

El Verdugo

Honore de Balzac

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El Verdugo

by Honore de Balzac

Translated by Katharine Prescott Wormeley

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EL VERDUGO

BY

HONORE DE BALZAC

Translated By
Katharine Prescott Wormeley

DEDICATION

To Martinez de la Rosa.

EL VERDUGO

The clock of the little town of Menda had just struck midnight. At that moment a young French officer, leaning on the parapet of a long terrace which bordered the gardens of the chateau de Menda, seemed buried in thoughts that were deeper than comported with the light-hearted carelessness of military life; though it must be said that never were hour, scene, or night more propitious for meditation. The beautiful sky of Spain spread its dome of azure above his head. The scintillation of the stars and the soft light of the moon illumined the delightful valley that lay at his feet. Resting partly against an orange-tree in bloom, the young major could see, three hundred feet below him, the town of Menda, at the base of the rock on which the castle is built. Turning his head, he looked down upon the sea, the sparkling waters of which encircled the landscape with a sheet of silver.

The chateau was illuminated. The joyous uproar of a ball, the sounds of an orchestra, the laughter of the dancers came to him, mingling with the distant murmur of the waves. The coolness of the night gave fresh energy to his body, that was tired with the heat of the day. Besides which, the gardens were planted with trees so balmy and flowers so sweet, that the young man felt as if plunged in a perfumed bath.

The chateau de Menda belonged to a grandee of Spain, who was at this time living there with his family. During the whole evening, the eldest daughter had looked at the young officer with an interest expressing extreme sadness, and such implied compassion on the part of a Spaniard might well have caused the reverie of the Frenchman. Clara was beautiful; and though she had three brothers and one sister, the wealth of the Marquis de Leganes seemed sufficient to justify Victor Marchand in believing that the young lady would be richly dowered. But could he dare to believe that the daughter of the proudest noble in Spain would be given to the son of a Parisian grocer? Besides, Frenchmen were hated. The marquis having been suspected by General G--t--r, who governed the province, of preparing an insurrection in favor of Ferdinand VII., the battalion commanded by Victor Marchand was quartered in the little town of Menda, to hold in check the neighboring districts, which were under the control of the Marquis de Leganes.

A recent despatch from Marechal Ney made it seem probable that the English would soon land a force upon the coast; and he mentioned the marquis as the man who was believed to be in communication with the cabinet of London. Thus, in spite of the cordial welcome which that Spaniard had given to Victor Marchand and his soldiers, the young

officer held himself perpetually on his guard. As he came from the ballroom to the terrace, intending to cast his eye upon the state of the town and the outlying districts confided to his care, he asked himself how he ought to interpret the good will which the marquis never failed to show him, and whether the fears of his general were warranted by the apparent tranquillity of the region. But no sooner had he reached the terrace than these thoughts were driven from his mind by a sense of prudence, and also by natural curiosity.

He saw in the town a great number of lights. Although it was the feast of Saint James, he had, that very morning, ordered that all lights should be put out at the hour prescribed in the army regulations, those of the chateau alone excepted. He saw, it is true, the bayonets of his soldiers gleaming here and there at their appointed posts; but the silence was solemn, and nothing indicated that the Spaniards were disregarding his orders in the intoxication of a fete. Endeavoring to explain to himself this culpable and deliberate infraction of rules on the part of the inhabitants, it struck him as the more incomprehensible because he had left a number of officers in charge of patrols who were to make their rounds during the night, and enforce the regulations.

With the impetuosity of youth, he was about to spring through an opening in the terrace wall, and descend by the rocks more rapidly than by the usual road to a little outpost which he had placed at the entrance of the town, on the side toward the chateau, when a slight noise arrested him. He fancied he heard the light step of a woman on the gravelled path behind him. He turned his head and saw no one, but his eyes were caught by an extraordinary light upon the ocean. Suddenly he beheld a sight so alarming that he stood for a moment motionless with surprise, fancying that his senses were mistaken. The white rays of the moonlight enabled him to distinguish sails at some distance. He tried to convince himself that this vision was an optical delusion caused by the caprices of the waves and the moon. At that moment, a hoarse voice uttered his name. He looked toward the opening in the wall, and saw the head of the orderly who had accompanied him to the chateau rising cautiously through it.

"Is it you, commander?"

"Yes. What is it?" replied the young man, in a low voice, a sort of presentiment warning him to act mysteriously.

"Those rascals are squirming like worms," said the man; "and I have come, if you please, to tell you my little observations."

"Speak out."

