

CURTAINS OF THE WIND

A short novel

by

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In autumn pastures where a bird had flown
I sought behind the curtains of the wind.

--Howard McKinley Corning

FOREWORD

The purpose of writing this thesis was to make a study of Mexican life. It is important that the people of the United States become better acquainted with the people across the border, for, since Mexico is a next door neighbor, its future is closely linked with the United States. Many preconceived notions color one's opinion of these people; many Americans think Mexico is made up of Indians, oacti, and bandits. A visit to this colorful country will correct this wrong impression, and certainly such books as "Guide to Mexico" by Toor, "Viva Mexico" by Flandean, "Mexican Frieze" by Burbank, "These are the Mexicans" by Cerwin, "Pattern of Mexico" by Gessler, and "Mexico and Its Heritage" by Gruening will give the reader a new conception of these neighbors.

This short novel, *Curtains of the Wind*, which is being offered as a thesis for the degree, Master of Science, is a study of some of those qualities that characterize the Mexican people. It is also an attempt to give a portrait picture of Antonio Chavez, during a brief but difficult period of his life. Certain internal and external forces were at work which motivated the young man's behavior. "Mexicans, like all Latins, seem emotionally exuberant," wrote Herbert Cerwin. "They do not hide or try to repress their passion whether it's in matters of love or in plain, ordinary living. They are hot-tempered and hot-blooded; they kill with the same passion that they make love."

Antonio is a Mexican boy sent by his father to live with his uncle in the States. Soon after arrival he enlists in the army,

and when the story opens he has just returned from Europe where he has spent four long years. For his work he has received decorations, but little more. A request for furlough to return home to attend his father's funeral is denied. Consequently Antonio leaves his camp, hitch-hiking to his home across the Rio Grande. Once he is safe across the border he yields to his life-long ambition to become a matador. He wins fame and name but not happiness. What gains a man to be a hero to his people if he cannot be a hero to himself? Realizing peace of mind more important than hero-worship, he returns to his camp to suffer whatever penalty the military will mete out to him.

Against this sweep of background is painted the romance of Antonio and Maria. Attending the Academy in San Jose, Antonio had not paid much attention to Maria for, to him, she was only a little girl. But Maria was faithful to Antonio! All the time he was overseas she wrote to him, and at last when he arrived at his uncle's ranch, she was there to meet him. Antonio had carried a mental picture of a girl in pigtails writing passionate declarations which had amused and entertained him. Now he saw her as a beautiful woman who seemed to be fashioned out of dream and desire. His love for her was true, but he did not allow it to influence his decisions. Only after he found that he had forever lost her, did he see his mistake. It was through her influence that he came to realize that peace of mind was more important than hero-worship.

To make the characters convincing, the material for the novel was drawn from three different sources: (1) from firsthand infor-

mation picked up on frequent tours into Mexico, during the time the writer was stationed at Fort Bliss, Texas; (2) from the accumulated facts of a true case history; (3) from research gained from books pertaining to travel, history, religion, customs--anything which gave material necessary to make the Mexican scene and people emerge clear and convincing before the reader's eyes.

Most experienced writers and teachers of this creative art will advise against writing about unfamiliar subjects. They will say that one should never attempt to write outside the range of his experience. This is understandable. For good writing must be convincing, and, in order that a work be convincing, it must come from the experiences of the author. Applying this principle to this story, it can be said that, if the characters and the scenes are not convincing, it is not because the novel was written outside the range of experience. All people are much alike, no matter who they are or where they live. Basic emotions are fundamentally the same. Personality, good or bad, is a matter of behavior, and behavior is dependent upon adjustments which are largely a matter of what has happened to the individual. Heritage and borders may fence in a race and a nation, but basically all people are motivated by the same forces and emotions. Antonio wanted to understand life; therefore, what happened to him is interpreted not so much in terms of meanings as in those of value taken from experience itself.

True art should attract the attention of a large group of people. To do this it should contain meanings which must be verified, shared, and enjoyed by a large and intelligent audience.

Thus, a composition is not a material thing put together, but a representation of something, a symbol which attains prominence only when its symbolism reveals notions, ideas, tendencies, and values rising from the mores of the times. In other words, art should be considered as a human activity, as a healthy act of labor, proceeding from, and affecting the lives of people. "To be completely great," Henry James wrote, "a work of art must lift up the heart."

To accomplish this, James Joyce said that a novel must have three outstanding qualities: wholeness, harmony, and radiance. Certainly a great novel will have all three made possible by the language of the writer. All art is composed of a language which must be studied and mastered, a language embodying not only technologies but human meanings and psychological assessments--the infinite surmises and experiences of the soul of man. Here must be emphasized the fundamental kinship between form and meaning, showing how procedure--the formal instruments of art--is modified and vitalized by subject matter.

It is quite unlikely this novel has any of the three outstanding qualities. As a piece of creative work, it has not received the necessary labor to raise it above mediocrity. Seldom does a writer achieve what he sets out to do; often there is a gap between conception and execution. The mind may conceive, but the work falls short of expressing the idea in its completeness. Only by long and hard labor is the objective gained.

CHAPTER ONE

I

In San Jose, a few miles south of the Rio Grande, the people will talk of Antonio for a long time to come. Perhaps the story they tell will never die. Each new generation may take up the tale and improve upon it, and thus it may be kept alive until it grows to be a legend which school children will study in their classrooms.

San Jose is a town of tranquil beauty and sane living, of perpetual fascination and human pathos. In the streets life moves leisurely as if time had stopped. Men and women and children meeting in the public square or at the market place or at the plaza murmur Adios, exchange pleasantries, and each goes his own way.

One fine day in the early spring of 1944 Leo Chavez, the father of Antonio, was on his way to the postoffice when he met a friend.

"Good day, Don Guerrero," he greeted, lifting his hat. "How are you?"

"Good day, Mayor Chavez. Very well, thank you. How are you and Dona Rosalia and your son Don Antonio?"

"My wife is well. And many thanks for inquiring about my dear son Antonio," said Leo. "He is coming home soon. Only last week a letter comes saying soon he will be back."

"Thanks to God. I am so glad to hear it."

"He has been gone almost four years," said Leo proudly. "And now he comes home decorated." And he added with an exultant gesture, "When he arrives I am going to give a big celebration in his honor and everybody far and wide will be invited."

"I envy you, senor. I had a boy too, but he was killed by a bullet in the streets of Mexico City."

"I am sorry to hear it," said Leo.

"Perhaps he is better off with God. Well, until we meet again."

"Yes, senor," said Leo. "Until we meet again, if God wishes it. May you go with God."

"Many thanks, Mayor Chavez."

"Thank you, senor," replied Leo, placing his straw hat on his black hair.

"Adios."

"Adios."

Leo went his way up the street which was bounded by shops and arcades and colorful ocolimined dwellings. He paused briefly to drop a coin in the withered hand of a miserably twisted old woman sitting at the steps of the municipal palace. Then he turned his gaze to a flock of sheep moving slowly down the thoroughfare. He waved his hand in greeting to the shepherd and turned in to the postoffice to get his mail. Excited, he looked through the stack and found to his great joy the letter he was expecting--the letter from Antonio, postmarked New York.

II

So it was when Leo Chavez received word his son Antonio was back in the States, he set about planning the celebration for his homscoming. Antonio had been gone four years; he was returning from Europe, a citizen of the United States, a private in the United States army.

As Leo read the letter to his wife that afternoon his happiness was almost like sorrow. He took a clean handkerchief from his pocket and wiped his eyes. And when he had finished the letter he handed it to his wife who read it aloud to Leo, and she, too, cried with joy.

It was a moment of great rejoicing.

In the ell of the living room stood an elaborate altar. That morning Dona Rosalia had placed an offering of lighted candles and fresh-cut flowers before the painted image of the patron saint. The lighted candles flickered as Leo rushed from the house to tell his friends the good news.

"Soon my son comes home," he related to a boy who stood on the street selling hot tamales. "My Antonio. Remember him?"

"Antonio, the matador?" said the boy softly, his eyes twinkling with pride to be speaking to the mayor.

"That is to be forgotten," said Leo in a hurt voice. Then his face lighted again. "Antonio is now a citizen of the United States. A private in the United States army." And he added emphatically, as if by word he could erase the memory from the boy's mind, "Yes, the other is to be forgotten."

The news was out. As he proceeded up the street small boys gathered like ants around honey until he was fairly surrounded.

"When does Antonio come back, senior?" "Will he be back next week?" "Will he come back here?" they oaroled.

"Antonio comes back soon. Yes, perhaps next week."

"Will he be the same Antonio who went away," asked a wide-eyed youngster of ten who remembered Antonio as a matador.

"The same Antonio," said Leo, smiling down on the children.

"A little older, but the same Antonio."

"And he will play with us as he did before he went away?"

"Antonio will never change," said the father lovingly. "He will find time for you as well as for me."

He turned and went up the crooked narrow street of little shops to the mission on the top of the hill. He was winded by the time he arrived, and pain like the stab of a knife cut through his heart.

He paused briefly until the pain subsided; then he went into the dimly lit church to pray, and to offer alms and candles to his patron saint. Several women, their black shawls drawn tightly around their heads and shoulders, were kneeling before the altar, and candles burned before the life-size images. As Leo crossed himself, kneeling there before the image of St. Mary, he felt the need to do something tremendous to express his happiness. He wanted to shout the good news to the world so all could hear and share.

When he came out into the sunshine he began planning the celebration to welcome his son. As mayor of San Jose he would de-

clare a holiday. All business would be brought to a standstill as it was on Independence Day, and he would hire a band to play on the steps of the municipal palace. And there would be music and dancing and drinking unequaled by the fall fiesta. And people would come from far and wide to see this son who had distinguished himself in battle.

He hurried down the street toward the city market where mid-afternoon shoppers were looking over colorful heaps of produce and merchandise spread upon the stone flagging. On his way he passed a group of women and, sweeping off his hat, he breathlessly told them the news. One after one they came and congratulated him, and as he went along they stood looking after him and talking together.

By late afternoon Antonio's name was on the lips of everyone in San Jose.

"Maria," called Leo, as he stopped in front of a white-plastered house with a red-tiled roof and a balcony, set in a garden of gardenias, magnolias and palms. "Maria. Come. I have news."

Maria Perez came to the door. In the sunlight her skin was the golden brown of fields rusty with the decline of summer. In her black hair she wore a red gardenia that matched the deep red of her soft full lips. Leo smiled his devotion. He thought her a girl with heart and humor against whose spirits you could warm your own spirits. And always when he looked upon her beauty and heard the sweetness of her speech he envied in no small way the man who would make her his wife.

"Maria," he cried excitedly, "Antonio is back. A letter

comes this afternoon. Soon he will be home."

"I, too, have a letter," she said softly in a voice always warm and friendly. "Often while he has been gone I have heard from him and thus I feel we have become well acquainted through our letters."

"That is what my wife Rosalia tells me," said Leo.

"Many letters we have written," said Marie. "And for so long I have looked forward to this day." And she said wistfully, "It is a dream, and it is so real that it is as if we had always known each other, and yet we will be meeting as for the first time."

Leo said, "Next week maybe Rosalia and I will go to my brother's across the border, and we would like you to go with us. Antonio is getting his furlough now any day and he will come straightway to us waiting for him there."

"Oh that will be so nice, Senor Chavez," exclaimed Marie.

Leo was beside himself with joy. "It makes me feel very happy because you two have come to know each other like this," he continued. "And Antonio will please his father even more than he can realize if only he will--"

Marie said, laughing, "Time will tell, Senor Chavez--"

And Leo, knowing full well the meaning of her words, could not restrain himself. He grabbed Marie in his arms and kissed her. And in turn she plucked a gardenia and put it in the buttonhole of his lapel. "For Antonio," she said, "whom we both love."

Tears rose to Leo's eyes and he smiled shakily. He could say no more. Turning, he waved her goodbye and went his way down the street.

III

To Paracho, a market vendor who was arranging his wares on wooden stands at the street corner, Leo cried, "My friend, I have good news. Antonio is coming home."

Paracho was a shriveled sun-dried half-breed wearing an old felt sombrero and shabby trousers held up by a leather strap. His face showed a peculiar wizened appearance, a look of age overlying youth, and he usually looked as if his spirits were soaked in gloom or a continuous stupor. But now he took off his hat and smiled gently on this good man whose happiness seemed to transform everything. With a dog-like affection Paracho loved his friend; what was more, he considered him the most important citizen in Mexico. And because he considered him great he spoke to him with a courtesy that transcended politeness.

"Your words make me happy," said Paracho, with great solemnity. "For this cause ought we not to celebrate tonight, the two of us?"

"Come now to my market," said Leo. "I will give you drink. We will drink to Antonio and be merry."

And Paracho replied, bowing politely, "With your permission, my friend, I accept with all thankfulness."

So they drank, the two of them, in the back room of Leo's market. And as the drink disappeared from the gallon jug which Leo had placed on the table, night came on. And when the little room became dark with evening, Leo lighted a lamp, and he talked of Antonio as a lonely man talks of happy days gone by.

"My Antonio," he said lovingly, "only such a short time ago he was a little boy. You remember how much he loved his father, you remember, Paracho?"

"Yes, I remember," said Paracho, producing a small tobacco pouch and making himself a cigarette.

"He was a good boy. And he listened and did as his mother and I taught him. In everything he did he proved his superiority."

"Yes," said Paracho. "He is a great man and heaven will reward him."

"Only once did he disobey me," said Leo sorrowfully. "Only once."

"But," said Paracho, pouring another drink, "is that to be regretted? I would say he is a man who proved diligent to many things." And he added with great care, "Does not a great future await him in the bullring?"

A trace of annoyance clouded Leo's face. "No," he said emphatically. "His father has need of him. Antonio will never betray his father again. Never."

"My dear Leo," said Paracho, refilling his glass, "must I remind you that the torero is the idol of the aristocracy, the hero of the people. Flattered by the critics, courted by handsome señoritas, applauded by the crowds, the popular bullfighter is the greatest man in Mexico." And he added cunningly, "Some day I wager the public will load Antonio with gold and he will be acclaimed a great hero."

"What gain a man to be a hero to his people if he is not a

hero to himself!" cried Leo vehemently.

"Begging your pardon, my friend, but Antonio loves the arena."

"Your talk sickens me, Paracho," said Leo, the heavy flesh of his face quivering. "The bullfight is something to be condemned by Church and State. A hideous spectacle. My son will have no part of it."

"He betrayed you once," said Paracho slyly, exhaling the smoke of his cigarette in large puffs. "What assurance he will not again?"

"My son is as good as his word," said Leo, his black eyes blazing with anger. "My son will never go back on his promise."

"Hold your peace, my friend. In friendship's name, hold your peace."

Leo sat back in his chair and his mood softened. "Yes, he betrayed me once," he said quietly, "but he promised me 'never again.' And remember, to convince me--straightway he went to the States and lived with his uncle, my brother, who farms in the valley. Thus he became a citizen and a hero to the land of his adoption."

"'Twould be better to be a hero to his native land," said Paracho, a cruel hardness coming into his face. "You are my friend, Leo, I bid you take counsel. I am not in agreement with your views. Is not this land of ours equal to the States of which you speak so fondly?"

"Here there is not equality and opportunity," said Leo sadly. "Our most industrious people live in poverty resulting from the shameful exploitation by the middleman who reaps rich rewards from their work. Here we do not put human rights above all other

rights. There across the border a man does not have to be rich to be treated with decency--"

"Just because your brother owns a ranch in the valley and is prosperous and happy is not proof that the States is a land of Paradise. I have cousins, too, who live there, and sad to tell they are treated as scum of the earth. They are nothing more than migrant slaves and their children are not even given the chance to go to school because they are forced to work with the rest of the family."

Leo disregarded his speech. And drinking his mescal he continued, "Even as a boy I recognized the handicaps and evils we all face here. And so I went to live on my brother's farm in the valley beyond the border. And there I would have settled down had I not returned here where I married and took over the management of my father-in-law's business. But the memory of those days I hold dear to me, and what was not mine to have shall become my son's. For now he is a citizen of the United States. A private in the United States army. And when he is discharged from the army of the United States, he will marry and settle down on his uncle's ranch and together they will prosper."

Leo now sat silent and absorbed, a glow warming his weathered face. He drank his mescal dreamily and he did not listen to Paracho, who no longer spoke with courtesy. A tarantula slithered across the table and Paracho calmly squashed it with a candlestick. But Leo did not even notice. He sat there thinking of days gone by. And as he dreamed a darkness seemed to settle around him like a black cloak. Suddenly he pressed his left hand to his heart and

his right hand groped in the air as if he were reaching to roll up the wick in the lamp. Then he slumped over, knocking his glass to the floor.

"Paracho--it is getting dark," he mumbled. "Tell Antonio to come--"

Paracho jumped up but before he could reach his friend, Leo's heavy body plumped down on the table and his arms hung like dead weights toward the floor.

IV

At home Dona Rosalia waited supper. She was sitting by a desk in the living room writing a letter to her son. Dona Rosalia was not yet middle-aged, but she looked older, for nature had been overtaxed. During the first five years of their marriage she had given birth to four children, three of whom were dead, so that now the thin lovely woman Leo had married was heavy and unshapely. Yet, she was not without beauty. Her face reflected patience and kindness. She had black hair combed straight back and fastened with a large glittering comb, and from her ears dangled little coin rings that trembled like aspen leaves. She wore a dark skirt and a white cotton blouse with rich embroidery; and on her large bosom was a heavy coral necklace with a crucifix.

She wrote "...Oh, my son, so happy I am that soon you will be home. I have been waiting this long while to hear that you are coming. It will be one happy moment when you come in this door and I can look at you again. It has been so long since you left. Marie came over and you should have seen us. There never were

three happier people in all the world than papa and Marie and me. Papa has planned big things. He is even talking of a big celebration...."

She put down her pen and wiped her eyes. She wanted to make the letter seem brave and yet express her true feelings.

It was quiet in the room. The teakettle on the stove in the kitchen sang and the clock on the wall ticked and the house seemed warm with joy and comfort. Even so Dona Rosalia felt very much alone, and for no reason at all she experienced a feeling of change and of loss. But soon Leo would come in and her loneliness would be gone and the house would again be filled with joy and goodness; all this strange feeling would be dispelled.

She smiled wistfully as she picked up her pen again. As she wrote she kept listening for Leo's step on the walk and from time to time fingered the beads as she murmured a prayer. And suddenly as she listened she heard feet come pounding up the steps, and a moment later the lighted candles in the ell flickered as the front door was opened and closed.

Startled, knowing it was not Leo, her fingers ceased turning the beads and the prayer was cut short on her lips. She rose quickly and went into the hall. There by the door stood Paracho, his face heavy with shock, his breath rattling in his throat. He came out of the depths of darkness, his blood-shot eyes blinking at the light on the table.

"Paracho," she said, and she moved toward him fearfully, holding the pen in her hand. "What is it," she asked, "why are you here--" And her face was full of wonder and fear.

the greatly dead
At first Paracho could not find breath to tell her. He was panting so hard, the words did not come out of his mouth.

"Beggging your pardon, Dona Rosalia, I beg of you to listen to me," he said, as if he were repeating something that his tired brain had been rehearsing all the way up the street. "I beg you will not think ill of me that I bring you bad tidings on this night of rejoicing. For tonight your husband lies dead in his market."

Her eyes opened wide in amazement and a chill of terror went through her. "Leo is--"

Paracho nodded. "He is dead," he said in a whisper, twisting his hat with both hands in front of him. "I was with him in the market. We were talking, having a social glass of mescal in friendship's name, and making merry because Antonio comes home soon. We had drunk our fill and were about to take leave when behold it happened."

Dona Rosalia leaned her shoulder against the wall. Then the full meaning came to her and she sank slowly to a chair. Suddenly she began to sob, holding her face in her hands. She rocked herself back and forth, sobbing and calling for him in her soft Spanish, calling his name until Paracho, frightened with her grief, ran from the house, going as fast as his short legs would take him, down the dimly lighted street, through the plaza, over the railroad tracks, as if he were running from something, escaping...escaping...

CHAPTER TWO

I

Under the vast expanse of April sky, the Mexican soldier, Antonio, walked with a tired stride down the dirt road that stretched ahead of him. On all sides the flat unbroken horizon fell back to invisibility; all earth and sky was curtained in grayness. The wind lifted the dust up out of the fields and carried it like a sluggish smoke into the air. The trees fought against the force of the wind, bending with the direction of the gale.

The young man stopped and surveyed the countryside, trying to fix his location. He took a road map from his shaki blouse, turned so it would be out of reach of the wind, and unfolded it. For several minutes he studied New Mexico, moving his finger to the spot where he now stood on a road that sloped gently into the dim distances. He looked about, speculating.

"Over there, perhaps, is San Bura," he reasoned.

He put the map back in his pocket; then swabbed his sweating forehead with a handkerchief, and started down the road. He was tall and lean, but he felt very tiny, very insignificant in the unending gulf of space. The great distances as big as God seemed to reduce him to oneness, leaving him alone to peril and pursuit. The sun lay on his back, and his belly was empty and his feet burned. The raw smell of dust was in the air. He felt the dust in his nose, the mucus of his nose dry from the dust, as he pressed forward against the wind.

Then the sun shone less brightly, and the wind made a mournful sound as it raced over the land. It softly wrapped its force around his body and sent huge tumbleweeds rolling across the road. Above its steady drone he imagined voices, separating for an instant and then being lost again. They were like the voices from another time; and listening, his thoughts traveled far back to those days when he was a boy, a little Mexican boy, growing up in a little Mexican town just south of the border.

His eyes swept the dust-clouded landscape.

"I can't be far from San Bura," he said aloud.

The wind seemed to tear the words from his throat and hurl them into the curtained abyss ahead. He labored forward in desperation, thinking chiefly of the distances that divided him from the town. The storm was some hostile force, mocking at him--he a puny mortal struggling across the face of the earth. He felt the strength of his body resisting that force, defying it as his will had defied the authorities. Against his inner tension, the heat and the torturing gale were almost pleasurable, an anesthesia to the dull pain within. With surprising and furious satisfaction, he welcomed it as a parched mouth would welcome rain.

He blinked his bloodshot eyes against the weary glare of the sun and plodded on. Now the heat was licking at his body. He took off his khaki blouse, and cursed himself because he had not changed to sun-tans. He realized he had been in too much of a hurry to break away from his Post. He wondered how his friends would take his leaving--and the officers. As sure as hell, the military police would be looking for him now.

"I don't give a damn what the dirty sonsofbitches do to me," he said. "I'll go back when I get ready, and I don't give a god-dam what they do."

The road began to climb. Pushing himself against the wind he turned his head and saw in the distance the outlines of adobe houses and frame shacks clustered together on the hillside. It gave him a deep sense of relief to see the town emerge from out the blurred distance. As he walked toward it he could detect hills with precipitous sides and overhanging crags sheathed in a vegetation to a depth that refined and softened their ragged shoulders. Not so far beyond the range, he reflected, was his uncle's ranch, and then--the Rio Grande. The thought energized him. He bowed his head into the wind and plodded doggedly on.

As he approached the village he saw on the outskirts a service station with a little lunchroom in back of the gas pumps. He hurried towards it, bucking the wind, and turned into the shelter of the building. He gripped the door, feeling the wind lap his face. A plump red-headed waitress stood behind the counter. He asked her to fry him three hamburgers with onions; then he sought the latrine off from the main building.

Here he washed the dust from his face, washing from a bowl stained with grime and rust. He buried his face in it, rubbing the water about with his hands, under his chin and around the back of his neck. The water felt cold and comforting against his wind- and sun-browned skin, and it helped to revive his spirits. He lifted his head blindly and reached for a paper towel. Not finding one, he dried himself with his handkerchief. He combed back

his thick, black hair with a pocket comb, and parted it neatly on the side, all the while looking at himself in a small mirror above the washbowl.

The mirror showed a face whose features were clearly cut. The jaw was strong and lean, and the rose-tan of his cheeks looked like polished copper. All of him seemed to reflect a firm, hard strength. The rims of his gray eyes were now red with sun glare; even so they were calculating, forever alight with energy. When he felt good, a genial off-handed unaffectedness seemed to dictate every action. Often his white teeth flashed as he smiled. Now, he did not feel good, so he did not smile. He soberly buttoned up his blouse, put on his cap, careful to set it at a rakish angle, and stepped out into the wind.

As he walked toward the lunchroom he could smell food, and his stomach moved with hunger as he breathed in the odor of hamburgers and onions frying on the grill. The plump and lonely waitress stood by the coffee urn. She turned and smiled engagingly at him as he entered and took a stool before the counter. He watched her frying the hamburgers; and waiting, he listened to the wind, feeling the desolation and loneliness.

"Does it blow like this every day?" he said.

"About ever' day."

"How do you stand it?"

"Get used to it in time," she said, drawing a cup of coffee from the spout of the urn. "Get used to anything, I guess."

The wind tore at the building; it whisked over the roof and left silence as it moved on; it had the sound of the ocean shatter-

ing its foam upon the beach at Gasmata.

"Where you headed for, soldier?" she said, serving up the hamburgers.

"Home," said Antonio. "I got word my father is dead and I'm going home."

She looked at him oddly, as if she did not know what to say. Antonio ate his hamburgers and drank his coffee, taking no further notice of the girl. The food made him feel a little better, but it did not relieve his worry. He had been spurred by an angry satisfaction in defying the army; now fatigue settled over him and relaxed his resolve so that in retrospect his escape from camp seemed as uncalculated as a boy's deciding on the spur of the moment to leave his schoolbooks and go fishing. He remained a long time at the counter.

It was hard to realize that it was only yesterday that he received the letter from his mother telling of his father's death. After he had read it he had looked at the postmark. It had been mailed two weeks ago and was addressed to his former post. Immediately he had gone to the commanding officer sitting behind his desk overlooking the parade ground. Antonio had saluted and stood at attention, awaiting recognition.

"Sir, my father is dead," he said. "I ask a furlough to go home."

The major was reading a newspaper and did not look up. He purposely avoided the pleading eyes of the boy, for he had that beautiful detachment and devotion to army discipline of men dealing with numbers. Enlisted men thought him stupid, a man without

humaneness, whose love of authority blinded him to real needs. Officers thought him logical, a man who acted in accordance with regulations without emotional bias or sacrifice to principle.

"A letter comes today," went on Antonio loudly with a certain helplessness in his voice. "It happened two weeks ago, sir."

"And you just heard today?"

"The letter just caught up with me."

The major was not impressed.

He said bluntly, "You are due a regular furlough in three weeks. I see no need for an emergency furlough. Your father is dead and buried. We are short of men and I cannot spare you."

"It is my mother, sir," said Antonio miserably, and he drew a deep breath. "She has need of me at once."

The major shook his head.

"But sir," said Antonio with a note of desperation in his voice, "it is needful that I go. I am asking for no other reason."

The major only looked at him.

Antonio swallowed hard. Then he leaned forward, his face intent with persuasion. "I will not be gone long, sir. Only long enough to see my mother. Not over a week--"

The major continued to look at him with hostile eyes. And with a sickening wave of disappointment Antonio saw the uselessness of his entreaty. It seemed unbelievable that this man was beyond the touch of ordinary human sympathy. Looking at the officer a madness entered into him, born of grief and loss, hurt and anger.

