**A Matter of Mean Elevation**

O. Henry

ONE winter the Alcazar Opera Company of New Orleans made a speculative trip along the Mexican, Central American and South American coasts. The venture proved a most successful one. The musicloving, impressionable Spanish-Americans deluged the company with dollars and “vivas.” The manager waxed plump and amiable. But for the prohibitive climate he would have put forth the distinctive flower of his prosperity — the overcoat of fur, braided, frogged and opulent. Almost was he persuaded to raise the salaries of his company. But with a mighty effort he conquered the impulse toward such an unprofitable effervescence of joy.

At Macuto, on the coast of Venezuela, the company scored its greatest success. Imagine Coney Island translated into Spanish and you will comprehend Macuto. The fashionable season is from November to March. Down from La Guayra and Caracas and Valencia and other interior towns flock the people for their holiday season. There are bathing and fiestas and bull fights and scandal. And then the people have a passion for music that the bands in the plaza and on the sea beach stir but do not satisfy. The coming of the Alcazar Opera Company aroused the utmost ardour and zeal among the pleasure seekers.

The illustrious Guzman Blanco, President and Dictator of Venezuela, sojourned in Macuto with his court for the season. That potent ruler — who himself paid a subsidy of 40,000 pesos each year to grand opera in Caracas — ordered one of the Government warehouses to be cleared for a temporary theatre. A stage was quickly constructed and rough wooden benches made for the audience. Private boxes were added for the use of the President and the notables of the army and Government.

The company remained in Macuto for two weeks. Each performance filled the house as closely as it could be packed. Then the music-mad people fought for room in the open doors and windows, and crowded about, hundreds deep, on the outside. Those audiences formed a brilliantly diversified patch of colour. The hue of their faces ranged from the clear olive of the pure-blood Spaniards down through the yellow and brown shades of the Mestizos to the coal-black Carib and the Jamaica Negro. Scattered among them were little groups of Indians with faces like stone idols, wrapped in gaudy fibre-woven blankets — Indians down from the mountain states of Zamora and Los Andes and Miranda to trade their gold dust in the coast towns.

The spell cast upon these denizens of the interior fastnesses was remarkable. They sat in petrified ecstasy, conspicuous among the excitable Macutians, who wildly strove with tongue and hand to give evidence of their delight. Only once did the sombre rapture of these aboriginals find expression. During the rendition of “Faust,” Guzman Blanco, extravagantly pleased by the “Jewel Song,” cast upon the stage a purse of gold pieces. Other distinguished citizens followed his lead to the extent of whatever loose coin they had convenient, while some of the fair and fashionable señoras were moved, in imitation, to fling a jewel or a ring or two at the feet of the Marguerite — who was, according to the bills, Mlle. Nina Giraud. Then, from different parts of the house rose sundry of the stolid hillmen and cast upon the stage little brown and dun bags that fell with soft “thumps” and did not rebound. It was, no doubt, pleasure at the tribute to her art that caused Mlle. Giraud’s eyes to shine so brightly when she opened these little deerskin bags in her dressing room and found them to contain pure gold dust. If so, the pleasure was rightly hers, for her voice in song, pure, strong and thrilling with the feeling of the emotional artist, deserved the tribute that it earned.

But the triumph of the Alcazar Opera Company is not the theme — it but leans upon and colours it. There happened in Macuto a tragic thing, an unsolvable mystery, that sobered for a time the gaiety of the happy season.

One evening between the short twilight and the time when she should have whirled upon the stage in the red and black of the ardent Carmen, Mlle. Nina Giraud disappeared from the sight and ken of 6,000 pairs of eyes and as many minds in Macuto. There was the usual turmoil and hurrying to seek her. Messengers flew to the little French-kept hotel where she stayed; others of the company hastened here or there where she might be lingering in some tienda or unduly prolonging her bath upon the beach. All search was fruitless. Mademoiselle had vanished.

Half an hour passed and she did not appear. The dictator, unused to the caprices of prime donne, became impatient. He sent an aide from his box to say to the manager that if the curtain did not at once rise he would immediately hale the entire company to the calabosa, though it would desolate his heart, indeed, to be compelled to such an act. Birds in Macuto could be made to sing.

The manager abandoned hope for the time of Mlle. Giraud. A member of the chorus, who had dreamed hopelessly for years of the blessed opportunity, quickly Carmenized herself and the opera went on.

