all other possible obligations.

"What will Maria Concepción say to all this?" asked Givens. "You are very informal, Juan, for a man who was married in the church."

Juan put on his hat.

"Oh, Maria Concepción! That 's nothing! Look you, *mi jefe*, to be married in the church is a great misfortune to a man. After that he is not himself any more. How can that woman complain when I do not drink, not even on days of fiesta, more than a glass of pulque? I do not beat her; never, never. We were always at peace. I say to her, 'Come here,' and she comes straight. I say, 'Go there,' and she goes quickly. Yet sometimes I looked at her and thought, 'Now I am married to that woman in the church,' and I felt a sinking inside, as if something were lying heavy on my stomach. With Maria Rosa it is all different. She is not silent; she talks. When she talks too much, I slap her

and say, 'Silence, thou simpleton!' and she weeps. She is just a girl with whom I do as I please. You know how she used to keep those clean little bees in their hives? She always smelt of their honey. I swear it. I would not harm Maria Concepción because I am married to her in the church; but also, *mi jefe*, I will not leave Maria Rosa, because she pleases me more than any other woman."

"Let me tell you, Juan, Maria Concepción will some day take your head off with that sharp knife she uses on the fowls. Then you will remember what I have said."

Juan's expression was the proper blend of sentimental triumph and melancholy. It was pleasant to think of himself in the rôle of romantic hero to two such desirable women. His present situation was ineffably perfect. He had just escaped from the threat of a disagreeable end. His clothes were new and handsome. He was on his way to work and civilian life with his patient *jefe*. He was little more than twenty years old. Life tasted good, for a certainty. He fairly smacked his lips on its savor.

The early sunshine, the light, clear air, full of the good smell of ripening cactus-figs, peaches, and melons, of pungent pepper-berries dangling in bright red clusters on the peru-trees, the very smell of his cigarette, shook him with a merry ecstasy of good-will for all life, whatever it was.

"Señor,"—he addressed his friend handsomely, as one man to another,— "women are good things, but not at this moment. By your permission, I will now go to the village and eat. To-morrow morning very early I will come to the buried city and work. Let us forget Maria Concepción and

Maria Rosa. Each one in her place. I will manage them when the time comes."

News of Juan's adventure soon got abroad, and Juan found many friends about him during the morning. They frankly commended his leaving the army. *Por Dios!* a man could do no better thing than that! The new hero ate a great deal and drank a little, the occasion being better than a feast-day. It was almost noon before he returned to visit Maria Rosa.

He found her sitting on a straw mat, rubbing oil on her three-hour-old son. Before this felicitous vision Juan's emotions so twisted him that he returned to the village and invited every man in the "Death and Resurrection" *pulqueria* to drink with him.

Having thus taken leave of his balance, he found himself unaccountably back in his own house after his long absence, attempting to beat Maria Concepción by way of reëstablishing himself in his legal household.

Maria Concepción, knowing what had happened in the wretched hut of her enemy, knowing all the events of that unhappy day, refused to be beaten by Juan drunk when Juan sober had never thought of such a thing. She did not scream; she stood her ground and resisted; she even struck at him.

Juan, amazed, only half comprehending his own actions, stepped back and gazed at her questioningly through a leisurely whirling film which seemed to have lodged behind his eyes. Certainly here was a strange thing. He had not intended to touch her. Oh, well, no harm done. He gave up, turned away. Sleep was better. He lay down amiably in a shadowed corner and floated away dreamlessly.

Maria Concepción, seeing that Juan was quiet, began automatically to bind the legs of her fowls. It was market-day, and she would be late.

Her movements were quick and rigid, like a doll jerked about on strings. She fumbled and tangled the bits of cord in her haste, and set off across the plowed, heavy fields instead of taking the accustomed road. She ran grotesquely, in uneven, jolting leaps between furrows, a crazy panic in her head, in her stumbling legs. She seemed not to know her directions. Now and then she would stop and look about, trying to place herself, then proceed a few steps.