Once more he began, "Sir, I must be given--"

But the major had cut him short. "Pvt. Chevez," he said in a firm voice, "there is no need for further argument. You heard me the first time, but I will repeat," he added in a voice that taxed all his patience. "You are due a regular furlough next month. Then you may go home."

Antonio's throat was so tight with anger he could say no more.

The officer continued, "Why in the hell do you fellows come pestering us when you know as well as I you can't go home unless there is a real emergency?" And he had added, "Of course you want to go home. I want to go home, too. All of us want to go home. What would happen if every one of us got his way?"

Antonio clenched his fists and felt his face harden. He stood irresolute, trying to grasp at some little thing which might convince the man. But there was nothing more he could find to say. He stood for another moment staring defiantly at the officer while tight lines strained at his mouth. Then he turned and walked from the room.

The recollection made him burn with humiliation. He suffered an excruciating pain which mocked him as the forces of the wind mocked the New Mexican earth around the little lunchroom. He still burned with anger--an anger that numbed him to the full realization that his father was dead. Even now he could not reconcile himself to the reality that all his bright hopes had come to a strange and bitter ending. For so often in the past he had pictured himself going home--had felt the rapture of walking into the house and shouting, "I'm home! I'm home! Antonio has come

home!"

He glanced up at the girl, for he felt she had been watching him. And then slowly he stood up and thought of the struggle to get to his uncle's ranch before nightfall.

"How far is it to El Tura?" he asked as he paid the bill.

"Sixty-seventy miles. Something like that."

Antonio looked at her, and she allowed her eyes to meet his. For a moment his thoughts focused. Almost all girls seemed to look at him lovingly, and always he had the same thought, the same speculation, the same impulse. He pushed his cap farther back on his head and turned to the door. He was thinking briefly about the girl when a bread truck pulled in close to the gas pumps and stopped.

"Where you headed for, mister?" Antonio called from the screened door.

The heavy-set driver got out and walked into the luncheonroom. "El Tura," he said, his quick eyes scanning the boy's face.

"Could you give me a ride?"

"Sure, I can take you as far as El Tura."

II

Antonio waited restlessly for the driver to drink a cup of coffee. He was anxious to be on his way. It was past three and he wanted to get started so that he would arrive at his uncle's ranch before sundown. If he stayed the night with his uncle he could cross the Rio Grande early the next morning. Crossing the Rio Grande might offer a problem, but he would take care of that

when he came to it.

"Ready, soldier," said the driver as he started for the door.

Antonio followed him to the truck and settled himself on the seat beside the man. The starter whirred and there was the roar of the cylinders. Then the gears clicked in, and the truck moved out onto the highway and headed south against the wind.

"You travel light," said the driver. "On furlough or have you been discharged?"

"Furlough," said Antonio, and the lie began burning like steel darts piercing his hide. He thought of what he would be doing if he were in camp, and he had that same feeling he had when he once played truant from school to see a bullfight. Suddenly the structure of truth within seemed damaged like the windows of a building shattered by shell fire. He felt he was betraying something precious, as when he went into the bullring against his father's wishes.

The driver looked carefully at him. "Hitch-hiking home?" There was the tone of subtle inquiry. "Home in Mexico?"

"San Jose, Mexico," said Antonio.

The driver eyed the boy secretly, then turned his attention to the road. "Say, you don't happen to be from Camp Brader, do you?"

Antonio did not look at the driver. A sudden sense of foreboding had tightened the skin across his skull, and a nervous flush along his back prickled faintly.

The driver persisted. "I overheard two M. P.s talking over at Clover City this morning. They were on the lookout for a sol-

dier that went over the hill." He added significantly, "They said he was headed for a town in Mexico."

Antonio listened gravely. He saw the trap and wondered what to do. Above all, he reasoned, he must keep his head and not grow afraid.

"I pity the poor bastard when they find him," continued the driver. "They make it pretty tough on guys like that--Mexican guys, 'specially."

"Yes, they do," said Antonio, licking his dry lips. "They sure do."

"Don't see why the bastards risk anything like that," said the driver. "They're bound to be picked up sooner or later and court-martialed. And then the stockade."

Antonio did not say anything. The wind was dying down and the truck tires whined on the road that stretched ahead; each mile cut off was bringing him that much closer to safety.

"'Course guys like you and me--we got more sense than that," went on the driver with the same investigating casualness. "I was in awhile and I kept my nose clean. Figgered that was the only way to get along with the goddam army." And he said, "How come you ever got mixed up in it, anyhow?"

"I was living in the States with my uncle," said Antonio briefly. "I wanted in, so I enlisted."

For a time neither one spoke. Gradually Antonio began to relax. He lit a cigarette, his hand not completely steady, and smoked moodily. The countryside slipped past, and he watched its changing green as it rippled and shaded in the wind. And he saw

the farm houses and ranch houses; and some were adobe and some were shacks, but to Antonio each was a little castle set solidly against this New Mexican earth.

The driver said, "You musta seen a lot of fighting, soldier." He glanced at the two rows of ribbons the boy wore on his blouse. "They really decorated you, didn't they?" And he asked, "Where were you?"

"All over the Pacific," said Antonio. Mostly Guadalcanal."

"How long you been in?"

"Four years next July."

"In four years and only a pfc?" said the driver. "Well, I'll be damned." And he added, "They decorate you and make you a hero, but it don't mean nothing. You win the Bronze Star, the Oak Leaf Cluster, the Purple Heart, the Silver Star, and when it's all over what have you got?"

"That's right," said Antonio.

"You musta loved the sonofabitchin' army," remarked the driver.

"In me was no love for the army."

"How come, then, all those ribbons?"

"It is simply doing what you should do at the time it should be done."

"You figger it's the same with everything you do?"

"Yes. Everything," said Antonio.

"Even with girls?" he said. He grinned at the boy, trying to find amusement in the situation.

Antonio did not say anything; he felt a little embarrassed.

"Girls like handsome Latin Americans," continued the driver, baiting him. "They like them to go to bed with. The Mexicans are great lovers--right?"

Antonio looked straight ahead. He was beginning to feel sleepy.

The driver baited him again. "Soldier had big time with beautiful women, no?"

"That's right," said Antonio; and immediately he was annoyed at himself for answering. He dragged the last smoke from his cigarette and tossed it out the window, and he did not say anything more.

The driver looked straight ahead and waited for an answer that would probe the more delicate strata of the subject. After a long silence he opened up again. "Goddam army gets you so you're afraid to turn around, don't it?" He glanced secretly at the boy. "Jesus Christ, in four years and only a pfc. And what a price you had to pay for it all. I heard a preacher talk about that very thing las' Sunday." He paused; then he said almost apologetically, "I don't mind listening to a preacher if he's got something to say. Well this guy gets talking 'bout there's a price tag on ever' goddam thing in the world. You can't get anything for nothing. What he was driving at you got to feel the pain of your imperfections." The driver said the last word delicately as if to test its soundness; and he repeated, "--imperfections. We all got imperfections. But we all got feelings, too. Don't matter what color a guy is we all got feelings. He gets lonely and he gets sick just like ever'body else. Goddam Japs got feel-

ings, too, and imperfections."

Antonio sat looking into the distance where the soft blue silhouette of the mountain range began to appear. The day was going fast and the shadow sides of near cliffs cut into the sun-bright fields. The light between the trees flickered across his eyes and the hum of the motor lulled him to a doze.

When he woke they were leaving the outskirts of a little town. At last the landscape was becoming familiar. Here the traffic signs were bilingual, reminding him that he was in territory that once belonged to Mexico and still had a large Mexican population. The truck moved southward and the time passed.

The driver glanced at him, and there was that same secret look. "You really are pooped out," he observed. "Went to sleep while I was talking to you."

"I didn't know I was so tired," said Antonio.

"We're not far from El Tura," said the driver. "Five-six miles and we'll be there."

Antonio looked out at the countryside. The sun was sinking in a somnolence of evening quiet and the purple trunk shades of the trees stretched out across the road. A yellowing, dusty light spread a golden cover over the land, and a deep loneliness settled down like a hushed voice.

As they rode into the little town Antonio felt a deep sense of relief to be so near the end of the journey. By sundown he would be at his uncle's ranch.

"Well, fellow, this is it," said the driver as he drew up to the curb in front of a restaurant. "This is as far as I go."

"I am filled with appreciation," said Antonio, getting out and standing beside the truck. He smiled at the man. "Thanks very much for the lift."

"Glad to do it for you, boy." He eyed Antonio curiously. "Good luck to you."

III

Antonio started walking through the little village. On the sidewalk he looked around. He knew no one among the men and women hurrying to and fro. Yet this was familiar ground; he knew every shop and market, every house. From a restaurant came the sharp odor of chili-hot tamales and a broadcast of Mexican music, and across the street under the wooden awnings of the postoffice, Mexicans like himself sitting on benches gazed at him. The sound of their softly spoken Spanish was a foretaste of what was to come and it made his blood tingle.

He struck out across a pasture, taking a short-cut to his uncle's ranch. Once more he felt the old singing spirit of the range, tasting something of the freshness and wildness that went to his head and made him want to run and shout. He began whistling softly to himself as he speeded his walk. He threw back his head and drew deep breaths, savoring the smell of the sweetness and the delicate new greenness of the earth. Fleet as a deer and with the same easy grace, he ran and swung himself over a tall fence, and he did not stop until he reached the top of the hill. Here he could see the open road leading to his uncle's ranch. His pulse quickened and his eyes dimmed.

He looked down on the ranch, saw the house, the two-story frame structure painted white; and the cow-barn, low-roofed and huddled; the corrals and the bunk house under the cypress tree. Black Herefords were standing about the gate of the corral and the windmill, and far beyond rode a man on horseback toward the hills.

For several moments Antonio drank in the scene before him. Then he let his eyes sweep the foothills and the mountains. This was home ground, the mountains dear to him. As a young boy visiting his uncle, he had often looked on them in wonderment, watching the peaks pinken under the first color of the sun. And in the evening when the sun had gone over the ridge the purple loneliness of their shapes had filled him with a desire to go beyond their secret and mysterious loftiness. Now the memory took away the years in between, took away the grief and pain of past years, and he was again a boy coming back from that secret and mysterious world beyond their ridges.

"I'm home," he cried, his fatigue forgotten for a moment.

Then a moving figure caught his eye. A girl followed by a collie dog came slowly over the brow of the hill, a basket on her arm. He saw the line of her lovely face and throat; and as she approached he saw she was dressed in a brown skirt striking her knees and in a sweater outlining her full breasts. He walked toward her as if through the beautiful archway of a dream; and he thought, "This is like something that has happened before." And he had a feeling of going backward through time and space to a moment of fantasy fashioned out of shadow and desire. When had he seen her before except in his mind? He stared at her, per-

plexed. Then she cried, "Antonio," and putting down her basket ran to him.

"You don't know me, do you?" she laughed. "I am Maria--"

"Maria," he repeated with incredulity, "Maria Perez?"

"Yes," she said without shyness. And she added, "I knew you would not know me--it has been so long--"

He looked down into her face. It was hard to imagine this girl who had written him letters--this same girl whom he had noticed once or twice at the Academy in San Jose, now a woman. Even photographs she had sent him when he was stationed overseas had not altered his idea of her; always he had carried a mental picture of a girl in pigtails writing passionate declarations which amused and entertained him.

"So you are Maria," he said a little stupidly. "I am surprised--"

"I wanted to surprise you," she said in a tone of bright happiness. "And your mother thought, too, it would be nice if I came here so that--" She ended abruptly and declared admiringly, scanning him from head to toe, "How nice you look in your uniform, Antonio." And then her eyes went wonderingly to his bearded face. And suddenly her voice showed concern. "You didn't come on the train?"

He picked up her basket and they started down the hill.

"I hitch-hiked," he told her.

"You are not home to stay?" she asked, regarding him with anxiety.

"For a little while. Tell me, how is Mama?"

"She is well. Every day she expects you in. She needs you."

Antonio's face was sober. Then she saw the sorrow in his eyes, and understanding she said, "See what I have here for you." And she added, "This is your dog, Pesos. He was only a pup when you went away."

"This is Pesos? My dog, Pesos?" Antonio dropped down and patted his head. The dog's moist muzzle touched his face affectionately and he switched the air with his white-tipped tail. And he stretched his wide mouth as if he were smiling, and this set them to laughing and the spell was broken.

"Pesos, you are a beautiful dog," said Antonio, straightening. And turning to Maria, "What have you got in this basket? I hope something good to eat."

"It is something good which I just bought," she said with spirit. "And I am going to prepare it especially for you." And she added, "We had just about given you up. Every morning for a week I would say to your aunt, 'I wonder if Antonio will come today or did he go straightway home?' If you had not come today or tomorrow, I would have returned to San Jose."

"The letter from my mother came late," said Antonio. "It was a whole two weeks before I got it."

They descended the hill and came on his uncle's ranch. It was a cluster of buildings standing in the shadows of the valley. Blue smoke from the house chimney rose thin and straight into the yellow sky. A short hill behind the house was covered with trees, and beyond was an orchard, its trees heavy with bloom. In the yard chickens were picking grain from the ground, and in their

midst stood a stout gray-haired woman throwing feed to the flock.

Antonio looked at his aunt but he did not call out. "I will come right up to her and then I will speak her name." Pesos lowered his nose to the ground and trotted out ahead, now and then looking back to make sure the two were following. Antonio swung open a gate and they went down a path that led to the clearing. A horse whinnied at the barn and a calf bleated in its stall. Pesos lay down under the cypress tree and beat his tail contentedly on the ground.

The woman turned and saw Antonio and Maria; and for several moments she looked wonderingly at the boy as if it took her some time to become aware of what she saw. Then she put down her pan of feed and hitched her blue gingham dress to her knees, stepping lively as she hurried toward them.

"Antonio! you are back," she cried gladly. And she threw her arms about his shoulders and kissed him on both cheeks. She looked at him and tears came to her eyes. Antonio stood rigid and miserable. He drew in his underlip between his teeth and did not speak. "Oh I am so glad you are back!" she said, using the corner of the apron to wipe her eyes. "Look at him, Maria. See how he has grown. What a fine-looking boy he is." She searched his face. "What kept you so long? Here we have been waiting. Day after day we have been waiting. Maria, where did you find him?"

"I was coming from the town, and there he was at the top of the hill," said Maria, acting as if Antonio were some fine surprise she had produced.

"Oh it is so good to have you home again," said Aunt Sophia,

squeezing his arm. And she said, "You are home now and do not have to go back?"

"No," said Antonio. "Only for a brief time and I must go back."

"Oh, so much I have hoped you were coming home to stay," said the woman. "It is so long to be gone to the war."

They walked toward the house. An old man came out of the kitchen door and peered at the approaching figure. And slowly he opened his senses to a realization that it was Antonio, and he hobbled toward them.

"Antonio!" he exclaimed. His face was alive with happiness. He took the boy's hands in his and then he patted him lovingly, and his voice was thick when he spoke. "My boy, you are home at last. Ave Maria Purisima! You have come safely home after four long years." And then with hopeful inquiry, "It is to stay and not go back?"

Antonio swallowed and his mouth felt dry. He looked at the aging man who was his uncle, at the thick stooped shoulders straining the seams of his blue plaid shirt--at the face that was the color of leather stretched in the sun for tanning. And he felt the even richness of his uncle's voice--a voice that reminded him so much of his father: soft with feeling and kind with understanding. And suddenly all his tiredness and grief and hunger and disappointment caught in his throat, and for a moment he could not trust himself to speak.

"No, I am not home to stay," he said; and he hastened, "I had to come. They wouldn't let me so I came anyway--"

"They--the military would not let you come?"

"No," said Antonio. "And it is for that reason I cannot stay long."

Uncle Manuel frowned, trying to understand. Then he said, "You are here and that is what counts." And he remarked proudly, "I did not know you, you have changed so much. Ah, you are even bigger than you look," he added, smoothing his hand over his shoulder, feeling the muscles under his khaki blouse. And he asked, "You are all right?"

"Sure he's all right," exclaimed Aunt Sophia. "Just hungry, that's all."

"My stomach feels as flat as a tortilla patted thin and toasted to a crisp," said Antonio. He stopped and sniffed the spicy smell that came from the kitchen, and he felt suddenly weak with hunger. "What is it?" he demanded.

"Now just you wait and see," laughed Sophia. "Be content that you are lucky to arrive just when I am preparing it."

At this they all laughed, and Maria led the way into the house, through the vine-draped porch into the kitchen. And Antonio felt at once the change, the coming-home cheerfulness that put him at ease and made him feel like the Antonio who had never been gone.

Aunt Sophia said, "Go to your room and clean up, my son. Your room is waiting for you just as you left it. And when you come down supper will be ready."

CHAPTER THREE

I

Uncle Manuel poured two drinks of wine and when Antonio came downstairs looking fresh and clean, his face shaved, his hair combed, and his shoes freshly shined, Manuel handed a glass to him and they both drank, enjoying the smooth hot flavor of the wine.

"It is some I made myself," said Manuel, licking his lips. "It will warm you up and make you feel better. Now tell me what is this that you are here without permission from the army."

"That is right," said Antonio, finishing his glass. "I am like a fugitive because I was refused a furlough and I came anyway."

Manuel said softly, "It is bad offense, is it not, to leave the army without permission?"

"But I asked to come," said Antonio hastily. "I asked to be with my mother and I was refused." And he said, "It is the first time I knew the army to refuse a request for furlough at time of death in a family."

The aunt came to the kitchen door and said, "Do not trouble yourself with the worry, Antonio. Soon we will have supper ready and I do not want anything to spoil your appetite."

Manuel nodded agreement. "Yes," he said, "free your mind of it for it is best to keep a clear head."

"It is nothing I am ashamed of," said Antonio, glancing from his aunt to his uncle. "My worry is being picked up by the M.P.s

before I get home. If I can avoid them and am able to return to my Post without arrest, I think I will not be punished too badly."

Aunt Sophia went back to the stove. "Supper will be ready soon. Maria, will you set the table?"

Antonio wandered about the room, trying to feel himself at home. It was relaxing to be inside the safe comforts of the house and feel the exhilarating glow that comes from goodness and understanding. He began treasuring each moment, measuring it against the time he would have to return to camp.

Aunt Sophia said, "I can't get over how you have changed. You went away only a boy and you come back a man."

Antonio went to the kitchen door and looked in at the two women hurrying to prepare the meal. He watched Maria stepping lithely between stove and cupboard and he was filled with an explainable something that held his attention. Her black hair, tightly braided, was wound around her head and her golden cheeks were flushed as if with passion. Her every movement displayed soft delicate lines: hips and shoulders firmly modeled, the breasts round and firm under the tight-fitting bodice of a fresh pink dress. A warmth filled Antonio that was not of the wine.

She said, taking a skillet of steaming food from the iron cook stove and arranging its contents on a platter, "This is it-- your favorite dish."

Antonio breathed in the tempting odor of roast pork and dumplings and cabbage. And he felt he had never been so hungry in his life.

"When Antonio first came to live with me," said Aunt Sophia,

"I couldn't fill him up--so much he liked everything." She laughed. "You remember, Antonio? What is it you want for dinner, I would say. And always the same answer--cabbage and dump-lings."

"Perhaps it was because he was in the United States," said Maria, "and no longer did he want hot tamales and beans and tortillas."

Antonio said, "Overseas my mouth would water for them. It is strange that I have wished for this moment and now that I am here, I cannot realize it."

Aunt Sophia looked at him and there was sympathy in her face. "It will be different when the war is over," she said, lighting the tall kerosene lamp on the table. "Supper is ready. Come, Antonio, and sit here where you always used to sit. Come, Manuel, Maria, you sit across from Antonio."

They all sat down at the table in the kitchen and Manuel said grace. Besides the dumplings, there was a succulent ham boiled with yellow corn. Everything was well cooked. The flavor was sweet, rich, and satisfying. Antonio munched joyfully, feeling his empty stomach fill. There were creamed peas and a gelatine salad and coffee and rolls. And to top it all off there was a strawberry shortcake.

Maria did not eat much. She watched Antonio all through the meal. They all watched him eating, enjoying the satisfaction of seeing him enjoy his food. They talked, hurrying from one topic to another, as though the whole night would not suffice to pour out all that they had to talk about. Antonio was slightly over-

whelmed with their attention.

Maria said, "I can't tell you how surprised I was when I saw Antonio this afternoon. I was thinking maybe tomorrow I would return to San Jose, for I had given up hope he would come. And then I saw him."

She smiled at Antonio and he smiled back across the lamp-light, and again a warmth filled and tightened his chest so that his voice was changed when he spoke. "Well was I surprised to find you, Maria!" And he asked, "How does it come that you are here?"

"Maria came back with us from San Jose," said the aunt. And she said, "She has been helping me with the spring cleaning and making me some dresses--and of course waiting for you."

Antonio looked at Maria and the color rose to her cheeks. Now that he had eaten all he wanted, he could scarcely keep his eyes off her.

After supper he went to the kitchen and helped her dry the dishes, and he felt a new kind of happiness that dispelled his gloom. And talking to her, there came to him a dream-like magic-carpet sensation as if he were being borne effortlessly upon the current of a stream.

II

Several neighbors came to visit during the evening, having heard Antonio was back. In the room they all sat and Antonio felt uncomfortable because he was the center of attraction. All were eager to hear about the war. They plied him with questions. Manuel's dark eyes beamed, so proud was he of the nephew who was like

a son to him.

"This son of my late brother is brave and strong," he said expansively. "Look at him. Broad shoulders and tall. And see the medals he wears? Each ribbon stands for great achievement," he pointed out proudly, "great act of valor." He paused a moment, then added, "His papa is gone, but his spirit must be very proud. It's a great accomplishment to win so much when you do for the things that are right--yes, truly Antonio is great hero."

Antonio looked down at his hands. He was embarrassed by the "hero." In his mind it had a meaningless ring like the hollow echo of a voice spoken into a well; nor could he identify it with courage, duty, and glory. Such words were spoken by officers and people in high places in their efforts to rally the brute force of men; and always he felt them offensive and impious beside the sacred names of his friends, the people he loved and the places he knew and called home--all the things that really counted. Only these were everlasting and meaningful.

He said, rising abruptly, "Don't talk about war!" And he strode across the room and went outside into the night. He knew it wasn't a polite thing to do, but he could not help himself.

Again he felt tense with anxiety. He wanted to be alone. For an hour he had sat there looking from one to the other, at the men and women with children on their laps all sitting like worshippers. He could cherish no feeling of kinship with these people except that their language was his own. He could not feel himself one of the group from which came sweetness and joy and wholesome laughter. He lived for the day when he would return to

the valley where he could wrest his food and wine from the earth and live untrammelled by circumstances--a day that seemed far away. It was like a figment of imagination--not something that could and might be.

The night was cool but the stars were friendly. The farm buildings were bluish forms against the night and the fruit trees a blurred wilderness. He walked slowly toward the barn. He stopped by the fence and gazed into the night. The air smelled of wood smoke from the kitchen stove. And now and then a breeze brought the scent of apple blossoms from the orchard. An owl was hooting somewhere back in the trees. And from the stable came the shuffle and stamp of a horse.

Antonio listened and his mind eddied over the wonderful memories of a time long gone. He recalled for an instant the warm pleasure of his body in the saddle and the smell of leather and sage as he rode the range. Unforgettable were the stirring long-day excitement of the spring roundup with its milling, bawling cattle, and the free life of the great open spaces. Fresh from the Academy in San Jose, he had brought with him the country boy's robust health and guilelessness; and when he wasn't riding the range, he was practicing the fine art of wild brone riding and roping and bulldogging, with the high hope that he would be good enough someday to entertain rodeo fans throughout the southwest.

Pesos came from out of the dark and stood beside him, and Antonio patted his head. Then he heard the gate swing open and saw Maria coming toward him.

"Why did you come out here?" she asked.

"I wanted to be by myself," he said.

"You didn't want me to come?"

"You are here and I am glad, Maria. I came because I thought you might follow."

She was silent. Then she said, "You don't sound happy."

"I am happy to see you, Maria. But I cannot be happy for other reasons."

"Your father would not have you feel thus," she said. "He was eager for you to be happy. He lived for the day you would come home."

Antonio did not answer. The moon was rising over the top of the barn and the world was filled with a living blueness. The quivering moon-witched shadows played over them, and he had an odd feeling that his real self was not standing there at all; though he had come back, his real self had stayed.

He said, trying to fit words to feeling, "While I was gone the planning for what I would do when I got home gave me something to believe in, a sort of something to rest against. I used to sit and think how it would be to come home. I would catch the feeling of gladness thinking about coming home and sitting down in the parlor and talking and listening to some music and having supper. And I would think how it would seem to have a girl like you and after supper going over to her house and sitting in the room with her, all glad inside to be back home to stay. And now I keep thinking it should be as I planned it--that I should have no thought of returning to my Post--"

"You must go back soon?" she said softly.

"Yes, because I came without permission."

"The officials do not know you are here?"

"No," he said, "and for that reason I cannot stay long. I will leave tomorrow for home."

"If you don't mind I would like to go with you."

"You may go with me. But you must understand, Maria, we will have to be careful because I have no papers in case I am questioned. We cannot travel as others do until we have crossed the border."

Her eyes looked frightened. "What will they do if they find you?"

"I would be arrested on the spot and returned to my Post."

"What if they couldn't find you and you never went back?"

"In Mexico maybe I would be safe. But if I stayed away too long and they found me I would be court-martialed and I could be shot as a deserter." And he added grimly, "They may be in search of me right now. This very night they may come here to arrest me."

"Who may come?" she asked.

"The military police."

"What would you do if they came here for you?"

"I was thinking about that, too." He was silent for several moments. "I have a good notion to leave tonight. I am anxious to be home."

"How would we go?" she asked.

"I would borrow Uncle Manuel's car."

"The car is old and it is a long drive," said Maria. "And you are tired. Let us wait for the morning." Then she added, "Don't

worry about it, Antonio. If you don't worry about it you will not make yourself unhappy."

"I am not really unhappy," he said, looking down into her face. "How could I be unhappy when you are here with me and the night is beautiful with stars and moonlight?" And he added, "It is only that I am trying to be careful."

"I know you must be careful but you must also be happy."

He stood looking down into her face. And again there came to him that dream-like magic-carpet sensation that he felt at the supper table. And he felt the uncertain discomfort of a man who is suddenly filled with the desire to take the girl in his arms and feel the tight pressure of her body against his and her lips against his, feeling the moist softness of the lips and the firm roundness of the breasts. He felt the discomfort because for the first time in his life he did not feel sure of himself, for Maria was not like any other girl he had known.

He wanted to say, "You are very beautiful. I have never known anyone so beautiful." He stood there feeling uneasy, feeling his heart beating a little fast. He said instead, "Hear that wind, that lonesome wind in the top of the trees?"

He stood beside Maria in the moonlight and listened to the lonely wind in the trees and he experienced a feeling of change and of loss.

