

THE CONSCRIPT.

(From the Spanish of FERNAN CABALLERO in the New York
Freeman's Journal.)

"ANOTHER conscription announced!" exclaimed the Conde de Viana, throwing down a newspaper he had been reading.

"This is a great evil, Marquesa, and others still greater will follow on its steps. Poor peasants! as if the hardships and misery of your lot were not enough! Oh, what a sad world, my friend, what a sad world!"

"But, Conde," answered the Marquesa de Alora, "if any strong argument exists against those who take on themselves to show up the wretchedness of the peasant's lot, surely it is to be found in the terror and desperation aroused in every village by the proclamation of a conscription? For, indeed, nothing can be compared to the agony with which the parents say of a son, 'It is his turn to put his hand in the cantaro.' All the world knows the stratagems resorted to by young fellows to avoid being drawn. They inflict self-wounds, and irritate these to give the appearance of ulcers. It is even related that one lad cut off a finger in order to make sure of his object. Yet anyone who believes that this repugnance is felt towards military life, as such, would make a great mistake; still less is it caused by fear, for valour is innate in man, it is a primitive virtue, and so found in all its perfection in the country where the softness and love of ease prevalent in our cultivated cities is still unknown. Neither does it spring from aversion to work, for peasants work far more laboriously, and their lives are beset with cares; nor is it a question of food, for the soldier is much better nourished than the peasant, who in summer expects and gets nothing but *gazpacho*. Moreover, it is well known that a soldier's life is gay enough. What can be more jovial than those bands of young men to whom care is unknown, who one and all carry life as lightly as the knapsack on the back, and when not on duty give themselves up freely to the pleasures of good-fellowship, making their mirth ring again in songs, dances, games, stories, and jokes of every description? We must therefore conclude that the immense grief and anguish that spread through the country when a conscription is notified, does not arise from repugnance to a soldier's life, but solely from dread of being torn from the place and life that are held so dear, from home with all its affections. The sentiment is founded on the pain of absence. To avoid leaving home all sacrifices appear light to the Spanish peasant. This clearly demonstrates that the peasants look on their lot as a happy one."

"Say rather that they love their lot, but do not deduce from this that they believe it to be a happy one."

"Conde, it is a proof of the weakness of cause, if, as now, you are driven to defend it by sophism. What else can make a situation loved except the happiness afforded by it? In order to prove the peasants' attachment to home and family life, with all its pure affections, I will tell you an incident that occurred not long since. My maid related it to me with every least detail, for it happened to relations of her own. I will repeat the story with the scrupulous exactitude I always employ, for the smallest *floritura*, the least poetical embellishment, might perhaps deprive it of its stamp of genuine truth, its purely popular character, which would in my eyes rob all my pictures of their authenticity, and perhaps give you occasion to say to me with your incredulous smile: 'You compose novels, my friend: you compose them unintentionally, deceiving yourself. You are like the sculptor who forms a saint out of a lump of clay.' Not so, I am simply a vulgar daguerreotypist. He who does not care to see things in the light in which I present them, either looks at them with the supercilious glance of the used-up man of the world, who never goes to the bottom of anything; or with the cold and bitter stare of the misanthrope, that withers the flowers on which it is fixed."

"Your imagination," said the Conde, smiling, "is a rose without thorns."

"And you would seek to wither it?"

"On the contrary, I would rather water it from the spring of Youth. But let me hear your story."

"The world," began the Marquesa, "blames as extreme the anguish and grief of a mother's love—"

"And rightly," said the Conde; "all that is passionate in man's nature, even to the holy love of a mother, requires control. Mary, at the foot of the Cross, neither tore her hair nor beat her breast. Senora! senora! every day we pray, saying, 'Thy will be done! Is our homage sincere if immediately afterwards we rebel violently against that same will? Believe me, inordinate griefs are not Christian griefs.'"

"However excessive a mother's love may be," interposed the Marquesa, "I sympathize with it, and think it beautiful and moving."

"Grief which may justly be termed inordinate is senseless and suicidal, my friend, and those mothers who are, as it were, possessed by their love, deserve that their sons should die in order to teach them what real grief is."

"Conde, have you forgotten that you had a mother?"

"God forbid! I venerate the earth because she trod it; I respect it because her body has returned to it, and I long for Heaven because there her pure soul awaits me—but—"

"But what you admired in her, what in her charmed you and filled you with gratitude, you find fault with and criticise in others? Love never says enough, Conde."

"Marquesa, this beautiful expression can only be correctly applied to Divine love."

"You always contradict me, Conde. If only you knew how much I feel it."

"Do not be hurt, dear friend; a passing cloud which somewhat obscures the brilliant rays of the sun, refreshing the earth with a seasonable shower, does good."

"But why should you form a cloud in my heaven?"

