The Lepers' Guest

Max Pemberton

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A Story of the Pyrenees.

By Max Pemberton

THE omen of the night was not such as to lead me further upon my road; yet, well or ill, it did not lie in my power to turn back. I had been riding upon a bridle-path since the clock of a village church chimed the hour of four; and now the way was so narrowed and stony that no horse could turn upon it. Nay, I began to fear that I should ride on to an impasse, and find myself for my pains perched high upon the mountain side in a place of peril and difficulty whence I might never hope to emerge. And at this I fell to hard thoughts of the man who had sent me from the high road, and had put me to so much discomfort for the gratification of so small a curiosity.

I say “for so small a curiosity,” and, indeed, at that time I thought his curiosity almost pitiful. I had met him three weeks before in the English Club at Pau. They told me that he was a man of substance, and entitled to call himself the Duc de Trevino; though he was known commonly as Señor

Quiroga. The most part of his lands had long passed from his possession to that of his hungry creditors; yet he contrived to maintain some position, and had no little glory from his traditional lordship over three castles in the Basque provinces. It was to one of those that I was now going, at his request. He had learnt, in a short conversation with me at Pau, that I had affairs to settle in the country of his birth. A mutual devotion to horses and to trout had put us upon terms of considerable intimacy. He begged me, if it should happen that I found myself in Biscay, to strike the mountain road to Durango, and to seek out the village of Mondragon.

“It would be a very great favour to me,” said he, “if you would accept the hospitality of my steward, even for a single night. I would welcome a word on that which you see. Once you are at Mondragon, you will not meet a man who cannot put you upon the road to the château. I myself must be at Santander in the last week of the month. You tell me that you also must be there at that time. If that is so, I should have news of my home from an unbiased and friendly witness.”

I assured him that nothing would give me greater pleasure, and told him that I hoped to come to Mondragon one day during the Christmas week. And at this his anxiety that I should do his bidding redoubled.

“Nothing could be better for both of us,” said he; “although a Spanish welcome is not usually exhilarating, I promise

you a cordial greeting from my steward. Ask for Juan Bazán anywhere in the village, and tell him that you spend Christmas Eve with him. I say Christmas Eve, for it is then that you would see some of the most amusing of our customs. You know something of the Basque legends, of course?”

I said that I did, and having repeated my promise to help him in his intention, I took leave of him. For the matter of that, the conversation passed quickly from my mind, and I proceeded to forget both the Duc de Trevino and his steward who was to welcome me. Not until the third week in December, when my business as a railway engineer carried me to the western spur of the Pyrenees, did any thought of my promise recur to me. But a filthy Spanish inn at a village called Isaro, and the rough company of equally filthy Spanish peasants, brought it suddenly to my mind. And it was curious, indeed, that this inspiration should have come to me on the morning of Christmas Eve. In short, I resolved to go.

The intention being formed, I spoke of it forthwith to the landlord of the venta. He surprised me by regarding it as an excellent joke; so excellent, that he called other of the villagers in to share his merriment; and they stood together, alternately guffawing or regarding me with a curiosity too profound for words. They were still standing thus when I turned the corner of the street, and the last word I heard was the host’s shrill cry:—

“Ho, Ho, the noble cavalier rides to the House of Snows. God be with you, señor. Hasten your visit, señor. Ojala!”

Now, what to make of talk like this, I knew no more than the dead. That they should find amusement in my visit to the Duke’s house was only to be accounted for upon the supposition that I was the victim of a hoax. But this I would not believe. The man I had met at Pau was, before all things, a gentleman. I would have wagered my life that he would not entertain so sorry a trick. Nor could I, rack my brains as I would, imagine any reason for the merriment of the folks at the inn. Indeed, it rather provoked me to curiosity, and, determined as much to fathom it as to keep faith with him who sent me, I put my horse upon the mountain road and set out for the place.

It was then about three o’clock of the afternoon, and the sun shone pleasantly in the valleys, though up upon the peaks the snow was glistening upon countless domes and spikes and silvered rocks. What wind there was came shrill and cutting through the gorges and the forests of pine; and so keen had been the frost of the night, that even the cascades were still, and hung like ropes of jewels and of crystal down the faces of the ice-bound hills. The trees themselves were powdered prettily with the scattered snow-flakes; the rough road below me was as hard as iron; the chasms above seemed to be plated with gold as the sun fell upon them. There was no sign of man or beast or of any living thing, save a great eagle soaring. All the world had fled to the

towns to keep the feast, and I alone was abroad upon the pass.