Afterward, when the lost cantatrice appeared not, the aid of the authorities was invoked. The President at once set the army, the police and all citizens to the search. Not one clue to Mlle. Giraud’s disappearance was found. The Alcazar left to fill engagements farther down the coast.

On the way back the steamer stopped at Macuto and the manager made anxious inquiry. Not a trace of the lady had been discovered. The Alcazar could do no more. The personal belongings of the missing lady were stored in the hotel against her possible later reappearance and the opera company continued upon its homeward voyage to New Orleans.

On the camino real along the beach the two saddle mules and the four pack mules of Don Señor Johnny Armstrong stood, patiently awaiting the crack of the whip of the arriero, Luis. That would be the signal for the start on another long journey into the mountains. The pack mules were loaded with a varied assortment of hardware and cutlery. These articles Don Johnny traded to the interior Indians for the gold dust that they washed from the Andean streams and stored in quills and bags against his coming. It was a profitable business, and Señor Armstrong expected soon to be able to purchase the coffee plantation that he coveted.

Armstrong stood on the narrow sidewalk, exchanging garbled Spanish with old Peralto, the rich native merchant who had just charged him four prices for half a gross of pot-metal hatchets, and abridged English with Rucker, the little German who was Consul for the United States.

“Take with you, señor,” said Peralto, “the blessings of the saints upon your journey.”

“Better try quinine,” growled Rucker through his pipe. “Take two grains every night. And don’t make your trip too long, Johnny, because we haf needs of you. It is ein villainous game dot Melville play of whist, and dere is no oder substitute. Auf wiedersehen, und keep your eyes dot mule’s ears between when you on der edge of der brecipices ride.”

The bells of Luis’s mule jingled and the pack train filed after the warning note. Armstrong, waved a goodbye and took his place at the tail of the procession. Up the narrow street they turned, and passed the two-story wooden Hotel Ingles, where Ives and Dawson and Richards and the rest of the chaps were dawdling on the broad piazza, reading week-old newspapers. They crowded to the railing and shouted many friendly and wise and foolish farewells after him. Across the plaza they trotted slowly past the bronze statue of Guzman Blanco, within its fence of bayoneted rifles captured from revolutionists, and out of the town between the rows of thatched huts swarming with the unclothed youth of Macuto. They plunged into the damp coolness of banana groves at length to emerge upon a bright stream, where brown women in scant raiment laundered clothes destructively upon the rocks. Then the pack train, fording the stream, attacked the sudden ascent, and bade adieu to such civilization as the coast afforded.

For weeks Armstrong, guided by Luis, followed his regular route among the mountains. After he had collected an arroba of the precious metal, winning a profit of nearly $5,000, the heads of the lightened mules were turned down-trail again. Where the head of the Guarico River springs from a great gash in the mountain-side, Luis halted the train.

“Half a day’s journey from here, Señor,” said he, “is the village of Tacuzama, which we have never visited. I think many ounces of gold may be procured there. It is worth the trial.”

Armstrong concurred, and they turned again upward toward Tacuzama. The trail was abrupt and precipitous mounting through a dense forest. As night fell, dark and gloomy, Luis once more halted. Before them was a black chasm, bisecting the path as far as they could see.

Luis dismounted. “There should be a bridge,” he called, and ran along the cleft a distance. “It is here,” he cried, and remounting, led the way. In a few moments Armstrong, heard a sound as though a thunderous drum were beating somewhere in the dark. It was the falling of the mules’ hoofs upon the bridge made of strong hides lashed to poles and stretched across the chasm. Half a mile further was Tacuzama. The village was a congregation of rock and mud huts set in the profundity of an obscure wood. As they rode in a sound inconsistent with that brooding solitude met their ears. From a long, low mud hut that they were nearing rose the glorious voice of a woman in song. The words were English, the air familiar to Armstrong’s memory, but not to his musical knowledge.

He slipped from his mule and stole to a narrow window in one end of the house. Peering cautiously inside, he saw, within three feet of him, a woman of marvellous, imposing beauty, clothed in a splendid loose robe of leopard skins. The hut was packed close to the small space in which she stood with the squatting figures of Indians.

The woman finished her song and seated herself close to the little window, as if grateful for the unpolluted air that entered it. When she had ceased several of the audience rose and cast little softly-falling bags at her feet. A harsh murmur — no doubt a barbarous kind of applause and comment — went through the grim assembly.

Armstrong, was used to seizing opportunities promptly. Taking advantage of the noise he called to the woman in a low but distinct voice: “Do not turn your head this way, but listen. I am an American. If you need assistance tell me how I can render it. Answer as briefly as you can.”