At once, with an inner quivering, she came to her senses completely, recognized the thing that troubled her so terribly, was certain of what she wanted. She sat down quietly under a sheltering thorny bush and gave herself over to her long and devouring sorrow; flinched and shuddered away for the first time from that pain in the heart that pressed and pressed intolerably, until she wished to tear out the heart with her hands to be eased of it. The thing which had for so long squeezed her whole body into a tight, dumb knot of suffering suddenly broke with painful and shocking violence. She jerked with the involuntary recoil of one who receives a blow, and the tears poured from her eyes as if the wounds of her whole life were shedding their salt ichor. Drawing her rebozo over her head, she bowed her forehead on her arms, folded upon her updrawn knees, and wept.

After a great while she sat up, throwing the rebozo off her face, and leaned against the clustered saplings of the bush, arms relaxed at her sides, her face still, her eyes swollen, the lids

closed and heavy. She sat there in deadly silence and immobility, the tears still forming steadily under the lashes, as if poured from an inexhaustible, secret, slow-moving river. She seemed to be crying in her sleep. From time to time she would lift the corner of her rebozo to wipe her face dry; and silently the tears would run again, streaking her face, drenching the front of her chemise. She had that complete and horrifying realization of calamity which is not a thing of the mind, but a physical experience as sharp and certain as the bite of thorns. All her being was a dark, confused memory of an endless loss, of grief burning in the heart by night, of deadly baffled anger eating at her by day, until her feet were as heavy as if she were mired in the muddy roads during the time of rains.

Juan awakened slowly, with long yawns and grumblings, alternated with short relapses into sleep full of visions and clamorous noises. A blur of orange light seared his eyeballs when he tried to unseal his lids. There came from somewhere a rapid confusion of words, a low voice weeping without tears, speaking awful meaningless phrases over and over. He began to listen. He strained and tugged at the leash of his stupor, he sweated to grasp those words which should have fearful meanings, yet somehow he could not comprehend them. Then he came awake with frightening suddenness, sitting up, eyes straining at the long, lashing streak of gilded light piercing the corn-husk walls from the level, disappearing sun.

Maria Concepción stood in the doorway, looming colossally tall to his shocked eyes. She was talking quick-

ly, calling to him. Then he saw her clearly.

"*Por Dios!*" thought Juan, frozen with amazement, "here I am facing my death!" for the long knife she wore habitually at her belt was in her hand. But instead, she threw it away, clear from her, and got down on her knees, crawling toward him as he had seen her crawl toward the shrine at Guadalupe many times. Never had she knelt before him! He watched her approach with superstitious horror. Falling forward upon her face, she kissed his feet. She huddled upon his knees, lips moving urgently in a thrilling whisper. Her words became clear, and Juan understood them all.

For a second he could not speak. He sat immovable. Then he took her head between both his hands, and supported her somewhat in this way, saying swiftly, anxiously reassuring, almost in a babble:

"Oh, thou poor creature! Oh, thou dear woman! Oh, my Maria Concepción, unfortunate! Listen! do not fear! Hear me! I will hide thee away, I, thy own man, will protect thee! Quiet! Not a sound!"

Trying to collect himself, he held and soothed her as they sat together in the new darkness. Maria Concepción bent over, face almost upon his knees, her feet folded under her, seeking security of him. For the first time in his careless, utterly unafraid existence Juan was aware of danger. This was danger. Maria Concepción would be dragged away between two gendarmes, with him helpless and unarmed, to spend her days in Belem Prison, maybe. Danger! The night was peopled with tangible menaces. He stood up, dragging the woman to her feet with him. She was silent now,

perfectly rigid, holding to him with resistless strength, her hands frozen on his arms.

"Get me the knife," he told her in a whisper. She obeyed, her feet slipping along the hard earth floor, her shoulders straight, her arms stiffened downward. He lighted a candle. Maria Concepción held the knife out to him. It was stained and dark even to the end of the handle, a thick stain with a viscous gleam.

He frowned at her harshly, noting the same stains on her chemise and hands.