Maria said, "Your mind is a thousand miles away, Antonio. What is it that you are thinking?"

He looked down at her. "I am thinking about what I intend to do."

She looked up at the moon without saying anything. Then, "Perhaps," she said. And all at once in a hopeful voice, "You will not have to stay much longer in the army?"

"No," he assured her. "The war cannot last much longer. The Germans have lost the war and the Japs cannot hold out forever."

"Oh I am glad," she said. And added, "Then you will come home to stay."

"Yes, Maria, I will come home and never will I leave."

Voices broke across his words. He looked toward the lighted porch. The company was leaving and his uncle's voice was raised, thanking the neighbors for coming and asking them to hurry back. When they had piled into their cars and were gone, Antonio and Maria walked across the mottled moonlight sifting through the bare boughs, to the house.

Manuel called, "Come in, you two. Company's gone now and we can have a good talk."

Antonio said, standing in the doorway, one hand on the jamb, "That wind sounds like rain. If it rained tonight that dirt road could give us a lot of trouble. Maybe it would be wise to leave at once. If I could borrow your car--"

"Oh you surely should stay the night," said the uncle, pouring them each a glass of wine. "Come, have a drink and then off to bed for a good rest."

"But it is quite possible the military police could come and find me here."

A silence fell. Everyone was serious with the weight of perplexity. Only the ticking of the clock on the shelf by the organ

stood out quiet and alone in the room.

Finally the unole said, "I think it is best that you stay here tonight. We can get you off early in the morning. You are very tired and it is best that you get your rest."

"Maybe you are right," said Antonio, sitting down on the sofa. "I am so tired I feel I would go to sleep at the wheel. And it is not so likely they will oome tonight."

"Needn't you worry if they do," said the aunt, "for I can handle them."

Antonio said, "It is not that I am afraid. It is that I do not want trouble." And he said with anger, "I was entitled to a furlough and I do not know why I should be denied that which I needed."

Manuel refilled Antonio's glass; and he said slowly, "We are Mexicans. Perhaps that makes a difference." He broathed heavily and his eyes smoldered. "We are citizens of these United States and yet we are Mexicans." For several moments he was silent; then--"You did right, Antonio. If I were in your shoes I would have done the same thing. You were bound to come to be with your mother in her grief."

The aunt nodded approval. "Yes, it is for her sake that you oame."

Manuel sat down, holding a glass of wine in both hands. "My boy," he said, "we are a very proud and sensitive people because our culture is based on the dignity of man and the primacy of God. But this they do not understand--some of these people of the United States whose way of life blinds them with prejudice."

Antonio looked at his uncle, who was much like his own father. His deep-set eyes were fiery globes of cobalt that now seemed to be fed by inner currents of strong emotion. Antonio had often heard him say that he was more Indian than Spanish, and he felt pride in this blood mixture. It was the blood of the people from Tinacantas, Mexico, the blood of a strong and energetic mountain people whose proud and handsome features were Antonio's heritage. That proud Indian spirit now sang in his veins--that same spirit whose ancestry went back many thousands of years--sang the ageless song of love and duty and courage.

Now they all sat in the room, and they talked of many things. Antonio drank his wine and felt his body grow warm and his spirits raise. The wine was the best he had ever tasted; it was smooth and sweet and its heat went all through him, so that now his dream of returning to the valley after the war no longer seemed like a figment of the imagination, but something that could and would be.

He said with eagerness, "You know, Uncle Manuel, I've been thinking. I've been thinking a lot about it for a long time. It's about what I'm going to do when the war is over." He got up and strode across the room, his hands in his trousers pockets. "It's a dizzy world we're living in. Most of us are spinning. But in all the spinning my sight isn't blurred nor my heart confused. You see, I've got something definite in mind: a way to live decently and honestly--right here on this ranch."

Manuel looked up from the pipe he was filling, and his eyes brightened.

"Oh I know I'm not prepared to operate a cattle ranch," went on Antonio, "but I'll learn and I'll work--if you'll have me--"

Now Manuel's face was shining with approbation and delight. "It is the best words I have heard come from your lips, my boy," he said. He stood a moment in silence, fingering his pipe; then, "You have given up the idea of becoming a bullfighter?"

"All that is so pointless," said Antonio. "I want something definite, something basic to build on--something with a future." And he hastened, "It is no idle dream thought up right now. It's something I've carried with me into every battle and prayed to St. Angelico again and again that my life be spared to realize that dream. Now it cannot be too far away when I will come home to stay."

Manuel said in a business-like voice, puffing on his pipe, "If that is the way you want it, my boy, so it will be. You will be my ranch manager on a profit-sharing basis." And he said, "The ranch hasn't made any money for years. It's hard to get good cow-hands and I'm getting old. But if you come here and work we will build it back to making money."

Antonio smiled. "I've thought about it so much--living right here--"

"Here?" echoed the aunt.

"Well, not in this house--but here on the ranch." And he added, "I want to build my own house--a real ranch house. Oh, I have it all planned, the rooms, the furniture, everything. It's going to have all the modern conveniences so that work will be easy. I never could see a woman having to slave all day--"

Aunt Sophia laughed; and she said, looking at Maria, who sat on the couch, "You are taking all this in, are you not, Maria?"

Antonio felt suddenly self-conscious. He glanced at Maria; their eyes met, then moved away. He walked over to the window and looked out into the living night. For several moments he gazed at the motionless stars above the shrouded earth. Tattered clouds raced across the moon like wisps of gauze and a lonesome wind moved through the trees. And suddenly an uncomfortable feeling gripped him. Where would he be when the next March winds blew and April was a thin green?

His uncle was saying, "You know I'd like to increase the present herd of one hundred and fifty registered Herefords to about five hundred. Why, my boy, in a short time we could be rich together."

Aunt Sophia laid her fancy work in the basket on the table, "Is it not time that we go to bed? See, it is eleven o'clock, and we must rise early so Antonio can be gone."

Antonio felt suddenly very tired. He took a lamp from the table in the hall. He could feel Maria watching him and he turned and smiled at her. Then he went up the steep stairs to his room, and he stood the lamp on the bureau.

He turned up the wick. The flame guttered in the draught from the window, throwing splashes of light along the walls. Nothing was changed, except that Maria and his aunt had been using the room for sewing and had left scraps of yellow tissue patterns on the bed. A picture of his father's family hung on the wall by the window, and in the closet was a gray suit coat--a

boy's coat that he had worn when he left for his induction center.

He lit a cigarette and sat down on the edge of the bed. All the excitement had gone out of him; even the wine, warm and relaxing within his veins, did not revive it. The memory of gone days was like something that was forever past. Where was his youth, he asked himself. He looked down at his wristwatch ticking quietly in the silent room: time rushing by, life rushing by, love rushing by--and where was he?

Suddenly he felt as if it might be possible to capture that old rapture--to feel the same powerful nameless urge that had sent him exploring every avenue of adventure. Again for a moment he was the boy, Antonio, a public figure, a bronzed Adonis with proud and handsome features and twinkling gray eyes. He was the boy who had been good at sports and who had liked to participate in them. His well-made figure was like tempered steel and there was a cat-like grace about him that fascinated those who watched. Always he was the object of admiration among the school girls; the very sight of him quickened their hearts. And always people gathered in little groups watching him as he rode his white horse down the main street of San Jose, his body slouched in a saddle richly decorated with silver, strumming a guitar and singing to the top of his lungs. Now it all seemed so long ago, and so far beyond his reach that he wondered if he would ever regain the lost eagerness of his youth. Was it nothing more than memory and shadow?

Again he was filled with sadness. Inside he felt the loss, a hollow place in the world like a tree that has fallen, a sort of death in the autumn woods with the wind sighing its melancholy

song. His father was gone and with him had gone his own youth; and the place made vacant by their going was a void drawing him to stand alone in the vacant loneliness. The grief was beyond his power to deal with; all else could be brought to terms. He could go back to his Post and answer the charges against him. He could go back into battle and draw on his last resources to conquer. He could suffer wounds of the flesh and not be afraid of dying. But this--

He undressed and blew out the lamp. He heard somebody coming up the stairs, and turning he saw Maria go into her room across the hall. For a time he sat on the bed thinking about her. And all at once he felt excited with the quick breath of desire that filled him and melted the heaviness that lay deep inside. Now he felt young and strong, the blood running warm in his veins, beating in his temples. His thoughts were alive to one impulse. A feeling of expectation throbbed in his chest, a joyful emptiness became filled, and for a moment he imagined her in his arms.

Then he silenced himself, alarmed by the thought. The sheets on the bed felt damp against his warm body. He lay there in the dark, listening, hearing night sounds, and feeling his desire ebb. For the past three years he had carried with him a mental picture of a girl like Maria and it seemed strange she had come to him as from out of another world. For a long time he lay thinking of her. Then suddenly he remembered and his mind grew silent. Reverently he drew from inside his undershirt the scapulary--two medals hanging together on a chain which he always wore around his neck, and, using it to make the sign of the cross, he prayed.

A whip-poor-will called across the bright night. Far off a coyote yammered. A dog was barking when he went to sleep.

III

It seemed he had only fallen to sleep when he was shaken violently by the shoulder. He opened his eyes and lifted himself to his elbow and blinked. For a moment he thought he was back in camp and he had the strange sensation of having to answer some command to action. Then gradually it came to him that he was here in his uncle's house and that it was his aunt who stood beside the bed, a lighted lamp in her hand.

Antonio sat up rigid and stared stupidly at her.

"They are looking for you," said the aunt urgently. "You better get up and be on your way."

Antonio's whole body tightened with fear. Still he could not rouse himself. He pushed hairy legs from beneath the bedclothing and suddenly he came to life. He leaped out of bed and went for his clothes. He looked at his wristwatch; it was a little past three.

"You better hurry, Antonio," said the aunt from the hall.

He grabbed his shoes and blouse. He was buttoning his shirt as he followed her down the stairs.

The aunt stood the lamp on the dining room table. She said, "Andus Torello stopped on his way from town." And she explained in a hushed voice as she hurried into the kitchen, "He was in White Springs last night and there he heard some fellows talking about you."

Antonio felt himself stiffen. The foreboding in him swelled, tightening his insides until his head and bowels ached.

Then his aunt came out of the lamplighted kitchen.

"Someone in uniform was inquiring where we lived," she explained further, "and one of the fellows told Andus they were looking for you and that tomorrow they are coming here to see if you are here." And she added, "Andus just left. He said he was late getting here because he had to do an extra job at the defense plant." She searched his face. "Don't be afraid. I am sure you will be guided safely to your home."

Antonio stooped over and tied his shoe laces. He said, "Where is Maria?"

"She must have gone to the barn," said Sophia. "She got up when Andus came." And she explained, "Manuel is seeing if he can start the car." She stopped and lifted a finger in the air. "Yes, I hear it going." And she said as she hustled about the kitchen, working between stove and cupboard, "We figure you better get an early start so you can make haste while it is still dark." And she turned the bacon that sizzled in the skillet.

"We should have left last night," said Antonio. "It is going to be hard getting across the border in the daytime."

"It will be hard but in no way impossible," replied Sophia, lifting the curling bacon from the skillet.

"I cannot cross by way of the International bridge, for I would be arrested on the spot. Perhaps we should go by way of Saltillo."

He stooped in front of the mirror hanging above a table in

the dining room and combed his hair. Then he buttoned up his blouse and put on his cap. He went to the door and looked out. The early morning was gray and thin with rain. A light at the barn flickered through the drizzle. Pesos came to him and waited restlessly outside the screened door, wagging his tail, and breathing lightly through his opened mouth.

Antonio said, "Pesos, you will have to stay here. I will be coming back in a day or two, old boy. You can wait for me."

Pesos looked at him and whined piteously.

"Maybe it would be better if you did not wear your uniform," Aunt Sophia suggested.

Antonio looked at her.

"You could put on one of Manuel's suits. And no one would know who you were."

Antonio considered her suggestion. He could make it easier for himself by losing his identity in civies. Still--in civilian clothes he would be masquerading, making himself a full-fledged fugitive. And if he happened to be caught he felt the military authorities would be much harder on him. What was more so long as he was in uniform he himself would not suffer the full guilt of disloyalty; his betrayal would not be made complete.

"No," said Antonio. "I'll go as I am. It's only at the border I have to be very careful."

"Do you have enough money?" she asked.

"Yes, I have over twenty dollars. That should be enough."

"Here, take another ten," said the woman. "You may need more than you have."

"Thank you so much," said Antonio, putting the money in his wallet. "I will bring it back with me when I return through here."

"Have a cup of coffee before you go," she said, lifting the coffee pot from the stove.

"No," said Antonio. "We do not have time."

Sophia disregarded his refusal and poured him a cup. "Here, drink it so that you will be awake when you drive."

Antonio gulped the too hot coffee and burned his tongue. He was momentarily angry with his aunt for insisting that he drink it. He took a buttered roll and a slice of bacon and washed down great mouthfuls with the coffee.

"I don't have time for more," he said, "for it is best that we be gone as soon as possible."

"You should eat more, and Maria should, too. All she had was a roll."

Antonio finished his coffee and turned to the door.

The aunt said, "Here, take Manuel's raincoat." And she hustled to the closet and brought him the coat. "You will need it. And don't forget the basket, Antonio. I have prepared food. And here, take Maria's suitcase. Maybe you can make it to your home before nightfall."

Antonio put on the coat. Then he took the basket and the suitcase and made a dash to the barn. The place was filled with the roar of the motor and the car was shaking like a toy wound too tight. Manuel had his head under the lifted hood, and Maria was holding the lantern close to the engine.

"Are you ready?" she asked in a shouting voice.

Manuel straightened and took the lantern. "It's working all right now," he said. "It'll get you there. It's never failed us."

Antonio climbed into the front seat. His legs felt stiff and heavy. He shook himself free of his numbness and regulated the spark. Maria got in beside him and Manuel placed the suitcase and basket in the back seat.

"I'll be back in a couple days," shouted Antonio.

Sophia came to the door. "Here, Antonio," she cried, handing him a medal of St. Christopher, patron saint of travelers. "Don't lose it! And in heaven's name be careful."

"Go by way of Saltillo," said the uncle. "You will lose a few miles but that road is safest, for it will not take you through the city."

Just then Pesos leaped into the back seat of the car and nuzzled his nose against the boy's cheek.

"Say, I thought I told you to stay here," yelled Antonio.

"Oh, let him come," said Maria.

Antonio looked over his shoulder and smiled at the dog. Then he released the brake. And the model T shuddered out of the barn. The dim lights caught the streaks of rain and glittered them. They moved out of the yard into the dawn.

CHAPTER FOUR

I

Antonio and Maria arrived at the border that evening after dark. A thin jet of steam spurted through a hole in the top of the radiator cap as the car labored in low gear down the street toward a brilliant light that burned at the hotel entrance. It had stopped raining, but the lamps of the town looked like yellow smudge and the lights shone on the wet sidewalks. In spite of the bad weather the streets were filled with people and the little plaza across from the hotel was noisy with merriment, and there was singing and dancing.

Antonio drove into a service station and climbed out. With the tips of his fingers he unscrewed the steaming radiator cap, flipping it so it jumped into the air as a spurt of steam shot up. An attendant came forward and stood by the gas pump.

"Is there anyone we can find to mend a leaking radiator?"

"Don't know of anybody," drawled the attendant.

"We can't go on until it's fixed. It's taken us all day to come thirty miles and I've got to be at San Jose tonight."

"You'll do well if you find someone to fix it tomorrow or the next," said the man. "There's a rodeo scheduled for tomorrow and all business is at a standstill."

"Couldn't we take a taxi?" asked Maria.

"With all this celebration," said the attendant, "it would be impossible to find a taxi."

Antonio frowned. He said to Maria, "There might be a bus out of here--or maybe the train." And he asked the attendant, "Is there anybody we could get to take us on?"

"Doubt it," said the man. "Everybody's interested in the rodeo."

A heavy-set Mexican with a turned-up mustache and wearing a white suit and a Panama came out of the hotel and stood in the shelter of the arcade. From his arm swung a cane and in his right hand was a pair of white gloves. He gave his mustache a careful twirl as he looked up and down the street, obviously trying to decide whether to venture forth or go back inside. And standing there trying to make up his mind he looked in the direction of the car so that Antonio got a full view of the face which was illuminated by the entrance light of the hotel. Then he started walking down the street toward them.

It is Rafael Morante, thought Antonio; and he called out, "Rafael--"

The heavy-set man turned and he looked surprised to hear his name.

Antonio stepped out in front of him, "You don't remember me," he said, "Antonio Chevez--"

The man looked at him for several moments before his face lighted with recognition. Then he bellowed, "Antonio. It is Antonio Chevez?"

He stared at the boy and his eyes brightened. "Of course I do remember. Antonio, how are you?" And he took the boy's hand in his and patted him on the arm. "You are a man now. Tall and

broad." And he looked at him as if yet he were not certain it was Antonio.

Antonio said, "Rafael, how are you? So glad I am to see you."

"How could I be anything but fine. And you, my boy, how are you? So long since I have seen you. Tell me what are you doing in the uniform of the United States soldier?"

"I am a soldier of the United States army," said Antonio.

"A soldier in the United States army? Well! And who is the young lady who accompanies you?"

"This is Senorita Maria Perez," said Antonio.

Rafael swept his hat from his head and bowed low. "This is a moment of great pleasure," he said elaborately. "For it is not every day one meets a girl of such beauty." And looking at Antonio, "Tell me, my boy, why are you here?"

"We are on our way home," said Antonio, "and our car broke down." And he said desperately, "I don't know what we are going to do. We must cross the border tonight for reasons of safety."

Rafael looked at him searchingly, "For reasons of safety?" he questioned.

Antonio explained, "My father is dead and for that reason I am on my way home."

"So sorry I am to hear it," said Rafael. He was silent for several moments considering the boy's predicament. "Yes indeed, I am very sorry to hear your father is dead."

"Would it not be possible to drive us tonight to San Jose?" asked Antonio urgently. "I ask it only because I cannot trust this car to take us another mile and it may take all tomorrow to

put it back into running condition."

"My Lincoln--Fermin Procuna has it and will not be back before late, perhaps after midnight."

Antonio felt helplessly depressed. He kept thinking how he had been keeping away from all places when there were military police, and here he was walking into a nest of them. Everything seemed to be working against him, breaking his patience, wearing him down until his fatigue reached to the marrow of his bones.

Rafael said, "But that will only delay you a few hours. Come--we can wait here in hotel lobby. Or maybe you and Dona Maria would like to go to my room and wash up and then join the dancers in the street."

Antonio shook his head. "No," he said, taking Rafael aside so that his words would not reach the attendant who was now giving gas to another car.

"Why do you act so nervous?" asked Rafael. "It is not like you to be nervous. Always you were so calm and collected when you fought the bulls. Is it that the war has ruined you?"

"I am in trouble," said Antonio, looking down at his mud-soiled hands.

"Well now--you needn't hesitate telling your friend."

"I would rather not talk about it here," said Antonio.

"You can depend on me," said Rafael, taking the boy's arm.

"What is it? Are you fleeing the police?"

"No," said Antonio, irritated. "I would not say it like that. It is only that I am evading them."

"Come--you and Maria come to my room and tell me about it,"

he said. "In my room you can stay in safety until Fermin returns with my car." And before Antonio could answer he called to the station attendant; and walking over to him he said, "Here, senor, for five pesos drive this wreck into the parking lot back of the hotel. Come, Antonio and Dona Maria."

"But it will not be safe to stay in the hotel," said Antonio.

"You will be safer in the hotel," said Rafael logically, "than in the streets."

Antonio took Maria's bag from the car. "We also have a dog," he said, looking at Pesos, who was standing on the back seat, waiting eagerly for attention. "Where can he stay?"

Rafael took one glance at the dog; and then to the station attendant he said, "Here, for another five pesos take care of this dog until we call for him." And leading the way into the hotel he said in a low voice, "Now don't torment yourself with worry, my boy. Relax and nobody here is going to question you."

The lobby was crowded with people. Antonio knew he was taking chances: he could be stopped by the military police and questioned. He felt a little easier once they were on the elevator. But beneath it all, a sense of fear and uncertainty quaked and beat as if this meeting with Rafael Morante and accepting his hospitality was the same as committing a wrong.

Maria was talking, as they went down the hall, saying, "It is not often such generosity is found in a stranger."

"Oh, but I am not a stranger," exclaimed Rafael. "Surely you have heard Antonio speak of me, the great Rafael Morante, to whom countless matadors are indebted?" He took a key from his

pocket and opened the door. "Here you are," he said expansively, switching on the light. "You may have it until Fermin returns with my car."

"Thank you, my friend," said Antonio. He put the bag down on the floor and took off his raincoat.

Rafael said, turning back to the door, "I will leave you now for a few minutes, for I have business downstairs. Then I will come up and we will have a good talk. So much I have to say to you." And then dropping his voice to an injured tone as he eyed Antonio from head to toe, "Antonio, how you hurt me! To think that the man who could be the greatest matador in all Mexico is wasting his time in the army of the United States. I can't understand." And he added, "My boy, how my heart bleeds."

Antonio felt a little irritated and did not answer.

"And to think you could be the greatest matador in all Mexico."

He turned then and was gone, and Antonio closed the door. The room was big and smelled of cigar smoke, and there was a bottle of bourbon on the table and two empty glasses. Antonio looked at the large bed with a satin coverlet.

He went to the windows of the balcony and pushed them open. The voices of the people in the street drifted up.

"Let us go outside," Maria suggested. And then remembering, she said, "You would not feel safe?"

"It would be risky to go out of the hotel."

"I wish you were out of uniform," she said, placing her raincoat on a hanger in the closet already filled with Rafael's fine

suits and coats. "Listen to the music and the voices in the plaza."

"If I have to change clothes to get across the border," said Antonio, "maybe I could make the change tonight and we could go down to the street." He went to the closet and looked at the clothes hanging there. "But I am sure I would look like a clown in any of Rafael's suits."

"We don't have to go out," said Maria.

"No," said Antonio. "It is nice and cozy here. And it is nice to be alone together."

They were quiet for awhile, neither one knowing what to say. They were in the room together but were distances apart as if their self-consciousness spread a gulf between them.

"We should get something to eat," said Antonio, "I am very hungry and you must be even more hungry, for you ate only two sandwiches."

"I am not hungry," said Maria, "I am only tired. It was a long trip in the mud. You must be very tired, Antonio."

"I suppose I am, but I do not realize it."

Again they were silent like two strangers sharing the same room. Outside the door came the clicking of the elevator as it passed the floors going down. In a little while it came back and stopped, and Antonio could hear the cheerful voices of the passengers as they walked down the corridor.

Antonio said, "Maybe it would have been more sensible if I had changed. But I would feel like a deserter in civilian clothes. In my uniform I still am without guilt, for I feel I have done

nothing but what I know is right."

"Oh, surely you are safe, Antonio," she said. "Don't worry. We must enjoy these moments together--every one of them so precious." And she said with great tenderness, "It was so long you were gone."

He looked at her across the room. She stood by the bureau, so intriguingly feminine, so infinitely appealing in a white blouse and black skirt. She did not say anything more but looked at him. Suddenly her eyes filled.

"But it will not be long again that I will stay," he said, walking over to her. And he added, "Then I will come back to stay here in the valley--forever, Maria."

She tried to smile but she had to blink hard to keep the tears back, and she dropped her head, saying nothing.

Antonio said, "You are very beautiful in that blouse and skirt."

"This?" she asked. "Oh, it is nothing. Something I made for myself while I was waiting for you. It was an old dress your aunt had discarded."

"You look beautiful in it, Maria."

She smiled up at him. "Oh, it will do. But I need nicer clothes--something from the store I could buy and put on to look like a picture on a magazine cover."

"Maria, you are more beautiful than any pictures."

He could feel his heart beating very fast as he stood beside her in the room. Suddenly his brain was filled with thoughts that tumbled one over the other, all jumbled together because of his

desire for her. His throat grew tense and his chest ached with warmth and hunger. His lips parted but he did not speak.

She must have seen the excitement in his eyes, for she turned and walked over to the window. Antonio did not know what to say to her. He went into the bathroom and closed the door. He felt a bit embarrassed and he was annoyed with himself because he had brought Maria with him. Her presence was only complicating matters, he thought, as he washed the dried mud from his hands. When he came back into the room he found her standing at the door of the balcony.

She said, turning to him, "You are worried because I am with you?" And she looked at him eagerly, with an expression of deep concern.

"No," he said, walking over to her. "I am worried only because we must wait here."

He looked down at her and he felt a strange excitement as he watched her face, so changeful in all its expressions, revealing all shades of feeling. Her innocence and gentleness seemed almost incredible after three years of the unsacred and all the pitiable and misery of human existence. He would have liked to take her in his arms and be lost forever, feeling her love a force that could vanish all ache and confusion. Instead he stood shy and embarrassed, unable to think of anything to say.

"Now I see I should not have come with you," she said. "I am only making it harder for you."

"It does not make it any harder," he lied. And he said truthfully, "You are making me forget my grief and loneliness."

And it is good to have you near me, Maria."

"Really, Antonio?" she said eagerly. "Oh I am glad you feel that way. For I was thinking it was a mistake to meet you at the farm."

"No, Maria, it was not a mistake."

"I had supposed we knew each other. And at once I saw we did not know each other at all, for I had been living in a dream and that dream now has ended."

He looked at her. Then he took her hand in his, and suddenly he had a strange feeling as if she had always belonged to him. And he began to talk of days before he went away: the first time he saw her and how he had carried the memory of her with him. And little by little his shyness lifted. He forgot himself and words came easily; and as the need for communication broke through the walls of reserve they began to show spirit like two people who have known each other a long time and have met after a long absence.

Then as they talked someone knocked on the door and Antonio went and answered it. A stranger in a raincoat stood in the hall, hat in hand. His dark handsome face looked very serious.

"You are Antonio," he said. "I am Fermin Procuna." And he seemed too perturbed to offer his hand. "I am sorry I have kept you waiting for the car. Rafael tells me you had better leave at once and he will have the car in front of the hotel in five minutes."

Antonio stared at him. He could hear the blood pounding in his temples so that when he spoke his voice was tight with fear.

"Why--what has happened?"

"The military police have wind you are here in this hotel and they will be here any minute to arrest you." And he added, hurrying down the hall, "Be ready very soon."

Antonio turned from the door he closed behind him. He looked at Maria but he did not say anything. She was slipping on her raincoat. Antonio put on his blouse and his fingers fumbled with the buttons. And standing there tense with perplexity and fear, he felt this unbearable reality must be a dream from which he would presently awake.

"What are you going to do?" asked Maria.

Antonio turned suddenly, startled by a sound in the hall. Then someone knocked urgently, and he opened the door. His whole body stiffened. Against the gray background of the hall stood two soldiers. They wore white helmet liners and M. P. bands around their left arms and holsters at their sides.

Antonio stepped into the hall and closed the door.

"Pvt. Antonio Chevez," the corporal asked.

"Yes sir."

"Come with us, you are under arrest."

Antonio stood looking at them. He did not say anything. Then he opened the door and went back into the room, and the two military police followed him.