They had told me at the inn to strike the bridle-path, which would appear upon my right hand when I came to a shrine of the Virgin, some four miles or more from the village. I was mounted upon a sturdy brown-black cob, cunning at treading a narrow track, and well used to the dangers of the heights. I had a thick black Spanish cloak or capa about my shoulders, and a sombrero of felt drawn over my eyes. Myzamarra, or short coat, was of black sheepskin, and my wine-bottle upon my saddle was strained to the point of bursting with its generous store of the rich vino de toro. Nor had I forgotten my pair of Army revolvers, which were at my hand upon the saddle, and likely, I said, to be of service if necessity should find me still upon, the road when night came down.

[Illustration: “THEY WERE STANDING THUS WHEN I TURNED THE CORNER.”]

How long I rode before any suspicion of the path dawned upon me, I am unable to say. Dusk was falling, and there was mist of the snow in my eyes when at last I observed that any further abridgment of the track would compel me either to halt or to risk my neck in an endeavour to turn upon the path. And that was no place to invite a careless foothold. On the one hand, the sheer rock towering up with

face as of quartz and jaspar to the snow-bound heights above me; on the other hand, the fathomless ravine with its thousand precipices and jagged points, the valley round lying like a streak of silver amidst the pine woods below me. One false step, one slip of my horse, and we should go hurrying down to death. The thought braced me to renewed effort; it called also for unspoken abuse of the man whose hospitality was girt about such a for bidding frontier. Indeed, in that moment, I cursed the Duke of Trevino and all that belonged to him; and with a final word of objurgation for the day upon which I had met him, I gave my cob his head, and prayed aloud for my safety.

There is an old saying that a sick man must be worse before he is better. And this, for a fact, was my own case. I had come at last to a place upon the path which, it seemed to me, no human thing could pass. The precipice here turned abruptly to the right. The track itself wound round the face of the rock, but with such a treacherous foot hold that my cob must go like a cat, hesitating at every step and shivering with terror. As for me, I was benumbed with the icy cold, the wind searched my very skin, my right arm brushed the wall of rock, my left hand swung above the ravine, whose depth I dare not imagine. And just at the moment when I had shut my eyes, fearful to survey the situation longer, the good beast, who had carried me so well, began to neigh with pleasure and to bound forward in a free, swinging canter which, I swear, was the most delightful I have ever known.

A single glance made manifest to me the change which had come upon our fortunes. The turn of the path had carried us out upon a broad plateau nestling in the very heart of the mountains. A fair carriage-way was to be observed not a furlong distant, and it was plain to me at once that this was the road by which I should have come up to the Duke's house. For the matter of that, there was the castle itself, standing, as it were, in a niche cut out of the solid rock; a bare, gaunt structure of white stone, looking for all the world like a monastery; and just as uninviting as any house I ever clapped eyes upon. Though it was now almost dark, not a light shone from any of the narrow windows of that gloomy building; no gates shut it off from the highway; there was no pretence of approach or inclosure; the lower windows were barred like the cells of a prison; no loom of smoke blurred the exquisite whiteness of the snow above its towers; no foot-mark was to be seen upon the untrodden carpet before its door. Desolation, solitude, neglect, these were my impressions, and every step that my horse took did but strengthen them.

"This, then, is the Duke's joke," said I to myself when at last my cob began to clatter up the stony pavement before that which would have been called, by courtesy, the great gate. "Here plain enough is the cause of mine host's merriment. The one has sent me fifty miles out of my way to inspect a ruin; the other will tell him of his success. The deuce take the pair of them."