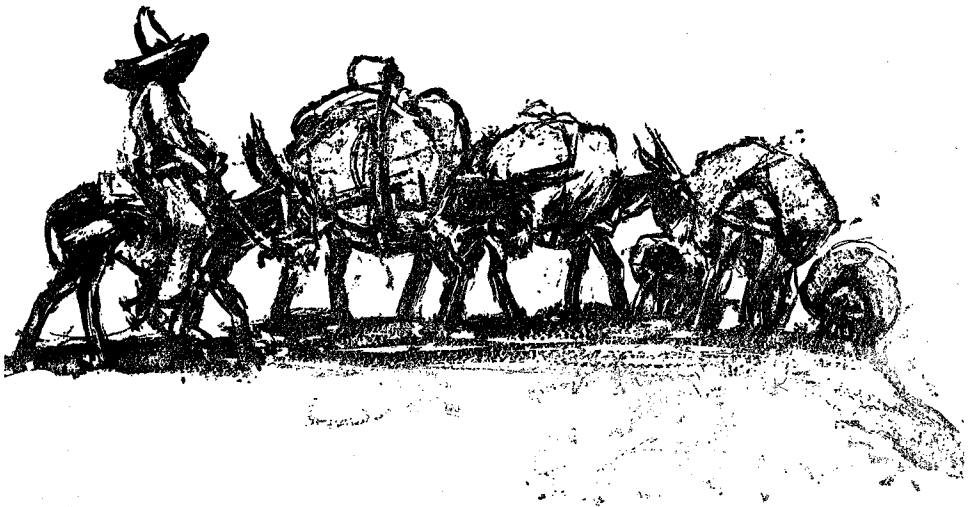
"Take off thy clothes and wash thy hands," he ordered. He washed the knife carefully, and threw the water wide of the doorway. She watched him, and did likewise with the bowl where she had bathed.

"Light thy brasero and cook food for me," he told her in the same per-

legged near her, he stared at her as at a creature unknown to him, who bewildered him utterly, for whom there was no possible explanation. She did not turn her head, but kept an oblivious silence and stillness, save for the movement of her strong hands fanning the blaze which cast sparks and small jets of white smoke, flaring and dying rhythmically with the motion of the fan, lighting her face and leaving it in darkness by turns.

"*Tu mujer,*"—Juan's voice barely disturbed the silence,—"*listen now to me carefully, and answer my questions as I ask them, and later, when the gendarmes come here for us, thou shalt have nothing to fear. But there will be something to settle between us afterward.*"

She turned her head slowly at this. The light from the fire cast small red sparks into the corners of her eyes; a



empty tone. He took her garments and went out. When he returned, she was wearing an old soiled dress, and was fanning the fire in the charcoal-burner. Seating himself cross-

yellow phosphorescence glimmered behind the dark iris.

"For me it is all settled, *Juanito mio,*" she answered, without fear, in a tone so tender, so grave, so heavy

with sorrow, that Juan felt his vitals contract. He wished to weep openly not as a man, but as a very small child. He could not fathom this woman, or the mysterious fortunes of life grown so instantly tangled where all had seemed so gay and simple. He felt, too, that she had become unique and invaluable, a woman without an equal in a million women, and he could not tell why. He drew an enormous sigh that rattled in his chest.

"*Si, si*, it is all settled. I shall not go away again. We shall stay here together, you and I, forever."

In whispers he questioned her, and she answered whispering, and he instructed her over and over until she had her lesson by heart. The profound blackness of the night encroached upon them, flowing over the narrow threshold, invading their hearts. It brought with it sighs and murmurs, the pad of ghostly feet in the near-by road, the sharp staccato whimper of wind through the cactus-leaves. All these familiar cadences were now invested with sinister terrors; a dread, formless and uncontrollable, possessed them both.

"Light another candle," said Juan, aloud, suddenly, in too resolute, in too hard a tone. "Let us eat now."

They sat facing each other and ate from the same dish, after their old habit. Neither tasted what they ate. With food half-way to his mouth, Juan listened. The sound of voices grew, spread, widened at the turn of the road, along the organa wall. A spray of lantern-light filtered through the hedge, a single voice slashed the blackness, literally ripped the fragile layer of stillness which hovered above the hut.

"Juan Villegas!"

"Pass, friends!" Juan cried cheerfully.

They stood in the doorway, simple, cautious gendarmes from the village, partly Indian themselves, personally known to all the inhabitants. They flashed their lanterns almost apologetically upon the pleasant, harmless scene of a man eating supper with his wife.

"Pardon, Brother," said the leader. "Some one has killed the woman Maria Rosa, and we must ask questions of all her neighbors and friends." He paused, and added with an attempt at severity, "Naturally!"

"Naturally," agreed Juan. "I was a good friend of Maria Rosa. I regret her bad fortune."

