

THE LAUGHTER OF GOD

The doctor expected the padre at the birth of this child, first son to Ruiz the carpenter, but he hadn't been there. A new birth always seemed to please the padre. Later, over whiskey in the doctor's office, he would talk of what he would do for the child, how he would baptize it and teach it the ways of God.

The child cried lustily when the doctor slapped him on the bottom, oiled him and wrapped the wriggling body in a blanket. As an afterthought, and because the padre wasn't there, he popped some garlic in the baby's blanket to keep evil away. He knew the child's mother would like the gesture.

Her labor had been hard and there were signs of it in the shadows of the woman's face, but the pain was forgotten now, he knew. This was a welcome child, unlike many he and the padre had introduced. The mother held out her arms and gently took the bundle.

The work was done. A neighbor would be in after supper to clean up. Yet the doctor lingered, watching the mother and child, hoping the padre might still arrive. "What's his name?" said the doctor.

Carlos,” said the woman. “We have decided to call him Carlos.” As good as any, the doctor thought. He hadn't had a Carlos in months. He wiped the woman's face, leaving the cold cloth on her forehead.

“Where's Ruiz?” said the doctor.

“He is getting drunk at the cantina with the gypsy. She said we would have a son.”

The doctor grunted and put on his raincoat.

“Where is the padre, Doctor?”

“I'll go look for him.”

“I want him to bless my Carlos,” she said. “He must bless my child. It is what I want done. I want to make my God happy. Why is the padre not here? He was at the Gonzalez's for their son. Does he no longer love us?”

The doctor put on his raincoat and stepped into the rain, which was now thick in the mountains, but in the street it was only a thin gray haze that bore the scent of mud and the spicy odors of food. The damp chill that spread through each of the rooms of the village creaked the bones of the villagers who he knew sat, glassy-eyed, in their adobe rooms, staring at the clammy mist.

Maria, his housekeeper and first patient, met him as he came in from the rain. She helped him off with his coat and hung it in the hall. Age had been kind to her. When he first found her she had been near death from malnutrition and infection. Her round face, the eyes dark and bright with fever, reminded him of a painting of innocence. With diligence he restored her health. To repay him she had stayed as his housekeeper.

“You have a visitor,” she said. “It is the padre.”

At sixty-eight, the padre still looked youthful and alert, yet lately his very black, bird-like eyes seemed to focus on something in the distance.

“I expected you at the birth,” said the doctor. “Why weren’t you there? It was a boy. The first for Ruiz. Carlos. The mother’s doing fine. She asked for you. She thinks you no longer love the villagers.”

“Perhaps she is right.”

The padre stared fixedly at a pot of small-petaled red flowers in the doctor's window.

“You can make poison from those,” said the doctor. “It's quite rare. I didn't think it would grow well here. One of the villagers gave it to me yesterday. He had come from the interior.”

“Poison?” said the padre.

“It can kill in a few seconds and can also be used as an anesthesia.”

“When that farmer, Miguel Santiago, poisoned himself,” said the padre, “he came home from the fields and kissed his wife and children. When I found him he was sitting under his favorite tree with his shoelaces untied. He had just started coming to church and had asked me for a Bible, which I was bringing to him. I never knew his soul was so troubled.”

“You need a drink, my friend.” The doctor poured out two glasses of whiskey and gave the padre one.

The padre gazed into his glass.

“You do what you can,” said the doctor. “Isn’t that what you told me? You can't stop now simply because things aren’t going the way they’re meant to. Where’s the faith you once had?”

The padre looked away.

When the doctor arrived in Espiritu twenty-six years ago on a bus full of women, children, and chickens, the only person to meet him had been the padre. He'd been sitting on a stone bench in the plaza, worn bare by pigs, heavy rain, and many feet. The padre had a bottle of whiskey and, together, they finished it off. As they neared the end of the bottle the padre looked at the doctor with sharp, intent eyes and said, "You are new to this life, and flushed with the thoughts of being a doctor where few have been doctors before. You know nothing of the poverty, sickness, and fear that is here. Sometimes I am full of such doubt that I wonder at my own abilities. I fear that I can no longer heal the soul or spread God's word. Then I see a new face among my congregation and know that all is not yet lost. The next week the face is gone. You have no choice but to go on because there is nothing else for you to do and there is always the hope of a new face will stay."