"I have just followed from the chateau a man with a lantern who is coming this way. A lantern is mightily suspicious! I don't believe that Christian has any call to go and light the church tapers at this time of night. They want to murder us! said I to myself, so I followed his heels; and I've discovered, commander, close by here, on a pile of rock, a great heap of fagots--he's after lighting a beacon of some kind up here, I'll be bound--"

A terrible cry echoing suddenly through the town stopped the soldier's

speech. A brilliant light illuminated the young officer. The poor orderly was shot in the head and fell. A fire of straw and dry wood blazed up like a conflagration not thirty feet distant from the young commander. The music and the laughter ceased in the ballroom. The silence of death, broken only by moans, succeeded to the joyous sounds of a festival. A single cannon-shot echoed along the plain of the ocean.

A cold sweat rolled from the officer's brow. He wore no sword. He was confident that his soldiers were murdered, and that the English were about to disembark. He saw himself dishonored if he lived, summoned before a council of war to explain his want of vigilance; then he measured with his eye the depths of the descent, and was springing towards it when Clara's hand seized his.

"Fly!" she said; "my brothers are following me to kill you. Your soldiers are killed. Escape yourself. At the foot of the rock, over there, see! you will find Juanito's barb--Go, go!"

She pushed him; but the stupefied young man looked at her, motionless, for a moment. Then, obeying the instinct of self-preservation which never abandons any man, even the strongest, he sprang through the park in the direction indicated, running among the rocks where goats alone had hitherto made their way. He heard Clara calling to her brothers to pursue him; he heard the steps of his murderers; he heard the balls of several muskets whistling about his ears; but he reached the valley, found the horse, mounted him, and disappeared with the rapidity of an arrow.

A few hours later the young officer reached the headquarters of General G--t--r, whom he found at dinner with his staff.

"I bring you my head!" cried the commander of the lost battalion as he entered, pale and overcome.

He sat down and related the horrible occurrence. An awful silence followed his tale.

"I think you were more unfortunate than criminal," replied the terrible general, when at last he spoke. "You are not responsible for the crime of those Spaniards; and, unless the marshal should think otherwise, I absolve you."

These words gave but a feeble consolation to the unhappy officer.

"But when the emperor hears of it!" he cried.

"He will want to have you shot," said the general; "but we will see about that. Now," he added in a stern tone, "not another word of this, except to turn it into a vengeance which shall impress with salutary terror a people who make war like savages."

An hour later a whole regiment, a detachment of cavalry, and a battery of artillery were on their way to Menda. The general and Victor marched at the head of the column. The soldiers, informed of the massacre of their comrades, were possessed by fury. The distance which separated the town of Menda from general headquarters, was marched

with marvellous rapidity. On the way, the general found all the villages under arms. Each of the wretched hamlets was surrounded, and the inhabitants decimated.

By one of those fatalities which are inexplicable, the British ships lay to without advancing. It was known later that these vessels carried the artillery, and had outsailed the rest of the transports. Thus the town of Menda, deprived of the support it expected, and which the appearance of the British fleet in the offing had led the inhabitants to suppose was at hand, was surrounded by French troops almost without a blow being struck. The people of the town, seized with terror, offered to surrender at discretion. With a spirit of devotion not rare in the Peninsula, the slayers of the French soldiery, fearing, from the cruelty of their commander, that Menda would be given to the flames, and the whole population put to the sword, proposed to the general to denounce themselves. He accepted their offer, making a condition that the inhabitants of the chateau, from the marquis to the lowest valet, should be delivered into his hands. This condition being agreed to, the general proceeded to pardon the rest of the population, and to prevent his soldiers from pillaging the town or setting fire to it. An enormous tribute was levied, and the wealthiest inhabitants held prisoner to secure payment of it, which payment was to be made within twenty-four hours.

The general took all precautions necessary for the safety of his troops, and provided for the defence of the region from outside attack, refusing to allow his soldiers to be billeted in the houses. After putting them in camp, he went up to the chateau and took possession of it. The members of the Leganes family and their servants were bound and kept under guard in the great hall where the ball had taken place. The windows of this room commanded the terrace which overhung the town. Headquarters were established in one of the galleries, where the general held, in the first place, a council as to the measures that should be taken to prevent the landing of the British. After sending an aide-de-camp to Marechal Ney, and having ordered batteries to certain points along the shore, the general and his staff turned their attention to the prisoners. Two hundred Spaniards who had delivered themselves up were immediately shot. After this military execution, the general ordered as many gibbets planted on the terrace as there were members of the family of Leganes, and he sent for the executioner of the town.

Victor Marchand took advantage of the hour before dinner, to go and see the prisoners. Before long he returned to the general.

