

THE BRIDE OF SAN LORENZO

By Louise Winter

THE most beautiful woman in Havana had sold herself for a title. So ran the rumor through the Opera House that night of "Faust."

Estela Diago was the reigning belle of the Cuban capital. Surely she justified the most extravagant praise of her admirers as she entered her box this night, attended by her father and the man whose diamonds sparkled on her breast and in the coils of her magnificent dark hair.

Over her jeweled fan she nodded with indolent grace to her friends in adjoining boxes. She knew what people were saying, and she was quite conscious that the vast audience was staring at her with curiosity, but she had schooled herself to play her chosen part, and her serenity was undisturbed.

The eldest of six daughters, and the beauty of an old but impoverished Cuban family, a wealthy marriage had been pointed out to Estela as her duty in life. No sacrifice had been considered too great to give her the proper setting of gowns, carriages and the other means of making a good appearance, and her sisters had uncomplainingly submitted to remain in the background that the idol of their hearts might blaze abroad.

To do her justice, Estela had protested at first against the favoritism, but her objections had been overruled.

"When you marry a prince, *hijita mia*, you can clothe your sisters in silks and laces," said her mother, soothingly.

"But, *mamaita*, there are no princes in Cuba, nothing but recently ennobled shopkeepers," Estela had answered, scornfully.

One of these same shopkeepers whom she affected to despise had begun to pay her serious attentions.

The Marques de San Lorenzo had come to Havana a barefooted boy, and by native shrewdness and unceasing toil had risen to be the richest merchant in the city. Though the great world sneered, and hinted that he had not kept his hands clean during his struggle for fortune, after he visited Italy and was ennobled by the Pope his ascent into society became assured.

There were certain houses where he was not received, but the world at large ate his dinners, danced at his balls, and offered him its fairest daughters in marriage.

He was a little man, bald of head and sharp of face, with hungry black eyes and thin, cruel lips under his heavy, dark mustache. At the time of their meeting Estela was eighteen and he forty, and she laughed at him and his wooing. She hugged her freedom to her breast, dreaming of love and happiness and all the romance of youth.

"You will take San Lorenzo when he offers himself," urged her mother.

"It would be the old story of Beauty and the Beast!" and Estela laughed merrily. "Surely you do not ask me to marry *him*!"

Her mother sighed. "Think of the advantages of such a match, my child. I hear he has bought the Valdes palace on the Calzada, and you always desired to live there."

The girl's face clouded. "Yes, but not with San Lorenzo. What has become of Antonio?"

"Your old playmate—you are not thinking of him, are you?"

"You mentioned the sale of the palace, and I remembered little Antonio, who dreamed of writing verses that should make him as famous as Lope de Vega."

"A poet! a beggar! Well, he has sold the palace to pay his father's debts, and now he has nothing, like the rest of us." Then, persuasively: "Estela, San Lorenzo will be at the Aguilars' to-night; remember, he wishes to marry you, and we are frightfully poor."

But for five years Estela resisted her fate, and it grew to be public speculation whether she would finally accept him or not.

His ardor increased with continued opposition, until the possession of her came to be his supreme ambition, and he had no eyes for other women.

Then Estela grew tired of the struggle, and gave in. It had been an unequal contest from the beginning, for she had known that a wealthy marriage was her only means of re-quitting her family for their devotion.

Many had wooed her, but she was schooled in repression and had yielded her favor to none.

To-night, as she faced her world, a tremor swept through her of fear for the future, of regret for the past. And the past was present in the person of one who had long been absent. As she lowered her gaze to the parquet she met the burning, compelling look of a man who seemed to draw her soul to his. She recognized him instantly, and her face suddenly burned with happiness.

"At whom are you looking so intently, Estela *mia*?" breathed San Lorenzo in her ear.

Estela smiled radiantly. "It is my old friend, Antonio Valdes. I did not know he had returned to Havana," she answered.

"There must be no old friends, no new friends; I am to be everything to you!" cried San Lorenzo, sharply.

