

Annuncio's Violin

by Rex Stout, 1886-1975

Published: 1912



ANNUNCIO LAY PEACEFULLY SLEEPING in the shade of a scrub mesquite. Now and again a curious, errant mud dauber, adventure-bent, explored the mazes of his wavy, ebony hair, or viewed from the vantage point of nose or chin the offerings of the surrounding country. Anon, a giant, home-returning ant, holding aloft a world of stolen grain for winter use, crawled across the bare, hemp-sandaled feet. But Annuncio still dreamed on. In easy reach of his brown-fingered hand, which yet retained half-lovingly the aged bow lay, dusty on the earth, an old violin, whose gracious curves and simple elegance of form revealed the master workman's craft. Annuncio's grandsire himself knew little of its history or of how the instrument had come to them, save only that his own father had played him to sleep in childhood with the selfsame bow. And now Annuncio played and dreamed, and waked to play again upon its ancient strings the lullabies and love songs of his people.

Within the low, thatch-roofed adobe house nearby, Eulalia began at last the preparation of their evening meal, humming low to herself as she ground the maize in the stone bowl and formed the cakes for baking. Eulalia was not as happy with her ardent wooing lover as she had thought to be. No poet she. To her, life meant more than dreaming through the sunny day and playing half-forgotten love songs to the tropic stars at night. Hers was the daily task of managing the little household cares, buying their scant supplies, and bargaining for all their simple, homely wrought apparel. And so it was that the wife had come to be the real ruler of the home, whom Annuncio indulged in every whim if only he might be allowed to dream and play. But poor Eulalia was not content with all this homage. She loved the bright mantillas of her richer sisters in the town, and gazed with longing that was not wholly free from envy at the coche and four white, prancing horses of Las Esperanzas' mayor whenever that dignitary passed by on a visit to some neighboring ranch.

The first cool evening breeze came wandering down from the mountain and wakened Annuncio. Sitting up, he raised the violin for an ante-supper melody. And while he played, slowly, unnoticed along the road approached a man, at once a gringo and a vagabundo. Attracted as much, perhaps, by the sweetness of the melody he heard as by the savory odor of tortillas coming from the house, the stranger left the highway and drew near the spot where Annuncio was sitting. With a single glance he appraised the ordinary surroundings of the peon's home, but when his eyes, furtive and shifting, rested on the native's violin, a new interest dawned in them.

The tune ended, Annuncio rose, aware for the first time of the stranger's presence. The latter showed a small coin and asked for supper and a place to sleep. Annuncio, eyeing with distrust the American's ragged clothes and unkempt exterior, began to refuse his hospitality, when Eulalia, coming out to fetch her man, caught sight of the real and bade the gringo enter.

The tortillas and frijoles eaten, Annuncio again took up his violin to play away the evening. The gringo listened for a space and then, turning to Annuncio, told him to bring the instrument close to the candle. Taking it from the reluctant hand of its owner, the gringo scrutinized the scratched and grimy case with half-concealed satisfaction. This done, he played, or rather wrenched from the unaccustomed strings, a few measures of Strauss' waltz, and handing back to miserable Annuncio his ravaged pet, he said: „My friends, I am a lonely man. On my travels often I need the music to urge my tired feet. This little violin could help me much. I wish you to sell me it for company.“

Annuncio at once and firmly demurred. Eulalia, the discontented, desired to know what the Señor would give. The Señor had but five pesos dos reales by him in silver, but this would scarce suffice to pay them for so great a boon, the life-long friendship of the violin, and so, the Señor would—ah, what cared he for gold, he wished for companionship—they had each other, but he went all alone—would give them for their charity to him, a lonely wayfarer, a lottery ticket sure to win the grand prize of 10,000 pesos, sold him by a friendly officer of the lottery Nacional whom he had saved from drowning but last month. This would he give to them, his friends.

Annuncio thought of all the starry nights to come without the solace of a single melody, and sadly shook his head; Eulalia thought of all the glories of a coche and four white, prancing steeds, of soft laces, silver combs, and silken shawls, a house in town, servants—and smiling, nodded her assent.

„And we will buy you many new violeens, all cherry red and shining,“ whispered she to hesitating Nuncio, and so the bargain ended.

The tenth of August came and early in the morning Eulalia rose to furbish up the threadbare jacket and breeches of Nuncio. Today began the new life, for was not the grand prize already theirs, waiting now in Esperanzas for the presentation of the winning ticket. Of a certainty. And so Nuncio was to trudge the ten hot, dusty miles on foot, but to return—ah, that triumphant march, had not Eulalia dreamed it over a dozen times? To return proudly borne back the weary way in a coche drawn by four white, prancing horses, even as the worthy corregidor of the town. The fertile brain of Eulalia had planned it all. They would destroy all vestige of their former poverty in one grand offering to the kindly gods of chance. Together they piled all their meager household goods—the shaky table, the rude chairs, and all the rest—into a little hillock beneath the center of the thatched roof. Their little store of maize and coffee, too, were placed thereon, and flung atop the heap lay whatever clothes they had other than those they wore. No single thing of all their former state would they retain. A little brush-wood fire smouldered without the door, and from this Eulalia, at first glimpse of returning coche and four, would take a brand and kindle that within. So they had planned and so it was to be.

Two o'clock saw Nuncio, dusty and worn, enter the main street of Esperanzas, the Calle Alvarez. Easily he found the office of the Nacional and entered, smiling round the crowd of loiterers standing by the door. In one minute the prize would be his, and he the richest man in many kilometers around. He stepped to the desk and presented the worn, tattered ticket.

„My ten thousand pesos, si gusta.“

The clerk smiled affably.

„The ticket is two years old, pobrecito,“ he said, „and wasn't worth a centava even then.“

„But the Señor said“—began Nuncio pleadingly.

The clerk only nodded pleasantly toward the door and commenced to talk to the little stenographer.

Annuncio stumbled to the sidewalk and started slowly away. He thought dazedly of his long journey home on foot and of the sad news he must tell his wife. Someone gave him a peseta and bade him get a drink. He went to a nearby store and purchased a bottle of mezcal, stupidly wondering if the Señor would ever bring back his precious violin, now that the lottery ticket was no good. Surely so kind a man as the Señor would not keep a poor man's property if he knew.

Thus sorrowfully musing, Annuncio wandered to the edge of town and took up the long way back to Eulalia. But now the road seemed strangely long to his tired feet. He began to resort to frequent drinks from the bottle. After a time he sat down to rest by the roadside. Some vehicle was coming from the city. Maybe they were coming after him to say that there had been some mistake. Or perhaps it was the mail coche to San Luis. Then he recognized the mayor's equipage. Ah yes, Nuncio remembered this was the evening of the grand baile at Madero's, and

doubtless the Señor Corregidor was overtaking him on his way thither. And would the Señor be so kind as to give him a lift, being very tired with the long walk? Of a certainty the Señor would. Nuncio might get up on the seat with the driver.

Thankfully he did so, and the coche proceeded toward the Madero ranch, the hacienda next beyond his own humble adobe. Little by little Nuncio's body relaxed, lulled by the easy rolling coche, and soon he forgot the troubles of the day, lost in a half-dream of near-forgotten melodies.

But suddenly, in front of them, through the gathering dusk of the autumn evening, a glorious, scarlet burst of flame leaped quivering into the air. Anuncio started up.

„Jesus Maria,“ he said, dully, „our little plan!“