They all went away together, the men walking in a group, Maria Concepción following a trifle to one side, a few steps in the rear, but near Juan. This was the custom. There was no thought of changing it even for such an important occasion.

The two points of candle-light at Maria Rosa's head fluttered uneasily; the shadows shifted and dodged on the stained, darkened walls. To Maria Concepción everything in the smothering, inclosing room shared an evil restlessness. The watchful faces of those called as witnesses, those familiar faces of old friends, were made alien by that look of speculation in the eyes. The ridges of the rose-colored silk rebozo thrown over the body varied continually, as though the thing it covered was not perfectly in repose. Her eyes swerved over the body from the candle-tips at the head to the feet, jutting up thinly, the small, scarred soles protruding, freshly washed, a mass of crooked, half-healed wounds, thorn-pricks and cuts of sharp stones. Her gaze went back to the candle-

flare, to Juan's eyes warning her, to the gendarmes talking among themselves. Her eyes would not be controlled.

With a leap that shook her her gaze settled upon the face of Maria Rosa. Instantly, her blood ran smoothly again: there was nothing to fear. Even the restless light could not give a look of life to that fixed countenance. She was dead. Maria Concepción felt her muscles give way softly; her heart began beating without effort. She knew no more rancor against that pitiable thing, lying indifferently on its new mat under the fine silk rebozo. The mouth drooped sharply at the corners in a grimace of weeping arrested half-way. The brows were strangely distressed; the dead could not cast off some dark, final obsession of terror. It was all finished. Maria Rosa had eaten too much honey and had had too much love. Now she must sit in hell, crying over her sins and her hard death forever and ever.

Old Lupe's cackling voice arose. She had spent the morning helping Maria Rosa. The child had spat blood the moment it was born, a bad sign. She thought then that bad luck would come to the house. Well, about sunset she was in the yard at the back of the house grinding tomatoes and pepper. She had left mother and babe asleep. She heard a strange noise in the house, a choking and smothered calling, like some one in the nightmare. Well, such a thing is only natural. But there followed a light, quick, thudding sound —

"Like the blows of a fist?" interrupted the officer.

"No, not at all like such a thing."

"How do you know?"

"I am acquainted with that sound,

Señor," retorted Lupe. "This noise was something else."

But she was at a loss to describe it exactly. Immediately, there was a slight rattle of pebbles rolling and slipping under feet; then she knew some one had been there and was running away.

"Why did you wait so long before going to see?"

"I am old and hard in the joints," said Lupe; "I cannot run after people. I walked as fast as I could to the organa hedge, for it is only by this way that any one can enter. There was no one in the road, Señor, no one. Three cows, with a dog driving them; nothing else. When I got to Maria Rosa, she was lying all tangled up, and from her neck to her middle she was full of knife-holes. It was a sight to move the Blessed Image Himself! Her mouth and eyes were—"

"Never mind. Who came oftenest to her house? Who were her enemies?"

The old face congealed, closed. Her spongy skin drew into a network of secretive wrinkles. She turned withdrawn and expressionless eyes upon the gendarmes.

"I am an old woman; I do not see well; I cannot hurry on my feet. I did not see any one leave the clearing."

"You did not hear splashing in the spring near the bridge?"

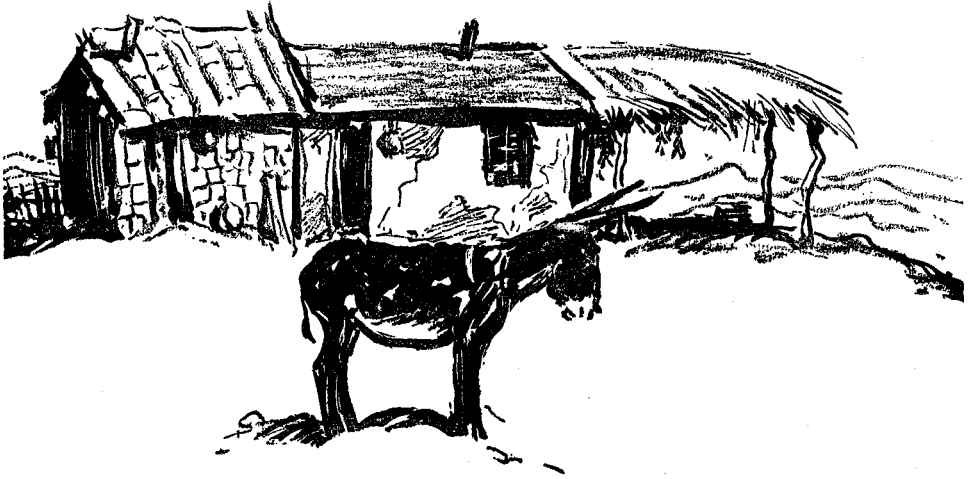
"No, Señor."

