

EL SOLITARIO, THE HERMIT PRIEST OF
 THE OLD SANTA FÉ TRAIL.

"No stream from its source
 Flows seaward, how lonely so 'or its course,
 But some land is gladden'd. No star ever rose
 And set without influence somewhere. Who knows
 What earth needs from earth's lowliest creatures?
 No life
 Can be pure in its purpose, and strong in its strife,
 And all life not be purer and stronger thereby."
 --- OWEN MEREDITH.



THE HERMIT PRIEST.

THE tourist en route to the Pacific coast cannot fail observing on his right a huge, relatively isolated peak, cutting the incomparably clear mid-continent sky, almost immediately after the train emerges from the picturesque cañon of El Moro, and commences to descend the long gradual slope to

the quaint old Mexican village of Las Vegas, New Mexico. Its scarred and verdureless front looms up grandly in the beautifully serrated landscape, of which it is the most conspicuous object. More prominently defined than any other individual elevation of the Taos Range visible from the point of observation, the shadow of its irregular contour reaches far out over the lesser mountains beneath, the moment the sun has crossed the meridian of its crest.

At its foot, grassy little valleys stretch eastwardly, which are cultivated by the primitive Mexicans under a system of irrigation as primitive as themselves—simple earth ditches, involving a very limited knowledge of engineering.

Foaming little torrents splash and sparkle in the sunshine, as they course through the fertile intervalles. Their sources are cool mountain springs hidden in the dark recesses of the towering range, which were, until the restless "Gringo" invaded the solitude of the charming region at the advent of the iron trail to erect saw-mills, filled with that most epicurean and gamy of all the finny tribe, the speckled brook-trout. Now, the disciple of the revered Walton vainly essays the streams with elegant modern appliances for lazy methods of angling, retiring disgusted, as

the listless native, answering his interrogatory of "Where have they all gone?" with a characteristic shrug, and his ever-ready "¿Quien sabe?" quietly opens his little ditch to let the tenantless water overflow his limited patch of corn, beans, and onions.

Maybe, in the sad and weird mythology of these strange people the Aztecs, this storm-beaten spur of the Rockies occupied an important place. Their Olympus, or Parnassus perhaps, for not many miles remote, on the bank of the classic Pecos, where lie the ruins of the once fortified Cicuyo, referred to so graphically in the itinerary of the historian of Coronado's wonderful march in search of the "Seven Cities of Cibola," is the reputed birthplace of their culture-hero, Montezuma (not to be confounded with the dynasty of sovereigns of that name), who was the Christ of their faith, for whose second advent the Pueblos, the lineal descendants of the Aztecs, look for so hopefully with the rising of every morning's sun.

Upon the summit of the Rincon de Tecolote, "The Owl's Corner," now known as "El Cumbre del Solitario" (The Hermit's Peak), as this grand old sentinel of the range is called by the Mexicans, an area comprising several acres, there is a remarkable cave. Around this natural grotto at

such a great elevation, are clustered by the simple natives the most cherished memories of the humble and beloved curious individual who once occupied the sequestered spot. It is sacred ground with them, upon which no sacrilege would for a moment be brooked.

Near its narrow entrance a spring of clear cold water gushes out of the indurated rock, which, after flowing for a short distance over the rounded pebbles in its deeply worn bed, tumbles down the precipitous side of the mountain in a diminutive cascade, joining the streams in the valley on their resistless way to the sea. A few scattered pifions cast a grateful shade over a portion of the generally bald bleak level of the limited plain, and at regular distances apart, in the form of a circle, are twelve rude crosses, typical of the number of the Apostles. They were erected years ago by the humble Mexicans living in the hamlets below, in memory of the deeply religious man who made his home in this sequestered spot, and whose name is revered only a degree less than that of the tutelary saint of the country, Our Lady of Guadalupe. On certain feast-days, particularly in midsummer, large fires are kept burning at night, and the devotees to the memory of the cave's once holy occupant, long since hastened by the hand

of an assassin to the unknown beyond, assemble there under the stars, and in a most devout spirit perform certain ceremonies, with a zeal possible only to the earnest believers in that ancient and widely disseminated faith, the Catholic religion.