It was all very well to indulge in this pious wish, but it did not help me to food or to shelter; and for food and for shelter I had begun to crave exceedingly. The night was setting in bitter cold; the blast howled dismally in the hollows of the hills; a spume of wind-cloud covered the sky threateningly. The lonely shapes of the gaunt head lands brought me to a sense of melancholy and foreboding; I thought of my friends making merry in Bayonne or Pamplona; I remembered that the morrow was Christmas Day—and at this, my estimate of the Duke was such as I could not possibly write. Nevertheless, I was but half convinced that he could plan so shabby a jest; and with this thought for consolation, I tugged at the long handle of his bell, and was answered by a jangle of sound which echoed a thousand-fold from every height and depth around. To my utter astonishment, the great, iron-studded door was opened at once; and just as I was saying that there was no one in the house, a civil old man was bowing before me and muttering phrases which, for all the meaning I could make of them, might have been so much Chinese.

“Halloa!” said I, when at last the old fellow paused, and, indeed, he was shivering like a man with the ague; “are you Juan Bazán?”

Now, instead of answering me directly (and I have some considerable acquaintance with Spanish), he, to my confusion, began to ramble on with such a string of appeals and complaints that I set him down at once as a maniac.

“God save me,” he cried, again and again; “I am but an old man, and it was not my work. I have meant no ill-will to you. Blame not the servant for the deed of the master. Let me go, and my lips shall be shut upon this night’s work—I will swear it upon the Holy Cross. Before Heaven, I am telling you the truth.”

This was the way he gabbled on; nor do I believe for a moment that he was sane when he spoke to me. All my appeals fell on deaf ears. I gave him the letter from the Duke, his master, and he stood gibbering with the note unopened in his hand. Meanwhile, I had dismounted from my horse, and had pushed my way into a Moorish court which would have moved an antiquarian to ecstasies. Glorious arches, memorials to dead centuries, raised their frescoed crowns on every side. A fountain, rich in sculpture and tracery, cast out a frozen jet which had the appearance of a band of silver; a balcony with delicately wrought balustrades gave access to innumerable rooms. Never was a greater contrast between interior and exterior. Without, I had been the sole actor in a scene of desolation; within, I was the guest in a house which kings might have built and queens enjoyed. Yet this was the mystery, that the man who was responsible for my entertainment regarded me as a cut-purse who had come to steal his master’s spoons.

“Look here,”said I, angered beyond restraint, “don’t you think that you’ve played the fool long enough? I have come here to stay the night at your master’s orders. You have his

letter in your hand, if my word is not enough. Take me to the stables, I beg, and get me some supper."

At this appeal he bowed again, though I could see that his legs were tottering under him.

"Certainly," exclaimed he. "I know well whence you come. Oh, indeed, I am your servant. All that you ask shall be done—I pledge my faith. I am but an old man, and it was not my work. God save your Excellency."

"Amen, to that," said I, telling myself that Juan Bazán, steward to the worthy Duc de Trevino, was nothing less than an imbecile. But he was already on his way to the stables, and thither I followed in a state of perplexity and wonder which no words could express.

[Illustration: "THIS WAY, SEÑOR."]

"This way, señor," he cried, snatching up a lantern which he had left upon the pavement, "this way, I pray you. The stables are through the great arch here. Have a care to the pavement; it is worn, I fear. If I had but known sooner. Oh, truly, news goes with a lame foot in Biscay."

"Then you knew that I was coming?" cried I.

"Your Excellency is the best judge of that," he exclaimed, and at the same moment he threw open the door of the

stables.

His answer struck me as curious and enigmatical. Unless the landlord down in Isaro had played a joke upon the pair of us, who should have told him of my coming? And this supposition afforded the only key that fitted the logic of the mystery. I saw at once that they had frightened the old man, and I turned round to tell him so. But he, who a moment before had been at my elbow, was no longer to be seen. He had vanished like a fleeting ray of light.

“A malediction on the old fool,” said I to myself; “they have told him some cock and bull story, and he takes me for a brigand. I shall have an account to settle with mine host of Isaro if ever misfortune carries me to his village again.”

Truth to tell, directly I had begun to understand the thing, the humorous side of it appealed to me irresistibly. I had played many rôles in a young life—but the rôle of brigand was new to me. Better, said I, to be taken for a brigand than a bagman; and with this for satisfaction, I tended my horse and gave the poor beast a feed. Nor could I, in reason, complain of the stables. They were ornamental enough to have moved architects to tears; and I did not fail to observe that one of the stalls was occupied by a sturdy bay cob, which was in the best of condition. Mad or sane, the steward of the Duke of Trevino undeniably loved his beast, and this was no small point in his favour. I resolved that I would reward him by putting an end to the farce we were

playing; and so thinking, I returned to the court and began to call to him.