"In order that its perfect purity and brilliancy should not lead you to believe that storms and tempests will never arise. But go on with your story. I will not interrupt you again."

The Marquesa began her recital as follows:

"No heart but must have been touched by the picture offered in the interior of one of the cottages on your estate the day that the lots had been drawn for the conscription. Stretched on a mattress on the ground lay an unhappy mother, while two of her daughters, themselves in floods of tears, supported her in their arms. On his knees by her side, and holding her hands between his own, was a handsome young man, her son, who had just drawn the fatal number that made a soldier of him. His father, seated on a low chair in the darkest corner of the room, twisted his hat around in his trembling hands, wholly unable to keep back the tears, which seemed forced from his very heart, and ran down his weather-beaten cheeks. Two little boys cried aloud, repeating over and over again, 'Benito is a soldier, and our mother will die!' This scene of bitter sorrow became still more heartrending through the inconsiderate entrance of a young girl who threw herself sobbing on the unhappy mother's bed exclaiming:

"Aunt, dear aunt of my soul! There is an end of my marriage. He is going away and I only care to die. Benito! Benito! who put this number, this sentence of death in your hand?"

"A similar scene of desolation might have been found in six other homes in the same village. But, Conde, I want you to share my admiration of the people. In the midst of all their violent affliction, not a single complaint was to be heard against the Government or the regulations, not a word against military life; the complaints were all against their ill-luck—the delinquent was the number! Benito left home, and it is impossible to describe the sufferings of his poor mother, or the grief of his betrothed, the young Rosa, who, like most of her class, felt in her heart that deep love which is at once the first and last, the unique love of a life; a love which concentrates on the same object the affection felt for the betrothed, the husband and father of her children, and the companion of her old age; an exclusive love which keeps the heart of the perfect wife free from all profanation."

"How different are your ideas," exclaimed the Conde, "to those that are found in novels, where the ideal of woman is vitiated, and every notion as to her destiny perverted. A young woman should be reared by her mother's side, should only bloom for her husband, and should find employment for all her simple wisdom in bringing up worthily the offspring God may bestow on her."

"This type which you describe so well, Conde, is certainly not generally to be found in novels, but only among the people who we look on as uncivilised and prosaic."

"Do you know," said the Conde, smiling, "that the people have a much better friend in you than in many who go by the name?"

"I should think so," answered the Marquesa. "I have in my favour all the difference between a true and a false friend. But I must get on with my history, for the hour of the *tertulia* draws near, which will interrupt my story if I do not finish in time. Benito arrived with a heavy heart at the chief town of the province to join his regiment. Very soon, however, his sadness was dissipated in the society of his merry companions; but not so his home-sickness, or his profound attachment to his betrothed. The first night after his arrival he enjoyed a sample of his comrades' music and poetry, for having possessed themselves of a guitar, they began to sing, now one at a time, now in chorus, innumerable snatches of various songs. Shortly afterwards an order was issued for the embarkation of troops destined for the Havana. The term of enlistment being reduced by two years to those volunteering for the service, the conscripts anxiously availed themselves of the opportunity to shorten the period of their longed-for return to their homes. All volunteers were ordered to a seaport to await the day of embarkation. There they were lodged in barracks; but shortly afterwards, whether from the heat of the season, or from the unhealthiness of their quarters, a bad kind of ophthalmia broke out among the troops, and those attacked by it were sent at once to the hospital. Benito was among the victims on whom the disease appeared to have fastened with great intensity. The patients were attended by a young surgeon, who, besides being skillful, both felt and showed a deep interest for the poor young fellows committed to his care. Benito moved his heart greatly, for, besides his good disposition and handsome face, there was something about him that attracted sympathy. The surgeon saw with much concern that the poor conscript's ophthalmia was almost incurable, and while his companions recovered and left the hospital, one after the other, Benito's complaint increased in gravity. In consequence of the suffering state of the sick man, some days went by before the kind-hearted doctor could make up his mind to impart his fears to the unfortunate young man, thus threatened in the springtime of life never again to see the light of day or the objects of his affection; and to find himself rendered useless in all the strength and pride of life, his good looks disfigured; and though destined to be the support of parents, wife, and children, now himself exposed to be an object of public charity. After a time, however, the complaint appeared to settle in one eye, and the other in consequence experienced some relief."

"Senor," said Benito to the surgeon, "all my comrades have recovered and left the hospital. Is my complaint worse than theirs, that I do not mend?"

"Yes, my poor fellow," answered the surgeon, sadly, "your complaint is worse. God knows how hard I have tried to cure you. You will get better, but— The surgeon stopped short, full of compassion."

"But—what?" asked the conscript.

"I fear," answered the surgeon sadly "that you will lose an eye."

"That I shall be one-eyed."

"I have done everything in my power to prevent it, but alas! I have failed," answered the surgeon, watching the effect of his words with much anxiety. What was his astonishment at seeing Benito