"If you can. You remember I made no pretense of love. I will marry you because you are rich, that is all. Make me love you if you can!"

And her tone indicated that she thought such a task impossible.

As they left the Opera House and passed between the rows of young men who lined the passageway to the street, Estela's eyes sought and found Antonio's, and in the rapid interchange of glances was a mutual confession of love.

Estela's window overlooked a deserted garden where as children she and Antonio had played together under the trees and had splashed barefoot in the old stone fountain; where, too, in after times she had sat on the stone seat while he lay on the grass at her feet and recited his verses.

Very dear had been those old days of childhood and youth, but when her parents had realized that she was fourteen and Antonio seventeen their intimacy was abruptly ended. Antonio came to the house, but he no longer saw her alone, and though she rebelled openly she was too honorable to meet him secretly. But at night she knew he went to the old garden, and often when she opened her blinds in the morning she would find a copy of some delicate verses that he had thrown up to her balcony.

He had gone away filled with the desire to make a name for himself, and Estela had not heard of him in years. Now, at last, he had returned, just when she had pledged herself to another.

Marta, her old nurse, took the fillet of diamonds from her hair and placed it reverently in the satin case.

"So *niña* Estela will be a marquesa," she said, with the familiarity of an old servant.

"Perhaps," answered Estela, musingly; "unless my prince turns up. You would prefer me to marry a prince, wouldn't you, Marta?"

Marta fumbled with the clasp of the diamond necklace. "I would rather you married Don Antonio," she whispered, rapidly.

"Oh!" and Estela bit her lip, as if in pain. "Hush! what are you saying?"

"Señorita, have you seen him?"

"Yes, yes, to-night, at the opera."

"He said he should go. I met him in the street to-day, and he asked for you, and he gave me this. I was afraid to give it to you before the señora."

Estela took the package and unwrapped it hastily. It was a small book, exquisitely bound, and lettered in gold: "*Mi Reina, Mi Corazon!*" It was a collection of his poems. Many of them she was certain, and the others she felt, had been written to her.

Long after she had dismissed Marta she sat poring over these passionate avowals of his love, and when her pain had grown too great to be borne silently she put down the book and opened the shutters leading to her balcony.

"Surely my thoughts must reach to him! If I could only tell him that I understand!" she whispered. The soft night air kissed her hot cheeks, and the leaves in the garden below murmured their sympathy.

"I am betrothed—I must not forget that!" she added, trying to quiet the pain in her heart.

San Lorenzo came to breakfast at eleven.

In the morning light he looked older and uglier than ever, and Estela shrank from the touch of his lips on her hand. He presented her with a jewel case, and she opened it mechanically. A superb necklace of turquoises and diamonds greeted her eyes.

"San Lorenzo, how beautiful!" exclaimed her mother, rapturously, and the younger girls crowding around uttered cries of delight.

Estela relinquished the case into her mother's hands. Turquoises were her favorite stones. Antonio had promised her a girdle of them when he achieved fame and fortune, and now she was to wear this necklace as the price of her soul.

"Why don't you say something, *niña*? It is magnificent!" admonished Señora de Diago, sharply, but Estela only smiled.

"San Lorenzo understands one always decks the victim in a sacrifice," she said, insolently.

For a moment San Lorenzo looked hatred at the beautiful, cold woman so soon to be his wife. He almost contemplated giving her her liberty and allowing gossip to say the worst, as it certainly would in the case of a broken engagement; then the fierce desire to hold her in his arms, to tame her, rose in his heart, and he stifled his better impulse.

Estela complained of a headache and ate no breakfast; but San Lorenzo appeared to enjoy the modest repast, and tried to make himself agreeable to all the members of the family.

Carmen, the second daughter, watched him from under her heavy-lidded eyes. She had none of Estela's beauty, but she had a sharp tongue and a keen wit.

"He will crush the spirit out of Estela, but I could crush the devil out of him. If I could only try!" she thought; and then she turned and made some caustic comment on his enemy, the Marques de Campostelo.