"Maria, you see how it is," he said, going to her. His voice was somber and he spoke very fast. "I will have to go with them. You had better go to San Jose by train if Rafael doesn't arrange to drive you. And take Pesos with you."

Tears welled in her eyes. "Oh, Antonio," she began; and could say no more.

He turned from her helplessly and faced the two military police. Then he took his cap and went with them.

II

That evening in a little town in New Mexico Antonio stood between two military police on the station platform awaiting the coming of the night train. Around him people were grouped in little knots, soldiers and sailors and their families, all waiting for the passenger train which was twenty minutes late. He was aware of their staring eyes as one is aware of a dull pain which begins to throb awhile after the injury. All the way from Saltillo, Texas, to this little village, where he was waiting to change trains, his senses had seemed to be held in tight bands of numbness. Now they were gradually coming alive.

On the side-track stood a freight, its engine headed in the direction from which he had come two hours ago. Soon the train taking him the remaining distance would be in, and again the miles would lengthen between him and home. And again time and distance would hang over him like a fishing net, entangling him in its meshes.

It was turning out just as he had feared; the very thing he wanted to escape now was a reality. A feeling of desperation rose in him.

Never before had uncertainty and gloom hung so heavy. Everything seemed unreal. Only the anxiety he suffered now for Maria

was real: the sound of her voice and her tear-filled eyes as she helplessly watched him taken from her. And in that moment rage struck him--rage and humiliation. He who had served faithfully an army to which he had pledged his services and life was now its prisoner, made thus by the will of one man.

Every fiber in him grew tense. An overwhelming desire to break away came to him.

The two M. P.'s were talking, laughing a little, looking self-important for having him in their possession. "We'll be getting in around three o'clock tonight," said the corporal to the pfc. And the pfc. said, "Christ, I hate these trips. These lousy Mexican bastards who go AWOL ought to be stood up and shot."

Two soldiers came up to the M. P.'s and began to talk. One said, "I see you got your man." And the M. P. corporal said, "You god-damn right we got him. That tip-off the station attendant gave us was no bum's steer." "Where are you taking him?" asked one of the soldiers. "We're taking him to San Antonio to jail him until his Post sends someone after him."

Antonio licked his dry lips. Anger grew in him.

He looked at the freight engine which was panting softly like a dog after a chase. Then he turned his gaze to the rear coach standing in the light of a street corner lamp. And he saw a length of chain suspended in a loop beneath the rear railing. His thoughts became connected and took shape. Now he saw that escape was so easily within reach that it was torture to stand here waiting.

Then he began to weigh the chances. He did not know whether

to wait until he boarded the train or make a break now. He was frightfully aware of the pistols in the M. P.'s holsters. That was the real danger. And he could see himself, shoulders hunched, head down, running--then pistol reports and his feet buckling. No, he must use his wits.

He forced himself to calmness.

The lamps of the village shone in the dark and beyond the range stretched out into emptiness and lonely silence. Then rising out of the silence the far-off wail of the passenger sounded. And a moment later the yellow glare from the headlight streamed down the tracks.

He stood alert and waiting.

Then the gruff sound of the corporal's voice startled him into realization. The engine clanked past with a pounding beat and slowed to a stop. And between his escorts he started walking up the platform to a rear coach.

The train had stopped and people were piling from the cars. He at once seemed surrounded in the crowd, lost except for the M. P.'s, who waited on either side. He glanced at the one on the left, who was talking to the conductor. Out of the corner of his eye he could see the other. Now was the time to act--now, as he started up the steps into the coach. Cautiously he moved, each step performed with desperate intentness.

Then his body grew tense in the expectation of a hand reaching for him or a bullet fired as he ran. He drew a deep breath and the force of his will took him on down the steps on the other side, thrusting him to the dark ground out of sight of everyone.

Ducking down he plunged for the freight train which was pulling out. There was a crash of pistol fire from the passenger coach and the excited noise of shouting voices. At that moment he felt a slight blow, and a sharp pain shoot into his leg, so sudden and intense that he almost fell. Lunging forward he caught hold of the steel platform of the caboose, and, swinging his body underneath, seated himself on the chain. Hidden from sight he stretched out and hung on tight as the freight gathered speed.

III

All in a moment it seemed to have happened. And now he felt he had been riding for days. What seemed an hour may have been only a minute, riding there below the level of the train's rear platform, seeing the liquid ties rushing under him like a muddy river, knowing his feet were dangerously close to them, the whole understructure of the train very close to the singing rails over which the steel wheels on either side of him rolled in a long, monotonous strain.

But he was no longer afraid. The power of will that had directed him now gave him new strength. And he felt relief, knowing the train was taking him back to the town where he had left Maria.

He shifted his body to relieve the agony of the chain links. And as he did so something in him moved like the weight of a pendulum striking his nerve-centers with agonizing force. His right leg felt wet and warm. He touched the calf muscle, and the moist place on the trousers stained his fingers. From the light pouring out from the platform he saw the blood. And now he knew one

of the bullets fired at him by the M. P. had lodged in the calf, perhaps severing an artery. A blackness shot with odd-colored lights flashed before his eyes. All at once he was afraid.

"The dirty bastards! The no-good dirty bastards!"

He swayed on the chains. And now the pain in his leg began to grow unbearably. He could not hold his leg up much longer. But if he let it sink down it could be caught in the ties, and his whole body could be hurled under the grinding wheels. He tried not to think about it, stiffening himself against the agony, drawing on his last resources to still the throbbing ache.

He moved his head, and from the flashing lights knew they were going through a town, the street lamps casting a barren glow on the blood-stained trousers leg. The train slowed a little and then gathered speed as it thundered loudly over a trestle, changing all sound to a hollow noise, giving him a flash of house-tops and street-lights, all strange and close and near. Then again all was darkness, filled with the pounding wheels of the train and pain shooting up his leg.

But he must accept the pain, he knew, and try to do something for himself. Releasing his hold with one hand, he reached into his pocket for his knife and managed by painful exertion to cut the trousers leg away from the wound. It was bleeding badly and he knew he could not afford to lose too much blood; by letting the air fan the wound he hoped to coagulate it. Then it occurred to him that by resting his leg a certain way the pressure of the biting links might act as a tourniquet. Gritting his teeth against the pain, he moved himself until he felt surely the pressure of

the links was directly on the artery, and thus he lay, sweat pouring from him, his suffering so great it numbed all fear.

Miles of agony seemed to roll under him, a great revolving pool of sound and liquid sight. The train had become a force rushing him across the country with a powerful unperturbed motion. He felt the everlastingness of space and time surging through the darkness, he alone in the black firmament of earth and night the fixed and timeless entity.

IV

At last when the train stopped, he dropped off and lay for a few minutes exhausted on the ties. In the dim recesses of his mind there was still the sound of a violent intercolliding of box-cars and the desperate feeling of picking himself up and getting away in the dark. Far ahead he could see the lights of the station and beyond he saw the street lamps receding into distance and night. For a moment he hoped that he was back in Saltillo, but the hope proved vain; lettered on a building near the tracks he saw the name of the town.

He must get out of sight. Nervning himself with the thought that a railroad officer might be on the lookout for him, he came to a quick decision. He must find a box-car to take him the remaining journey. And he must make a tourniquet before he bled to death. He stood at the side of the track looking at the box-cars. At the switch a brakeman was swinging his lighted lantern. The train started moving and Antonio watched for a car whose door was open. Here was one. He stood until it had almost passed; then,

gathering all his strength, he caught the sill with both hands. It was all he could do to pull himself to the floor.

Inside he leaned against the wall exhausted, breathing heavily. He did not think anyone had seen him. He could see scraps of paper on the floor; without moving his position he gathered a pile of them and made a support to rest his leg on.

Then he went to work. Taking his knife he ripped bandages from the lining of his blouse, but when he applied them he saw it was going to take more to stop the bleeding. His trembling fingers acted fast. He felt his leg until he thought he had his fingers on the artery. Then, tearing off one of his two rows of ribbons, he formed a hard object and, wrapping it in a strip of lining, made a pad. For a bandage he used his necktie and, finding a pencil in his pocket, he twisted the bandage, making it only tight enough to check the bleeding. Tears of pain filled his eyes. After a little while the hurt eased and he relaxed himself, sitting there against the vibrating wall.

The train was gathering speed now. The street-lights flickered into the car as the spokes of empty streets flashed past. The box-car throbbed with the beat of the wheels on the rails. Far ahead he could hear the lonely howl of the engine. A drowsiness fell over him as the roaring rhythm pounded in his head.

He fished a cigarette from his pocket and lighted it. Smoking, he felt like a hurt animal licking its wounds. For his wound was more than that of flesh, torn and bleeding. Something in him had been crushed with intolerable violence. And hatred had taken its place in him. Stronger than fear, stronger than pain, he was

conscious of it settling in him like an anvil upon which he would shape his actions.

It was up to him to decide what to do next. It was quite likely he would find Maria at the hotel, and Rafael would be there and they would take him to a doctor across the border. He had to find someone who could remove the bullet. He could get gangrene unless something was done soon. And it must be done across the border. He was not going to surrender to the military authorities; perhaps he would not even go back....

The train moved on and he dozed, conscious of the shouting roar in his ears. Suddenly he was shaken violently and he came awake, realizing the train had stopped. For a moment he held his dulled head between his hands. Looking out he saw he was back in Saltillo: through the trees he could see the entrance lights of the hotel. He hastily loosened the tourniquet and took his handkerchief and wrapped the wound, making it secure by knotting his necktie around it. He looked out to make sure no one was in sight to see him. Then, carefully easing himself to the ground, he limped with a tortured hobble into the darkness.

There was no one on the street. The whole town was asleep. Rain dripped from the tired limbs of the trees, but overhead the moon was breaking through the clouds. It seemed impossible it was only a few hours ago he had walked down this same street with the two military police.

The hotel was only two blocks away but it seemed miles. He had to move very slowly, for the bleeding had started again, and the pain was a throbbing ache all through him. He stopped and

leaned against a tree. And all at once he seemed to be a heavy object in a stormy sea, swimming toward a sailboat which had a light; and he was shouting to it in his efforts to be rescued. But he was growing so tired he could not shout any more. He felt like lying down and not trying to make it to the light.

Again he started, limping, as if his body were responding to a command outside himself. At last he was in the hotel, leaning against the wall. When he tried to take another step he couldn't move. And all the while he seemed to be looking through a shimmering heat wave from which emerged a man running toward him. Antonio could hear himself asking to be taken to Rafael Morante's room. His voice was very dim and it took a great deal of strength to make the words. It was like a thin note in the deepening darkness that enveloped him.

V

The next thing he saw he was in a room with white walls, and a white sheet over him and white light slanting through the venetian blinds of the windows. It took him a long time to realize he was in a hospital. Then he began to recall stray bits of what had happened and he saw himself reaching the hotel. And later there was a vague feeling of traveling, riding in an ambulance on a stretcher with Maria sitting at his side; and when they unloaded him seeing the front of the hospital and the green lawn and palm trees; and then the smell of ether clogging his lungs....

In his sleep it seemed he was watching the red and orange flashes of explosion which kept the horizon blinking. And shower-

ing flames bathed the world and a plane trailed a plume of smoke so dense it cast a shadow against the bursting earth. And then the firing ceased and in place of shell-burst came a hush, and suddenly his body was poker-stiff and his right leg throbbed in agony.

Now there were subdued voices in the room but he felt too tired to care what was said or who was saying it. Everything that had happened was without interest or relation, and thus he fell into a troubled sleep.

Later when he woke there was someone sitting at his bedside looking at him. He blinked his eyes. And from out of the spidery shadows drifting around him emerged the slim figure of Maria. He saw the line of her dark hair against the forehead and her face, which was very beautiful with that certain look of goodness and purity that set her apart from all other girls.

"Maria--" he said.

"Yes, Antonio," she answered, bending close to him.

"Where are we?"

"We are home."

"Home--"

"Yes, Antonio, we are home. And you are all right now. Just rest and take it easy."

Antonio lay staring at the ceiling. It seemed all this had happened years ago, and it had not happened to him but to someone else. All events belonged to a distant past and were shaped out of another time, from somewhere beyond the world. And Maria had come to him from that somewhere like the joy and fragrance of spring after a long winter. Her very presence made the blood run

warm in his veins. And looking at her he felt again he was gazing through the arches of a dream where he had met a girl like her before.

He said, "Maria, was it bad--the wound?"

"The doctor says soon the wound will be healed and you will not even know you were hurt."

"I guess I lost a lot of blood," he said. "I broke away from the military police and they shot me as I ran. I rode the brakes of a freight back. I barely made it to the hotel."

She put her hand on his hand and he felt its warm pressure going all through him, touching every fiber, and he felt coolness and calm mounting pain and suffering, as if he were traveling back through the years, back to a place where there were no burden and grief, but only comforting.

After awhile Antonio said, "Did Rafael come with us?"

"Yes, it was he who got us safely across the border." And she said, "He did not leave you for one minute from the time he hired the ambulance to bring us here until the bullet was removed."

He lay silent for some time; then he asked, "Does my mother know--?"

"I will go to her this afternoon and tell her," said Maria. "But I will not say things to worry her."

"Will you tell her it was an accident?" said Antonio. "For she must not know that I left my Post without permission nor that I was shot resisting the military police. Later I will tell her but not now."

"Yes, Antonio, I will not say anything to worry her."

Antonio stared at the ceiling. His mind was still very foggy. Only the sharpest thoughts got through like little beacon lights piercing the fog.

He said, "I do not wish anyone to know what happened."

"Don't worry, Antonio. No one will know. Even the doctors do not know, for Senor Morante is taking care to tell them only what is necessary."

He was silent for awhile. And then he asked, "What about Pesos? Did you--?"

"Oh yes, I forgot to tell you," she said softly. "Pesos was waiting outside the hotel and we brought him along."

Antonio smiled, thinking fondly of the dog. And he said, "You will keep him until I am well?"

"Of course I will," said Maria; and she rose to leave. "Now go to sleep and have a good rest so that you will feel like talking to me when I come back this afternoon."

Antonio smiled at her and watched her go from the room. She was a very wonderful girl, he thought. She gave him a feeling unlike he had ever known before. Just thinking of her made him happy.

CHAPTER FIVE

I

When his mother came to see him he was lying on his side looking out of the window. He heard someone coming down the hallway: the steps were light and energetic, and he knew even before he saw her it was she, his mother.

She walked quickly over to his bed and kissed him. She looked years older and her face was very anxious and tired and worried. But her hair was still dark and untouched by gray, and she wore the same heavy coral necklace with a crucifix which she had worn as long as he could remember.

"Dear son of mine," she breathed. She closed her eyes. "Oh Lady of Guadalupe, my prayers are answered."

Antonio did not say anything. He swallowed hard and tears filled his eyes. His mother sat down on a chair by the bed. And she took a handkerchief from her dress pocket and wiped her face.

"Here I am crying when I should be laughing with joy that you are home." Then she recovered her composure and she asked, "How are you anyway? Is it so that you cannot come home soon?"

"I will be out of here in a few days," said Antonio as calmly as he could. "Perhaps a couple days at the most and then I will come home."

"Oh I am so happy, Antonio. So long I have waited."

It was enough and he was glad she did not say more. The unspoken things were too close to both of them for expression. He

did not look at her. Through the windows he could see the ragged blue silhouette of the mountain range, and at its feet the town sprawling in the late afternoon sunshine. He knew each shop and market and house and church, and yet a sense of strangeness hung over everything as though he were looking at the place for the first time; it had the strangeness of a little town you pass through in the night on a train journey across the country.

His mother said, "Everybody is asking about you, Antonio. When they heard you were in the hospital my parlor was crowded to suffocation with people--everyone waiting in a tense silence to know about you."

"It is good of them to be concerned," he said.

His mother smiled. "Already they are planning a celebration."

"Oh no, Mama, they must not do that--"

"You will have to get up and give a talk," she laughed. "And there will be such a crowd to see you. People will come from all over."

"But--I cannot stay home, Mama," he said with difficulty.

"Once I am well I will have to go back--"

"You must go back," she said with great disappointment.

"I am not discharged from the army yet," he tried to explain; and wished that someone would come in--a nurse or a doctor, anyone just to break the tension.

She said anxiously, "You are wounded?" And he felt her searching glance. "You have been hurt in an accident?"

"Yes," he said, "but it is not bad, Mama--"

She said, "Father Valentos is coming tonight to see you. You will have many visitors once you are strong enough."

Just then Rafael Morante appeared at the door, hat and cane in hand. He came over to the bed and patted the boy warmly on the shoulder. "Well now," he exclaimed jovially, "I think this boy of yours, Senora Chavez, is going to live!" And he said, "What a scare you gave us. How do you feel anyway? You do feel better, don't you, now that you are home and safe from those wolves."

Antonio smiled at his mother, and she smiled back. She seemed to accept it as a joke and said nothing.

Rafael continued, "It was lucky for you that you did come to your old friend for help. And remember so long as you are with Rafael Morante you are safe."

"I am grateful," said Antonio. "You are my friend and I shall remember that."

"Senora Chavez," said Rafael looking at her and winking, "this boy of yours will need watching, for he is quite a man with the ladies."

Dona Rosalia nodded her head and smiled.

Rafael continued, "The nurses already are crowding him for attention and they are talking what a handsome man there is here in the hospital for them to care for."

Dona Rosalia said gently, "Do not exert yourself, Antonio." And rising from the chair, "I am going now so that you can rest--"

"Do not worry about this boy, Senora Chavez," said Rafael. "Soon he is going to be up and then we are going to feed him spinach like our friends across the border would do. That will put

iron in the blood so that he will be a match for the most savage bulls." And he laughed uproariously.

Again Antonio smiled at his mother. He could see she was annoyed. She was looking at Rafael as if she were trying to size him up.

"By the way, your father was a famous matador, Senora Chavez?" said Rafael. "I heard tell of him. What a fighter he must have been. And what a fighter this son of yours could be too."

"Yes," said Dona Rosalia, "my father was a great matador. But I would not have my son follow his footsteps. It is too dangerous."

"It is for its dangers that we Spanish-speaking people love it," said Rafael. "And for that reason the skillful matador can be the greatest man in all Mexico."

Dona Rosalia bent down and kissed her son. "I will be back tonight to see you," she said. "Maria and I will come together."

"Good bye, Mama."

She went out and Antonio lay thinking about her. So much he had wanted to say to her but could not trust himself to say what was in his heart. He felt very bad because he was the cause of adding sorrow to a life which was too much filled with it already.

"Your mother is very happy now that you are at home," said Rafael. "I hope my boy you will decide to stay in Mexico now that you are safe."

Antonio did not answer.

"Under the ether you acted very well," went on Rafael. "You gave the United States army hell and you said never would you go

back there even if they made you president of the country. You were very good. Even the doctors laughed."

"I hope I did not say anything out of place."

"You did not say anything to incriminate yourself or anyone. You simply damned the army and all its brass. It would have done some of them good to hear you."

Antonio said, "Three years of war and three rows of ribbons, but no wounds." And he said trying to joke, "I wonder if they'll give me the purple heart." But it was no joke and he added, "The dirty bastards!"

"You're right," said Rafael, standing at the foot of the bed. "Those fine neighbors across the border! If you had not escaped from them they would have taken you back and killed you. They are lovers of discipline, and what finer way is there to enforce discipline than to put a man before a firing squad and let the others look on?" And he shuddered as if the thought sent cold chills down his back.

Antonio only looked at him.

"Now that you are safe I have great plans for you," he said, taking his cane and going to the door. "Yes, we are going to do big things together, you and I. And someday you are going to be the greatest matador in all Mexico. Now does that no please you, my good young friend?"

II

During his stay at the hospital the Sisters were very good to him. The doctors too were very attentive. The nurses liked to

gather in his room in little groups and talk, and always they spoke in tones of flattering brightness. Many friends, and friends of his father and mother came to see him; and many brought and sent fruit and nuts and flowers. Always there were magnolias in the room and baskets of oranges and bananas and tangerines, all a symbol of the deep affection the people held for this boy who was the son of their late mayor.

Antonio appreciated the show of kindness; and when there were people around him he felt the depression left in him go away. But when he was alone again he felt a sharp loneliness come to him and he was filled with uncertainty.

Often he would think about his Post, but it was with no sense of duty that he thought of it. For all his good feeling toward the army was gone. Everything that it meant to him, the pride he felt wearing its uniform, the ribbons they gave him, the maze and fury of each day's tasks, the feeling of each man's mortality, the daring and the doing, the responsibilities and the glory--all had exploded in his eyes like shrapnel. And in the abyss that yawned before him he saw little to reclaim.

He was startled by the growing silence in his body.

"Damn the dirty swine," he would cry. "To hell with them."

It did not seem important now that he try to square himself with anyone. He had only his own conscience to answer to; and he could not see himself going back like a dumb beast, standing court martial, and spending months, maybe years in the stockade for a crime he felt was not of his own making. What of it if he could never go back to the United States again? What really would he

lose? All that was a lost dream; all that was a colorful piece of tapestry designed by his will now lying unravelled in a pile heaped before him.

Thus, there were times when he was very unhappy. But this unhappiness would not last too long, for he found himself thinking of Maria a great deal, and with his mind on her there was little room for anything else. In the night time before he fell asleep he would like to picture her there with him, her head against his shoulder, the scent of her hair pleasant in his nostrils, her breathing slow and restful to his senses, her body warm and soft against his body; and in the quiet of the room, often with the sound of rain like the comforting sound in a seashell, he felt fear and loneliness and indecision go out of him so that he thought that he would never feel lonely so long as Maria was with him. All that made him very happy. The thoughts of what had happened were gone as if they had never been, and the future was a place where he and Maria would live their lives in quiet and contentment, unharmed by the world, never seeking its applause, never stooping to its approval, but living their lives in a goodly manner in the narrow confines of the Rio Grande valley where his father's spirit would smile down on them with approval and blessing. Only thus could he bring his full worth to account and give significance to living; only thus could he prove his right to live, making goodness a living thing--a goodness which never rested but which reached out to bring joy to all it touched. He knew this to be the only way open to happiness; all else was unreal.

Then in the midst of his thinking he would remember he was a

fugitive from the United States army and his going back to live there could never be unless he returned now to square himself. And he would begin to wonder just how it would seem never to be able to go back to the United States, and he would sense at the bottom of his hatred a feeling of self-reproach and condemnation and argument. He could say, "Oh what the hell," but he could not rid himself of the feeling that maybe he had acted with too much haste and at last his strong will was his undoing. Thus he argued from this leading fact, central to all other facts, that he might be a little to blame. Yet the forces that had directed him were rooted deep in the Major's denial and the M. P.'s bullets. And no sooner did he scorn himself for his predicament than did he pour out his wrath upon those he felt responsible for his crime, and in one stroke erased from his mind all blame.

Thus he would fall asleep.

III

One day Rafael brought Fermin Procuna to visit him. Antonio had not seen the good-looking Procuna since the night at the hotel at Saltillo and he was impressed by the young man's enthusiasm for the arena. Antonio was able now to be up and he sat in a deep easy chair, slowly drinking a glass of bourbon. It was his third glass and he was beginning to feel expansive. Anxiety and uncertainty were gone, and listening to the two men talk, he was conscious of a returning nostalgia for something he had turned his back on when he left Mexico to live on his uncle's ranch in the valley.

Rafael was saying, "Never before in the history of bullfighting are the purses so immense. Do you know what Espartero draws in Mexico City for a single fight? One hundred and twenty-five thousand pesos." And he flashed a pair of languishing black eyes at Antonio.

Antonio said, "I have heard of this Espartero. Does he always carry off the bull's ears or tail?"

Rafael laughed loudly. "'Does he always carry off the bull's ears or tail?' he asks. Antonio, this Espartero of whom we speak is regarded as the greatest matador of all time. Even so he has his off days. Only last month I saw him perform. It was anything but a success."

"I saw Espartero at Torreon last fall," said Fermin, lighting a cigarette. "Billed with him were Leo Rivera and Lua Reina, two of our very best toreros. Each was to kill two bulls. Rivera did well with the first, at least he was presented the ear. The great Espartero fought the second bull and was no better than fair. Reina faced the third bull. And what a bull. It chased Reina over the barrier and he had to climb back to make his kill. Rivera killed the fourth bull very poorly. Then Espartero fought the fifth bull and failed completely to make a kill. You should have been there, Rafael. Espartero wept like a baby and the crowd jeered and hurled everything it could find at him. What a spectacle!"

Antonio said, "And still he is considered a great matador?"

"He is considered the greatest because you are not there to challenge his greatness," said Rafael slyly. And he continued

sadly, giving his mustache a careful twirl, "What a shame, Antonio, that you forsook the arena to go to the States to live. You broke my heart and you betrayed your own people."

He paused as if he wished to let his words sink in; then in a very lofty voice speaking in a mocking way he added, "But I suppose you are happy. You are in the army of the United States and you did your duty and you risked your life and performed deeds that deserve the highest honor. And for it they gave you medals--but no consideration. For it they pinned ribbons on your chest but they did not let you come home when your father died. For it they gave you citations but if you are absent too long without leave they will pronounce you a deserter and shoot you like a dog! But that is neither here nor there--now what was I saying? Oh yes--"

"So this young man has the makings of a great matador," broke in Fermin looking carefully at Antonio.

"Does he have the makings?" bellowed Rafael standing in the middle of the room, a glass in one hand and a bottle of Bourbon in the other, ready to pour himself a drink. "Listen--" and he couched his words in terms flattering to Antonio's ears. "Three years ago when he was only sixteen he was good enough to be billed as a novillero in Juarez. You should have been there. Never have I seen a novice like him. For the way he handled himself was something great to see. Even then I voiced the opinion that here was a man whose name would someday be spoken reverently all over Mexico. Yes, what a pity to throw himself away, spending his precious time fighting with the United States army."

Antonio did not say anything. He looked down into his glass of bourbon and it was as if he were looking into a mirrored reflection, seeing the great matador he once dreamed he would be.

Rafael was talking to him, but he was looking at Fermin. Everything he said was meant for Antonio; and hearing the voice, it seemed so far away it was like his own voice, suppressed these three long years, now come to life to be heard in concert with all the other voices in him.

"Yes indeed," Rafael was saying, "Espartero at his best is a great fighter. And by the way he is billed to fight in Monterrey next week." And he said to Antonio, "If you are out of the hospital and feeling well by then would you like to go as my guest?"

"That I would like very much," said Antonio, delighted. "I think they will let me go home soon and I will be feeling all right by then."

"Then it is a date," said Rafael. "I will buy our tickets at once and get hotel reservations."

Fermin said, "I will go with you, for I would like to see this Espartero again--this great one whom the critics say at his best is as great as Guerra."

"Guerra was the last of the great toreros and Espartero cannot be compared with him," said Rafael. "In all his movements--his method of avoiding the horns of the bull--so completely graceful, so devoted to the art of danger, he revealed a genius and a display unlike anything we have today."

"I never saw him," said Fermin. "That was before my time."

"Only one might have come close to duplicating him," went on

Rafael, pouring himself another glass, "and that was Antonio."

