

## THE TRAIL OF BLOOD

BY SAN MARCOS TRUMBO

### I.

OF all the strange religious orders within the boundaries of the United States, the strangest of all has its stronghold in northern New Mexico. Down through the dim mists that clothe the past centuries, comes this strange religion, a survival of a medieval European order.

The traveler through the mountain regions where trails are few and white people scarce will be surprised to see that the barren hills are scattered with little white crosses, like so many snow-white butterflies hovering on the landscape. About each little cross is a pile of stones. Perhaps there will be a church or a low, flat-roofed *morado*, or meeting-house, somewhere in the district, and doubtlessly a massive cross will darken the skyline on some near-by peak. Let the traveler know that he is within the boundaries of the *Hermanos de Luz*, or Brothers of Light, and that every little cross covers the grave of one of the brotherhood who has died from the voluntary, hideous torture of cactus whips. Perhaps one of them may cover the grave of a modern Christ who was crucified upon the giant's cross on a long-gone Good Friday.

The Penitentes, as the members of this order are known today, are far from dying out as is popularly supposed. Every year the numbers increase, and whole Mexican villages in the north Rio Grande Valley have become Penitente. Little Alcalde is entirely Penitente, and Taos and Abiquiu have enough of that faith to control the politics of the villages. The people belong to an ordinary Catholic church in the community and this religious order seems to be a branch of it. Only the men are admitted to the *morado*, which is governed by the ten *Hermanos de Luz* and also the *Hermano Mayor* who has the authority to settle disputes among the members and occasionally between Penitentes and outsiders.

The *morado* used to be built of stone, without windows, and nobody outside of the order knew what strange rites went on within the inky blackness of the house, but in recent years a few have gone in and returned to tell the world the strange tortures revealed. Weird tales are these, in which the characters tread barefoot on cactus and

beat themselves unmercifully with cactus whips. But today the *morado* is built of adobe with a cross above the low doorway, except in some communities where the tourists have become such nuisances that the crosses have been removed and the building masquerades as a dwelling.

The history of the Penitentes is rather unusual. It is supposedly descended from the Flagellantes of Europe which appeared in Italy in 1210. However this particular order is a stray remnant of the Third Order of St. Francis to which everyone of importance in New Mexico once belonged. After the Franciscans left the country the order went wild and time brought many queer and superstitious changes until today all that remains is the Penitente Order.

The biggest event in the year of the Penitente worship is on Good Friday, when one of their members is crucified in such a realistic manner that he often dies from his wounds. It seems incredulous that such a practice goes on within the boundaries of this country, but nevertheless it is true. It is practised in the open in the back communities where tourists are unknown, but those in the better-known districts remain within the sheltering walls of the *morado* to crucify their fellow member because tourists have interfered with the ceremony.

It is the most true-to-life ceremony of the crucifixion of Christ staged anywhere on the whole earth, even excelling the Passion Play at Oberammergau. It is the most impressive, if not awful, spectacle of modern times. Yet can it be modern times? As one watches the ceremonies which are held during the week preceding Good Friday, one wonders if he has not managed by some curious spell to step back several centuries into Medieval Europe. It is a page out of the past, a survival of the age-old custom of sacrifice, and the weirdness of it startles one as he sees the procession winding up Calvary perhaps for the last time for the unfortunate *Cristo*.

## II.

Let us turn the calendar ahead a few weeks and witness the mysterious ceremony which takes place at Easter-time . . .

It is Lent in the little adobe village nestling at the foot of the cliffs. The evening is chill since the setting of the sun, for spring has not yet advanced to make the country warm with her blushes. Beside the village walls, the Rio Grande tinkles icily thru its narrow channel of rock and sand. Slowly the mountains and the hills

and the village are being clothed in a dusk that is as crisp as the inky-blackness of a deep well. On the outskirts of the village the little adobe *morado*, the meeting-house of the Penitentes, snuggles up to its little high-pointed hill, on whose summit a great rugged cross darkens the last glimmering light of day in the west. The little adobe hut is awake, as well as the other houses in the village, and tiny patches of shimmering light paint the darkness of the night.

Shortly there is a larger patch of gold as the door of the *morado* opens and a mysterious person in white emerges to stand in the deep shadow of the wall. Instantly the air is filled with the high weird notes of a native flute, echoing eerily down the cliffs, as the piper calls the men of the village to torture. The pipings cease and the village begins to stir. Every home gives up its male members to answer the piper's call. They are big, brawny men, lithe as the wildcat, healthy, fearless. They have stood years in the torture chamber and have survived. They are immune from fear of death, and almost immune from suffering and the fear of pain.

Slowly the *morado* fills and at last the door is shut. Few people have ventured or been allowed to venture beyond that door during the ceremony, but those who have, have brought back tales that might have come from the hinterlands of a pagan country . . . tales as heinous and terrible as the fresh blood now dripping from the cactus whips within the self-torture chambers.

There has been absolute silence in the little old adobe, but now a doleful chant arises as if from the very hearts of the mountains themselves. The door is flung open wide and the piper emerges, followed by a ghostly procession . . . five of the brothers dressed in long white robes, each equipped with a whip made from the fibers of the Spanish-bayonet, ended with a knot of cholla cactus. Behind them comes the *Hermano Mayor*. The rest of the brothers follow, carrying lanterns or torches which throw a ruddy glow upon the faces of the suffering five. Three or four men guide the whippers up the narrow, devious path. As they walk the flagellantes throw the whip over one shoulder and then the other, and it lands with a dull sickening thud into the flesh which is already raw with torture. If one of the five cringes or falters, the guides immediately whip him severely with blacksnake whips which they carry.

