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La Bruja

By LOLITA H. POOLER

THE little villa of Bienvenida, in spite of its cheerful name, crouched on the knees of the dark Manzanos range. Through the narrow pass in the mountains which led into the plaza of the town, little of the outer world ever squeezed. Bienvenida, named by some truly grateful priests, who long ago had found haven there after the tortuous mountain trail, invited few of the denizens of the later world to bring their marks of contrast to its antique, but satisfactory ways.

On a morning in early June one family of the town was awake early in an early rising community. "Inez, it is five o'clock and Nicolas is waiting outside for you," called a woman's voice, edged with sharpness and middle age. "Si madre, I know; I saw him through the window," and the slender, dark-eyed girl again looked at herself in the old mirror that sent a zig-zag reflection of eighteen years of youth and comeliness. Today would end maidenhood for her. "Su novio" was ready to take her to Alcalde. She held up her veil gingerly, kissed her mother, and walked gravely out to the wagon. Her madrina was in the back seat—a stout woman with an olive complexion, whose figure, enveloped in a pink dress, reminded one of a large upholstered chair. Inez got in beside her, while in the front seat sat Nicolas with his best man.

The journey to Alcalde, where the parish priest lived, was never regarded by bridal pairs as an inconvenience, but rather as one of the cherished traditional customs of the village, a part of life that was unalterable.

While the mountains were wrapped in their gauzelike cover of gray mist, the solitary farm wagon creaked and rumbled noisily over the rutted road. It was cold that early June morning, but the four in the wagon did not seem to mind; the chill of the canon was familiar to them before

even the most blistering summer afternoon. As the sun broke through the flame-colored glow that hung over the mountains, the mist gradually receded into the deep blue ravines. Now the air changed, and gave a comfortable feeling of warmth. The scolding and twittering of the birds in the cottonwood trees stopped as all things burst into harmonious life. Meadowlarks that sat on the barbed wire fences drew attention to their brilliant yellow breasts by singing their clear, throaty greeting. Jack rabbits nibbled at their breakfasts in the fields, while now and then one would hop leisurely across the road where the first mellow rays of sunlight stretched across the wagon tracks. The men were silent, except for the sharp "giddiyaps" spoken to the ever weary horses. Groaning and lurching, the wagon managed to ride the chuck holes. Manuela clutched the side of the seat with one hand, as she continually righted her large straw hat with the other.

"Do you know, Inez, that Placida was taken ill yesterday?"

"Yes, but she will be able to finish preparing the wedding feast," was the absent minded reply.

"No, your mother told me that Tomasa was going to help her today." At this the girl turned pale. "Oh, it can't be true; Tomasa is a witch!"

"So they say; perhaps her heart will soften today; she may not do any harm." Inez shuddered, "I am afraid when I think of her. She is so small and so dried up. Her white, pock-marked face has a ghostly look when she speaks, her hoarse voice makes me think of the crows cawing in the desert, while they are waiting for death to come to some unfortunate living creature."

They neared the church, whose sun-baked walls seemed to offer Inez the peace that had been dispelled by uneasy thoughts of the future.

Adjoining the old mission church was the parish house, hidden by a high, adobe wall. The wooden door, weather-beaten and creaky, opened into a patio that seemed to carry

one into a different world. A large bed of purple and pink verbenas made a lovely splash of color in the center of the yard, while a Tree of Heaven in one corner and a cluster of lilac bushes at the farther end offered shade to the brilliantly colored birds that darted out unexpectedly. There were gaily plumaged pheasants, a chattering magpie that seemed to resent their approach, the green and red parrot who looked silently at them from his perch suspended from the vine-covered porch, and the lovely peacock who spread his gorgeous tail, confident that his looks and his struttings made him superior to all creatures.