San Lorenzo laughed, and showed his gleaming white teeth in appreciation. "So he looks like a rabbit, you think, with his long face and big ears?" he repeated; and then he glanced at Estela.

Campostelo had been a rival suitor for her hand, but she had dismissed him as she had the others, and now she met her fiancé's eyes fearlessly.

"Better look like a rabbit than a wolf; it is not so dangerous," she drawled, maliciously. "You know you have always said that San Lorenzo looks like a hungry wolf, Carmen."

Carmen paled, but she was sitting next to San Lorenzo, and under cover of the laugh that followed her discomfiture she whispered to him, rapidly: "That is because I am afraid of you. I feel as if you wanted to eat me."

San Lorenzo turned his head in her direction, and met her eyes.

Curious, green eyes they were, shadowed by long black lashes, and languorous and alluring.

For one moment he gazed, then his

evil face darkened. "So I do when you look at me like that," he answered, in tones as low as her own.

Carmen thrilled with triumph; she had won a moment's consideration on her own account. He had gazed at her, spoken to her as a woman, not merely as a member of his fiancée's family.

"What would you give me if I rid you of San Lorenzo?" she asked of Estela, later in the day.

Estela was sewing. She glanced up from her work in amazement.

"Rid me of him! What do you mean?" she demanded in return.

Carmen drew up a stool and sat at her sister's feet. "You hate him—don't protest, *hermana mia*; let us be truthful—you hate him, and you love Antonio Valdes," she began.

"Carmen!" ejaculated Estela, sharply.

"I know what I am talking about. Last night, after you sent Marta away, you did not go to bed—you sat for hours poring over a little white book, and then you went out on your balcony and cried. I saw the book, and I knew that it was Antonio's verses. Poor Antonio, how he loved you. And you promised to wait for him; you know you did, Estela."

Every word that Carmen uttered made Estela's wound bleed afresh, and the younger girl, feeling more sure of her ground, went on: "Of course you were both children then, but I can't help feeling that neither of you has forgotten, and if San Lorenzo would only set you free and take me in your stead, it would keep the money in the family and give you your chance of happiness."

Estela smiled derisively. "Do you think he will give me up for you, little sister?"

Carmen's eyes darkened with anger. "Stranger things than that have happened," she ventured.

But Estela shook her head. "You talk nonsense, Carmen. San Lorenzo has loved me for five years; it is my beauty he admires, not my heart, not my intellect; and what would you offer him instead? You are not even pretty, my sister. Forgive me if I speak

plainly, but you asked for the truth between us, and truth is often brutal."

"You took all the beauty there was in the family, Estela; nevertheless, if you will let me try, I think I can take San Lorenzo from you," and Carmen's voice shook with emotion.

"Try, then; you have my good wishes, but I fear your plan is hopeless," returned Estela, indulgently.

That night, at the opera, Carmen, dressed simply in gray, sat modestly beside Estela, and seemed to shrink from the blaze of admiration that enveloped her beautiful sister.

Once she dropped her fan, and San Lorenzo stooped to pick it up.

As he handed it to her he touched her fingers, and the touch thrilled him strangely. He looked into her eyes; they glowed with fire, and her mouth trembled.

Greatly disturbed, he moved closer to Estela and reveled in the thought that the most beautiful woman in Havana had promised to be his wife; but in spite of himself his glances strayed now and then to the slight little gray-clad figure with the maddening eyes.

Estela was gazing down into the parquet, where Antonio sat worshipping her, and her unhappiness was for a time forgotten.

After the second act he made his way to her box.

Diago greeted him warmly. Antonio was the son of an old friend, and he questioned him about his stay abroad and the success he was beginning to enjoy.

Estela said little, but the smile that lingered about her lips was enough for Antonio.

"That wretched little upstart may have won her promise, but I still hold her heart," he said to himself as he left the Opera House.