Many times I called, my voice sounding wonderfully deep and baying under the old arches of the cloister; hut no word answered me. A search in the lower rooms about the quadrangle was no more fruitful; the most part of these, as is the custom in Spanish houses, being given up to lumber and to cellarage. It was only when I had made the circuit of the yard twice, and had come upon a little staircase which carried me to the balcony above, that I found evidence of life and occupation. Many doors opened upon this balcony; some leading to reception-rooms, gaudy in Spanish splendours; some to gloomy bed-chambers of vast size; one to a chapel with an altar weighed down with time-worn emblems of devotion; one to a library sparsely stocked with heavy volumes. But at the very far end of the passage, facing the stables, I came suddenly upon two apartments that spoke unmistakably of very recent occupation; and in the larger of these there was a spectacle which filled me as much with merriment as with wonder.

The first of these rooms was furnished as a sitting-room, the second as a kitchen; but it was not their furniture which I remarked with such amusement. Piled high upon the floor of the larger chamber were silver vessels, cups, goblets, dishes, spoons, of every conceivable shape and variety. Mingled with them were a number of rings, bracelets, necklaces, and other votive offerings, snatched, I surmised,

haphazard from the altar near by. I guessed instantly that the excellent Juan Bazán had made this attempt to save such of his master's property as he could from the hands of one whom he regarded as a marauder. Defeated in his purpose by my sudden coming to the House of Snows, he had left the heap as a witness to his endeavours. But more than this, he had also left the house. Even as I was examining the amazing collection at my feet, I heard the great gate clang upon its hinges. The windows of the room looked out upon the mountains; I beheld, by the white light of the glittering snow, the unhappy steward flying for his life down the broad road to Isaro. Terror at length had conquered him. I was sure that he had gone for the police.

This utterly unlooked-for greeting struck me at first as entirely funny. I said to myself that a whole company of alquazils would occupy the house presently, and that they would be merry souls, at any rate, and to be preferred to the gibbering idiot who had offered me such a bewildering welcome. Meanwhile, the terror-stricken man had left a very decent dinner and a very good bottle of wine behind him—not, perhaps, the dinner to be eaten on a Christmas Eve in England, but mightily welcome in the Pyrenees, and a God-send under the circumstances. I judged that it would have been an insult not to have sampled his cooking on the spot, and wishing him *bon voyage* on his way to the police station, I fell to with the appetite of a hungry and snow-driven man, and made a meal worthy of a prince-bishop.

It must have been near to nine o'clock when I had finished. There was a wealth of the moon's beams then pouring into my room, and the surpassingly white light fell plenteously upon the mountains. All the valleys had put on armour of silver and of jewels; the amphitheatre of hills and peaks glittered with an irradiance blinding to the eyes; the pine trees had the aspect of great bushes made of silver twigs; the cascades were like froth of diamonds and of pearls. No human thing was abroad at such an hour. I opened the window of my room and listened if there were any sound of horses' tramping, or of men approaching. But all was still as the zenith of the night; the police which Juan Bazán were to bring were not yet to be heard. Solitude reigned in the heights; the towns alone echoed the spirit of the feast.

I had made myself sure of this, and was about to close the casement again, for the wind was bitterly cold, when the first really startling vision of that night of visions came to my eyes. I say that I thought myself alone, the victim of a pretty hoax, the one living thing in that house of mysteries. And just when I was hugging the notion that I would do Juan Bazán the honour of sleeping in his bed until he should return, and was about to make the window fast, what should I see but the shadow of a girl cast plain and clear-cut upon the white terrace before the house. There it was, the reflection of the shape of a woman in Spanish dress; of a young woman, as I thought, and of one who was watching and waiting. During long moments the shadow lay upon the snow. Then it passed quickly; nor was there any sound, not

so much as of a footstep or a whisper, to indicate whence it came or whither it had gone.