Of the history of this remarkable man, who by his exemplary life made such an impression upon the untutored minds of a large number of the degraded primitive New-Mexicans, but fragmentary leaves have been obtainable. To intelligently understand even these, the reader must let his mind drift backward for more than a generation to the plains of central Kansas, and learn of his advent into the State as I recall it.

It was late in the spring of 1861. Our Civil War had been inaugurated by the firing upon Sumter, and the loyal States were preparing for the great impending struggle, upon the result of which depended the destiny of the Republic. Kansas at that time, so far as its agricultural possibilities were concerned, was not materially considered in that connection; it was a remote, relatively unknown Territory. It is true, its eastern portion, a narrow belt contiguous to Missouri, had a bloody political history; beyond which fact, it was merely the portal to the vast mountain region on the west, to be reached only

by crossing the "Desert" supposed to be included within the new State's geographical limits, through which ran the trail to far-off Santa Fé and Chihuahua.

There arrived one morning in the busy little hamlet of Council Grove, Morris county, Kansas, during the month of May, a strange, mysterious person. He attracted much attention, for he was to the denizens of that remote frontier town as curious a personage as the Man in the Iron Mask, or the awkward Kaspar Hauser, whose appearance at the gates of Nuremburg once startled the good people of that staid and quiet town, hoary with the conservatism of centuries.

The stranger who came so unexpectedly to Council Grove in the spring of 1861, evidently a priest, talked but little; it was an exceedingly difficult task to engage him in conversation, so profoundly did he seem impressed with the idea of some impending danger. He acted like a startled deer, ever on the alert for an expected enemy, and weeks rolled by before two or three of the town's most reputable citizens could gain his confidence sufficiently to learn from him something of his varied and romantic history. In a simple sketch, as this is intended to be only, nothing but a mere outline of his checkered life

previous to his advent in America can be presented, as it was gathered, very reluctantly on his part, in detached fragments at odd moments in his erratic moods of communicativeness. It certainly contains enough of pathos, suffering and tragedy to form the web of a thrilling novel.

Matteo Bocalini, at the date of his appearance in Council Grove, was about fifty-five years old. He possessed the eye of an artist, a head that was beautifully symmetrical, with a classically moulded face; and notwithstanding his age, his hair, of which he had a profusion, was long, black, and lustrous as a raven's wing. Yet the heart-sorrows he had experienced were indelibly impressed upon his benevolent countenance in deeply marked lines. He was a lineal descendant of Trajano Bocalini, the witty Italian satirist, author of the celebrated "Ragguagli di Parnaso," who died in Venice in 1618. Matteo was born about the beginning of the present century, in Capri, that charming and most romantic island of Italy, situated in the Mediterranean, at the entrance to the Bay of Naples, twenty miles south of the beautiful city whose name the bright waters bear.

His youth was passed on the island, in the city of Capri, the seat of a bishopric. There he re-

ceived his early education, devoting himself to the Church, and commencing those theological studies which were soon to be the cause of his sufferings, his wanderings, and eventually his tragic death.

The island of his birth, which has so often been sung by the muse, is historic as well as picturesquely beautiful. It was there that the Roman emperor Tiberius passed the closing decade of his life, and the ruins of the twelve gorgeous palaces he erected during that period are still visible. Capri, too, as tourists well remember, is famous for a cavern called the "Grotto of the Nymphs," or the "Blue Grotto." Matteo declared it was there that during his youth, in the calm recesses and sequestered nooks of that delightful underground retreat, he first learned to love the companionship of his own thoughts, a desire for solitude, and that to him indescribable peace which a life apart from the "madding crowd" assures. It was this strange characteristic, absence of that love of gregariousness common to man, which earned for him in Council Grove half a century later, the sobriquet of "The Hermit Priest of the Santa Fé Trail," and a year after his departure from that place, among his devoted adherents in the mountains of New Mexico, the

more applicable one, "El Solitario" (The Solitary Man), in contradistinction to "El Hermito" (The Hermit), which he never was in the strict interpretation of the term.