Again that night Estela sought her balcony, dreaming of the past. "Antonio, Antonio!" She breathed his name softly, and then, as if in answer, to her ears came wafted gently: "Estela, *mi reina!*"

Did she imagine it, or was there a stir among the trees in the old gar-

den? She listened intently, strained her eyes, and finally made out a shadowy form beside the old wall.

"Estela!" came once more that soft whisper.

"Oh! It is you, Antonio!"

"Just one word." He was standing close to the wall, almost underneath her balcony. "Ah, my soul! my queen! Tell me, do you still love me?"

Estela trembled. "Yes," she murmured. "But go, go, Antonio, I beseech you!" she implored. "Someone will overhear!"

"Say it but once again," he pleaded.

"I love you. *Adios!*"

She was gone, and the poet was left to his varied reflections.

Antonio had won fame and some money abroad, and he had come home to claim the woman he had installed in his heart, only to find that he was too late. But the bitterness of his discovery was mitigated by the shy avowal he had surprised in her eyes the night before, and now he was willing to dare all things for her sake, since she had confessed she loved him.

Each night thereafter he repaired to the old garden, and each night Estela appeared for a few moments on her balcony. To her these half-hours were the only bright spots in her long days, for she still doubted Carmen's ability to effect the transfer of San Lorenzo's affections, and she herself dared not break the engagement.

Her father was deeply involved in debt, and only the prospect of her marriage kept the creditors at bay. If she broke with San Lorenzo she would ruin her parents, and after the sacrifices they had made for her she could not buy her happiness at such a price.

But Carmen was still confident of ultimate success. As Estela's manner became more mocking, her own grew yielding, until San Lorenzo began to turn to her for comfort after every rebuff from his fiancée.

One night, as he assisted her to alight from the carriage, her foot slipped and she fell into his arms.

For a moment she made no effort to free herself, and her lips brushed against his cheek. "Wolf, let me go!" she murmured.

His arms closed around her.

"Never! I shall eat you now!" he replied, exultantly; but Carmen, fearing she had gone too far, struggled from his embrace.

Estela had witnessed the little comedy with wonder, and when Carmen followed her into her room, she asked: "How could you let the beast hold you in his arms?"

"I stumbled."

"Purposely?"

Carmen shrugged her shoulders.

"Don't do anything foolish," Estela warned, coldly. "I could not accept my liberty at the expense of your good name."

Carmen's eyes flashed. "You are more careful of *my* good name than you are of your own!" she retorted, hotly.

"What do you mean?"

"Merely that you are willing enough to meet Antonio at night, when you think no one knows."

"Carmen, I only speak to him from my balcony," protested Estela.

"I know, but each night, when you open your shutters, I lie awake and listen until you close them again, so that I can warn you if others suspect and come to spy on you. Don't thank me; it is my game as well as yours; but don't play the hypocrite with me. I intend to marry San Lorenzo, and when you get your freedom I suppose you will marry Antonio. Why you should wish for a continuance of poverty I cannot understand. I should think you would be sick of it; but each to her own taste. Will you give me your white mull, Estela? I want something pretty to wear to the Marques's fête."

Estela went to her wardrobe.

"Choose what you wish; make yourself as attractive as you can, and good luck to you, my little Marquesa!" she said, as she opened the door with a flourish.

Carmen examined the contents critically. "This time next year I

shall not be wearing your old clothes," she remarked. "I want only the white mull; it suits my plans to dress simply."

Estela's eyes were full of interest. "Child, you are very young to tempt fate, and you are so clever I am beginning to realize that you may succeed." She spoke musingly. "I am almost afraid to let you go on. Remember, marriage is a bond you cannot break."

Carmen laughed. "Do you wish to draw back? Are you regretting your part of the bargain?" she demanded.

Estela's face clouded. "If trouble comes to you I shall blame myself for it."

"Trouble!" repeated Carmen, scornfully. "My troubles will end the day I become San Lorenzo's bride. There is no misery like being poor, and I hate trying to keep up appearances on nothing a year!"