Antonio sat staring at Rafael. The soothing voice sounded in his ears. And suddenly falling beneath the spell of his voice he was not Antonio, the soldier, but Antonio, the matador, who had mastered the art of the espada with an extensive repertoire of tricks and passes of the sword, and he was risking his life to exhibit his skill and prowess.

For a moment the lighted room with the whiskey bottles and the glasses on the table between Rafael and Fermin came back. And then....

The tiers of seats of the big arena were packed and thousands of people were cheering him. Then there fell a hush. The bull was making his last headlong rush, directing his fury at the fluttering red cloth. Confronting total danger Antonio decided how close he would come to the bull's horns. Now he stood still to the rush of the bull to receive the beast on the point of the sword. The bull fell and blood gushed from the wound. Antonio turned and bowed to the thunderous din of applause....

He felt spellbound and could not move.

Rafael was still talking. The room was still brilliantly lighted. And Antonio was still the soldier of the United States army, sitting in the deep easy chair in a hospital, two thousand miles from the camp where he was absent without leave.

IV

Maria came to see him the last night he spent in the hospital. She came quite late, and he was surprised to see her because she

had told him that morning she might not be back. She was to be a bridesmaid at her friend's wedding and she and her mother were attending the reception tonight, and it would not be likely she could leave in time. He was propped up in bed reading a magazine, thinking about putting out the light when he heard someone coming down the hallway. He looked toward the door and saw it was Maria.

"I had to come to see that you were tucked away comfortably for the night," she said. She looked very beautiful and happy. She sat down on the edge of the bed beside him. "What are you reading that you were so occupied you could not even smile. Oh, I see it is all about the arena and the great matadors."

"I was looking at the pictures," he said, "but I was thinking about you, Maria, and wishing that you would come." And he added, "I have good news for you."

"What is it?"

"The dootor told me I can go home in the morning."

"Oh I am so glad to hear it!"

"And also," he continued, "next Sunday we are going to Monterrey to see a bullfight. How will you like that?"

"I--go with you to Monterrey--"

"We are going with Rafael as his guests. He has three tickets and Fermin Procuna has decided not to go so I have asked that you come."

"Oh that will be nice," she said. "I have never seen a bullfight and it will be so nice to see it for the first time with you."

"We will make it a real holiday," he went on. "I wish I could buy a new outfit--suit and hat and shoes--"

"You will not go in your uniform?"

"No," he said, "and it is not likely I will ever wear it again." And he asked, "If I should decide to buy a new suit will you go with me to pick it out?"

"Oh yes, Antonio. I will love to help you choose it. What will it be--brown or gray?"

"I think a shade like your dress would look well."

"A blue gaberdine with a red tie and a white handkerchief?"

"I used to see myself in a new outfit like that," he said.

"I'd be looking through a magazine and come across an ad showing a man in a brown tweed or an ocean-gray gaberdine. I'd look down at my own soiled and dirty uniform and then I'd picture myself all toggled out in a summer suit like that and a Panama." And he said, "It helped a great deal sometimes."

He looked at her and smiled. She was wearing a blue rayon dress with short sleeves, and her soft dark hair curled a little untidily about her face. She looked so much like a child that he thought of the first time he saw her at the Academy.

"I like the way you are wearing your hair tonight," he said, and his fingers went up and touched it lightly.

"Do you, Antonio?" And she said, "I fixed it this way because I thought you might like it."

He looked at her but could not find words to answer. Never could he find the right words when she was there with him. Only at night when he lay alone with thoughts of her did he think of many fine things he could say when he saw her again. But when she came to see him, again there was this feeling which rose above

words or expression. He did not want to think he was really in love with her; and still it was she to whom he poured out his love in the night-time quiet of this room.

"You are very thoughtful," she said. "Will you tell me what was so interesting as to spend a whole minute all by yourself."

Antonio said, "Tell me about the wedding." And he added, "You must have been a beautiful bridesmaid."

She smiled then and told him all about it; about the wedding ceremony. And she said, "I'll tell you about the dress I wore. It was white eyelet organdie with double puff sleeves and a high neckline." And she told him how the veil floated from a coronet of field daisies and with it she wore ballet slippers and around her throat a strand of pearls. "I did it for Lucio. She is my best friend." And she said thoughtfully, "I am going to miss her."

He detected a lonely quality in her voice. For several moments she was silent. Then, "Perhaps someday," she said wistfully, her eyes tenderly dreaming, "I will have a wedding like that."

Antonio smiled up at her. And suddenly it was as if there was no past nor a future, only this infinitely precious now that was everywhere like a serene blue sky. And he had a feeling of drifting out of time to somewhere on the other side of the world to a place made for her and him. And he rose suddenly above the small state of affairs that chained him to the earth and was free.

He closed his fingers around her hand; and looking into her eyes he felt a joy so perfect and pure it seemed as great as God. Her hair had the odor of cactus flowers and her cheeks the smell of air after rain. And he had a feeling he had come a long way to

enjoy these moments--all that had happened to him, his going away and the war and his coming back was only a brief interval of unconsoling sleep which sometimes carried its suffering into memory.

He said, "Maria, what would you say if I decided to stay home?"

Her eyes grew wide and she looked at him disappointed. "You aren't going back to your Post?"

For several moments he did not answer. Then, "I don't know. I suppose I will."

She took a deep breath as if she were relieved. "I am glad, Antonio," she said. "That way you will be cleared and you will feel proud you did it." And she added thoughtfully, "It's nice always to be able to feel proud of oneself."

"Is it?" he said.

"You know it is." And she explained, "Not vain proud, but clean proud--just sort of good all over like when you make the scoring run that wins the ball game--like you used to do. Remember?"

"It's so long ago I'd almost forgotten," he said.

"You didn't know it but I used to pray for you all through the game when you played at the Academy. And whenever you made a score or struck somebody out I was so proud." Then she looked away and said quietly, "I was awfully jealous too, because all the girls liked you so much, and I was afraid--"

He said, "Maria--"

"Yes, Antonio."

But he could not bring himself to speak the words in his heart. Instead he asked her about the teachers at the Academy,

and if Sisters Angelioa and Therese were still there. And he wanted to know what had become of several of his schoolmates: Garcia and Ronal and Manuel--names he hadn't thought of in months; and faces too--faces which had not flashed across his memory in a long long time.

"Garcia is married and lives in Acapulco," she told him, "and Ronal is still in the Mexican army. He is now an officer and the people here are so proud of him."

Antonio commented, "Ronal was a smart boy."

"The people too are very proud of you, Antonio."

"If the people knew they could not feel proud of me--"

Maria said quietly, "I am sure they do not know. And if they did they would be very angry because you were shot by the military police."

After a silence, Antonio said, "I hope they never do find out."

"If they knew they would be back of you. It is even talked as soon as you are released there will be a celebration."

"No, it must not be!" he said. "I will not have it."

Again he felt the tension in him, and all gladness was gone. He was disappointed with himself, and also very angry with the army because it had reduced him to shame and humiliation. After a while he heard someone coming down the hall and Maria stood up.

"It is time for visitors to be out," she said, looking at her wrist watch. "Good night, Antonio, and sleep well and take me into your dreams."

"Oh surely," said Antonio. "By the way you will come with me

to Monterrey Sunday?"

"Yes, indeed," she said, her eyes shining. "We will make it a real holiday." And she added, "I will even go with you to pick out the new suit."

"No," he said soberly. "I have decided it will be better to wear the old one."

She frowned at him, perplexed, as if to ask him why he had changed his mind. Then smiling she was gone. And again he had come back to earth and chains.

CHAPTER SIX

I

The Plaza de Toros, a great structure with a seating capacity of twenty-five thousand, was packed with a colorful mass of people who were there to see the great Espartero. The rank and beauty and wealth of the city sat in boxes and all others thronged the open galleries. Rafael and Antonio and Maria sat in a box in the sun, and Maria carried a small fan which she fluttered excitedly. She was dressed in a white linen suit which accented her healthy tan and nowhere in the crowd did Antonio see anyone who could quite compare with her.

Then the music began, almost drowning the voices of the crowd, and the imposing procession of bull-fighters entered the sanded arena. Heads up, stopping lightly to the music and looking straight ahead they marched, the troop of toreros following two mounted men; and behind came the picadors, or spearmen, and the banderilleros or dart-throwers and the bull-ring servants, all in bright silk and velvet and gold braid. The crowd cheered in a great roar, and Antonio felt his heart beating fast as he watched the matadors bow before the president in his box at the right of them.

"Isn't it wonderful," said Maria when the cheering had subsided. "Oh I will never forget this: the beautiful colors, the excitement--and you Antonio--you are not so much like a stranger to me in your blue suit and Panama and red tie."

"I feel like an overgrown boy," he laughed. "See the sleeves

are too short and the coat is too tight. You see I have grown up since graduation exercises."

"Just the same you look very well. Here, let me straighten your tie."

Just then like a challenge a bugle note rang out, and a hush fell over the packed amphitheater as the first bull rushed into the arena, pawing the ground and snorting. The fight was on and Antonio sat tense, roused to a mood of terrific expectancy. His pulse was racing; even the air came into his lungs sharp and rapturous as he breathed: it had the odor of nostalgia, the smell of something that was in his blood, dormant these past three years, now come to vigorous life: this love of daring and agility swaying the passion of the people, this courage in the face of total danger.

All through the fight he told Maria what to watch for and gave her an idea what it was about: what seemed an unexplained horror was only the component part of a great act in which both the bull and the men must do their parts with zeal and bravery lest the crowd express disapprobation and throw everything they could at the performers. And he made her see how Espartero used his cape to turn and outwit the bull and how his movements were very graceful in comparison to the others.

After the great matador had killed his first bull and the crowd was cheering wildly and waving their handkerchieves, Rafael said to Antonio, "It is not that Espartero is so good. It is only that the people have no better."

"I have seen others I considered better," said Antonio.

"The hard-shelled technicians, too, do not think too much of him," continued Rafael. "For he is not a natural-born fighter. What he does he has learned. It would be different with you, Antonio. What you do you do naturally." And he asked, "How do you like it, Maria?"

"Perhaps if I knew more about it I would like it," she said.

Antonio smiled at her; then turned his attention to the fight. He lighted a cigarette, and watched every movement in the arena and dissected every paze with intense eagerness. And watching he felt within him a change: all of him was responding to the art and skill of the fighters. No longer did desire come in conflict with reason. He felt the urge to live recklessly in order to satisfy all his capacities for life. For should not each man have the right to desire for himself and not be bound by obligations to a desire stemming from another's will?

Yes, he had turned his back on the corrida to meet the demands of his father, a choice utterly and stubbornly opposed by his own reasoning. Now that action loomed in him as ridiculous; for the father, for whom only a short time ago he was grieving with all his heart, was now the man who had directed him away from his deep-seated love of the arena into a fiery hell of human slaughter and mutilation from which he had emerged wearing three rows of ribbons.

When it was time for Espartero to kill his second and last bull that afternoon, again the crowd sent up a great roar. The bull that confronted him was especially fierce. He had charged one of the picadores with a rush so terrific it lifted the horse

off its feet, pitching the rider out of the saddle onto the ground and ripping open the belly of the horse. Then he had turned upon one of his tormentors and tossed him bleeding to the ground. His neck was adorned with steel barbed darts planted there by the banderilleros and he was bucking wildly, jumping and tossing and shaking his head. Now the great Espartero faced the bull to make the kill.

"How do you like it, Maria?" asked Antonio. "Do you feel all right?"

"It is all so brutal," said Maria, covering her face with her hands. "It is almost too much to look at--the suffering of the horses and bulls."

Maria looked upset and Antonio told her not to watch the things that bothered her; after she got used to it she would enjoy it.

The beast was slowly moving his tail and staring at the matador in sullen anger. Then he charged; and again and again he attempted to impale the man, but only succeeded in striking the red cloth, always coming very close so that it looked as if each time the fighter would receive a thrust of the horn and be born to the ground. The crowd roared; the infuriated toro was giving them their money's worth.

"The great Espartero has found his match," laughed Rafael, handing Antonio his binoculars. "Look at him. He is visibly frightened. The bull has a tendency to hook when he charges and is bearing down on the matador."

"He is in a bad spot," said Antonio peering at the man through

the glasses. "He has that worried look that tells he does not know what to do. He shows clearly he is on the defensive."

Antonio watched carefully in rapt excitement, all of him concentrated on the fight. Everything around him ceased to exist; even Maria was not there beside him.

"I am very disappointed in this Espartero," Rafael was saying. "He strives so hard to outdo all the others and yet he is only a shade better because he is more daring. Watch him now try to make the kill and fail completely."

Espartero drew the sword out of the muleta and stood waiting for the charge. A hush fell over the Plaza as the bull made his headlong rush. There was a glint of steel in the sunlight but the blade did not pierce the black hide. The sword shot in the air and in a flash the matador was carried beneath the horns to the ground.

The crowd rose to its feet and looked on in hushed horror. The bull was on the matador goring with his horns. The attendants had rushed to the rescue and were trying to take the beast away.

Maria covered her face with her hands.

"Well, this is the end of Espartero," said Rafael letting his breath out explosively. "Come, let's get out of here. It is making Maria sick."

Antonio looked at Maria and saw her face was pale with shock. She turned in his arms and hid her face in his chest. "Antonio, I feel so--like I was going to--"

He held her to him but he did not realize at once what had happened. He was still full of the fight, the tense excitement of

watching man and beast fight to the death.

"Maria, are you ill?"

She did not answer. She pressed her face in his chest and grew limp in his arms.

"Come," said Rafael, "we will get out of here ahead of the crowd."

"I will be all right in a moment," said Maria. "Everything just turned black."

II

After the fight they came back to their hotel to dress. And later they went to the dining room and ate dinner, sitting at a table reserved for them. The room was crowded with diners, and a subdued excitement hung in the place like cigar smoke thick enough to cut with a knife. Espartero had died in the infirmary soon after he had been carried there from the arena, and this was the topic of conversation; the babble had a muted and far-away sound like the hum of bees around their dead queen, and even the orchestra did not quiet it.

Rafael said over his glass of wine, "Yes, it is a loss, for he was a great and colorful figure and a courageous fighter. Too bad when there are so few great matadors."

"I am glad I saw him perform," said Antonio.

Rafael continued solemnly, "But even so, he lacked the qualities that make a matador really great. He was not as artistic and nearly as technical as he would have been had he been a natural. It is like a great singer. It is possible with proper train-

ing to develop a fair voice to a highly acceptable degree, but never can that singer attain the artistry by training alone. There is no substitute for genius."

Antonio looked at Maria and smiled. "How are you feeling now, Maria? Is it too much that we talk about the fight?"

"It does not matter," she said. "I am enjoying the food and the music. And that is enough right now."

Just then a big man looking very pompous and distinguished, wearing a gray suit and horn-rim spectacles, came over to their table. Rafael rose, appearing very exuberant in his delight at seeing an old friend. "How are you, Senor Chico. You look fine. So glad to see you. Too bad about Espartero."

"What a loss, what a loss," moaned Chico. "Yes, indeed, it will be a long time before we shall see his equal."

"It is only a temporary loss," said Rafael, "for soon there will be one to prove himself far superior to Espartero." And he added, "Meet my good friend, Antonio Chavez. And this is Senorita Maria Perez."

Antonio stood up and shook hands with the man.

"So this is Don Antonio," said Senor Chico. "He is a damn good looking rascal, isn't he?" And he said, "Do you realize you have been attracting a great deal of attention from the ladies? They think you are a Hollywood movie star." And he asked, "Do you mind if I sit down with you for a minute?"

"Do sit down," said Rafael, "and talk with us."

When they were all seated Rafael said, "Yes, Senor Chico, this boy has the looks of a handsome actor, but in him is the gen-

ius of a great bull fighter."

Senor Chico raised his thick dark brows. "So?"

"You remember his grandfather," said Rafael, "the great Reverte who was known far and wide as El Monstruo--"

"So? This is the grandson of the famous Reverte?" asked Senor Chico looking at Antonio, and his face beamed with interest. "I knew your grandfather very well. A great matador he was. Always he was fighting at close quarters with the bull and behaving with reckless courage."

"It might interest you," went on Rafael, "to know this boy is a chip off the old block."

Again Senor Chico raised his brows. "So?"

Rafael continued, "Yes indeed. And this boy could be greater even than Espartero ever was. I would go so far as to say he could be shaped into the greatest matador Mexico has ever seen. All he needs is a little backing."

Senor Chico looked carefully at Antonio; then to Rafael he said, "Well now, that coming from you, my friend, means something. For you are not one to waste your praises merely to please the ear and hear yourself talk."

Antonio glanced at Maria. She looked lonely and disappointed. He did not know how to bring her into the conversation; neither did he know what to say to Senor Chico. He himself felt warm and happy: it was good to be with his own people talking the language of the arena. Yet beneath this warmth and happiness he was not at ease, and again uncertainty quaked and beat.

Then Rafael went on to sketch a brief history of him, telling

about his experiences as a novillero in the provincial bull rings, and how he had handled himself with a boldness and artistry that was comparable only to those who had won ever-lasting fame.

"Very interesting," he said. "Yes indeed, exceedingly interesting!" And turning to Antonio and looking at him with hard shrewd eyes, "From what my friend Rafael has just told me I have every reason to be very much interested in you, young man."

Antonio smiled but did not say anything.

Senor Chico continued, "You look like a serious-minded and studious chap. Are you willing to work hard with a view to fame and riches?"

Rafael said, "Antonio already knows the tools of the business. Under the training of a master it is very possible he could develop a subtle style, *olasico y depurado*, which our fighters today have not achieved."

Then Antonio spoke. "I am grateful for what my friend Rafael has told you," he said. "But it is only fair that you should know it has been a long time since I fought a bull."

"Genius does not deteriorate," said Rafael. "It may lie dormant and become a little tarnished for lack of use but always it is there to be polished to its natural glittering luster."

"Quite right," said Chico. Then he asked, "How come you deserted the ring and what have you been doing in the interval?"

Rafael answered for Antonio. "He has been a soldier in the army of the United States and has been kept quite busy fighting a war."

Antonio looked down at his hands, and he moistened his lips.

"So?" said Chico. He was silent several moments; then he said, "How would you like to spend some time on one of my bull ranches at El Cappa? If you prove your mettle you can go to work as a novillero until you are ready for bigger fields."

"Your proposition is flattering," said Antonio.

Senor Chico rose to leave and Antonio rose too and stood by his chair. "How about coming to my office sometime in the near future? Will next week be all right for you to come to Mexico City and make arrangements for an interview?"

"I might do that," said Antonio. It made him feel good to have won this man's attention.

And Rafael added, "It will be an honor, my friend, to bring this boy to see you."

"Good," exclaimed Senor Chico; and patting the boy on the shoulder, "I will look forward to the occasion. And you, senorita, it has been a pleasure to meet you," he said with great dignity. "Adios."

When he was gone Rafael said, "I am proud of you, my boy. You have made a great hit with Senor Chico."

"Who is he?" asked Antonio.

"Who is he--well! Now you are a bright one that you do not know your own people. He is one of the richest men in Mexico. What is more, he is a owner of a bull ring and a fine judge of men, and his word among the aficionados is law."

"I have read of him," said Maria quietly.

Antonio looked from Rafael to Maria; then finished his coffee and sat in meditative silence. A signpost had suddenly appeared

out of the dark and it was pointing the way. He felt good all over.

III

He was still feeling good the next day. But soon the balanced immobility of his mood underwent a change and his thoughts became confused and disturbing. Now that he saw himself actually idle, whiling away the hours at home in a solemn discontent, he knew he must come to a decision. In the hospital he had sort of welcomed each day for the pleasure it gave him, secure in the belief that it was not necessary to look to the future for a solution. Now he felt he was on his own and he could no longer postpone decision. A mark was on him, a stain made by dishonorable conduct. What should he do? Erase it by going back to his Post or evade it by letting tomorrow take care of itself?

"You are sitting there so quiet and thoughtful," said his mother coming from the kitchen into the living room. "What is the trouble, my son?"

"It is nothing, Mama," he said, rising and going to the window. "I was thinking how good it is again to be home. I wish I could stay."

"Why is it that you cannot stay?" she asked anxiously.

He did not answer her.

"Now that your leg is well you will have to go back?"

"Yes, Mama, it is well. And I must leave soon."

She was silent. Then she asked anxiously, "But you will not have to go back overseas again?"

"No, Mama, I will not have to go back."

He felt miserable and could not turn to look at her. Why must it be so? Why was he not home to stay; to enjoy the previous moments, letting time rest lightly on his shoulders, using his mind and strength for her happiness? He had come home to be with her in her grief, and now that he was here he offered little consolation; he was no good to her. Oh, why can I not say the things that are in my heart and tell you the truth?

She said little more and he was thankful she did not question him further. What ought he to say? Here he was home surrounded by the familiar things of his boyhood: the many shelves of books from which his father had often read to him in the night-time glow of the hearth; the piano on which his mother often made music; the family portraits on the walls; the flower-filled patio. "I am at home. I am at home." But this did not put him at peace with himself. He must come to a decision and abide by it, whatever the consequences.

He turned from the window and went outside. For a long time he walked the streets, trying to picture himself back in another time and again feel the rapture of the free and happy life he knew before he went away. But it did not come, this quick joy; and more and more he felt he did not belong here. The people on the streets who greeted him warmly, stopping to talk and shake his hand, were all his friends; yet a gulf lay between him and them and he could not bridge it. This elaborate kindness seemed inappropriate and hurtful and he had no inclination to stop and talk. Even the park with its tall and aged trees casting a per-

petual twilight of leafy shade, and moldering stone benches inviting repose belonged to another time. Here he had often played--it seemed ages ago. And down this same street he had walked with his father, matching his step to his--how long ago was it? And as always basket-and-flower sellers stood on the corner and beyond, the market vendors under rectangular homemade parasols displayed their wares. And the same drowsy languor hung over the town as if Time stood still, as if all the incidents of life occurred here with the same necessity as the movements of a clock.

Antonio stayed away from his house a long time. As he walked the streets flashes of his commanding officer's unrelenting face kept rising to his brain. Now, reviewing that episode he felt convinced that he had been driven into his present predicament by an authority he had served for three long terrible years--that authority all reduced to the will of one man. And again anger flamed in his mind, and he burnt with indignation at the thought of humbling himself before him--a man no better than himself--feeling his authority a chain on his legs, his will a bloodhound pursuing him across great distances, his word a law meting out punishment.

Then suddenly this anger died down and the rage that had blinded him receded and he grew empty-calm so that he seemed to be standing outside himself watching two spirits engaged in mortal combat. And after he had watched this match fought to no decision, he felt the hollow place in him fill with pictures of the arena; and now he was standing in a little corner of the world where the bull-ring became an outlet for that great sphere of un-

satisfied desires turned inward.

And suddenly he came to a decision. Here he had found an infallible foundation upon which to shape his actions and rest his claims; here was the answer to every opposing voice that might henceforth speak from his conscience.

Here he made up his mind.

IV

It was his last evening at home and he went to see Maria. For a time they walked in the park and he sensed a great loneliness. They walked slowly, her arm slipped through his; and he felt the light pressure of her hand in his, the softness and warmth going all through him. She was talking but he was only half hearing what she said, for his mind was thinking of the problem of leaving and he did not feel altogether happy with himself. He had made a decision and he was wondering where that decision would take him and just what might happen to him. And again he felt miserable with uncertainty and doubt.

Maria was saying, "Isn't it a beautiful evening? Of all the months of the year I love May the most."

Antonio looked down at her.

"Then the flowers bloom and the trees have leafed--"

Antonio did not reply.

"You are very quiet," said Maria, looking up at him. And she said, "Don't worry. Everything will work itself all right."

They walked along in silence. The street lights were pools of yellow blinking through the moon-lit night, and over them lay

the silence of the town.

"Like Papa always says," she continued, "don't cross your bridges until you come to them."

"But I have come to my bridge," he said, "and it is as if there were no bridge there to cross because I have burned it."

"You are leaving?" she said with great disappointment.

"Yes," he said and did not look at her. "In the morning--tomorrow."

All evening he had postponed the moment he would tell her and now he felt the ache of her disappointment and his own loneliness. He stopped and took her in his arms and he looked down into her face.

"Maria I have decided not to go back to my Post," he said swiftly.

"I was afraid," she said, her voice filled with feeling, "that you would not go back. When you were talking to Senor Chico I knew then you had decided."

Antonio dropped his arms. "It has not been easy," he said. "There were times when I thought I would go back. And then I would think: why go back? I am home and I am safe. There are opportunities here as well as in the United States."

They walked along in silence. After a while Maria said quietly, "I would like for you to go back. For you will not be at peace with yourself until you do." And she asked, "They would not be too hard on you?"

"I rather think they would be," he said. "There would be extra charges for resisting the military police and it might mean a

year or two in the stockade."

"A year or two is not long compared to a life time."

They turned into the gate and stopped on the porch.

"What is it that you mean, Maria?" he asked.

"You will be imprisoned, that is certain. But once you have served your sentence you will be free. While if you do not go back, all your life you will be imprisoned within yourself, for you will never be free."

"I wish you did not talk like that, Maria!" he said angrily.

"I have made up my mind--"

He caught himself speaking rudely, and in the light of the street lamp he saw the tears he brought to her eyes.

"Maria, I didn't mean to speak so," he said. "Please forgive me for saying it. I know you want me to go back--because it is the right thing to do. And something in me tells me I should go. But if I go--"

"I am not crying because of what you said," she told him calmly. "I am crying because I hate to see you so unhappy." And she continued, "I know it is hard to decide. And it is hard for me to say these things. Much rather would I have you stay here. For it is everything I have looked forward to so long--that you come home and that we would be together."

He took her hands and brought them to his lips. He did not turn to leave but stood looking at her. And in the dusk he saw her eyes and her lips; and beyond her eyes and her lips he saw the sky and the dark shape of the trees. And then there was no sky, no trees, no nothing, only a warm tide of feeling as he took her

in his arms and kissed her.

"Maria, my darling," he whispered against her lips.

He kissed her again and he held her tight. He looked at her face, the gold-brown smoothness of her cheeks, the full redness of her lips. Then he kissed her again. And he felt her trembling in his arms, her whole body trembling as he held her close to him.

"Maria," he said, looking down into her face, "I don't know how to say it. But I want you to know I have loved you from the moment I first saw you, and I did not know it then like I know it now. Even when I would read your letters I did not know it. And when I answered them--it was not to you I wrote but to someone I fashioned out of whim and loneliness and dream. Only when I saw you at the farm did I know that you were the one--"

And he said, "Maria, look at me."

She raised her eyes to his and he saw the tears in them.

"Antonio," she said, her words a whisper against his lips, "it is as I prayed it would be. Every night you were gone I prayed to St. Therese for your safety and return. And often I made a novena to Her and many times I was showed by the sign of a rose that you were safe and would come to me and say the things you have just said."

Antonio looked at her without speaking. He felt wretched with guilt. He had fallen in love with her and yet he was not allowing that love to be an object of veneration and the solitary master of his life. In her there was an identity of purpose with all things right, and he was acting against that purpose because he was not doing his best before God and man.