What a picture! It makes one shudder to see the weird procession winding up the crooked path toward the Calvario cross. The

white-clothed figures loom dully white and crimson against the black, starlit sky, as if each garment had been soaked in blood. Perhaps it had been, or maybe it was only the red of the lanterns and torches. The hollow behind the church seems to be filled with phantom figures of those who have gone before, now witnessing their kinsmen going through the same fatal rites that they once performed. It is unreal! It can't be happening here in our own country. It is some witches' sabbath in which the devil is taking part.

The Calvario cross is reached and the lanterns have covered it with bloody light, which sharply defines the anguished faces of the five flagellantes as they prostrate themselves before the cross while dolorous hymns arise from the other members.

Finally the ceremonious rites are finished and the *Hermanos de Luz* parade back to the *morado* for a short service before they go back to their homes in the village to nurse their wounds. This same service takes place night after night during the six weeks of Lent. How those sturdy rustics stand even that much is a mystery, for every night their old wounds are reopened by those devilish devices called cactus-whips. Often they do not survive, for many of them die while in the torture chamber of the meeting-house. When this happens the whipper is taken from the *morado* at midnight and buried secretly, the only message to his family being his shoes placed outside his door. A year passes and a little white cross bearing his name is erected over his secret grave.

When Ash Wednesday arrives, the usual ceremony takes place in the evening, but the five flagellantes draw lots to see who is to act the part of Christ on the following Friday. Unfortunate Cristo! The ceremony on Good Friday is the climax and the last one of the year. And perhaps it is the last ceremony on earth for the Cristo!

### III.

Friday morning. The whole valley lies under the bloom of saffron daybreak. Although the skies to the westward are still dark and filled with stars, the eastern skies over the Sangre de Cristos are bright with approaching dawn. The little village so peacefully slumbering might be carved from choice beryl, set in a case of silver with one glowing topaz on its edge. The topaz is the gleam of light coming from the tiny window of the meeting-house, for the *Hermanos de Luz* are already going through the solemn ceremonies preceding the crucifixion. Somewhere in the mountains

looming black to the westward, a coyote howls dismally. A sudden patch of darkness drifts across the saffron dawn as an eagle, disturbed in his sleep, flutters over the surrounding landscape. Calvario hill, distinctly dark against the dawn, is minus its rugged cross. The brothers have removed it for use in the coming ceremony.

The shrill notes of the piper's flute come from the *morado*. The door swings open and he emerges into the early light, shivering in the frosty chill of the spring morning. Behind him stumbles the unfortunate Cristo under his heavy cross, followed by the two thieves with their smaller crosses. The rear of the weird company is brought up by the whippers and guides who prevent any interference from outsiders.

The edge of the red-gold sun is just peeping over the tops of the Sangre de Cristos, flooding the clouds of dawn with blood. How strange that the very mountains should bear the name, "Blood of Christ"! As the Cristo falters up the path a brother helps him along to prevent him from going down under the load of the massive oaken beams.

The hill is finally reached. Fourteen little crosses like those which cover the graves of the dead are hastily erected in a circle around the top of the hill, and the Penitentes, like grim spectres from another world, march around the circle saying a prayer at each little station. The Cristo is divested of his garments, hurled down upon the waiting cross and bound so tight that the flesh on his pitiful hands turns blue. The brothers stop their chant. The silence is so complete that the Rio Grande, shimmering palely in its course, echoes nothing but the murmur of water. Slowly the great cross is lifted by struggling men. Someone rushes forward and thrusts a crown of thorns upon the head of the Christ. At last the great cross falls into place and the blue body of the Cristo hangs limp upon its beam. The unnatural silence is broken only by the wails of the mother and the wife.

What a weird ceremony! Can it really be here in America? It might not be, for the pale blue walls of the adobe village lack only a dome and a slender minaret to become a Palestinian village. These long-robed figures with their dark, swarthy faces might easily be the Jews bent upon the destruction of the King. This whole dusky arid land, watered only by the opulence of the Rio Grande, might be a patch of ancient Palestine moved across the seas and set in the heart of America.

And that unfortunate man whom destiny picked to be the Cristo? The massive old cross silhouetted against the sunrise holds only the sagging form of an unconscious man. His bare body has turned a hideous blue from the lack of circulation and from the bitter cold of the early morning. A tiny stream of blood trickles over his face from a wound inflicted by the crown of thorns. "Blood of Christ"! This whole country is stained with blood; first the Plains Tribes fighting against the Pueblo Indians; the Indians fighting against the Spaniards who brought the Faith into the country; and now, these simple people enacting the age-old story and perpetuating the tragedy in a drama that is as impressive as it is terrible.

When only a deep inflicted wound remains and the first outbreak of weeping from the women has died down, the *Hermano Mayor* gives a signal and the man upon the cross is at last taken down to be borne back into the meeting-house where the women may not enter. If the Cristo dies, as he often does, he is buried secretly before another dawn. The following morning his anxious family, waiting for his return, may find that his shoes have been placed upon their doorstep. By these signs they know that he is gone. A long year passes before they gain the knowledge of his burial place, and then one day, they discover that a tiny white cross bearing his name has appeared on his grave like a ghostly little butterfly hovering on a flower. The friends of the family each place a stone in remembrance beside the cross so that the wild north winds will not blow the dirt from around it. Another cross has been added to the myriads that adorn the hillsides, monuments to the grim tragedy that occurred in a foreign country nearly two thousand years ago.

As the night of Good Friday arrives the piper lures the people for the last time that year to the little church that is generally close to the meeting-house. "Tinieblas," or "earthquake," the people call this little service at night, for it represents the earthquake that followed Christ's crucifixion. The church is dark as pitch, for the service is held in the blackness of night, and the songs and chants that ring from the black recesses are the very symbols of the dolor and despair that is echoed in the hearts of mankind over the death of the Christ!