When but eighteen, the youthful Matteo left his native island, under the patronage of the good bishop, who loved him, to perfect his education in Rome, beneath the very shadow of St. Peter's, where he took holy orders at the early age of twenty-one. Then, according to his sad story, began that life of stormy passions and sorrowful pilgrimages, culminating in his assassination forty years afterwards in the far-off Occident.

He was called by the Church "Father Francesco," and although so young, was noted for his eloquence, subtle philosophy, and the boldness of his political utterances. But notwithstanding his pronounced views, the Pope named him as one of his secretaries. The College of the Propagandists, however, refused to confirm him, and placed him under interrogation and discipline. He eloquently defended himself, and the charges were not sustained. The severe discipline ended to which he had been subjected, and he was assigned to duty in the parlours of the Eternal City.

In a short time, Matteo Boccacini's sunny nature and warm passions caused his disgrace. He

became enamored of a fair devotee, one of his charge—a dark-haired, lustrous-eyed, bewitching creature of the "Land of the Vine." Alas! the too susceptible young priest succumbed to the wiles of the "radiant maiden," and he fell in a most earthly and fleshly way. Poor Boccacini was immediately and openly charged with the enormity of his crime, prosecuted, and denounced. He was despoiled of his sacerdotal functions, and compelled to flee; became a wanderer upon the face of the earth, supping with sorrow, and in despair for companions throughout the remainder of his mundane pilgrimage.

For a short time after his unwarranted and sinful escapade he campaigned with the heroic Garibaldi; then he turned with appealing looks toward America, the haven for all who are oppressed; crossed the ocean, and in a few weeks began his eventful journey on this continent. Never again was he to behold the place of his birth, the chalky outlines of fair, beautiful Capri, which so gloriously begems the Mediterranean. The phosphorescent Bay of Naples, the sky, the sunshine and vine-clad hills of dear old Italy, were never more to stir his once impulsive nature, or quicken into life his now deadened heart.

Years rolled on; youth passed by and middle

age was upon the homeless priest, when, after having roamed wearily from place to place, visiting one Indian tribe here and another there, in the vain hope of discovering some clan, or people near unto nature's heart, whose souls were attuned to his own, who would receive him in the simplicity of his severe and pious penance, he arrived among the Kaws, or Kansas, whose reservation was in the lovely valley of the Neosho, a few miles below Council Grove. But that tribe, a dirty, despicable race, very suspicious, and withal not remarkable for their reverence of any religion, did not take kindly to the weary old man, who had entered their midst with the purest intentions: his pious zeal, his abstinence and self-denial made them fear to approach him. They did not understand that—

“When holy and devout religious men
 Are at their beads, 'tis hard to draw them thence,
 So sweet is zealous contemplation.”

The miserable savages looked upon him, the meek and humble pilgrim, as an intruder; said he was “bad medicine.” So Father Francesco was no more at ease with them in their rude skin lodges than he would have been in the gilded halls of the Vatican.

He then came to Council Grove, as stated—

came as the tramp has since come, unheralded and uninvited, but not to beg bread at the doors of its residents, as the latter now does. Nor did he come to tell off his beads in the presence of the vulgar curious, but went upon the hillside beyond the town, to seek the solitude and retirement of a natural cave in the limestone rock of the region, troubling no one; an enigma to the world, and a subject for the idle gossip.

There for five months he lived, accessible to but few, with whom, when he felt and recognized in them the quickened glow of a soul that believed in the Fatherhood of God and the Brotherhood of Man, he would talk in tenderest strains of everything that was good, true, and beautiful.

The “hermit priest,” as he was now called, had of earthly possessions so little that he could have vied with the lowly Nazarine in the splendor of his poverty. Of crucifixes, devotional mementoes, and other religious trinkets, sweetly suggestive of better and happier days, he had preserved a few. His greatest solace was in half a dozen well-thumbed small volumes, between whose covers none peered but himself. He was ever regular at his devotions; for notwithstanding he had grievously sinned, as he declared, he was constantly striving to outlive its horrid memory, and

to repair the injury he had done his Master's cause.