Estela sighed, but said no more. She had not breathed a word of Carmen's scheme to Antonio. Until to-night it had seemed wholly visionary. Now it must be confronted as a possibility. If it proved successful, she would be free to bestow her hand where her heart had already gone.

San Lorenzo was giving a fête to celebrate his saint's day.

All fashionable Havana was invited, and many accepted for the sake of the future Marquesa, whose nuptial day was set for a month hence.

As Estela stood beside her betrothed, to receive his guests, her beauty seemed divine. She was robed in soft, shimmering folds of white, and on her breast was a rose-wreath of diamonds, his latest gift.

When Antonio was announced a faint flush rose to her cheek, and her hand touched his guiltily.

After a while he drifted to her side again. "How strange to think that you will be mistress here, after all," he murmured, glancing down the long gallery. "San Lorenzo has restored its pristine beauties, and only

to-night have I realized what my home was in the days of its grandeur."

Estela's face contracted with pain. "Does it hurt you to see your old home in his possession?" she asked, tenderly.

"Not so much as to know that he will possess you; you, who are dearer to me than any palace of stone could ever be," he answered, passionately. "Oh, Estela, give him up! I will work for you—for your family! Give him up, and let our love have its way!"

"Antonio, wait! Perhaps there is a chance—I cannot say more to-night. Hush! they are watching us; not a word before my father!"

Meanwhile, Carmen, her delicate face alight with eagerness, had drawn San Lorenzo to her side. She looked very young and very pure in her white dress, cut away just enough to show her full throat.

"How happy Estela ought to be! She will be mistress of this palace and of you!" she said, softly.

"It is I who should be happy as our wedding day draws near!" he answered, uneasily.

Carmen sighed. "If she only loved you!"

"She has never pretended to love me." He laughed bitterly.

"No, and she never will love you. She marries you merely because you are the richest of all her suitors."

"I know."

"But it is hard on you. You are so generous; you have crowned her with jewels; and to another, who would treasure a flower from your hand, you give nothing." Her words were so faint that he could not be sure he caught their meaning.

"No woman could love me for myself. I am old, I am ugly, but I am rich, and I will have the best for my money!" His voice grew strident, but Carmen's hand on his arm quieted him.

"And is beauty the best?" she queried.

He looked at her mistrustfully.

"Would not a warm, loving heart next your own be better?" she con-

tinued. "Some woman's white arms about your neck, some woman's head resting on your breast, some woman's lips seeking yours—would not that be better?"

He gazed at the little figure, quivering with excitement, the face flushed, the mysterious eyes ablaze, and his heart leaped.

"Carmen! you!" he cried, drawing his breath quickly; but she shrank from him in apparent terror. Her face paled, and her head drooped pitifully. "I have betrayed myself," she said, with a sob. "Oh, forget my madness, if you can, and think mercifully of me!"

She glided away from him before he could protest, and mechanically he resumed his duties as host. Ever before his eyes was the pathetic little figure in white with the wonderful green eyes; ever in his ears sounded the liquid tones of her voice. "Some woman's white arms about your neck, some woman's lips seeking yours—would not that be better?" Would it? And his whole soul answered yes.

Carmen sat opposite him at the supper table; her first glance was full of shy entreaty, then she grew bolder, and before they rose from the table she had challenged his eyes, and had been confirmed in her triumph.

"Estela, the game is in my hands, and to-day he will sue for terms," she confided to her sister, as they drove home in the early morning. And Estela, full of her own sweet dreams, sighed gently.

"I only hope you will not live to regret it," she said.

When San Lorenzo called that afternoon Estela was not visible. A violent headache kept her a prisoner in her room, her mother explained, and she begged to be excused.

He accepted her excuses languidly, and listened to Señora de Diago's praise of last night's fête, but his eyes wandered to the door expectantly, and finally he could bear the suspense no longer.

"Where is Carmen?" he asked, abruptly.

Señora de Diago looked around in

vague surprise. "I don't know; she was here when you knocked. Carmen, come here!" she called, and then Carmen appeared in the open doorway. She greeted San Lorenzo shyly, as if she dared not meet his eyes, but when her mother left the *sala* for a moment she flashed him a reproachful glance.