As the four stepped into the patio, a screen door closed, and rapid steps advanced toward them down the long porch. The stocky, grey-bearded priest, who had spent so many years here, greeted the bridal party in his usual friendly manner, with a Frenchman's vivacity and courtliness, which, mellowed and modified by his humble Mexican surroundings, seemed to make him one with the old walls, bright flowers and gentle things that claimed him. The priest bade them go into the church and wait, and they reverently stepped through the wide doors into the cool nave. Each one stopped at the holy water font to make the sign of the cross. They walked slowly toward the altar as the priest came out from the sacristy and knelt for a moment at the foot of the crucifix. Standing at the communion rail, the words of the "padre" echoed and re-echoed in the vault of the adobe church, until it seemed that all the corners and crevices were filled with ghostly, unseen worshippers, mocking the solemnity of the marriage vows. The young bride shivered, for the clay walls still held the frostiness of the night. From the freshly sprinkled floor of hard packed earth, a musty smell crept through the sanctuary.

After the ceremony, the bridal party bowed their heads in silent prayer before the blue and white statue of the Blessed Mother, who looked down on them with eyes strangely compassionate for paint and plaster, as if she wished to spare the dark-eyed bride any anxiety for the

future. Silently they all walked out of the church, and Nicolas, after untying the horses, got into the back seat with his bride. Framed in her white tulle veil, she was more serious than the customary bride returning to Bienvenida. Along the twisting road through clusters of heavy boulders, occasionally crossing the choppy little río, the couple rode with occasional comments on the countryside, the priest's good wishes to them, the wedding celebration to follow their arrival home. Inez's thoughts turned often to Tomasa. She was perceptibly disturbed.

"Nicolas, are you afraid of Tomasa?" she finally asked.

"Isn't she a witch?" the young man returned.

"Yes, she is, and I am afraid, for she is to prepare the wedding feast. Had the "padre" been able to come to our banquet, it would be different, because I know that witches cannot do any evil if a priest is present."

"No tengas miedo," smiled Nicolas, "I will protect you. Tomasa cannot hurt you in Valencia, where we shall live." Nicolas had already built a new house in Valencia, of adobes not six months cut, for his esposa. His heart had been filled with happiness while his brothers and a neighbor put up the walls and laid the timbers in the days before the wedding. Valencia was twelve miles beyond Alcalde, farther down the valley toward the bosque of the Rio Grande. The thought of being far away from Tomasa was reassuring to Inez. She relaxed against her husband's arm.

Upon their arrival home, the musicians, who had been standing at the gate tuning their violin and guitar, began playing the Schottische that for many years had served as the wedding march in all the surrounding villages.

The bridal party led the procession into a large, cool room that had been prepared for the reception of the guests, while the blind fiddler and his companion brought up the rear. Nicolas and Inez sat on the chairs which had large bows of white ribbon tied on them. The wedding guests now began to arrive; old and young walked gravely up to the couple and shook hands. All chairs along the walls were

soon occupied, and now and then a young child was lifted from a chair to make room for an older person. Women hushed their babies, and the young girls stood about in admiring groups, their occasional words of praise bringing a smile of gratitude to Inez's otherwise serious face.

Savory odors from spicy concoctions stole in from the kitchen—stewing meat, chili sauce, blue cornmeal, and frying onions. Then came the signal that the feast was being served. The bride and groom were the first to be seated at a long table in the adjoining room, where elderly women bustled about placing the steaming food on the table. There was a bowl with "sopa de pan," a broth into which pieces of bread had been broken; from another bowl came the delicious odor of chicken that had been cooked for hours with rice and flavored with onion and garlic. In the center of the table there was a large platter piled high with egg-shaped croquettes made of ground meat, chile and raisins. No wedding dinner is complete without them. Several heavy glass bowls filled with canned fruit, and gay colored plates, were conspicuous for the pink-and-yellow-iced store cookies that were heaped on them. Coffee was served to everyone, regardless of his age or size. Men, women and children solemnly came into the banquet room and sat down to the feast. A small boy led the blind musicians into this room to play during the meal. The thorough enjoyment of the dinner was manifested by the number of times that the bowls were taken to the kitchen and refilled.