He possessed one article of property that tinged his sojourn at Council Grove with a delightfully romantic remembrance among the very limited number now living there, who knew of the vagaries of the remarkably strange man; these were sometimes his confidants and friends, within a limited degree. It was a rudely constructed mandolin, which during all the years of his erratic pilgrimage he had tenaciously clung to, until its exterior presented a confused mass of scratches and dents, indicative of hard usage. Despite all that, curious as it may seem, by some mysterious means its rich tones had been preserved in their original purity and depth.

On the evenings of Kansas' incomparable Indian summer, during the early part of which season he was living in his cave near Council Grove, the "hermit priest," seated on a projecting ledge at the mouth of his rocky and isolated retreat, would sweep the strings of his treasured instrument with a touch as light, deft, and sorrowfully tender as a maiden whose pure young heart had just been thrilled by its first breath of love.

To those who were so fortunate—and they were very few—as to be invited to spend an hour

with him, his vesper hymns, rendered in his exquisite tenor voice, were as soul-inspiring as the gentle earnestness of a young girl's prayer. His sometime Neapolitan songs and soft airs of his native isle were as sweet as the chant of the angels he invoked when in a deeply religious mood, and his heart-feeling tones mingled sadly with the sighing of the evening breeze in the dense foliage on the margin of the placid Neosho that flowed near by. Thus, in the calm enjoyment of his self-imposed solitude, he lived with

"The moss his bed, the cave his humble cell,
His food the fruits, his drink the crystal well."

Among the various languages necessary for the communication of ideas between the motley crowd comprising the civilization of the then remote region, there was none that Matteo Bocalini did not understand and speak fluently, so liberal had been his education in that particular.

Once, when a stabbed and dying Mexican, the victim of some gambling-quarrel among the drivers of the "bull-train" to which he was attached, asked a service for the repose of his soul, Father Francesco hastened to the anxious man's side. There he administered the last sacrament of the church to the expiring creature in his own lan-

guage, who died with a resigned look upon his face, as he listened to the absolving words he could perfectly understand, which was a thing of joy to the holy man who had performed the sacred office.

One day late in the month of October, now nearly thirty-six years ago, the "hermit priest" saw walking through the streets of the little village a dark-visaged person, clad in clerical garb, and whom Bocalini believed to be the lover of the woman he had wronged in his youth, and that the stranger, if it were he whom he suspected, could never be persuaded to think that Matteo was not wholly to be blamed for the life he had blasted.

He told his friends he could no longer tarry with them; he would go away to the mountains of New Mexico, seek another cave, rear again the blessed cross, emblem of his Master's suffering, and once more live in solitude, from which he had here somewhat strayed.

He frequently, when in a communicative mood, had talked much to them of the delights of absolute solitude. It was, he argued, the nurse of enthusiasm; that enthusiasm was the parent of genius; that solitude had always been eagerly sought for in every age; it was the inspiration of

the dominant religion of every nation; that their founders were men who, seeking the quiet and seclusion of caverns or the desert, and subordinating the flesh to the spirit, had visions of the "beyond." The veil hiding the better world had been lifted for them, and their teachings had come down to us through the æons, elevating man above the brute.

The next morning after the sudden appearance of the stranger whose presence had so discomposed the usually calm priest, a delicious morning in the month of "autumn's holocaust," when the breeze was billowing the russet-colored grass upon the virgin prairies, Father Francesco gathered up his few precious relics, and, accepting the escort of a caravan just ready to start for New Mexico, left Council Grove, his cave, and the warm friends he had made there, forever.

The caravan under the protection of which the frightened prelate went westward was owned by a Mexican don, a brother-in-law to Kit Carson. He still resides near the spot where the ill-fated Italian, a year or two after his wearisome journey across the Great Plains, was hurried to eternity.

This venerable Mexican and old-time voyageur of the almost obliterated Santa Fé trail, when I last visited him at his hospitable home in the

mountains, fourteen years ago, entertained me by relating some of the more prominent characteristics of his strange *compagnon du voyage* during that memorable trip with the "hermit priest" from Council Grove more than twenty years previously. He said that the strange man would never ride, either on horseback or in one of the wagons, despite the earnest invitation extended to him each recurring morning by the master of the caravan; preferring to trudge along uncomplainingly day after day during the sunny hours beside the plodding oxen through the alkali dust of the desert, and faltered not.