The woman was worthy of his boldness. Only by a sudden flush of her pale cheek did she acknowledge understanding of his words. Then she spoke, scarcely moving her lips.

“I am held a prisoner by these Indians. God knows I need help. In two hours come to the little hut twenty yards toward the Mountainside. There will be a light and a red curtain in the window. There is always a guard at the door, whom you will have to overcome. For the love of heaven, do not fail to come.”

The story seems to shrink from adventure and rescue and mystery. The theme is one too gentle for those brave and quickening tones. And yet it reaches as far back as time itself. It has been named “environment,” which is as weak a word as any to express the unnameable kinship of man to nature, that queer fraternity that causes stones and trees and salt water and clouds to play upon our emotions. Why are we made serious and solemn and sublime by mountain heights, grave and contemplative by an abundance of overhanging trees, reduced to inconstancy and monkey capers by the ripples on a sandy beach? Did the protoplasm — but enough. The chemists are looking into the matter, and before long they will have all life in the table of the symbols.

Briefly, then, in order to confine the story within scientific bounds, John Armstrong, went to the hut, choked the Indian guard and carried away Mlle. Giraud. With her was also conveyed a number of pounds of gold dust she had collected during her six months’ forced engagement in Tacuzama. The Carabobo Indians are easily the most enthusiastic lovers of music between the equator and the French Opera House in New Orleans. They are also strong believers that the advice of Emerson was good when he said: “The thing thou wantest, 0 discontented man — take it, and pay the price.” A number of them had attended the performance of the Alcazar Opera Company in Macuto, and found Mlle. Giraud’s style and technique satisfactory. They wanted her, so they took her one evening suddenly and without any fuss. They treated her with much consideration, exacting only one song recital each day. She was quite pleased at being rescued by Mr. Armstrong. So much for mystery and adventure. Now to resume the theory of the protoplasm.

John Armstrong and Mlle. Giraud rode among the Andean peaks, enveloped in their greatness and sublimity. The mightiest cousins, furthest removed, in nature’s great family become conscious of the tie. Among those huge piles of primordial upheaval, amid those gigantic silences and elongated fields of distance the littlenesses of men are precipitated as one chemical throws down a sediment from another. They moved reverently, as in a temple. Their souls were uplifted in unison with the stately heights. They travelled in a zone of majesty and peace.

To Armstrong the woman seemed almost a holy thing. Yet bathed in the white, still dignity of her martyrdom that purified her earthly beauty and gave out, it seemed, an aura of transcendent loveliness, in those first hours of companionship she drew from him an adoration that was half human love, half the worship of a descended goddess.

Never yet since her rescue had she smiled. Over her dress she still wore the robe of leopard skins, for mountain air was cold. She looked to be some splendid princess belonging to those wild and awesome altitudes. The spirit of the region chimed with hers. Her eyes were always turned upon the sombre cliffs, the blue gorges and the snow-clad turrets, looking a sublime melancholy equal to their own. At times on the journey she sang thrilling te deums and misereres that struck the true note of the hills, and made their route seem like a solemn march down a cathedral aisle. The rescued one spoke but seldom, her mood partaking of the hush of nature that surrounded them. Armstrong looked upon her as an angel. He could not bring himself to the sacrilege of attempting to woo her as other women may be wooed.

On the third day they had descended as far as the tierra templada, the zona of the table lands and foot hills. The mountains were receding in their rear, but still towered, exhibiting yet impressively their formidable heads. Here they met signs of man. They saw the white houses of coffee plantations gleam across the clearings. They struck into a road where they met travellers and pack-mules. Cattle were grazing on the slopes. They passed a little village where the round-eyed niños shrieked and called at sight of them.

Mlle. Giraud laid aside her leopard-skin robe. It seemed to be a trifle incongruous now. In the mountains it had appeared fitting and natural. And if Armstrong was not mistaken she laid aside with it something of the high dignity of her demeanour. As the country became more populous and significant of comfortable life he saw, with a feeling of joy, that the exalted princess and priestess of the Andean peaks was changing to a woman — an earth woman but no less enticing. A little colour crept to the surface of her marble cheek. She arranged the conventional dress that the removal of the robe now disclosed with the solicitous touch of one who is conscious of the eyes of others. She smoothed the careless sweep of her hair. A mundane interest, long latent in the chilling atmosphere of the ascetic peaks, showed in her eyes.