Inez, whose long fast was to be broken with this delicious feast, was enjoying the "sopa," when suddenly she thought she heard her mother's voice in the kitchen. However, upon looking up, instead of her mother she saw Tomasa standing in the doorway, staring at her with an ugly, uncanny expression that was not friendly. Inez turned pale. She placed the uplifted spoon back on her plate; she was no longer hungry. After a few moments Nicolas whispered, "What is the matter, Inez, why don't you eat?"

"I'm not hungry any more." She sat there patiently, waiting for him to finish, and then the two walked into the main room, again taking their accustomed chairs. All afternoon the music whined and sobbed in Inez's ears. She felt she could bear it no longer; an endless stream of people coming and going; the heat, the stifling room, everything palled on her. It was strange, she thought, that it should be so on her wedding day. She loved Nicolas, and had been looking forward to this occasion, the greatest event in a girl's life. What could be the matter? Why did "La Golondrina" and "La Paloma" fill her with sad thoughts and gloomy foreboding? She had always associated the sweetest pleasures of her rather uneventful life with these melodies.

That evening a long hall, lighted with two large kerosene lamps, showed wooden benches lined along the wall; the rude board floor was being generously sprinkled with floor wax. Strumming sounds came from the farther end of the hall, where the "musicos" of the evening sat with their accordion and guitar. The summer twilight was slowly changing into the starlit night; this dance was the closing event of another village celebration. Soon the guests came trailing in. Little children came with their mothers. Those too young to walk were being carried, and others clutched at their mother's dresses, or followed in the rear with an expression of awe and wonder in their questioning brown eyes. The grandmothers in their long, full black skirts and loose blouses almost entirely covered by their long, fringed black shawls, came to watch the "baile" and care for the little ones. Young girls sat in groups or with their parents. Most of the men stood in the doorway, quietly discussing the affairs of community interest.

As the musicians began, with the waltz "Sobre las olas," Nicolas got up from his chair and offered Inez his arm. They walked sedately around the room before starting to dance; the others followed in the same manner. The noise of scuffling feet on the rude board floor made a sound

of greatest commotion. As the evening progressed, small children were stretched out on the benches fast asleep, while tired grandmothers ceased to look interested. Inez looked perturbed and weary. By twelve o'clock the guests had begun to thin out, and an hour later the kerosene lamps were cold; the village was in darkness. . . .

It was February in the villa of Valencia. Crisp, clear sunshine played around the doorsteps of the village, and in the corners of the steps and patios patches of snow covered the ice lingering from bitter nights and cold mornings. Seven years have moved by for the thin woman, sitting for a few moments outside her home to catch the warmth of nature's lamp. Her parched skin made her face look leathery, almost the color of her brown eyes. Sighing, she got up slowly and went into the clean, poorly furnished room, with its little fireplace tucked in the corner, the inside of which had been freshly plastered; the cheap, white iron bed, the washstand with a mirror hanging over it, and two straight chairs, made the mud floor look barren and cold. The newly whitewashed walls were bare except for an old, crudely fashioned crucifix, that hung above the fireplace. Geraniums of bright pink and deep red, growing in coffee cans, stood in the deep-silled window. All was very still. The winter sunshine softly found its way through a crack in the green window shade and fell on the holy crucifix.

Inez walked into the kitchen to look at the beans she had put on several hours before. She stirred them, and then put another stick of cedar wood in the stove. Slowly she opened the door to the bedroom and walked toward the bed. She lay down, covering herself with the shawl that had been neatly folded on a chair.

A knock at the door announced a visitor; one of the neighbors entered, a woman of forty, dressed in a black skirt and a gray calico waist, partly covered by the black shawl that hung from her shoulders.

"Take this chair next to my bed, Amalia," and Inez motioned to her caller. Amalia sighed with pity as she sat

down. "It is strange," she began, "that you do not get well."