Neither would he at night partake of the shelter of a tent, constantly offered but as constantly and persistently refused, preferring to roll himself up in a single coarse wrap, seeking some quiet spot removed from the corral of wagons, where for an hour or two under the scintillating stars he would toll off his beads, or, accompanied by his mandolin, chant some sad refrain to the Virgin, until long after the camp had gone to sleep. For his subsistence he himself caught and cooked the prairie dog, ground squirrel, and gopher. Only occasionally, when hard pressed, would he accept a meal, which was constantly proffered by the Mexican teamsters, begging the "hermit

priest" to share with them; for in their love for the Catholic Church, to which they were so devoted, he seemed to their untutored minds a most zealous but humble exponent of their religious tenets and visible form of their sacred faith.

Thus reticent, thoughtful and devout, he marched with the caravan for many weeks, until at last the city of Holy Faith, the quaint old Spanish town of Santa Fé, was reached. There he parted company with his escort, and for nearly a year afterward wandered all over that portion of the Territory of New Mexico, and into Arizona, still seeking the Alnaschar of his dreams, a suitable abiding-place in the recesses of the hills, and a people whose souls might be made to attune with his. But he miserably failed in all that he desired during his sad pilgrimage throughout the Southwest. Then, turning northward again, he slowly and almost despairingly retraced his steps until he arrived in the sequestered valley of the Sapillo, where he at last found a humble class and his coveted cave on the summit of the mighty mountain described at the opening of this chapter.

There, content after so many years of unsatisfied wandering, he commenced that life of religious ministrations, and exercised those unselfish

acts of kindness and love, whose remembrance is imprinted so indelibly on the hearts of his devoted followers; for,

“Through suffering he soothed, and through sickness he nursed.”

There again, under the constellations, which nowhere else shine more brilliantly, were the strains of his mandolin, and the rich notes of that magnificent voice, heard by the enchanted people who listened each evening at the doors of their rude adobe huts in the valley below the huge hill that cast its great shadow over them.

Notwithstanding the “hermit priest” had found a class congenial to his soul’s demands, his eccentricities still clung to him. His persistency in living apart from his chosen people enforced them to always speak of him as “El Solitario” (The Solitary Man).

He would visit among them to solace and nurse the sick, and give absolution to the dying, which his and their religion so beautifully promised, but he would never break bread within their hospitable doors; preferring, and insisting, always, upon a crust and a cup of cold water outside.

Nor would he sleep upon the soft woolen *colchons* which even the poorest of New-Mexican homes

afford, but, absorbed by devout thoughts, wrapped himself in his single coarse blanket and laid himself on the bare ground; or, if it was stormy, in some outhouse with the sheep and goats. This, of course, was part of his self-imposed penance, from which he never deviated, rigorous as it was.

One day, after his familiar and beloved face had been missed for more than a week by his devotees, a sorrowful party went out to seek him. They found him dead on the rugged trail to his lonely home; his beads enfolded in his delicately shaped fingers, and his countenance wearing a saint-like expression. A poisoned dagger in his heart, by the hand of an assassin, had accomplished the foul deed which for a whole lifetime, during every moment of the unhappy man’s active and dreaming hours, was a continually disturbing fear.

Thus passed away, as he had predicted in his youth, the eccentric but holy Matteo Boccacini, “Hermit Priest” of the old “Santa Fé Trail,” and the “El Solitario” of the New Mexico mountains. A man of sorrow and grief, yet with as much repentance, and as many penances as sins; one of those ethereal beings who might become physically unclean, but never spiritually impure.

For years after his departure from Council

Grove, the "hermit priest's" cave was an object of much interest. Until within a very short period, when the quarrymen tore down its last vestige, upon its time-worn walls could be traced, rudely carved, his name, "Matteo Boccacini," a cross, "Jesu Maria," and "Capri"—all so dear to the lonely and sad man's heart.