This thaw in his divinity sent Armstrong’s heart going faster. So might an Arctic explorer thrill at his first ken of green fields and liquescent waters. They were on a lower plane of earth and life and were succumbing to its peculiar, subtle influence. The austerity of the hills no longer thinned the air they breathed. About them was the breath of fruit and corn and builded homes, the comfortable smell of smoke and warm earth and the consolations man has placed between himself and the dust of his brother earth from which he sprung. While traversing those awful mountains, Mile. Giraud had seemed to be wrapped in their spirit of reverent reserve. Was this that same woman — now palpitating, warm, eager, throbbing with conscious life and charm, feminine to her finger-tips? Pondering over this, Armstrong felt certain misgivings intrude upon his thoughts. He wished he could stop there with this changing creature, descending no farther. Here was the elevation and environment to which her nature seemed to respond with its best. He feared to go down upon the man-dominated levels. Would her spirit —not yield still further in that artificial zone to which they were descending?

Now from a little plateau they saw the sea flash at the edge of the green lowlands. Mile. Giraud gave a little, catching sigh.

“Oh! look, Mr. Armstrong, there is the sea! Isn’t it lovely? I’m so tired of mountains.” She heaved a pretty shoulder in a gesture of repugnance. “Those horrid Indians! Just think of what I suffered! Although I suppose I attained my ambition of becoming a stellar attraction, I wouldn’t care to repeat the engagement. It was very nice of you to bring me away. Tell me, Mr. Armstrong — honestly, now — do I look such an awful, awful fright? I haven’t looked into a mirror, you know, for months.”

Armstrong made answer according to his changed moods. Also he laid his hand upon hers as it rested upon the horn of her saddle. Luis was at the head of the pack train and could not see. She allowed it to remain there, and her eyes smiled frankly into his.

Then at sundown they dropped upon the coast level under the palms and lemons among the vivid greens and searlets and ochres of the tierra caliente. They rode into Macuto, and saw the line of volatile bathers frolicking in the surf. The mountains were very far away.

Mlle. Giraud’s eyes were shining with a joy that could not have existed under the chaperonage of the mountaintops. There were other spirits calling to her — nymphs of the orange groves, pixies from the chattering surf, imps, born of the music, the perfumes, colours and the insinuating presence of humanity. She laughed aloud, musically, at a sudden thought.

“Won’t there be a sensation?” she called to Armstrong. “Don’t I wish I had an engagement just now, though! What a picnic the press agent would have! ‘Held a prisoner by a band of savage Indians subdued by the spell of her wonderful voice’ — wouldn’t that make great stuff? But I guess I quit the game winner, anyhow — there ought to be a couple of thousand dollars in that sack of gold dust I collected as encores, don’t you think?”

He left her at the door of the little Hotel de Buen Descansar, where she had stopped before. Two hours later he returned to the hotel. He glanced in at the open door of the little combined reception room and cafe.

Half a dozen of Macuto’s representative social and official caballeros were distributed about the room. Sefior Villablanca, the wealthy rubber concessionist, reposed his fat figure on two chairs, with an emollient smile beaming upon his chocolate-coloured face. Guilbert, the French mining engineer, leered through his polished nose-glasses. Colonel Mendez, of the regular army, in gold-laced uniform and fatuous grin, was busily extracting corks from champagne bottles. Other patterns of Macutian gallantry and fashion pranced and posed. The air was hazy with cigarette smoke. Wine dripped upon the floor.

Perched upon a table in the centre of the room in an attitude of easy preeminence was Mlle. Giraud. A chic costume of white lawn and cherry ribbons supplanted her travelling garb. There was a suggestion of lace, and a frill or two, with a discreet, small implication of handembroidered pink hosiery. Upon her lap rested a guitar. In her face was the light of resurrection, the peace of elysium attained through fire and suffering. She was singing to a lively accompaniment a little song:

“When you see de big round moon Comin’ up like a balloon, Dis nigger skips fur to kiss de lips Ob his stylish, black-faced coon.”

The singer caught sight of Armstrong.

“Hi! there, Johnny,” she called; “I’ve been expecting you for an hour. What kept you? Gee! but these smoked guys are the slowest you ever saw. They ain’t on, at all. Come along in, and I’ll make this coffeecoloured old sport with the gold epaulettes open one for you right off the ice.”

“Thank you,” said Armstrong; “not just now, I believe. I’ve several things to attend to.”

He walked out and down the street, and met Rucker coming up from the Consulate.

“Play you a game of billiards,” said Armstrong. “I want something to take the taste of the sea level out of my mouth.”