His grip on the doctor's shoulder had been hard. When the doctor took the bottle again, it was empty and the padre was smiling.

"There is so much poison about," said the padre as he rose to his feet in the doctor's office. "In your flowers. The seas, the earth, air. We are slowly dying of a disease for which neither you nor I have a cure. It is all around you. Even in the vast and tangled jungle, there is poison. In the toad, the snake, and in man."

Dogs barked in the street. The doctor walked to the door and opened it.

A new wave of rain clouds was building in a mass formation over the dark ragged mountains. The lightning reflected on the underside of the clouds glowed like a distant explosion.

A young couple, spattered with mud, walked up the path. The man was muscular, unshaven with deep set eyes. His free hand was around the limping woman's shoulder. She was

wide-hipped with long black hair. The doctor heard the padre behind him and felt him press near, smelling as he always did of mothballs.

The couple stopped in front of the door. The woman put the canvas bag she carried on the ground and flexed her cramped fingers. The man swung the battered fiber suitcase down from his head.

“May we have something to drink?” said the man. “Water, perhaps. My wife is very thirsty. I am Gomez. My wife is Rosa.”

“Come far?” the doctor said.

“Sixty miles, maybe,” said Gomez.

“You seem in a hurry,” said the doctor.

“It is our baby,” said Gomez. “He is ill. We left him and our little girls with my mother. We have land in one of the new districts, but we are still clearing it. It is no place for children.

“We have been traveling nearly five days. The road is in bad shape. We had to help push the bus many times, build a few bridges. But, the last washout was too much. We left the bus and walked.”

“There's no traffic going your way,” said the doctor. “And the road's out ahead, too.”

The woman bit her lip, close to despair. Tears glittered from the corners of her eyes as she fought to keep from crying.

“The bulldozers have been sent for,” said the doctor. “The roads might be open tomorrow. Stay for the night. There's plenty of food and drink. I've a few beds next door in my clinic. I can look at your wife's foot later.”

“*Gracias*,” said Gomez. The doctor poured out a glass of water and gave it to the man's wife. She took a long drink, and then passed the glass to her husband. He took a sip then

returned the glass to the doctor. They picked up their luggage and stepped into the hallway, then followed the doctor to the clinic, which was divided into cubicles off a dark central corridor. In the cubicles were tables and rough-hewn bed frames with thin mattresses and clean white sheets. Mosquito nets hung from the ceiling above the beds.

“If you need anything,” said the doctor. “I’ll be right next door. The walls are very thin, you will not need to shout.”

“We will be fine,” said Gomez. “We will be fine. *Gracias.*”

The doctor returned to the sitting room where he filled his glass and then sat rolling it between his hands. The padre stood nearby looking out the window.

The woman began to cry softly from the next room.

“I never should have left the child,” she said. “Never. It was a bad thing.”

“It is not your fault,” said Gomez gently. “We did what we thought best. Do not worry. Everything will be all right. I love you.”

“I am sorry,” said the woman in a calm voice. “I have been silly. Tomorrow the road will be open like the doctor says and, perhaps in two or three days, we can go home again. Our baby will be well. When we arrive, everything will be all right. We must have faith.”

“Yes,” said Gomez. “We will never be separated again. Things will be better. We will ask God for help and the padre for his prayers. He looks like a good man.”

The padre poured a drink and downed it. His face became flushed, and his eyes shone.

“Bless thy children around the world, Jesu,” said the padre his voice rising to a shout.

“But don’t forget us here in Espiritu. Shine thy light on us and heal our sufferings, flood us with thy light. Help us flee our frailties.”