"I have come," he said in a voice full of feeling, "to ask for mercy."

"You!" said the general, in a tone of bitter irony.

"Alas!" replied Victor, "it is only a sad mercy. The marquis, who has seen those gibbets set up, hopes that you will change that mode of execution. He asks you to behead his family, as befits nobility."

"So be it," replied the general.

"They also ask for religious assistance, and to be released from their bonds; they promise in return to make no attempt to escape."

"I consent," said the general; "but I make you responsible for them."

"The marquis offers you his whole fortune, if you will consent to pardon one of his sons."

"Really!" exclaimed the general. "His property belongs already to King Joseph."

He stopped. A thought, a contemptuous thought, wrinkled his brow, and he said presently,--

"I will surpass his wishes. I comprehend the importance of his last request. Well, he shall buy the continuance of his name and lineage, but Spain shall forever connect with it the memory of his treachery and his punishment. I will give life and his whole fortune to whichever of his sons will perform the office of executioner on the rest. Go; not another word to me on the subject."

Dinner was served. The officers satisfied an appetite sharpened by exertion. A single one of them, Victor Marchand, was not at the feast. After hesitating long, he returned to the hall where the proud family of Leganes were prisoners, casting a mournful look on the scene now presented in that apartment where, only two nights before, he had seen the heads of the two young girls and the three young men turning giddily in the waltz. He shuddered as he thought how soon they would fall, struck off by the sabre of the executioner.

Bound in their gilded chairs, the father and mother, the three sons, and the two daughters, sat rigid in a state of complete immobility. Eight servants stood near them, their arms bound behind their backs. These fifteen persons looked at one another gravely, their eyes scarcely betraying the sentiments that filled their souls. The sentinels, also motionless, watched them, but respected the sorrow of those cruel enemies.

An expression of inquiry came upon the faces of all when Victor appeared. He gave the order to unbind the prisoners, and went himself to unfasten the cords that held Clara in her chair. She smiled sadly. The officer could not help touching softly the arms of the young girl as he looked with sad admiration at her beautiful hair and her supple figure. She was a true Spaniard, having the Spanish complexion, the Spanish eyes with their curved lashes, and their large pupils blacker than a raven's wing.

"Have you succeeded?" she said, with one of those funereal smiles in which something of girlhood lingers.

Victor could not keep himself from groaning. He looked in turn at the three brothers, and then at Clara. One brother, the eldest, was thirty years of age. Though small and somewhat ill-made, with an air that was haughty and disdainful, he was not lacking in a certain nobility of manner, and he seemed to have something of that delicacy of feeling which made the Spanish chivalry of other days so famous. He was named Juanito. The second son, Felipe, was about twenty years of age; he resembled Clara. The youngest was eight. A painter would have seen in the features of Manuelo a little of that Roman constancy that David

has given to children in his republican pages. The head of the old marquis, covered with flowing white hair, seemed to have escaped from a picture of Murillo. As he looked at them, the young officer shook his head, despairing that any one of those four beings would accept the dreadful bargain of the general. Nevertheless, he found courage to reveal it to Clara.

The girl shuddered for a moment; then she recovered her calmness, and went to her father, kneeling at his feet.

"Oh!" she said to him, "make Juanito swear that he will obey, faithfully, the orders that you will give him, and our wishes will be fulfilled."

The marquise quivered with hope. But when, leaning against her husband, she heard the horrible confidence that Clara now made to him, the mother fainted. Juanito, on hearing the offer, bounded like a lion in his cage.

Victor took upon himself to send the guard away, after obtaining from the marquis a promise of absolute submission. The servants were delivered to the executioner, who hanged them.

When the family were alone, with no one but Victor to watch them, the old father rose.

"Juanito!" he said.

Juanito answered only with a motion of his head that signified refusal, falling back into his chair, and looking at his parents with dry and awful eyes. Clara went up to him with a cheerful air and sat upon his knee.

"Dear Juanito," she said, passing her arm around his neck and kissing his eyelids, "if you knew how sweet death would seem to me if given by you! Think! I should be spared the odious touch of an executioner. You would save me from all the woes that await me--and, oh! dear Juanito! you would not have me belong to any one--therefore--"

Her velvet eyes cast gleams of fire at Victor, as if to rouse in the heart of Juanito his hatred of the French.

"Have courage," said his brother Felipe; "otherwise our race, our almost royal race, must die extinct."

Suddenly Clara rose, the group that had formed about Juanito separated, and the son, rebellious with good reason, saw before him his old father standing erect, who said in solemn tones,--

"Juanito, I command you to obey."