"Why, then, do our dogs follow a scent there and lose it?"

"Solo Dios sabe, Señor. I am an old wo—"

"How did the footfalls sound?" broke in the officer, hastily.

"Like the tread of an evil spirit!" intoned Lupe in a swelling oracular tone startling to the listeners. The



Rosa Santos

Indians stirred among themselves, watchfully. To them the medicine-woman was an incalculable force. They half expected her to pronounce a charm that would produce the evil spirit among them at once.

The gendarme's politeness began to wear thin.

"No, poor fool; I mean, were they heavy or light? The footsteps of a man or of a woman? Was the person shod or barefoot?"

A glance at the listening circle assured Lupe of their thrilled attention. She enjoyed the prominence, the menacing importance, of her situation. What she had not seen she could not describe, thank God! No one could harm her because her knees were stiff and she could not run even to seize a murderer. As for knowing the difference between footfalls, shod or bare, man or woman, nay, even as between devil and human, who ever heard of such madness?

"My ears are not eyes, Señor," she ended grandly; "but upon my heart I swear those footsteps fell as the tread of the spirit of evil!"

"Local" yapped the gendarme in a shrill voice. "Take her away somebody! Juan Villegas, tell me—"

Juan told him everything he knew, patiently, several times over. He had returned to his wife that day. She had gone to market as usual. He had helped her prepare her fowls. She had returned about mid-afternoon, they had talked, she had cooked, they had eaten. Nothing was amiss. Then the gendarmes came. That was all. Yes, Maria Rosa had gone away with him, but there had been no bad blood on this account between him and his wife or Maria Rosa. Everybody knew that his wife was a quiet woman.

Maria Concepción heard her own voice answering without a break. It was true at first she was troubled when her husband went away, but after that she had not cared. It was the way of men, she believed. Well, he had come home, thank God! She had gone to market, but had returned early, because now she had her man to cook for. That was all.

Other voices followed. A toothless

old man said, "But she is a woman of good repute among us, and Maria Rosa was not." A smiling young mother, Anita, baby at breast, said: "But if no one thinks so, how can you accuse her? Should not a woman's own husband know best where she was at all times?" Another: "Maria Rosa had a strange life, apart from us. How do we know who may have wished her evil?"

Maria Concepción suddenly felt herself guarded, surrounded, upborne by her faithful friends. They were all about her, speaking for her, defending her, refusing to admit ill of her. The forces of life were ranged invincibly with her against the vanquished dead. Maria Rosa had forfeited her share in their loyalty. What did they really believe? How much had old Lupe seen? She looked from one to the other of the circling faces. Their eyes gave back reassurance, understanding, a secret and mighty sympathy.

The gendarmes were at a loss. They, too, felt that sheltering wall cast impenetrably around the woman they had meant to accuse of murder. They watched her closely. They questioned several people over again. There was no prying open the locked doors of their defenses.

A small bundle lying against the wall at the head of the body squirmed like an eel. A wail, a mere sliver of sound, issued. Maria Concepción took the almost forgotten son of Maria Rosa in her arms.

"He is mine," she said clearly; "I will take him with me."

No one assented in words, but she felt an approving nod, a bare breath of friendly agreement, run around the tight, hot room.

The gendarmes gave up. Nobody could be accused; there was not a shred of true evidence. Well, then, good night to everybody. Many pardons for having intruded. Good health!

Maria Concepción, carrying the child, followed Juan from the clearing. The hut was left with its lighted candles and a group of old women who would sit up all night, drinking coffee and smoking and relating pious tales of horror.

Juan's exaltation had burned down. There was not an ember of excitement left in him. He was tired; the high sense of adventure was faded. Maria Rosa was vanished, to come no more forever. Their days of marching, of eating, of fighting, of making love, were all over. To-morrow he would go back to dull and endless labor, he would descend into the trenches of the buried city as Maria Rosa would go into her grave. He felt his veins fill up with bitterness, with black and unendurable melancholy. *O Dios!* what strange fortunes overtake a man!