The couple stood in the hallway. The woman was frightened. Gomez stood awkwardly behind her.

“It's nothing,” said the doctor. “Sorry to have disturbed you. The rain makes him so.”

Gomez nodded. The doctor poured another drink to steady himself, then sat down heavily, watching the padre.

The padre opened his mouth as wide as it would go, screwed up his eyes, and screamed “*Ay Dios*” so piercingly that the surprised doctor banged his knee against the table.

Maria stood in the kitchen doorway and shook her head at the padre.

“Now look what you've done,” said the doctor. “Disturbing our guests and bringing Maria from the kitchen.”

The padre said nothing.

Maria shook her fists in the air, and then returned to the kitchen where she rattled her pots and pans.

“Our guests have enough to worry about without you going through all this,” said the doctor.

“Thank you,” said Gomez. “It is all right. Our padre is the same when he is with God. Thank you.”

He took his wife's hand and led her back to the clinic.

“*Ay, Dios Mio,*” said the padre in a low voice as he fell to his knees. “*Ay, Dios Mio.*”

“Once more,” said the doctor, “and that'll be it. Do you understand?”

He took the padre by the shoulder and pulled him roughly to his feet.

“I mean it this time.”

“Ay, *Dios Mio*,” said the padre and pushed the doctor's hands away “Praise the Lord. Oh yes, dear Jesu, for today we have in our midst a new little lost lamb, Carlos, who is crying out to be saved, but by whom? Tell me Lord, who is to bless Carlos? Who will save his soul? And for whom? I can do no more.”

The padre breathed hard and swayed slightly as he stood in the center of the room staring at the backs of his hands. He blinked his eyes as though he had just come in from the dark.

“Tomorrow,” said the doctor. “First thing in the morning, you come see me.”

“Yes,” said the padre, slowly, as if he were thinking about something else. “Tomorrow things will be better.” Then he lurched bareheaded out into the rain.

The doctor watched the figure disappear and remembered an Indian who once said he never saw a sadder bunch of people than those who worshipped God. When he heard the priest begin to wail about something, the Indian always felt like laughing because the priest was trying to feel holy and full of the spirit and then would forget what God was really like. The Indian thought that God might enjoy laughing, true laughter, more than the silly wailing over sins.

The doctor filled his glass and sat staring into the clear brown liquid. He drank it quickly, knowing that soon he wouldn't be able to feel anything and the words and thoughts of the padre would go away like they always did.

Huge drops of rain banged on the roof and slashed at the leaves and ground. As much as the doctor hated the rain, the misty countryside still excited him in the early innocence of the morning.

The loud banging on the door woke him from these thoughts.

“Doctor. Doctor. You must come quickly.” The voice rose with the increased pounding of the fist. “Doctor. Come quickly.”

The doctor opened the door. Olivio, the church sexton, stood in front of him. His face silver with rain.

“It is the padre.”

The look of primitive fright in the man's eyes made the doctor's stomach turn, and he cursed himself for not having kept the padre with him. The doctor grabbed his raincoat and medical bag then followed Olivio out into the rain toward the church. The padre lay on the floor, a bottle of whiskey next to him. His face had the sad, peculiar pose of one in a drunken asleep.

“*Madre de Dios,*” said Olivio. “When he drink like this, he is like one who is dead.”

“It's best that he sleep it off now.”

They picked up the limp body and carried it to the small sleeping room, then lowered the padre to the bed.

“When he wakes up I must have a talk with him.”

“I have tried,” said Olivio. “He told me to go away.”

“Not anymore. I will make him listen to what I have to say. “

“Yes,” said Olivio. “I will watch him. He is my friend.”

“And mine, too,” the doctor said in a trembling voice. “And mine, too.”

The doctor picked up his medical bag and walked slowly back to the clinic in the rain.

He would have another drink, perhaps more, and contemplate the padre's act of despair.

Later, he would care for the injured foot of the woman who was returning to her children.