"Yes, we have tried all the remedies, and Nicolas even bought some medicine at the store."

Amalia drew a little closer to the bed, looked around furtively and whispered, "La Bruja, it may be that you are bewitched; God forbid that anyone should hear me say that," and the older woman hastily made the sign of the cross. "Mi abuelo used to tell of a woman he knew who suffered so." The two talked on, half whispering, half in fear.

The light of the sun was beginning to fade as Nicolas came into the room. Amalia rose from the chair, bidding the younger woman goodbye, and left the house. Taking a match from his pocket, Nicolas scratched it on the door-sill and lit the piece of candle in an old brass candle-stick that stood in its niche in the wall. He sat down on the chair just vacated, and from his pocket took out a small bag of tobacco with the necessary brown paper. Slowly, but deftly, he rolled a cigarette and lit it at the candle. He had an expression of anxiety as he looked at his wife, whose face seemed distorted through the haze of smoke.

"You see, Nicolas, I'm not going to get well." Inez spoke with a finality gathered from the afternoon's conversation. "Will you take me to Bienvenida soon, so that I can be with my parents?" Inez looked at him appealingly.

The carefree youth of seven years ago had changed into a stronger, heavier, but somewhat stooped man, who looked far older than his years. "Ay Dios, Inez, I'm so sad, but," he continued hopefully, "it may be that someone in Bienvenida can cure you." The woman turned her face toward the wall, and the candle sputtered as a moth came too close.

When the day arrived for Inez to leave, a gray mantle covered the sky, while the land seemed hushed before the stillness of the trees. It was with difficulty that Inez slowly climbed into the wagon beside her husband. As they drove along, the countryside seemed very dreary with heavy

clouds casting additional gloom over these two patient beings. Shivering with cold, the sick woman wrapped the blanket closer about her.

"How glad I will be when we are there."

Nicolas looked at the sky. "It is cold; I think it will snow."

After an hour's drive, they drew up before the house Inez had left as a bride. Dona Perfecta came out to the gate to meet them, and with her arm about her daughter, tenderly helped her indoors, while the curious neighbors flocked to doors and windows in order to see what was going on. How well Inez remembered the morning she stood before the same disconcerting mirror arranging her veil. The lovely old spool bedstead and the cheap dresser offered a strange contrast of the old and the new. In the corner of the room was a small adobe fireplace that sent out a cheery glow into the scantily furnished room.

Late that afternoon, Inez was sitting in front of the open fire sipping a cup of strong black coffee, when a knock at the door announced the entrance of a visitor. It was Luz, a cousin.

"Buenas tardes, Inez, how are you feeling? Your mother told me you were sick." She brought a chair from the other side of the room and placed it beside her young relative.

"Yes, I think I'm not going to get well," Inez answered feebly.

Luz let her shawl fall to her shoulders. She smoothed back her hair with both hands. After several moments of silence, spasmodically broken by sighs from the invalid, Luz ventured to say, "Inez, you have been bewitched."

"I know that is so; Amalia told me so at Valencia. I am afraid to tell anyone, because I thought something might happen to the rest of my family." The thin cheeks of the sick woman grew more drawn, the eyes more faded, at the thought of sickness to her dear ones.

"It was Tomasa who bewitched you," Luz continued, "and I know how to cure you, for an old Indian in Isleta told me how to break the evil spell that La Bruja casts over people."

"Why should Tomasa wish to harm me?" asked Inez, repeating a question often in her mind, but not before expressed.

Luz drew her chair closer. "Don't you know that she has always wanted her daughter to marry Nicolas? If you had waited much longer," whispered Luz, "Quien sabe?" With that remark she put her shawl over her head, as she walked toward the door. "I will come back tonight."