"Why did you ask for me?" she cried. "Isn't it hard enough to know you are in the house, without being forced to meet you! Ah, I thought I should die with shame after last night, and I don't know how I can bear it for another month."

"Carmen, I, too, have suffered! I don't know what has come over me, but I love you, sweetheart, I love you!" he answered.

"Hush! think what you are saying!" she warned, but he became reckless. The fire smouldering in her weird eyes kindled his inflammable nature.

"I think of nothing but that I love you—you—and only you!" he said, going close to her.

"And Estela?"

"Ah, Estela——"

"You see we are both mad. You must not try to see me again. I will keep out of your way, and when you have married my sister it will be easy to forget me."

"Never!"

"Then what is to be done?" There was a note of despair in her voice that wrung his heart. He had not thought of the future; this turn of affairs had come about so suddenly that there had been no time to consider consequences.

"One thing I know," he muttered, fiercely. "I cannot—will not—give you up!"

"Unless you set Estela free——"

He started, but she went on: "She never cared for you; it was to save our father from ruin that she consented to marry you, and if you let her break the engagement it will not hurt her pride. As for father, he will do anything we ask, and you will still remain in the family. That is the only way to make me yours."

He was silent. Once more those words echoed in his heart: "Some woman's white arms about your neck, some woman's lips seeking yours;" and he turned to her impulsively. "For your love I would give my soul!" he cried.

"Ah," she answered, softly, stealing her hand into his, "you love me even as I love you."

For a moment they stood facing each other in tense silence; then Carmen heard her mother returning. "Not a word of this to my mother; let me settle it. Go now, and tomorrow come and claim me openly."

Half-dazed by his passion and the rapidity of recent events, San Lorenzo obeyed, and as the street door closed after him, Carmen flew up stairs to Estela.

"Estela, you are free! Write, write to him at once! I will see father and win his consent to the change. You must admit that it is not beauty alone that is powerful!" and she threw her arms about her sister's neck, and laughed hysterically.

"Carmen, you will not regret?" demanded Estela, earnestly.

"Shall you?"

A little smile played about Estela's lips. "No, for freedom gives me the man I love; and a competence with him is more than unlimited wealth with another," she answered, softly.

"Estela, you may not believe it, but I am really fond of San Lorenzo," admitted Carmen, with a blush. "It is not all ambition."

It was a delicious bit of gossip for Havana's smart circle, but no one

questioned the wisdom of the substitution of brides. Carmen was married to the Marques on the day that had been appointed for her sister's wedding, and people seeing the adoration in his eyes, marveled, and did not doubt the verity of her conquest.

Estela's marriage to Antonio, which occurred some six months later, caused a fresh ripple of excitement.

She was radiant in her wedding robes of silk and lace, a wreath of flowers crowning the head that had worn a chaplet of diamonds, and her soft, dark eyes were suffused with love.

Carmen, beaming with matronly importance, rivaled the bride in the attention she received.

"Now are you satisfied, *hermana mia*?" she questioned, playfully.

"Need you ask?" and Estela smiled. "And you?"

Carmen laughed joyously. "I have drawn the fangs of my wolf, and now he is merely a watch dog," she replied. "As I said long ago, each to her taste—you for love only—I for love of the good things of life, and my Marques."

San Lorenzo came to his wife's side. He had accepted the new conditions without a murmur.

"Are you happy, wolf?" she added, indulgently.

He put his arm about her waist. "Yes, for I have eaten my lamb," he answered, adoringly.

Again Carmen laughed as she turned to Estela. "You see *that* is a matter of opinion. So is happiness, *querida mia*," she added.



AN EVENT

THERE was sound of deep rejoicing round the throne of Grace Imperial,
Of happy, holy revelry, and joy beyond concern;
At last from Earth had fluttered, all the way through space ethereal,
A prayer of wholesome praise that begged no favor in return.

FRANCIS JAMES MACBEATH.