"Maria," he said, but he could not say what was in him to say. And he kissed her and held her close to him, feeling her heart beat, feeling time passing, knowing that time and distance would soon separate them. His throat swelled and there was a hollow aching all through him. And he felt this trembling in him so that he did not trust himself to speak.

"Then you will not see me again before you leave?" she asked. And when he did not answer, "Oh Antonio, I wish--" She stopped. "I know I should not say this. But--"

"What is it, Maria?"

"I wish you to go back to your post, Antonio," she said. "And I will wait. For there is nothing on earth equal to my love for you."

He did not answer. He buried his face in his hands and turned away.

"Antonio," cried Maria. She pulled his hands from his face.

He took her in his arms and kissed her. And he said, "Good-bye, Maria. Always I will love you." And he turned and walked furiously fast up the street and vanished into the darkness.

CHAPTER SEVEN

I

Descending from the train in El Cappa, Antonio was met by his new friend Fermin Procuna whom he had not seen since the night at the hospital. Rafael had sent him ahead to arrange for a place to live and he had found a room only three blocks from the station. It was in a boarding house where several matadors and their attendants stayed, he told Antonio as they walked up the shabby street. Senora Gonzales was the landlady, a woman in her late fifties, and she was like a mother to the boys rooming there. He thought Antonio would like the homey atmosphere.

They walked the three blocks, crossing a network of railroad tracks and taking a sidewalk up a steep hill. Antonio carried his heavy bag, and because of his recent illness he felt winded by the time he arrived at the door. Fermin led the way into a gloomy hall where a stairs ascended into a strange twilight. He knocked on a door and soon a woman in a light print dress appeared. She was short and heavy with smooth black hair knotted at the back of her head, and from her ears dangled large gold rings.

"This is the young man who will occupy the room, Senora," said Fermin. "He has been traveling all day and is anxious to clean up before he eats."

Senora Gonzales smiled at Antonio. As she started up the stairs which smelled of staleness, she said, "Come. It is on the third floor, Senor. I hope you will not mind." Antonio said he

did not care; but before he reached the room he felt an ache in his wounded thigh.

"Now here it is," she exclaimed, unlocking the door. "I have been saving it for you." And she trotted briskly to the closed window and jerked it open.

Antonio stepped inside and set down his bag. It was a small room with a sloping roof. Over the bureau was a bull's head, stuffed by a taxidermist; on the walls which were discolored with age were several pictures. There were a table and a chair by the bed.

"I want you to like it here, Senor Padilla," she was saying cheerily as she flung open the doors leading to the balcony. "See, it is a lovely view."

Antonio frowned questioningly at Fermin.

"We eat promptly at six," went on the woman in her jubilant way. "I will set a plate for you."

"Thank you, Senora," said Antonio.

"By the way, Senor, you are not married?"

"No," said Antonio shyly.

"No, he is not married," said Fermin; and grinning at Antonio, "But soon--maybe?"

The woman laughed and her plump face was bright with merriment. "Good. Good. Whenever any of my boys gets married we always give him and the bride a big reception. Remember that, Senor Padilla." And she went down the hall laughing.

Antonio closed the door and said, "Padilla--where does she get that name anyway?"

"I should have mentioned it to you," said Fermin. "Rafael thought it best no one know your real name."

Antonio made no protest. He opened the suitcase and put its contents into a bureau drawer. He felt suddenly sick with apprehension. Up to this moment he was restless and eager: the future beckoned to him and he was unafraid. Now he felt a little unhappy.

He said, "I will clean up and then we'll get something to eat."

"The washroom is on the second floor," said Fermin. "Come, I will show you."

Antonio went into a little room which had a mirror above the wash bowl. Looking into it he combed his hair using water to slick it down. Before he came out he carefully stuffed his white shirt into his new blue slacks and tightened his belt, making himself look neat and clean. Then he joined Fermin waiting for him at the banister and they went down to the dining room.

All the other boarders were already at the table, and they rose as Fermin introduced Antonio. Each was associated in some way or other with the ring. No one paid the smallest attention to him after he sat down. He thought they all smelled faintly of the arena and this sickened him. There were two picadores and a retired matador and several bull-ring servants. The matador was a short stout man who had once enjoyed a measure of fame. After a savage encounter with a fierce bull after which he had been carried from the ring in a state of insensibility, he lost his nerve, and in an attempted comeback had been hissed out of the ring for

his timidity. This Fermin told Antonio as they went back to his room.

Antonio went to bed early that night, but felt too excited to sleep. He thought of his Post from which he was absent without leave, and it gave him a strange satisfaction to feel he had triumphed over a force that had tried to imprison him. But he had to admit to himself that he was not happy and he was not free of fear. Back in his mind lurked the idea that officers were looking for him; that the military police of the United States army might learn his whereabouts and anyday there would be someone waiting just outside his door to take him into custody.

He fell to sleep wondering how things would turn out.

II

In the weeks that followed Antonio learned much about the people with whom he lived and worked. Often he listened to stories of heroism, sometimes fascinated, again repelled. He saw nothing of himself in the men and he felt a little lonely. In his eyes each was a show-off, interested in the ornamental tricks adopted to attract attention without endangering his life. None possessed any real nerve and it disgusted Antonio to hear them tell of their great fetes.

In comparison his passion for the daring followed the classic style in handling the bulls, avoiding all brusque movements; everything he did stemmed from his love of courage and his admiration for endurance. To him it was a matter of grave importance that he wield the sword in accordance with the correct tradi-

tion of the ring, and he abided by the rules of the arena as though they were the articles of a creed. He studied the styles of the great matadors and worked hard to master every stratagem and feat, and thus he gathered into himself an extensive repertoire of tricks which he performed with agility and great boldness. Sometimes he grew so daring he challenged the bull by every imaginable device known to this art, and because of his courage his skin-tight pants were ripped in every fight. Always he went into the ring with a sort of wonderful fear and managed himself so well he spent his hate and emerged exhilarated.

At night in the quiet of his room he would often lie on his bed and think of the day when his name would be a shining thing in the minds and memories of thousands of fans. Everywhere he would go he would be entertained and feted and made over in a way few people on earth are celebrated. Magazines and newspapers would show him in the company of famous men. Thousands of his photographs with flattering inscriptions would hang in the homes and offices of countless aficionados all over Mexico. And his life would become a continual round of amusements--the reward of his agility and courage.

Such were Antonio's thoughts during the first weeks of his work in the provincial bull rings.

"Rafael is much pleased with you," said Fermin one afternoon as they walked toward the heart of the town. "He says you are doing so well that it may be possible to win a place on the cartel for the annual fair this fall."

Antonio felt very much pleased. He was beginning to win re-

cognition and his spirits were high. Once he made a name, he felt he would then be able to identify himself with that name and forget the circumstances that had brought him here. It excited him to think he was close to the day when he would become a full matador, eligible to join the tough company of the great masters.

"Do you mind helping me pick out a gift for my wife," said Fermin as they passed store windows vivid with brightly colored merchandise. "It is her birthday next week and I thought I would send her something."

He stepped suddenly in front of a shop and looked at the display of earthenware cooking utensils, sandals, guitars, tasseled kerchiefs, and hand-tooled leather goods.

"Come, I think I see something she would like."

They went inside and a clerk came forward to wait on them. It was hot in the shop and drops of sweat stood on his forehead. Fermin asked to see an alligator purse, and, waiting, Antonio gazed with delight at the beautiful merchandise. He suddenly thought of Maria. He had never bought her anything and it occurred to him a present would be nice to send her. While Fermin was making his choice Antonio looked around in the shop.

There was a show case filled with jewelry and this attracted him. "I would like a present for a young lady," he told the girl behind the counter; and she showed him pins in the shape of butterflies and ear rings that sparkled. "I don't know exactly what she would like," he said.

"The ear rings are pretty." And she went to a little mirror and put them on to show him. "See, Senor," she said, smiling

brightly, her fingers touching them daintily. "Do you not think they are attractive?"

He smiled and shook his head. For a minute then he stood eyeing the diamond rings in the showcase. Suddenly it dawned on him what he was really after. "I would like to look at your rings," he said. And he felt his heart beating very fast as he examined a flashing solitaire enhanced with two brilliant stones. "This," he said, "how much is it?"

"It is nine hundred pesos, Senor."

He looked at the ring carefully. He was filled with a strange excitement. For several moments he stood entranced and motionless, seeing in front of him not the diamond but Maria as he put the ring on her finger. It was sort of a dream where they were together in a garden of eternal enchantment. He suddenly looked up at the clerk and smiled.

"I will take it," he said. "You will accept my check?"

The girl went into a small inner room where a man sat at a desk. He turned and looked at Antonio. "I am sorry, Senor," he said. "We take no checks."

Antonio felt defeated. "Do you mind putting aside the ring for me?" he said at last. "I will come back for it tomorrow."

"Yes, Senor," said the man. "The ring will be here when you come back."

Antonio joined Fermin and they went out onto the street.

"Well now you must feel rich," said Fermin. "It is not every day a man can buy a gift like that."

"It is more than I can afford right now," said Antonio. "But

what is money unless you can convert it into happiness."

They made their way through the streets noisy with automobiles and busses. There were cafes and liquor shops all around, and in front of a city market there were pyramids of golden oranges, avocados, chile, and pepinos. Antonio stopped and bought some of the fruit. He handed Fermin an orange and proceeded to peel one for himself. He felt good all over. He didn't know exactly why but for the first time since he left camp he felt in tune with the world.

III

But that night in his room he experienced the first obstacle of his glowing mood. His love for Maria was real and constant and he knew he had been acting against his better judgment to try to put her aside. When he left San Jose he thought this feeling for her would go away, but instead her absence had only accentuated it. He had made up his mind to take this step and abide by the results, and therefore he shrank from any influence that might dissuade him from going on. She stood for everything contrary to what he was doing and he could not include her in his plans.

Yet he realized how much he missed her.

For though he had tried to get away from her she kept coming back to him. She was with him in the nighttime, and from the memory of her he drew a new kind of strength and courage, urgent and aching in its wanting, giving a new meaning to the canons of right and wrong which fed the flame of his spirit. She was with him when he was alone, and his memory of her was as comforting as the

sound of rain falling on parched ground, as pure as light slanting across the waking earth.

And suddenly, thinking of her, a nostalgia for home would fill him: for San Jose with its quiet streets sleeping in the sun; for his uncle's ranch lying in the valley. And he would remember the smell of sage as he rode after cattle and the wholesome odor of leather and the sight of cactus flowers and the range stretching to the dark New Mexican hills. Then he saw himself at evening time coming home to the smell of bacon frying in the skillet and the delicious fragrance of buttered buns baking crisply in the oven--and Maria turning from the stove to greet him at sundown.

Maria....Maria....

And he would think of all the things he dreamed when he was in the army. And how far from that dream he had gone and how he stood deaf and stony to everything he felt deep inside of him: to the quickening emotions which the thought of her always aroused; to her voice that kept haunting him beyond his own longings; her voice in his ears.

"....I am crying because I hate to see you so unhappy...." she had said; and "It is hard for me to say these things. Much rather would I have you stay here...."

"Oh, Antonio, I wish you would go back to your Post. And I will wait. For there is nothing on earth equal to my love for you."

Maria....Maria....

She kept coming back. And the past seemed to be all around him and it merged with the future and there was no present. Her laughter was in his ears, and her smile before his eyes was like

a clear spot of happiness. Again he was walking with her up the street in San Jose--walking, quiet and wordless, in the evening calm. And suddenly he would find himself entranced, seeing in front of him her face filled with disapprobation, her eyes sad with disappointment.

"....I would like for you to go back," she had said quietly. "For you will not be at peace with yourself until you do."

She had not said "unless you do"; she had said "until you do"--as if she knew he would go back someday, as if she read the prophecy and was repeating it to him, making it something that had to come to pass like words from the Old Testament.

Then loneliness came down on him and he felt a silent gnawing contempt for himself and he was filled with an aching hollowness of wanting. And he was afraid.

Indeed the need for her was great; yet he hesitated to write her the letter that would ask her to be his wife. Within him was a massive acceleration of emotion; a friction of opposites striking deep in him a fire which cast a glowing light across the future. Fame lay in that future, but the light of the fire was so bright he could not see it. Only Maria was before his eyes--Maria, her face serene, her expression beautiful from goodness.

He went for his pen and paper, but before he sat down to write the letter his spirits flagged, and he decided to wait.

CHAPTER EIGHT

I

Antonio had spent six months in El Cappa when one day Rafael Morante bought him a bull-fighting suit. Up to this time he had been renting them, paying two hundred pesos for each performance. Because his skin-tight pants were often ripped by the bull's horns he thriftily rented instead of buying. Now for the first time he had one of his own. It was red and gold, a classic combination he had always liked. The jacket was brocaded and his name was embroidered on the sleeve. It was not his real name, Antonio Chavez, but the name, Leo Padilla. Someday it would be the great Padilla. Someday he would fight in Mexico City and maybe in Madrid. It would not be Antonio, the soldier, fighting but Padilla, the matador. It would not be the old self fighting his way to fame, but his new self, metamorphosised, the butterfly emerging from the larva, full colored and free. Wherever he went people would proclaim him.

Now he stood very straight in his bull-fighting clothes and looked at himself carefully. He stood before the bureau and smiled into the mirror. Then going through the action of making a kill he rose on his toes and with his right arm extended high up he bent over to throw his weight on an imaginary sword, all the while making his movements pleasing to the eye.

But he was not satisfied. For the past four months he had worked very hard to develop a subtle style, classic and pure in execution, and he felt he had accomplished very little to perfect

what he had set his mind on. In the ring he realized this even more; often he was not too clean or quick at the kill.

Even so he had gone a long way. He had learned to handle himself well in the ring and he was beginning to attract attention. Indeed, his recent performance had been so outstanding as to win a place on the cartel for the annual El Gappa fair. This was held in celebration of Mexico's Independence Day, an occasion that had begun yesterday and would last through tomorrow. Yesterday in the ring Antonio had done well enough to win the acclaim of the crowd, and Rafael had been well pleased with him.

Antonio was still looking at himself when there was a knock at the door, and Fermin Procuna came in. Antonio smiled at him in the mirror. In his hand was a newspaper.

"I was just trying on my new suit," said Antonio, turning. "How do you like it?"

"You look very good in red and gold," said Fermin. "Do you know what it cost?"

"I imagine quite a sum," said Antonio.

"Three thousand pesos," said Fermin. "Are you wearing it tomorrow?"

"Not tomorrow but later when I fight in Mexico City."

Fermin handed the newspaper to him. "Here is something that will please you very much," he said. "The bullfight critics are praising you for your fine work yesterday."

Antonio looked at the newspaper. He was surprised to see his picture and the name Leo Padilla under it. He read the account about the fight very carefully. The critics had praised him vol-

ubly and were predicting a great future for "this fast-rising star of aficion." Much space was given to the way he had conducted himself; critics and patrons alike were agreeing that here was a man comparable in his daring to the great Espartero who had recently met gallant death in the bull ring in Monterrey.

Antonio frowned, displeased.

"You are not happy with all their praises?" asked Fermin.

"I do not wish to be compared to Espartero," said Antonio, throwing down the paper. "If I cannot be better than him I do not wish to be praised at all!"

"But Espartero was their idol," said Fermin. "It is their way of proclaiming you and taking you to their hearts." And he added, "Come, take off your suit and dress for dinner. You are cross for want of food."

Antonio made no answer. He undressed slowly, hanging his suit on the back of a chair by the iron bed. Then he put on his brown civilian suit and stood in front of the mirror while he did his tie.

Fermin picked up the paper. "It is a very good picture of you," he said. "Now that you are being recognized you should start a scrap book." And he took a knife from his pocket and cut out the picture and the article.

Antonio said, "It is something I do not care about. It is enough to know I please the crowds and that someday I can fight in Mexico City. Come, let's go."

They went down the dark ancient stairs to the sidewalk. There were many people on the street in celebration of the second day of

the fiesta and it was like walking in a big crowd. Everywhere there were people in festive mood and dress, and the square was solid with couples, singing and dancing. When they turned the corner they found mainstreet animated by a parade of soldiers led by a band.

"By nightfall the lid will be off of everything," said Fermin, "and there will be no end to the merriment."

They went into a little cafe. It was after two, and there were few people at the tables. A waiter came up as soon as they were seated and they ordered their faro. After awhile he came back with their order of tamales and coffee. Antonio did not look up.

Fermin laughed. "You will have to get over your shyness," he said. "For soon the people are going to take you to their hearts."

"I am not ready to be taken to their hearts."

"You are hard to understand," said Fermin, his fork halfway to his mouth. "Do you realize people are standing in long lines to buy tickets to see you tomorrow?"

Antonio said, "I admit I was good yesterday. And because I was good yesterday the crowd is going to demand that I be more than good tomorrow. And if it happens I cannot be more than good and meet their expectations, they will feel themselves cheated and their anger tomorrow will be louder than their praises today."

"You will be good, if not better, tomorrow," said Fermin.

"Much depends upon the bulls I will fight," said Antonio.

"The bulls look very good," said Fermin. "I saw them this morning."

"They better be good."

"You do not sound very confident."

"I am confident," said Antonio. "But always I am careful. I know what I can do, and against this sureness I weigh my chances. Yesterday I was lucky. The bulls were the kind I like to handle. They were good performers and they gave me a chance to appear better than I really am."

"You performed beautifully," said Fermin. "The day isn't far off you shall be considered greater than Espartero."

"Please do not compare me to Espartero."

Fermin gaped at him. "What is the trouble? Are you homesick for that girl you write letters to?"

Antonio made no answer.

Fermin said, "You cannot become a famous matador unless you keep your mind free. Do you not want Rafael and me to make you famous? If you perform well tomorrow, it will not be long before we can bill you for a fight in Mexico City."

Antonio ate in silence and looked at his plate. After awhile they got up, paid their bill and went outside. On the street the people were moving in all directions, and above the din could be heard the drums and pipes of the band. Antonio pulled his hat down over his forehead and walked in the crowd unnoticed.

II

The next day in the ring he did even better than the first day. He demonstrated to the crowd his ability to handle the most enraged bulls, and to handle them with a grace and courage that often pulled the great throng to its feet. Many times the arena

bloomed with white handkerchiefs and the cheers rose in great volumes. He had completely dominated his last bull and he had performed with a classic sculptured grace unlike anything seen for years. In the newspaper that night one of Mexico's foremost bullfight critics paid tribute to the boy's valour and extraordinary agility.

"Now this is something to be proud of," said Rafael with high elation. "You have attracted real attention and are acclaimed a novillado to watch by Miguel Torre."

"Who is Miguel Torre?" asked Antonio, sipping a martini.

"Listen to him," exploded Rafael. "He asks who is Miguel Torre! He is Mexico's foremost bullfight critic--if that means anything to you. And his word is followed closely."

Rafael was standing in the middle of his hotel room, and Antonio sat in an easy chair by the table. Fermin sat on the bed reading the newspaper, his black hair shining under the reading lamp. From below in the streets the muted noise of the crowds celebrating the last night of the fiesta drifted into the open window.

Fermin said, "Listen to what the critic Montes has to say." And he began to read, "He is a very handsome boy, this Leo Padilla, but in the ring his features take on the shape of cold-blooded ferocity as becomes one whose business it is to incur danger and to deal death. Today's performance was a real spectacle. His skill is so superhuman that well he might be called The Monster."

"It is not a compliment," said Antonio, "and I do not approve of his comparison. At least he might be original."

Fermin continued, "They are also saying you are the answer to their prayers and that there has not been a real one like you for a long, long time."

"I am anxious to know what Senor Chico will say about this," said Rafael, hooking his thumbs in his waistcoat and pacing the floor. "It is a pity he could not be here to see it."

"He will learn about it and that will be enough to convince him Antonio is ready to make his debut in the brand-new Plaza Mexico."

Antonio rose from the chair. There was a sudden burst of cheering and he went outside and stood on the stone balcony. The street below was filled with people swarming in gay merriment. The balconies of the buildings were crowded and everyone was watching the fireworks in the public square. Beyond he could hear the crowds shouting and a band playing. The rockets went up in the air above the rooftops, trailing flame and smoke. He watched, but it was with no sense of pleasure. It seemed quite unreal and inconsequential. It was like coming back to something that happened a long time ago and finding the memory more exciting than the actual event.

For a little while he stood there; then he went back into the room and took his hat. He felt lonely and tired.

"You are not going so soon. Come, have another drink."

"No, I have to go. I am tired and I have some letters to write."

"Then I will drive you to your room--"

"I wish to walk," said Antonio. "It is not far."

Clapping the boy on the back Rafael ushered him to the door.

"Now that you will come into big money," he said, his face beaming, "it will be necessary to move from your quarters. You no longer can do as you please, for now you belong to the people. You will have to make your conduct becoming to a great matador."

"You do not like my manners?"

"No, it is not that," said Rafael. "Indeed you have very fine manners. But they are not fitting to a great matador. You must learn to meet crowds. You must get along better with those who work with you and not hold yourself so aloof. And you must learn to be a ladies' man. The women will idolize you. Next year this time you will be a full matador and all of Mexico will be at your feet."

Antonio smiled with embarrassment and hurried off. On the street he sensed an emotional feeling of elation knowing that people were talking favorably of him. The night was warm and overhead a full moon sailed through tattered clouds. There were many people on the streets and a military band was playing in the plaza. Suddenly he thought of Maria. He wished he had asked her to come here to be with him at the celebration. But as quickly as the thought struck him he put it aside. He had built up a resistance against any influence that might hamper him and he did not wish it torn down. In the company of Maria he might not feel comfortable. It would not be what she said but what she made him feel. When he was with her he always let the hate go out of him, and without hate he was disarmed of the only excuse he could make to himself for not going back to his Post.

He walked down a side street away from the crowd and lights into a district of little shops with hooded doorways. All business places were closed except a liquor shop on the corner. Here a cluster of drunken vocalists wearing sombreros and colorful serapes were singing and shouting their music to untuned guitars.

Stopping he looked at them. And suddenly he felt an overpowering desire for a strong drink to down the loneliness in him; and he went inside. Behind the counter stood the fat bartender talking to three customers. He wore an apron and was in shirt-sleeves, and his muscled hands rested on the counter.

Antonio ordered a mescal and sat listening to the conversation which was about the fight. One of the men was talking with high enthusiasm about Padilla, saying this new star was not only a proficient espada, but so daring--fighting always at close quarters with the bull. What was more, he had the unusual ability of exciting a weird power over the beast by fixing him with his eyes, forcing the animal to turn aside from the glare of his gaze. And he went on to tell how Padilla had knelt on the ground, and in this sculptured position he had allowed the enraged toro to pass so close that surely his thigh was scratched by the point of the horn.

"So graceful, so sure of himself. It is superhuman!"

"He is a classic come to life."

"Look at these pictures in the newspaper. I will cut them out and paste them on the wall."

Antonio drank his mescal slowly. He felt a little uncomfortable and did not look up. He was the subject of their conversa-

tion; yet he stood outside himself like a man in the cold gazing in with dumb unreflectiveness, unable to recognize himself. His success did not rouse exultation. He could not bring himself to feel proud.

It was a little past eight when he went to his room. The drink helped to raise his spirits. He began to see himself a great matador to be idolized and courted and acclaimed all over Mexico. Crowds would cheer him as he went forth to the fray clad in his glitter of tinsel and glory of silk, plush and diamonds. People would crowd into his hotel rooms after a fight to pay him homage. And his name would be made a symbol of reverence in the hypercritical circle of afición. But it was no good: this dream. He could not bring himself to that feeling he was walking on air.

He let himself into the rooming house and went up the stairs where a dim lamp burned on the second-floor landing. He had just gained the first landing when he heard the door below opened quietly. He looked over the bannister, and saw Senora Gonzales, the keeper, standing plump and short against the bright light of her parlor.

"I thought it was you, Senor," she said softly. And she added, "You have a visitor."

Antonio stopped short. Fear suddenly stiffened him; and in that moment the memory of the two military police outside the hotel room in Saltillo flashed across his mind.

"A visitor--?"

"Yes," said the woman, "I thought I should tell you I took the liberty to let her in your room. She could not find a place to stay--"

"It is a young lady?"

"Yes, Senor. A friend, she tells me."

Her words released the tension and he felt relief pour over him. He went up the second flight of stairs, two steps at a time. He was puzzled as to who it could be. His pulse was beating fast as he hurried down the dim-lit hall to his room. Fear had subsided and he felt joy and expectancy welling up inside. Even before he opened the door he wondered if it was Maria waiting for him there.

He was right. Maria was standing by the window, and she turned as he entered. She was dressed in a trim white linen suit, and her dark hair fell smoothly to her shoulders. For a moment he stood against the door he closed behind him, just looking at her.

"You are surprised to see me, Antonio," she said. And she added, smiling, "I thought you would like me to surprise you."

III

Afterwards he did not know how long he stood there, just looking at her. The whole world had suddenly glowed. He felt almost delirious with happiness.

He said, "You do not know how glad I am to see you, Maria."

"I came this afternoon," she told him. "I decided all at once. There was not time to let you know."

He stood looking down at her. He felt a little shy and did not trust himself to take her in his arms. His heart thumped with the miracle of her presence. Months had passed since he saw her last, and she had changed. Her face was thin and it had lost its

deep smooth tan. Even her voice was different. But it was Maria, cool and radiant, standing there beside him.

"I am sorry I was not here sooner--"

"I did wait a long time," she said. "But I was enjoying it, surrounded by all your things." And her gaze moved slowly about the room, from the window where a grimy lace curtain ballooned in the evening breeze to the shabby furniture: the table, the iron bed, the walnut bureau, and the chair over which hung his red and gold bull-fighting suit.

"It's not a very nice place to live," he said. "But it saves me money. And here nobody knows me."

"It's lovely, Antonio--exactly like you described in your letter." And she said, going to the bureau, "Here is something I brought you."

He took the package, fascinated.

"It is something good to eat which your mother and I made for you."

He hastily opened the box and undid the white linen cloth around the bundle. At once the rich aroma of cakes and sandwiches and candy met his nostrils. He sniffed the air. "Tamales too. Say this is a real treat!" And he smiled at her in appreciation.

"We thought you would like it," she said with tender simplicity.

"It is almost too good to be true," he said. "You are here and you have brought my favorite food. What do you say we have it all to ourselves right now. Or would you rather go to the celebration?"

"It is so nice and cozy here," she said. "And there is not much time, for my train leaves at midnight. Let us stay and talk."

"Then I will see if I can beg two cups of coffee from my landlady, and we will have a feast, the two of us here in my mansion!"

He went down the two flights of stairs and knocked on the parlor door. The door opened slowly and Senora Gonzalas stood before him, looking discretely curious. He stated his request and told her his visitor was his girl friend from his home town.

"So I suspected," said the woman, delicately pleased. "For you have that happy look of a man in love. And now you want two cups of coffee," she said, going to her stove. "Well it is not enough. I will fix you a pot full and bring it up."

When he returned to his room, Maria had the table ready: the linen cloth from the basket covered it and the food was emptied from the box. Smiling she looked at him.