To say that this apparition alarmed me, would be to magnify the truth. There had been nothing particularly terrifying about the aspect of Juan Bazán; there was nothing so far in the house which he had left to compel suspicion or watchfulness. I argued that the girl possibly was his daughter; or was employed about the place. She, too, it might be, went in dread of the "brigand" who had descended so suddenly upon her home. I determined to reassure her; and snatching the lantern which the estimable Juan had left behind him, I ran into the court and began to bawl Spanish exclamations with the energy of a watchman. Yet, and this was strange, not a whisper of an answer did I get. Except for the crackle of the frost beneath my feet, the whole yard was as silent as the fields of snow upon the heights above. Smaller courts opening from the greater one were alike deserted, and lit only by the moon beams which flooded down upon them so searchingly. No longer did any black shadow lie upon the untrodden snow. The ghostly corridors had no company; the entwining pillars were the only sentinels that guarded this haven among the mountains.

Convinced of this, I began to think that a poor digestion was responsible for my apparition; and though a certain vague uneasiness, bred, perhaps, of the strange shapes about

me, was not to be put off, I returned at last to the steward's room and lay down upon his bed.

[Illustration: "WHAT SHOULD I SEE BUT THE SHADOW OF A GIRL!"]

The lantern was still burning where I had set it; there was a flicker of firelight upon the ceiling when at last I went to sleep. The day's work had tired me; the crisp, bracing air of the mountains weighed down my eyes with drowsiness. I could not have been upon Juan's bed more than ten minutes when a dreamy, restful unconsciousness stole over me. And the same dreamy feeling still possessed me when, after that which seemed an exceeding short time, I awoke again, and observed the red glow from the fire still dancing upon the ceiling of the room. But the flame of the lantern had burnt itself out, and I was in the very act of feeling for a match, when there burst upon my ears a sound which seemed to freeze my very heart, so mournful was it, so shrill, so dirge-like. It was the sound, not of one, but of many men chanting a slow measure, fit to be styled a dirge of the dead—a haunting, weird melody rising up like a summons to all the spirits of the mountains—a chant, now of triumph, now of despair—as wild and as plaintive as any music man has listened to.

A roving life, lived amongst many men, and in many cities, is the best antidote to the sins of the nerves. For my part, whether it be temperament or whether it be education, I

have never been a considerable victim of panic or of alarms. Yet, I confess that when first I heard that mysterious chanting in the House of Snows, my heart seemed to stand still, and an icy cold sweat broke out upon my forehead. Whence came the sound I could not, at the first hearing, tell. The whole house was full of it; the cloisters resounded the dismal note; the night wind carried it far up into the mountains. Now shrill as with voices of women; now deep and sonorous as with the power of men, the measure rose and fell in haunting cadences, swelling at one time to the grandeur of a great organ, dying away presently until it was a mere lisp of words. And so soul-stirring was it, so terrifying, that I listened spell bound, motionless, nay, almost terrified.

The chant rose and fell and died away in lingering harmonies. It was not until the final chord had ceased to reverberate beneath the eaves that the spell left me; and full of curiosity, perhaps of fear, I sprang from the bed and ran out upon the balcony before my door. Clear reason had then returned to me, and I knew that the music was the music of human voices. But whence came they; why were they raised in the House of Snows? The answer to such speculations was given to me immediately. No sooner was I upon the balcony than I saw a spectacle which I shall not forget, though I may live for a hundred years. The court, which had been dark save for the moonlight when I had gone to my sleep, was now glowing with a hundred lights from a hundred flaming torches. Wild figures of wild-

looking men danced and capered in grotesque attitudes around a great fire which burnt at the very foot of the frozen fountain. Women snapping castanets, girls dancing dreamily, cripples hobbling, the blind feeling their way, ragged cloaks elbowing scarlet sleeves and embroideries of gold; strange creatures, drunk with excitement and with warmth, helped that wondrous and haunting scene. Never had I looked upon the like of it; never heard sounds so strange or cries so shrill. A hundred demons might have risen suddenly from the shades and come to hold carnival in the mansion of the Duke. The master of pantomime might have had out his wares in the court especially for my delectation.