Well, there was no way out of it. For the moment he craved to forget in sleep. He found himself so drowsy he could hardly guide his feet. The occasional light touch of the woman at his elbow was unreal, as ghostly as the brushing of a leaf against his face. Having secured her safety, compelled by an instinct he could not in the least comprehend, he forgot her. There survived in him only a vast blind hurt like a covered wound.

He entered the *jacal*, and, without waiting to light a candle, threw off his clothing, sitting just within the door. He moved with lagging, half-awake hands, seeking to strip his outworn

body of its heavy finery. With a long groaning sigh of relief he fell straight back on the floor, almost instantly asleep, his arms flung up and out in the simple attitude of exhaustion.

Maria Concepción, a small clay jar in her hand, approached the gentle little mother goat tethered to a sapling, which gave and yielded as she pulled at the rope's-end after the farthest reaches of grass about her. The kid, tied up a few yards away, rose bleating, its feathery fleece shivering in the fresh wind. Sitting on her heels, holding his tether, she allowed him to suckle a few moments. Afterward—all her movements very deliberate and even—she drew a supply of milk for the child.

She sat against the wall of her house, near the doorway. The child, fed and asleep, was cradled in the hollow of her crossed legs. The silence overfilled the world, the skies flowed down evenly to the rim of the valley, the

stealthy moon crept slantwise to the shelter of the mountains. She felt soft and warm all over; she dreamed that the newly born child was her own, and she was resting deliciously.

Maria Concepción could hear Juan's breathing. The sound vaped from the low doorway, calmly; the house seemed to be resting after a burdensome day. She breathed, too, very slowly and quietly, each inspiration saturating her with repose. The child's light, faint breath was a mere shadowy moth of sound flitting in the silver air. The night, the earth under her, seemed to swell and recede together with a vast, unhurried, benign breathing. She drooped and closed her eyes, feeling the slow rise and fall within her own body. She did not know what it was, but it eased her all through. Even as she was falling asleep, head bowed over the child, she was still aware of a strange, wakeful happiness.





The Stevenson Myth

BY GEORGE S. HELLMAN

DRAWINGS BY PAUL ROCHE



THE zest of discovery and the enjoyment of research in the field of unknown writings of great authors are delights familiar to the lover and student of such papers. Let them imagine the thrill I experienced when, in looking over the Stevenson material offered a few years ago at auction sale in New York, there came the realization that score after score of the manuscripts therein included had never been printed. To acquire these without having the dealers recognize the astounding nature of many insufficiently described items led me, after having marked the catalogs, to refrain from attending the various sessions of the auction; adopting, instead, the policy of doing my buying the next morning. I would then make a round of the booksellers and offer a fifty per cent. advance over the prices fetched the preceding day, on the condition that I should be left alone with their Stevenson purchases to make my own selections. In this way, save for those items which were bought on order and which private collectors would not relinquish, almost all of the unpublished Stevenson material was corralled without having aroused competitive bidding by various dealers who knew my special predilections in the field of unpublished material. In this collection were family letters, unpublished essays, stories, portions of plays and

novels, and, most important of all, well over one hundred poems.

Professor W. P. Trent of Columbia University had been asked by that ardent Stevensonian, the late F. S. Peabody of Chicago, for his opinion concerning some unpublished material that formed a part of Mr. Peabody's notable Stevenson collection. Professor Trent and I were at that time associated on the publication committee of the Authors Club, and at one of our meetings there was occasion to mention the Stevenson papers that I had acquired. Professor Trent became greatly interested, and asked me whether I would study Mr. Peabody's manuscripts in connection with the others. The upshot of the entire matter was that at the invitation of the Bibliophile Society, whereof Professor Trent was vice-president, Mr. Peabody one of the most interested members, and H. H. Harper of Boston the directing spirit, the editing of all this unpublished material was undertaken by me. It led to the issue of two volumes of Stevenson's poetry in 1916, and later two more volumes of hitherto unknown Stevenson material were brought forth by the Bibliophile Society under the joint editorship of Professor Trent, Mr. Harper, and myself.

Thus these four Stevenson volumes came to make their appearance in print. But when the first two vol-