"We will have coffee," said Antonio with high spirit, "and plenty of it. Senora Gonzalas is making it now."

Maria said, "This is a good picture of you, Antonio."

He glanced over her shoulder and saw she was looking at the picture clipped from yesterday's newspaper. "Oh that," he said, "Yes, it is pretty good."

"You look very well in bull-fighting clothes," she went on. "But what is the name Padilla doing under it? And who is this Padilla who is attracting so much attention?"

Antonio smiled, a little embarrassed. "I call him my other self," he said. "It is the matador in me whom they call Padilla."

It is not really I, Antonio--"

She looked at him steadily with an expression in her eyes that made him feel uncomfortable. "So there are two of you," she said; "Antonio Chavez and Leo Padilla. And the one self is apologizing for the other self. Is that it?"

"No, I am not apologizing," he said a little flatly. "I am--"

She turned to him, laughing. "Do not be hurt with what I have said. I know you must be very proud of yourself. You are doing what you have always wanted to do. And now you are winning acclaim and soon you will be so famous--" She stopped and her lips parted and despair crept into her voice. "--you may not want me to come to see you again."

"Do not talk like that, Maria," he said soberly.

Just then there was a knocking on the door and Senora Gonzalas came in with a tray on which were a pot of steaming coffee, cream and sugar, and two cups. She put it down on the table and she looked proud doing it. "Now there you are," she exclaimed. "And if there is more you need you know where to come."

Then she was gone and Antonio went and poured the coffee. He could not remember when he had been so happy. Maria was brilliantly alive, sitting on the chair across from him at the table, passing the sandwiches, and talking gayly about so many things at home that she brought the narrow streets of San Jose before his eyes. And she turned back the last three years and he felt again the free, careless days of his youth. Then she wanted to know all about himself, and he told her. And he told her about Rafael Morante, whom he had grown to dislike very much because he had worked

him so hard in his efforts to push him straight into fame and fortune. She looked at him disappointed. "Oh Antonio, I was hoping you would not stay with him," she said.

He did not answer. He was watching her face; everything she felt came out on it. He could read the meaning even before she spoke the words.

She said rising, "I know it is not the way you would do it--if you were free to do it your way."

Antonio drained the last of his coffee. He watched her wander about in the room, looking at his pictures on the walls and some trinkets on the bureau. A torito on the bureau attracted her attention--a papier mache of a bull covered with fireworks. "Oh how cute," she laughed. "Is it like the bulls you killed this afternoon?"

He went to her and looked at the torito as if he saw it for the first time. "It is something an admirer gave me. I have not even had time to look at it."

For a moment she seemed lost in thought. Then she turned her inquiring gaze on him. "Is it well, Antonio, always to be looking so far in the distance you cannot see the things around you?"

"I wish you had not said that, Maria," he said. And after a thoughtful pause he added, "I know there is a different way you might have put it. You might have said, 'You are a espada and someday you will be rich and famous. But you are running away from yourself to do it. You are running very fast so that your real self cannot catch up with you--'"

"Isn't it true?" she said quietly. And then laughing, "Do not

look so serious about it. There is so little time to enjoy each precious moment. Come, is there more coffee?"

He poured her another cup. He did not have much to say after that, and he listened to her talk. She told him about her friend Angelica who was entering the convent this fall. She had been thinking about going with Angelica. He saw a tender radiance light her face like a smile. In the next moment the radiance was gone and she looked disturbed.

"If only I were sure of myself," she said despairingly, "for I do not know if I have heard the divine call to be a religious."

Antonio did not know what to say. He felt terribly disappointed. The thought of her gone from him forever stabbed him with pain, and suddenly he felt lonely.

"Oh, Maria, if I were only sure of myself," he began involuntarily.

"Why can't you be sure of yourself?" she said quietly.

Antonio took a deep breath. He had no way of hiding his disappointment. He could feel his face flush and he could not meet her eyes.

"Maria," he began miserably. "I do not have the words to say what is in me to say." He jumped up and walked across the room. "I cannot say that I do not wish you to become a religious. And I cannot say that if you should decide not to--that I want you to come here to be with me--to marry me--"

She said, "You are right, Antonio. I could never come here. But I could wait for you if you decided to go back to your Post."

"But, don't you see, Maria," he said desperately, "I won't

give myself up--"

"Why won't you?"

"Because I have gone this far and there is no turning back!"

There fell a silence.

"I understand," she said, gazing into space. Then so faint that he hardly heard, "That is why I came Antonio--to make sure. I should have died if I couldn't have seen you again."

Antonio did not know what to say.

"I wanted to be with you, that's all, before I decided."

He walked to the bureau and stood with his back to the room. The mirror reflected his face, violent with emotion. The lips were white; the eyes dark with feeling. He felt all torn up inside.

"You are so lonely, Antonio," she said. "I know you are lonely. Even away from you I can feel it. I feel it in the letters you write to me and in the letters you write to your mother. They are so self-revealing, and yet we are both so helpless."

She waited for him to answer and when he did not, she went on. "Before you came back I often thought how it would be--to have you home and to go hiking together in the hills and boat riding down the river like other young couples do--couples who are in love. Now it seems like a dream--your coming home and our being together. Even tomorrow when I wake up this will be like something that really never happened."

Still he did not speak.

Maria continued, and now her voice was urgent, "Why, Antonio, can't you see the truth--the misery you are bringing to yourself and to everyone who loves you--all of it because of your own will--

your own strong and stubborn idea."

Antonio turned abruptly and came to her.

"Why is it you cannot see things as I see them?" he said harshly. "Why did you come here at all if it is only to try to persuade me and make me feel I have committed a terrible wrong? Why oan't you let good enough alone!"

He stood regarding her with angry eyes. But she did not look up. In her lap was a handkerchief which she wadded in her small hands. Suddenly and without gentleness he took those hands in his and drew her to him.

"Why do you torture me till you drive me mad with your senseless talk," he said angrily. "I did not ask you to come here! I did not ask you to feel I could even--"

She looked up at him and tears gleamed on her lashes. He felt the blood pounding in his temples and his fingers dug into her arms. Suddenly he released his grip--what was he doing to her anyway? Had he lost his senses? His hands were trembling; he felt strained all over. Then he felt himself breaking like thin ice and the anger went out of him.

"Maria," he said in a choked voice.

He took her in his arms and pressed her to him.

"Oh, Maria, how can I bear it--with you gone from me forever. Look at me, Maria," he said with intense feeling. "I love you. I will always love you."

He kissed her again and again, holding her firmly in his arms, feeling the anxiety of each moment which seemed to hang suspended in webs of urgency.

"I am so sorry, Maria, my love," he said vehemently. "You don't ~~think~~ I am sorry, but I am. I'm sorry for what I just said and for the way I've treated you and for everything that has happened--"

She put her arms around his neck and she pressed her lips against his. Then her head dropped and she was crying softly against his chest.

He felt wretched with guilt; and it was on his tongue to say he would give himself up. Then the thought came back of all the humiliation that awaited him if he yielded; it seemed too hard a punishment and he could not bring himself to surrender. He strained her closer to him.

"Maria," he said, "I want you to marry me."

She drew from his arms and stood with her back to him.

"It is true," he went on, "I am lonely. I am miserable. But I would not be if you would marry me and accept this life and make me forget that I deserted the army. You could make me forget, Maria."

He paused but she did not answer.

Antonio continued, "Don't you see, these things are past. I have risen above them and I do not wish them to be brought to mind. I am what I have always wanted to be: a great bullfighter. Soon I will fight in Mexico City and if I am successful I will be on top of the world. Then you and I can have whatever we want. The sky will be the limit."

Maria did not reply. She began to gather up the dishes on the table. After awhile she said, "Why not take them down to Senora

Gonzalas. She may need the coffee pot."

"You haven't answered me, Maria," he said.

She handed him the tray with the coffee pot and dishes.

"Maria, you must answer me."

"When you come back," she said, "I will answer you."

"You must answer me now."

"Go, Antonio. Take the tray downstairs."

He went down the dark stairs in a panic of despair. A homesickness filled him for something that seemed beyond the world. He had allowed something very precious to slip through his fingers and he felt helpless to retrieve it.

"It was nice of you, Senora, to make us the coffee," he said, putting the pot on the stove in the kitchen downstairs. "We enjoyed it so much."

The landlady stood in front of him, her chubby hands folded across her big stomach, and there was a gleam in her eyes. "You love the senorita very much, do you not?"

Antonio nodded. He looked very sober.

"It is good to see people in love." And she added seriously, "Let me tell you something, my young fellow. If you love this girl do not put off asking her to be your wife. It is not good for a man to live alone."

Antonio made no reply. He said, turning to the door, "Thank you so much for the coffee, Senora."

And he hurried back up the stairs.

The room was empty. At first it did not occur to him Maria was gone; perhaps she had stepped out. Then he saw her crumpled

handkerchief on the bureau and beside it a note she had written on an envelope. It ran thus:

"It is best that I do not see you again, Antonio. So I am going to my train alone. Good-bye, my dearest love. Good-bye."

IV

He remembered afterwards--it must have been at least thirty minutes afterwards--the true meaning which came to him. He read the note several times and tears filled his eyes. She did not want to see him again! Well, what could he expect? He had made up his mind to take this course, and he had not included her in his plans.

It was far after midnight before he went to bed. Then he could not sleep and he got up and dressed, and he smoked one cigarette after another, taking only a few puffs from each before he put it out.

Now that Maria had come and was gone the room seemed empty. Not only the room was empty but all the world. It was quiet and empty like the stillness of the night.

Then under a spell more persuasive than he had ever known before something deep down in him took command and he began to act. He went for his traveling bag in the closet and packed it. He gathered up his few possessions and discarded what he didn't need. His door was still open and as he piled his shirts into the suitcase he grew aware of a radio blaring down the hall. Then he heard his name and he straightened to attention. A man's voice was so loud Antonio could hear quite clearly everything he said. He walked out into the hall and listened carefully to each word.

"...his performance is a great spectacle," spoke the sports commentator, "in which art, bravery, nobility, beauty and color all play the part. He does not fight by rules; everything he does in the ring is the outcome of inspiration on the spur of the moment. He performs the most valiant feats with the coolness and daring of a master. Indeed Leo Padilla must soon fight in Mexico City."

Antonio listened, and he began to think. Would it not be better to have a name to be honored than to reclaim a name dishonored by disgrace? Yes, he had moved up to a place where now his name was beginning to mean something among bull-fight impresarios. Each new hair-raising performance would widen his popularity. At last he had made himself the fighter who would more than satisfy the people's lust for blood and death.

He looked at the traveling bag gapping open on the floor. He did not take the trouble to unpack it. He undressed, put out the light and flung himself into bed.

After that Antonio began to prepare himself to fight in Mexico City. In the ring he worked with a zest of one who finds not only a genuine delight in the spectacle but who must escape into his work like one pursued. He learned to deal death with a clean and quick thrust of the sword; and his various passes--pase de pecho, pase natural, paso por alto, all tricks which were closely watched and criticised by the vast concourse of spectators--were made with the refinement and grace of a master.

So as the weeks grew into a month his spirits began to revive

and he ceased to lament; and a calm settled upon him. In the depths of his being he isolated his mingled sense of shame and remorse and guilt, and from every combat from which he emerged victorious he drew new materials to strengthen his resistance. Thus like one who burns his bridges and will not allow himself to look back, he prepared himself for his debut.

CHAPTER NINE

I

Early that winter Antonio made his bullfighting debut as a novillero in the brand-new Plaza Mexico in the Capitol City. The Plaza Mexico had a seating capacity of forty-eight thousand and was the largest bull ring in the world. Days before the event all tickets had been sold and still there were long lines of aficionados waiting at the ticket booths in hope that room would be found for them. Many who stood in line were too poor adequately to clothe their families; many of them were spending their grocery money to see "this fast rising star of aficion." Those who had their tickets poured into the open gates until the ring was jammed with the gaily-attired spectators all roused to a mood of joyous expectancy.

Before entering the perilous arena that afternoon Antonio received the sacrament from the padre who was always in attendance at bull-fights. In the small chapel of the Plaza Mexico, Father Esteban stood in his black robes and ministered to each of the fighters who knelt at the altar where two candles burned before the image of Our Lady of Guadalupe.

Antonio was last of the performers to receive the sacrament, and after the others had left he lingered at the door, feeling there was something terribly important which he ought to say--something about the way he felt and about the truth which he was trying to hide even from himself. He knew the priest would re-

main all afternoon ready to minister if need be to a fighter borne dying from the ring, but he felt if something happened to him it might then be too late, and he should do it now.

"What is it, my son?" asked the padre, taking note of the boy's troubled face. But Antonio could not bring himself to say what was on his mind and he told the holy father it was nothing. Then he went out and joined the others in the padio de caballos.

"We have been waiting on you," said one of the fighters in a silver-and-orange suit. He put out his hand. "I am Garcia and you are Leo Padilla."

Antonio shook hands and smiled.

"My brother saw you fight at El Gappa," he went on. "He said it was a good performance and you were lucky. I hope you will be as lucky today."

"Why talk of luck," said one of the banderilleros. "It is a matter of skill and not of luck."

"Wait until you see the bulls," said a serious-faced youth. "They are big and I swear they are over four years old."

"If they are over four years old they are not novillos and we should not be billed as novilleros."

"That is right," said Garcia. And turning to Antonio, "I hear you drew the worst lot. Both have long horns and look especially fierce."

Antonio smiled. "It is the fierce bulls I like to fight for I know just what to do."

"Listen to Leo Padilla talk. He likes them fierce."

"I like them tame," laughed one of the banderilleros, "nice

kind bulls that have led a placid life on the plains and have followed a herd-boy as sheep follow a shepherd."

"Like Ferdinand--"

"Yes, like Ferdinand, the bull."

They all laughed.

"Oh yes, this business is all very simple," continued the jester. "Once I heard it summed up like this: you place yourself in front of the bull; the bull comes and you move away; you do not move away, then the bull moves you away."

Again they all laughed.

"Listen to that crowd," said one of the attendants. And another said, "We better be good today or else--" "Where are the pics?" asked another. "I thought everything was ready." "Here they come," said Garcia. "Look at those wretched nags. That dappled gray can hardly walk."

The four picadors on their gaunt blindfolded horses joined the group. The men were well-protected with pads and leg-guards, and they sat in their big quilted saddles, holding their steel-tipped spears erect, waiting for the others to line up for the entrance into the arena. They all made up quite an assembly and everyone seemed anxious for the fight to start. Beyond the high door that led into the bull-ring, the stirring music of the band mixed with the voice of the crowd drifted into the patio.

Antonio felt his heart pounding and his body was tense. He and Garcia, the two espadas who were taking the leading part in the corrida today, stood in front waiting for the march into the arena. Back of them were the young men of the cuadrillas with

their heavy red capes on their arms. Antonio's corps of assistants, most of whom had worked with him at the El Cappa fair, were especially good looking. In the ring they would all work together to give the customers all and more than they had expected.

"This is it," said Antonio.

The music drowned the voices of the crowd as the troop of fighters marched across the sanded arena. Arrayed in all the glory of their gala costumes, the imposing procession stepped out smartly to the stirring notes of the band. Following the espasas came the picadors on their horses, and next the banderilleros, and behind them the muleteros with their gaily-adorned mules. The big crowd sent up a mighty cheer as the group bowed before the president and then broke up into its component parts.

Antonio went over to where Rafael and Fermin had watched the procession from the runway between the barrera and the seats. As usual Rafael was a dynamo of nerves and he was interested only in the welfare of his protegee.

"How do you feel? Indeed you look fine. The red-and-gold suit does something for you." And he said to Fermin, "Is he not a striking figure in his new suit?"

"Don't let the bulls rip the breeches off of you," joked Fermin. "They cost too much for such carelessness."

Rafael laughed uproariously and said, "Yes, be very careful that the suit is not damaged. With yourself, it does not matter. But with this beautiful garment be very careful."

Antonio smiled and looked up at the colorful crowd that jammed the arena. Here were the rank and beauty and wealth of Mexico

City, and here were the people who had saved their hard-earned pesos to buy a seat--a vast concourse of all classes assembled to satisfy their passion for his display of courage in the face of total danger. And suddenly he seemed to have been transported into another time and the incident was identical with something out of the past, and he was not Antonio Chavez who as a boy had dreamed of this hour, but someone formed out of shadow and desire. And all at once he saw himself a gladiator of old and this was the amphitheater where he would fight his antagonist to the death, to leave an impression that would not fade quickly from the memories of all who saw him. Then he heard Rafael's voice and he came back to earth, and turned his attention to the arena.

The ring was now cleared of all the combatants except two picadors who were sitting astride their horses, awaiting the entry of the bull. Just then a bugle note rang out, and at the silvery sounds the audience grew quiet. A second later a huge black beast with long horns came out in a rush, stopped for a moment as if bewildered by the sudden light, then moved at a gallop into the ring. At once he caught sight of the gaudy colors of the picadors and lowering his head he charged toward the one on the dapple gray. His assault was received on the blunt point of the picador's spear in the swelling hump of the muscle above the shoulder. Incensed by pain, he gathered himself for another charge, this time lifting the hapless horse and goring him savagely before one of the assistants could divert his attention by flapping his red cape.

It was then that Antonio stepped out into the sanded ring.

II

That afternoon Antonio enchanted the crowd with his masterful work. His first bull named Zananto was a black brute which he dominated with a grace and courage not seen in the ring for years. His handling of the cape and muleta was not only a thing of beauty and art but here was something new--this Leo Padilla whose repertoire of tricks excelled the most finished fighter of the day. Sometimes he stood motionless and immovable and allowed the furious toro to sniff at him. Again, standing statue-still and close he forced the charging beast to pass between him and the barrier, a feat so dangerous his brocaded vest was caught by the horn and ripped. At once he went so far as to perform the perilous feat of vaulting over the beast with a pole. Then before the astonished crowd could get its breath he knelt on the ground shaking the muleta and thus he forced the animal to pass so close the spectators rose in mass and cried out, "Well done! Well done!"

As the afternoon progressed he grew bolder and bolder. He dared the bull by every imaginable device. So complete was his self-abandonment that he seemed to fight without the slightest regard for his life.

After his first kill the whole arena sparkled with fluttering white handkerchieves, and down into the ring fell a shower of hats, men's topcoats, fur scarves, and bouquets of carnations and roses. And a great roar of approval and acclaim rolled across the arena.

Two more bulls were fought and killed and now it was Antonio's chance again. His second toro was larger than the first, with a thick brawny neck, elongated horns, and a pair of angry eyes. He had already proven himself especially fierce. He had killed both the picador's horses with his savage goring; and when the banderilleros had gone to work, infuriating the beast with their steel barbed darts planted in his neck, he had charged one of the dart-throwers with such unexpected fury that before the tormentor could vault over the wooden barrier to safety the bull had pinned him beneath his horns and wounded him severely.

Now a bugle note rang out over the arena to announce the final act of the drama--the suerte de matar. With sword and muleta Antonio stepped into the ring. Taking off his hat he bowed to the president sitting high up in a box and gave his little speech, dedicating "this bull, Carlos, to you, Mr. President." Then he turned and, carrying the muleta in one hand and the sword in the other, walked out toward the center of the sanded ring.

The black toro watched him with angry eyes. Antonio stopped and spread the red cloth. He looked at the beast, taking note of the feet, the neck bristling with banderillos, and the sleek shining hide stained with blood. The bull was not nearly as fatigued and worn down as he had hoped he would be. There was something menacing in the way he held its head and the forward-pointing spread of the horns.

In contrast Antonio felt a little tired. He had spent himself more than he realized in his fight with the first bull. The applause of the crowd had been like a powerful stimulant; de-

lighted with their acclaim he had protracted the last act far beyond his own endurance. Now he saw his mistake and he was a little worried.

He had need for worry. Usually the bull directs its fury at the fluttering red cloth and not at the fighter who waves it. But Carlos was no stupid beast. Here was a toro who did not follow the cape and muleta but bore down directly on his antagonist. What was more, like the bull who killed Espartero at Monterrey, Carlos had a tendency to turn sharply and hook when he charged--a very dangerous thing for the espada.

Antonio weighed his chances. For the sake of his own life and his reputation he would not protract this last act to delight the populace. He would simply finish wearing the toro down to make him ready for the kill. The death stroke must be clean and effortless; it must be decisive. For if he blundered the blade would not find the little spot no bigger than a silver dollar between the shoulders, and the point of the sword would not reach the heart. His triumphs had been celebrated all afternoon by a thousand acclamations; now in one clumsy stroke he could lose all he had gained.

Now he advanced toward the beast and he waved the red cloth. The bull suddenly stood squarely on all fours. Then he threw up his tail and with his head down he flung himself toward his enemy; the muleta received the horns. Immediately the bull turned and charged again; and performing smoothly each time Antonio was ready for him. Now Antonio waved the red cloth high over the toro's horns, causing him to rear upon his hind legs. Each time the bull

charged Antonio escaped his horns by confusing him at a split second before he could touch him.

The crowd was well aware the bull was not altering his charge to follow the cape, and shouts of *cuidado! cuidado!* rent the air. Each time he came the crowd gasped with fright; still Antonio would not step aside as the bull bore down on him, but stood immovable while he managed the muleta to receive the furious attack of the beast.

The bull was savage with fury; there was no end to his endurance. Though he was bleeding badly from wounds made by the picadors' spears and the banderilleros' darts, he still was good for a long fight. Now he paused, lashing his tail, and then walked round and round the motionless Antonio, as if trying to find a weak point for a charge.

Antonio watched carefully, and suddenly he felt very tired. With grace and balance he had managed to conceal a certain want of harmony within him; but to himself he admitted a strange new fear. He was making no progress; the bull was wearing him down. He could feel his tiredness growing; his nerves were taunt and icy. He told himself the alarm was absurd, that he was a match for the beast. But he knew the fear was real; and he could not put it aside.

The sweat rolled down his cheeks. It ran into his eyes and he wiped it away with his hand.

Cries of "Watch out! Watch out!" came from the crowd.

Antonio came alive. Again the bull swished past him. This time it came very close hooking him with its horns.

Now he could feel the fear fanning out like a cobra's head, going all through him and tightening his muscles. Nothing he could say to himself made any difference. In a whirling confusion his thoughts hummed in his brain. Suddenly he felt himself sinking into a gray mist. When he came out of it the bull was charging toward him again.

Antonio drew the sword out of the muleta, profiled, and made himself ready for the kill. He grasped it fast in his hand and waited with tenseness the onrush of the beast. Here he comes, his head down, his nostrils snorting. I must stab him clean. I must act quickly against terror. And suddenly he thought in a panic that he would be swept under the horns and gored to death as Espartero was gored to death in Monterrey.

He waited, strained to the uttermost.

A hush settled over the crowd as the bull charged forward.

Antonio gathered all his courage and skill into this one effort. His legs tight together he rose on his toes. He sighted along the blade of the sword at the spot it must enter the shoulder. He felt the bull's breath and the sharp point of the horn dig into his thigh. In desperation he threw his weight forward. In one moment there was the flash of steel in the air; in the next the blade disappeared up to the hilt.

Antonio stood rooted to the sand. He drew a sharp breath of relief. He found himself staring unbelievably at the bull. The beast was sinking slowly to his knees, its body going over with the feet in the air.

A thunderous din of applause rolled across the arena. As

slowly as a man in a dream he raised his eyes to the tiers packed with people. The whole theater was white with handkerchieves, and the crowd was shouting. In one great voice it was saying he should be given both the ear and the tail--the highest mark of approval for his excellent performance.

The voices released the tension in him and he felt weak all over. He licked his dry lips. Then with slow and uncertain footsteps he walked across the hard sand.

III

The people began to pour into the ring. In a minute they would sweep him up onto their shoulders and carry him in a triumphant procession from the arena. He wanted none of it. He felt no flush of pride in what he had done and he did not want their hero-worshipping.

Now only one thought stood out in his mind: to escape and find a place to hide. He walked through the door he had come in by and sought the chapel. One of the picadors smiled at him as he passed and asked him where he was going. But Antonio scarcely saw nor heard; it was as if he walked in a trance. He had come so close to death it was unreal he should be here. The cheering of the multitudes rang in his ears, but it had a far-away sound as if it were echoing from another world across a dark abyss.

Wild-eyed and sweating he rushed into the chapel. The padre who sat at his desk looked up, surprised to see the boy standing in the doorway. Antonio gazed at the white-haired man. He felt his heart beating very fast and he was short of breath. Deeply

perplexed the priest jumped up and came to him.

"Come, sit down, my son."

He closed the door and Antonio sat down on a chair and he did not say anything. Some mysterious force seemed to have taken hold of him and had directed him here. When he collected himself he said, "Let me sit here, Father, until I get my bearings."

Antonio felt the padre looking intently at him as if trying to search out the meaning back of this strange behavior. His dark eyes behind his spectacles were looking deep into him. Antonio glanced up and met the eyes, and his own expression asked for help.

"It is for you the crowd is cheering so mightily?"

"Yes, Father," said Antonio. He sat in silence for several minutes trying to untangle his thoughts.

"Do you not wish to go to the infirmary?" said the priest.

"You are wounded--"

Antonio looked down at his blood-stained suit. The breeches were ripped so badly the wound was exposed. "It is not deep," he said, examining the scratch closely. "It needs only an antiseptic."

The padre went to a pitcher on his desk and poured Antonio a drink. When he handed the glass of water to him he said, "Here, quench your thirst."

"Thank you, Father," said Antonio, drinking the water. His lips were dry and his throat parched. He felt the water cool and clean inside his stomach.

The padre said, "I insist you go at once to the infirmary."

"No, Father," said Antonio. "I wish to stay here awhile."

He could not raise his head to meet the padre's searching

eyes. Deep inside he felt a mixture of horror and exultation and humility. The room was silent except for the hushed roar of the crowd. The cheers of the people still rang in his ears but in himself was stillness.

The padre stood with his hands folded beneath his scapular.

He said, "What have you come here for?"

Antonio remained silent.

"My son, is there something you need say to me?"

Antonio looked up and met the eyes in their deep hollow sockets. The heavy stern features had undergone no change, and there was nothing in the face to show he perceived the vast and strange contradictions which had disrupted his own consciousness.

After an observant silence the padre went on, "Why did you come here when you have made yourself worthy to receive the glory and honor of your people?" And again he said as he sat down, "Is there not something you have to say?"

Antonio drew a deep breath. "Yes, Father. There is much I have to say."

He ran his fingers through his hair nervously. Then as if it were not his own voice but some other voice which so long had been kept in silence, he spoke as one compelled to talk. And all at once the words poured from him and he told him all that had recently happened. And when he had finished the tension inside of him was gone and he felt light and easy and free. His confession had had a cleansing effect on him and he felt as if a great weight had been lifted from his shoulders. He did not know why but he had suddenly found his directions and he was no longer confused.

Now the room was silent. Only the ticking of a clock somewhere in the chapel went on so unceasing it seemed to belong to the silence. And suddenly he remembered kneeling beside his father in the chapel in San Jose where the candles mystically winked and the sanctuary light glowed softly at the dark altar. And he remembered the same stillness broken now and then by the wind sighing lonesomely through the mission where countless people before him had come and would come year after year through all of time.