The young count remained immovable. Then his father knelt at his feet. Involuntarily Clara, Felipe, and Manueto imitated his action. They all stretched out their hands to him, who was to save the family from extinction, and each seemed to echo the words of the father.

"My son, can it be that you would fail in Spanish energy and true

feeling? Will you leave me longer on my knees? Why do you consider YOUR life, YOUR sufferings only? Is this my son?" he added, turning to his wife.

"He consents!" cried the mother, in despair, seeing a motion of Juanito's eyelids, the meaning of which was known to her alone.

Mariquita, the second daughter, was on her knees pressing her mother in her feeble arms, and as she wept hot tears her little brother scolded her.

At this moment the chaplain of the chateau entered the hall; the family instantly surrounded him and led him to Juanito. Victor, unable to endure the scene any longer, made a sign to Clara, and went away, determined to make one more attempt upon the general.

He found him in fine good-humour, in the midst of a banquet, drinking with his officers, who were growing hilarious.

*

An hour later, one hundred of the leading inhabitants of Menda assembled on the terrace, according to the orders of the general, to witness the execution of the Leganes family. A detachment of soldiers were posted to restrain the Spaniards, stationed beneath the gallows on which the servants had been hanged. The heads of the burghers almost touched the feet of these martyrs. Thirty feet from this group was a block, and on it glittered a scimitar. An executioner was present in case Juanito refused his obedience at the last moment.

Soon the Spaniards heard, in the midst of the deepest silence, the steps of many persons, the measured sound of the march of soldiers, and the slight rattle of their accoutrements. These noises mingled with the gay laughter of the officers, as a few nights earlier the dances of a ball had served to mask the preparations for a bloody treachery. All eyes turned to the chateau and saw the noble family advancing with inconceivable composure. Their faces were serene and calm.

One member alone, pale, undone, leaned upon the priest, who spent his powers of religious consolation upon this man,--the only one who was to live. The executioner knew, as did all present, that Juanito had agreed to accept his place for that one day. The old marquis and his wife, Clara, Mariquita, and the two younger brothers walked forward and knelt down a few steps distant from the fatal block. Juanito was led forward by the priest. When he reached the place the executioner touched him on the arm and gave him, probably, a few instructions. The confessor, meantime, turned the victims so that they might not see the fatal blows. But, like true Spaniards, they stood erect without faltering.

Clara was the first to come forward.

"Juanito," she said, "have pity on my want of courage; begin with me."

At this instant the hurried steps of a man were heard, and Victor Marchand appeared on the terrace. Clara was already on her knees, her

white neck bared for the scimitar. The officer turned pale, but he ran with all his might.

"The general grants your life if you will marry me," he said to her in a low voice.

The Spanish girl cast upon the officer a look of pride and contempt.

"Go on, Juanito!" she said, in a deep voice, and her head rolled at Victor's feet.

The Marquise de Leganes made one convulsive movement as she heard that sound; it was the only sign she gave of sorrow.

"Am I placed right this way, my good Juanito?" asked the little Manueto of his brother.

"Ah! you are weeping, Mariquita!" said Juanito to his sister.

"Yes," she said, "I think of you, my poor Juanito; how lonely you will be without us."

Soon the grand figure of the marquis came forward. He looked at the blood of his children; he turned to the mute and motionless spectators, and said in a strong voice, stretching his hands toward Juanito,--

"Spaniards! I give my son my fatherly blessing! Now, MARQUIS, strike, without fear--you are without reproach."

But when Juanito saw his mother approach him, supported by the priest, he cried out: "She bore me!"

A cry of horror broke from all present. The noise of the feast and the jovial laughter of the officers ceased at that terrible clamor. The marquise comprehended that Juanito's courage was exhausted, and springing with one bound over the parapet, she was dashed to pieces on the rocks below. A sound of admiration rose. Juanito had fallen senseless.

"General," said an officer, who was half drunk, "Marchand has just told me the particulars of that execution down there. I will bet you never ordered it."

"Do you forget, messieurs," cried General G--t--r, "that five hundred French families are plunged in affliction, and that we are now in Spain? Do you wish to leave our bones in its soil?"

After that allocution, no one, not even a sub-lieutenant, had the courage to empty his glass.

In spite of the respect with which he is surrounded, in spite of the title El Verdugo (the executioner) which the King of Spain bestowed as a title of nobility on the Marquis de Leganes, he is a prey to sorrow; he lives in solitude, and is seldom seen. Overwhelmed with the burden of his noble crime, he seems to await with impatience the birth of a second son, which will give him the right to rejoin the Shades who

ceaselessly accompany him.

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