After the family had finished their supper of beans, coffee and tortillas, some slight joy in all their breasts at having Inez with them, even though sick, they sat around the bright fire in Inez's room quietly discussing the neighbors and their affairs. At nine o'clock Luz came in. One by one the family got up and went into the next room. After they had trailed out, Luz closed the door, and blew out the candles that were on the table. From under her shawl she brought forth a medium sized paper bag, which she placed on the floor by the chair she was going to occupy. Then she carefully folded her shawl and put it at the foot of the bed. Seating herself before the fire, she said, "Come closer, Inez, I want you to watch me very closely." Thrusting her hand into the bag, she took out three red "chiles" and with great care broke off the stems. Next she proceeded to remove the seeds very gingerly, in order not to break the pods, and after this she handed these to the other woman, to whom she motioned to fill them with some salt that she had brought. Inez, trembling with excitement, filled the peppers. Luz, noticing that Inez worked with shaking hands, went over to the bed and took one of the blankets to wrap around her.

"Now throw these pods into the fire, one by one; the second one must not leave your hands until you can no longer see the ashes of the first, and the third must not be

thrown in until the ashes of the second have mingled with the wood ashes." Inez threw the "chile" into the heart of the fire; it sputtered, hissed, then burned, and finally lost its identity. The second one, however, seemed to burn more slowly, but finally its glowing shell succumbed to the heat of the fire and followed the fate of the first. It was some time before the third caught fire. Luz bent over in the chair nearer the flames, with her eyes fixed on the object just thrown in. Inez sat there, her teeth chattering in spite of the heavy cover around her, while Luz murmured inaudible phrases with her eyes fixed on the fire. Now there was a crackling and spitting in the flames; the firelight grew dim while the "chile" gleamed faintly. Luz clasped her hands, her face had a strange look. Suddenly, out from the dying embers leaped a monstrous black cat. It gave one jump, and disappeared through the closed window into the darkness.

Inez broke into a dripping perspiration; she went to her bed exhausted, and fell into a sound sleep almost immediately, the first night's rest in many years that had not been disturbed by a series of horrible dreams.

The next evening, at nine, the same plan was followed as on the evening before. The same monstrous black cat made its momentary appearance without leaving any trace. On the third night when Luz came, she seemed somewhat disturbed.

"Inez, if the cat jumps out of the fire again tonight, I will not be able to help you." Silently, the two women watched the flames as they slowly consumed the pods. A flare of light threw fantastic shadows on the whitewashed walls. The glow from the fire disclosed the strained look on the faces of the two sitting in the semi-darkness. When the third "chile" was thrown into the fireplace, the silence became tense; Luz was rapidly murmuring the magic words, while Inez held the blanket tightly around her, her sunken brown eyes gleaming with an unusual brightness. However, the flames did not grow dim as on the preceding nights; as

for the sacrifice, it slowly crumbled and could be seen no more. Both women leaned back in their chairs, completely worn out by their ordeal, but a sigh of relief expressed their feelings more genuinely than any words could possibly have done.

"Tomorrow we must go to the church and thank our Blessed Mother that it was not too late to cure you." So, with a whispered goodnight, Luz left the house.

In the course of the following morning, Inez was relating the experience of the past three nights to the family, and how Luz told her that Tomasa could only harm her if she accepted "sopa" from her; once she refused, the evil person would never come to her again.

At the end of the two weeks, Nicolas and Inez were on their way home, a happy and grateful couple. They had been in the house but a few minutes, when Tomasa walked in with a covered bowl.

"Inez," she croaked, "take some of the 'sopa' that I have brought you; it will give you strength."

"Gracias, I will put it where it won't harm anyone." Inez gingerly took the bowl and threw it out into the field. The ugly, pock-marked face became hideous with anger. The woman's shoulders drooped and she seemed to become smaller, as she walked away, trembling with emotion. Inez was not afraid any more, because she knew the creature would never enter the house again.

Several times during the night Inez was awakened by the sound of someone sobbing and moaning in the meadow. She knew it was La Bruja lamenting the loss of her power.