At last the padre lifted himself heavily to his feet and said in a low, condemning voice, "What fences you have build! What walls you have made! How do you expect to achieve greatness in such a prison?"

Antonio hastened, "Father, it is not greatness I want--"

The padre silenced him with an impatient gesture of his hand. "You do not understand," he said almost harshly. And then in a voice filled with feeling, "It is not greatness as measured by the standards of the world. That greatness was yours this afternoon." And he said, pounding his chest, "It is the feeling of greatness here inside of which I speak. Here and here alone is the vessel of greatness--the clean wholesome sense of pride for oneself."

Antonio sat looking at the floor. He was humiliated and ashamed. And he was angry. He was angry with himself, and he was still angry with the circumstances which had given shape to this moment.

He said desperately, "What should I do?"

The padre did not answer. He paced the floor, his hands

locked behind him, his face furrowed with thought. The rosary hanging from his neck made a clicking sound as he walked. Then he began to talk, and now his voice was soft with tenderness.

"You have been a soldier and a good one. The ribbons your country gave you were a symbol of your courage on the battlefields. You were proud of your achievements. But it was not enough that your valor be recognized. Indeed you felt it should give you extra privileges. Like all men you asked for more than was due you." And he said almost helplessly, "It is the same old story over and over again. This is a world of change and chance, of weighing one hazard with another, a world of unsubstantial theories and ideals. And people elbowing for room and crying to make themselves heard and using their time and themselves and others to get what they think is due them. In the end it all comes to nothing." He paused and then his face brightened. "But there is one consolation. In the midst of it all your own soul and that alone is substance and refuge."

Antonio sat listening. And he felt the need of a refuge where the unreal could not shine through the absolute reality of better things. And he saw clearly the need for more than glory. He needed a belief in his own courage--not the cold achievement of valor won on the battlefield--that was nothing more than a superficial strength stemming from a brotherhood of fear where all were partners of a common hazard united by one purpose. Nor the acclaim of the multitudes after he had outwitted the furious attack of a savage bull. Indeed he needed much more. And again he said desperately,

"What should I do?"

The padre looked at him sternly. "Do?" he said. "What should you do? The penance I could give you would not be sufficient. No, it would not be enough! Go someplace and think yourself out of this trouble. Go and return to yourself those precious things you have thrown away. Learn again what it means to have courage!"

Antonio stood up. And he said, "Thank you, Father. You do not know how grateful I feel."

He turned to the door and stepped into the gathering dusk outside.

CHAPTER TEN

I

Antonio stood in his room in the Hotel Reforma in Mexico City and felt himself in a dilemma. The acclaim of the people was everywhere, but inside he felt only a hollow silence. It was as if success had not brought him what he had expected and he needed a rest. For months he had been trying to indorse an excuse to go home, and he felt he had one now that could not be disputed. The urge had become so strong he could not ignore it. It had come to him so pressingly that all of a sudden he made up his mind to go back to San Jose where he could think everything out for himself.

That afternoon before he left Rafael and Fermin came to his room to say good-bye; and they brought him a new hand-tooled leather bag--so he could travel in a style, as Fermin put it, fitting to a famous man. Antonio was very glad to get the bag. As he packed it Rafael said, "I want to see you coming back with it before the week is out. Have a good time but remember there is much work to do and many social obligations to fill."

Antonio paid no attention. He went on packing, not even hearing what was said.

Fermin exclaimed, "Look at him. Here he has all of Mexico at his feet and he acts like he didn't give a damn."

Still Antonio made no answer.

"If I were in your shoes, I think I would be sitting on top of the world."

Just then an attendant came in with a postcard and said, "Senor, the father of a little boy who is very sick begs that you do him the favor of signing your name below your picture. He said so much delight you will give the boy to have your picture autographed."

"Where is my fountain pen?" asked Antonio.

"Here, use mine," said Fermin.

Antonio took the pen and signed the name Leo Padilla. And then: "To a little boy much loved by his father." He paused. It did not seem enough, and he added, "Get well so you can grow up to be a man he can well be proud of."

When the attendant was gone, Rafael said, good naturedly, "If you write such a long message following all your autographs you will have to hire a secretary for that special function."

Antonio made no reply. He buckled the straps of his new bag. Then he took his hat and blue topcoat.

Rafael walked with him to the door, his hand on his shoulder. "Remember, my boy, to be careful. You are inclined to be a little too daring you know." And he said, "Your future is ten million pesos and not the mausoleum."

Antonio smiled.

"When you come back we will do big things together. All of Mexico is crying to see you. For you have made yourself the great hero for the pleasure of your people."

Fermin took him to the train in his red sport-modeled Lincoln. He talked all the way. He was still excited over Antonio's triumphant debut; in contrast Antonio had little to say. He kept

wishing Maria would be home when he got there. He had her handkerchief in his pocket. He pressed it in his hand tenderly, and there was suddenly a warm pressure deep down inside impelling him to entertain some special hope she would still be at home. All the way to the station he kept thinking of her.

"I can't help feeling I will see Maria again," he said.

Fermin said, "Sure you will. Why not? I wouldn't be surprised you'll bring her back with you."

Antonio did not go on to tell him why he hardly dared entertain any special hope. He knew it was no use trying to explain what was on his mind and what constituted his real fears.

When they pulled up in front of the station's entrance, he said, "Tell Rafael I may be late getting back. A lot depends--"

Fermin looked at him oddly.

He said, "I'd like to be going with you. It would be nice to get back to the country for an outing."

"I wish you were," said Antonio.

He took his bag.

"Well, adios, my friend."

"Adios," said Fermin. "And like my father used to say--may God go with you." As an afterthought he added, "But don't spend too much time out there. Like Rafael told you, you've got your public to think of. You're quite an idol, you know."

Antonio was looking at him but he was not hearing what he said. His thoughts had gone forward into tomorrow and what it would bring. And suddenly he was filled with a consuming impatience to be gone.

II

Then as in a dream he was riding on a train rushing him across the country. The engine whistled lonesomely far ahead, and the pounding of the wheels hummed in his ears. The night swept past the window and he felt the secret quickening of desire as though he were drawn, past all resistance. He was like one fleeing from the fulfillment of the very dream he had known all his life--fleeing into an unknown where again he must make a decision, leaving behind the acclaim of the people, the packed arenas, the fluttering white handkerchieves. Perhaps never again would he be a part of the procession of bullfighters arrayed in colorful suits to enter the ring. Perhaps never again would he march across the sand, stepping lightly to the music, looking straight ahead, knowing that it was for him the crowds cheered.

I have had my little portion, my moment of glory....

He dozed, and when he awoke it was daylight outside the window. The train rumbled through many towns and the names of the stations began to conjure up meaning as a panorama of thoughts glided across his mind. The familiar scenes marked the boundaries of a time gone forever. They dispelled his gloom; and the silent gnawing contempt for himself was gone, and his heart trembled with a curious and tender excitement.

The train whistle moaned. The wheels ground on the rails. Soon he would be home.

III

It was night when the train slowed to a halt in San Jose. At a window Antonio stood looking at the street lights cycling past in the dark. When the train stopped he picked up his bag and stumbled down the steps. Among the handful of people waiting on the platform he saw no one he knew, and he turned away and hastened up the sidewalk. The corner lamps cast a barren light upon the old houses and shops. He walked fast, aware of the lighted window of homes, and he heard laughter and the musical strumming of a guitar playing "Romano." At last he stood before the door of his own house, and his hand on the knob grew heavy.

For several moments he stood there on the familiar step. He peered into the lighted parlor and he saw the familiar room with its piano and overstuffed chairs and pictures. A lamp burned on the small center table, and his mother sat in the old rocking chair as if she sat there waiting for him to come in. He stood several moments in the dark just looking at her. Then quietly he opened the door and went inside.

"Mama--"

He stood in the hall waiting for her to look up. She did not hear him and he went on into the room. He took off his hat and put down his luggage. And then she saw him and her eyes opened wide and great joy filled her face.

"Antonio," she breathed, moving toward him. "Thank God!"

Her hands grasped his arms and she kissed him. "Dear son of mind," she said softly and patted his shoulder, "How glad I am

that you have come home. Here I was thinking of writing you a letter." And then taking note of his tired and anxious face, she said, "You are hungry and tired. Do you not wish me to fix you something to eat?"

"Not right away, Mama," he said as he took off his topcoat and hung it on the hall tree by the door. "I just want to sit down and enjoy being home."

She was looking at him from head to toe; and she said, "My, you look nice in your clothes. And very prosperous too. You are making money?"

"Yes, I have made money."

"You are doing what you have always wanted to do," she said. Then she drew a deep breath of disapproval and said, "But my, it makes me so unhappy."

Antonio made no reply.

"After you were home and gone, and you wrote and told me you had gone back to the arena you don't know how you hurt me--"

Still Antonio did not say anything.

"Your fight the other day in Mexico City--I read all about it," she went on. And then, shaking her head, "I wish it would not be like this. It is such an awful worry for me. It was bad enough to worry about the war. And now the bullfighting--"

Antonio could not look at her. He walked about the room feeling restless and penned in. He suddenly wished he had not come home. It seemed too much to have to talk it over with his mother too.

She put her fancy work into a basket on the table and said,

"The people here will be glad to know you are home, Antonio. They are all proud of you. And now since you have made yourself so popular--"

Antonio went to the piano and thumped out a one-finger melody. He turned and sat down on the stool, facing the room. Then he jumped up and he stood, his hands in his pockets and his gaze far away.

His mother looked at him carefully.

She said, "Your face looks troubled, Antonio."

"Everything's all right, Mama," he said, avoiding her questioning eyes. "Yes, everything is all right."

"You have made yourself great, but you have not--"

"I haven't made myself great," he said.

His voice quivered with the intensity of his feelings. He waited a moment and suddenly he gave up the attempt to conceal the truth. Then he began to speak swiftly but with softness.

"I don't know how to tell you about this," he said, "about the army and all--"

She nodded. "I know all about it," she said quietly.

He went on, compelled to talk, "Well, I've been thinking." He stopped and glanced at her disturbed and anxious face. "When I fought in Mexico City the other day I was doing something I had dreamed of doing ever since I was a boy. I fought well and I did not disappoint the people who came to see me. The crowd went wild. But instead of feeling great I just stood there in the arena like it wasn't me at all. And suddenly I wanted to run away from it because it meant nothing to me. I had made myself

great and yet it meant nothing. And suddenly I was tired of all the clapping and cheering, and I went to the priest in the chapel there to get away from it. I don't know why I went, but I went as if someone told me and I obeyed. And afterward I could not feel happy even though I was famous. For I found I had no spirit for it. My spirit was all worn out."

He stopped talking and he walked around the room. He paused at the window and for several moments he stood there looking out into the night. And he said, "I had to be off all alone to think. Here I was a great bullfighter and I couldn't feel proud. And I thought of things the priest told me and I felt a sorrow even greater than when Papa died. Even then as bad as I felt it was not like this, because then the sorrow was because of loss, and now it was because I had turned my back on everything I knew was right. And everything I had ever done before--all the things I had done in the name of duty and honor and courage were no good to me. I couldn't even feel proud of those things anymore. And I felt sad and lonely. And I was wretched with guilt. And I knew why." He turned and looked at her now sitting in the rocking chair. "It was not only because I had deserted the army but it was because it was not the way I wanted it at all. And it was not the way you or Papa wanted it. It was all bad because it was not right."

Antonio stood by the window and no longer did he feel lonely and hurt. He saw everything clearly now like a man who had found his directions. The fine filaments of strain in his being--an inner coolness that had spread itself over all the warmth of his

dreams--were gone. He felt again light and happy. Time alone had stood the test to all his perplexities, as time is the full test to all things, corroding and dissolving all but the genuine which like pure gold withstands it.

The woman had listened carefully to all her son said. She sat in the rocking chair, her hands folded in her lap. Her eyes had filled and she bent her head so he could not see the tears.

Then she smiled and she began to speak, slowly and with great care and thought. "It is good you found out for yourself when you did. Maybe it is even a good thing it happened. Maybe you will be enriched by this experience, and all your life you will profit from it. Maybe without it you'd really never known if you were the man you thought you were. Now you've seen how it is to fight back. You've seen how it is to betray. And you've learned that no matter what you do in the world you yourself have to be proud of it before it can have any meaning. Life is hard at the best without making it harder by carrying a load."

Her fingers moved delicately over her crucifix.

And she said, "Every person must find out in his own way what is the right thing to do. I--or even your father if he were here could not tell you. There is a great deal to be done and we are all given our chance to do our share. Some do a great deal more than their share, and others shirk and still others become confused and lost. Now I know you are not lost."

She rose heavily to her feet and she took a handkerchief and blew her nose. Then her breath came out in a great sigh of relief and she said, "Well, here I am a good one not to be out there in the

kitchen getting you something to eat."

"Stop to think about it," said Antonio, "I am awfully hungry."

She smiled at him from the kitchen door. "Always hungry," she said. "Just like when you were a little boy."

Antonio said, "Ma--"

She stopped and turned to look at him.

He hesitated. All the way home the one question uppermost burned in his heart. Now he could not bear the agony any longer. Though he knew he had no right even to hope Maria might have changed her mind, the words came out.

"Did Maria--do what she planned?"

His mother nodded.

He was silent for a moment.

Then, "Do you mean she has gone?" he asked hoarsely.

"Last week she went to Veracruz to be with her uncle who is a Jesuit priest. He is going to conduct the nine day's retreat--"

Antonio could think of nothing to say to cover his disappointment. He turned to the window. It seemed the whole world had dropped into stillness and a door had closed somewhere in space.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

I

That night for the first time he dreamed of Maria. She was in a white-eyellet organdie dress and a veil floating from a coronet of field daisies which crowned her head. He was standing beside her in a shaft of light falling from a stained-glass window of the church while the padre read the marriage vows. Then he saw himself giving her thirteen pieces of silver, signifying that he would provide for her always. And he saw the bridesmaids draping the veil of her dress about his shoulders symbolical of their forever after living under one roof; and then both of them being circled with a gold chain signifying union.

He woke with a feeling of great relief and joy, only to realize a moment later it was a dream. Then a sudden sense of desolation swept down on him so pressingly that it seemed that everything had come to an end.

Through the window he looked out into the coming day. The east was streaked with a soft glow. Roosters were crowing in the chicken yards, and the quick flutter of birds in the treetops sounded against the small noises of the street. The eastern sky grew lighter, and the gray outlines of buildings took on shape and character. And people's voices, subdued and secretive, came out of the silence. Downstairs he heard his mother getting breakfast.

He watched the coming day, trying to make up his mind. He saw the chimney smoke of houses eddying into a blue sky. For a

minute he forgot his pain and stretched himself luxuriously. And suddenly there was no past and no future. He was simply Antonio Chavez, and the moment was now. Not yesterday or tomorrow, but now--the whole day stretching before him to help him decide.

He got up then and went into the bathroom and took a shower. He stood a long time under the spray, watching the water pepper his supple body, pouring down over his chest and stomach and running in little streams over the horn scars on his thighs and the bullet wound. Then he dried himself and began to shave, and as he lathered cheeks and neck, and then scraped off the lather with a razor he carefully looked at himself in the mirror.

His face looked thin and tired. Yes, he thought, he needed a little time to recover; a breathing spell to get his bearings. Yet he did not wish to stay home more than a day; he did not wish to be seen or talk to anyone. He wanted only this scrap of precious time to gather himself together and turn his face back toward his camp.

Antonio dressed slowly. He saw his old jeans hanging in the closet and he put them on. And he put on his cowboy boots and a red plaid shirt he had worn on his uncle's ranch. He looked at himself in the mirror and his thoughts dwelt proudly on the outfit. When he came downstairs he felt every inch the cowboy he used to be.

The kitchen was warm and light with sunshine, and it smelled of breakfast. His mother was working at the stove and she turned and smiled at him, standing in the doorway. She told him how fine he looked and she said she would be so glad if he would return to

the ranch. She also told him about the large herd of cattle his uncle was getting ready for the market and how badly he needed him.

Antonio listened thoughtfully. He sat down at the table and bent his mind upon the food she placed before him. She put toasted rolls on the table, and scrambled eggs, and poured the hot chocolate. He ate heartily and thought he had never tasted food so good.

"You were always a great one for scrambled eggs," she told him with devotion. And she said, "My, it is so nice to have you home again."

Antonio did not make an answer. He looked at her poinsettias blooming in the window. He saw the fruit picture above the table. And his eyes rested on the china closet behind whose doors gleamed his mother's glassware--things that had been there as long as he could remember. And suddenly he had the good feeling of being home. And all at once he remembered how many times in the past he had thought of home with such an intensity of passion he savored every luxurious moment spent here--here where his roots were deeply planted and where he would come again when he was free.

His mother began clearing the table as he sat there, scraping the dishes and putting the left-overs into a pan. Then she took the pan of food and opened the outside door. At once a low whine greeted her and Pesos came tearing in.

"Pesos!"

In a bound the dog was beside him, barking and leaping in ecstasy. Antonio knelt and took him in his arms. "Good old Pesos!" he exclaimed and patted him while the dog shoved his nose

into his face and waved his tail and twisted in great excitement.

"Maria brought him over before she left," explained his mother stacking the dishes in the sink. "He has been so lonely since she went away."

Antonio stood up and the dog pawed his stomach and whined softly. He saw his mother looking at him as if she were trying to see what his feelings were. There was a trembling inside of him and a desire to be out of the house. He leaned to stroke the dog's head.

"What do you say, old boy, you and I go hunting!"

He wanted to know where he could find his rifle and where were his corduroy jacket and hat and his army shoes. His mother went into a room off from the kitchen and came back with all he asked for. He put on the shoes and hat and jacket. Then he took the gun and the dog followed him outside.

II

He and the dog walked west, skirting the town. Antonio walked with slow and heavy steps as if his feet were lead. The hill slopes were steeper than he had ever remembered them; it took all his strength to pull himself up to a little ledge where he could sit and rest.

Pesos sat down beside him, breathing heavily, his tongue dripping. Antonio was tired with a fatigue not born of exertion but of heavy spirit. The acclaim of the people was in his ears and the voice of Maria was in his ears and so were the words of the commanding officer--all of them churned together until they were like

like a howling wind beating its fury upon the very roots of his being.

It occurred to him to go back to the house. But there was no work to do, no plans to make--and really no hurry about getting ready to return to his camp. He admitted, however, the sooner he went the sooner he would get it all over with. It was not easy to pull away. He suffered the agony of standing before the military tribunal. So many times in his mind he had lived it that now it seemed as if that ordeal had taken place in some distant past and he was simply recalling it, feeling the humiliation he had suffered. He shrank from the moment he must make up his mind to leave. He felt as he used to feel when his mother would bring him a glass of castor oil to drink.

He sat there all tired out. He remembered the same feeling when he woke in the hospital. He had been exhausted from the loss of blood and he had wanted only to sleep. He felt that way now--all exhausted because so much had gone out of him.

For a long time he sat there gazing into the distance. Here he could see the Rio Grande with its faint line of cottonwoods and tamarisks standing gray in shadow; and beyond a haze of green melted into the sky. In his mind's eye he saw the sloughs greenening up in the spring time and the bending of grama grass in the wind and vast herds of cattle grazing on the range. Then he remembered his dream of bringing Maria to live with him in the valley, and his eyes filled. The thoughts now held only pain to hurt him like hot coals raked across his vitals.

It would have been better to have been killed like Espartero

he thought. It would have been better never to have come home. It would be better....

He fingered the trigger of his rifle. It struck him all at once it would be easy to stand the gun so that the muzzle rested against his temple and pull the trigger. He turned the thought over and over in his mind. He saw himself lying dead and found here by searchers. He saw death bringing terror and grief to his mother. He saw himself freed of the necessity to go back and stand humiliated before an authority that would imprison him. He weighed one horror against the other and lifted his hand from the trigger.

"Maybe they won't be too hard on me," he said aloud. "Yes, maybe, they'll give me a chance. If they'd let me go to the Pacific--"

He stood up and took his gun. Pesos looked at him and whined plaintively.

"Brace up, old boy," exclaimed Antonio. "It isn't so bad as all that."

He patted the dog, and then together they descended the hills and walked through the wooded slopes. The forest with its undertones of cry and movement eddied across his mind like the voiceless murmur of a dream. The wind sobbed in the bare branches. The wooded creatures sounded against the snapping of tired and aged limbs, and the light of day began to dim.

"Maybe it's clouding over," he said to Pesos, "and is going to rain."

After awhile the rain came down like a fine mist and it felt comforting to his bruised senses. Then it began to rain harder

and the wind whipped sprays of it against his face. The heavens rumbled with thunder and the drops came down fast. He plodded on as if he walked toward a future stretching before him in desolate emptiness. It was beyond his power now to do what he liked with it. It seemed to open up in front of him like a steel trap and he was a helpless animal.

"I don't have to go back," he said aloud.

But this statement of fact gave him no assurance. For it seemed necessary to follow the ideals instilled in him by others and not the desires of his heart. Maybe it was the same with all men: one great voice inside speaking the tongues of many people. Maybe that alone was conscience and the compass pointing the directions. That alone gave man the right to answer and go on.

After awhile it stopped raining and suddenly a great shaft of light falling through a break in the clouds fell at his feet. Everything grew very quiet; not a twig stirred. And in that moment he felt at the bottom of his feelings a consciousness of a divine spirit which glowed all about him. And all at once he was aware of a strange sense, an indescribable feeling of spirituality, a prescience of some new realm into which he was moving. No longer was he immersed in gloom and fear. The loveliness of the spectacle touched and lightened his whole being.

He drew in his breath sharply. Inside he was raw and tender, and now the silence of the woods was like something healing; the beneficence of its calm comforted him. Here a great emptiness filled all time and space so that now everything had a murmurous echo of days gone by. And the past lived in a thousand memories

and the present moment waited as if to let the by-gone catch up with it.

The sun was setting as he and the dog walked home. Through the trees he could see its brilliant colors deepened by the darkness of the bare limbs. As the sun went down behind the hills the light in the streets turned to a delicate rose color. And in the sky flocks of birds sailed into the gloaming. Ahead spread the blue and gold of infinite heaven.

III

That evening Antonio felt restless to be gone; yet he postponed the moment when he must go upstairs and make himself ready. He heard the clock in the hall ticking off the minutes and he sensed the flow of time--time which was like a humming bird hovering close to perch itself on a slender stock, a symbol of man's tragic brevity. Then he went back outside. Pesos saw him and ran out of the shadows. He jumped up and playfully pawed him as Antonio plunged his fingers into his fur and patted him affectionately.

"Good old Pesos," he said. "What am I ever going to do without you?" And he sat down on a stone bench under a tree and the dog sat down on the ground and rested his muzzle on the boy's knee. "You are a very good dog, do you know that?"

And Pesos whined a soft sound like a nasal croon and looked as if he were about to jump onto his lap.

"I'm going away again, Pesos," said Antonio.

The dog put his paw on the boy's knee and whined softly.

"Yes, I'm going back to my Post. And I want you to promise that you will be here when I come back. Oh, I don't think it will be very long. Maybe a year or two. And I want you to learn to love Mama as you learned to love me--and Maria."

Maria....

He took a deep breath. And he jumped up and walked down the flagstone path. Everything in the world seemed silent except the continuous wind scuttling lightly in the tops of the trees. Across the street he could see an old man with a hoe working in his patio, and beyond a group of children were playing ball, their voices puncturing the evening quiet. Suddenly from a bough overhead a dove cooed, and it sounded to him that all the loneliness in the world came from the throbbing throat.

"I would like for you to go back," she had said quietly. "For you will not be at peace with yourself until you do."

Maria had said that. And now her voice came back to him as across a great distance of time. And again he felt the hurt as real and fresh and cutting as when she told him her plans to become a religious.

The dark deepened into night. And overhead in the powdery blue a lone star twinkled. For a long time he stood there, just thinking. Through the trees the mellow lights of street lamps gleamed and from nearby houses came the voices of neighbors. And suddenly the immensity of the sky and the distance between himself and all things in heaven and on earth came back to him. And now all at once it did not seem so important what happened to him; or the hurt and humiliation he must suffer. For after all he was

only a mere speck, an infinitesimal portion of the earth's living in time. Yes, he was no more than one of many millions living within a design set down in the great framework of humanities' movement: a streak of lightning flashing for a moment in the firmament and forever gone without a line to trace its fiery pattern.

He went up to his room. At seven o'clock that night he was ready.

On the wall by the dresser hung a school picture taken the year he was graduated from the Sacred Heart Academy. Maria was sitting in the front row, and she wore a red carnation in her hair. He looked at her, and all at once the thought came to him of that afternoon in May almost four years ago. After the picture was taken he had played baseball with some of the boys in the school-yard, and he had hit the ball into a group of girls watching from the sidelines. Maria had caught it and would not give it to him when he came after it. All the girls were giggling at the way he tried to wrest it from her. He had taken her in his arms and kissed her smartly on the neck as they struggled....

He looked at the picture a long time as if lost in the past. Why had he not realized sooner what she meant to him? He had been so strong-willed and so heartless as never to give a thought of what it would mean to lose her. An ache choked him so that he wanted to cry out in pain. Never again would he love anyone like he loved Maria.... He clenched his hands and felt he had earned this unhappiness; all his life he would be punished with the terror of its loneliness. But his life was still in his hands to make of

it the most he knew how; he was still Antonio Chavez....

After awhile he took his traveling bag--an old one he had packed for the train journey back. He had decided against wearing his uniform; he had put on slacks and a gray sweater. Now he took his topcoat and hat and went quietly down the stairs. The rooms were quiet; he thought perhaps his mother had stepped across the street to visit with a neighbor. It was the way he wanted it: to leave without saying good-bye. He closed the door silently behind him and went down the dark street.

At the corner he looked back. He saw the old house with its lighted parlor window and the trees standing silent against the night. He stood there several moments just looking. Then he saw Pesos running toward him and he waited to pat the dog's head.

In the house his mother gazed from the bedroom window. She saw the boy and the dog in the light of the corner lamp. She saw him take the dog in his arms and caress him. Then he was gone; and from somewhere in the night she heard his voice like a sad and lingering bell from out of another time: "Go back, Pesos. Go back."

CHAPTER TWELVE

In San Jose time moves leisurely. And there is a changeless quality about its passing. No momentous events take place, no great mishaps occur to stir the placidity or break the routine. Here each is content to build joy and laughter from the fruits of his work, and each is glad to share and make his happiness go a long way. And if a painful thing comes to anyone this too is shared and made less harmful, so that in time the hurt disappears and the wound heals.

Therefore, when the people heard Antonio had been killed....

* * *

It was that spring of 1945 that he fell, on a day in April when the trees were in bloom and the sky was bright blue. On the beach somewhere along the west coast of a remote island in the Pacific several thousand miles from his home in San Jose, he was found lying with his face down and one arm stretched forward. A mortar shell had caught him when he was just thirty feet from cover, and he lay as he had fallen on the beach. Afterwards they took his billfold from his tunic. In the billfold was the picture of a girl, and in the corner of the picture was the single word, Maria.

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