For many minutes I stood upon the balcony watching this medley with curious feelings. I had remembered that the Duke had spoken to me of the Basque customs, and had laid it upon me to visit the house if possible at the eve of Christmas. This remembrance helped me to regard the whole thing as a play, a surprise of the wily old steward who had left me so cunningly. And I was just about to declare myself, thinking to get fun of the frolic and the din, when events below took a turn which showed the whole thing in a new light, and one so horrible that its memory is to this day like a haunting vision of my sleep. Of a sudden there was a great cry at the chief gate of the court. I beheld many with torches running to that place; but returning immediately with new-comers, who had formed a ring round one whom they were beating and cuffing and

dragging onward, regardless of the shrieks and cries, and wailing appeals for mercy. Now falling, now up again, now torn almost limb from limb, his face bleeding, his eyes outstanding, I recognised the victim of the mob. He was Juan Bazán, the steward of my host, the Duke of Trevino. And him they pushed forward, the women more fiercely than the men, until they had him at the edge of the great fire they had made; and here they formed a ring about him, while he continued to raise cries which must have been heard miles away in the mountains.

“Mercy! for the love of God! Mercy, as you hope for mercy. I am an old man; I have done you no hurt—I swear it. I am but the servant—pity me!”

These, often repeated, were his words when they forced him upon his knees before the fire. And the mob, listening to them, greeted him with ringing guffaws; some stripping his clothes off his shoulders, some thrusting torches in his face, some flashing their shining knives before his eyes. Nor, for many minutes, could you hear a word; not, indeed, until a deformed old man, who appeared to be the leader of the gang, suddenly raised his hand, when instantly the whole company hushed its voice. And to this hush there followed the croaking note of the leader—harsh, satirical, and unpitying.

“Juan Bazán,” said he, and I could but just follow the patois, “you ask mercy of us. We will give it to you even as

you have given it to us. You cry that we shall pity you. Let our pity be as yours. You call on the sacred name of God, that name under the cloak of which your master has hunted us from house to house and hill to hill, putting a curse upon our children and a yoke upon our lives. Let the holy name of God be our justification."

He said this, and with the word he raised a hand from the shelter of the brown cloak. As I looked at it by the torches' light, an overwhelming horror came upon me. It was the hand of a leper. But he went on with his accusation.

[Illustration: "IT WAS THE HAND OF A LEPER."]

"Let the holy name of God be our justification," he repeated, turning to the mob behind him, who answered his words with a savage roar of anger. "What say you, my children? This man who has driven you from your homes, who has hunted you like wolves—what shall be done to him?"

It was not possible to doubt the nature of the answer which would be given to him. The horde no longer had patience to listen to the accusation. Drunk with the desire of blood, hot in uncontrollable anger, the Spaniards sprang upon the terror-stricken steward. The light playing over his face showed me a countenance distorted with agony and the fear of death. In one horrible moment I saw the flash of many

knives; I heard the man's long-drawn shriek as the blades were buried in his body; I saw him roll over and over, clutching the ground in his agony. And then I shut my eyes for very terror, and a loud cry escaped my lips.

Until this time I had watched the scene like a man in a dream. Waked from my sleep to take part in it, there were moments when I said that I had imagined the whole thing—that it was a freak of the brain following upon a stolen supper. But no sooner had I uttered a word of protest than the grim reality was brought home to me. Every face in that throng below instantly turned upward to mine. A hundred torches were raised that their light might fall upon me. The quivering body of the steward was left that men might come and look at him who sought to stay their hands. And never have I heard anything like the shouts which fell upon my ears when the mob had satisfied itself that I had witnessed its work. Twenty men seemed to leap together to the staircase upon my right hand; others, grinning with rage, swarmed up the pillars; some ran to and fro roaring with their desire of vengeance; the women and young girls added voices to the clamour; the leader endeavoured to make himself heard, but none listened to him.

As for myself, though I had whipped out my pistols as the horde ran to the staircase, I looked for nothing but instant death, for such a death as Juan Bazán had died. The meaning of those shrill cries was unmistakable. The faces of the first-comers, as they appeared at the head of the stair

case, betrayed neither pity nor hesitation. I was one against a hundred mad with the lust of blood and murder. The very thought moved me to a dogged and obstinate determination to strike one blow for my life. Quick as light, I set my back against the wall and covered the first of the Spaniards with my pistol. As he thrust his dirty face forward, raising his arm to strike me, I shot him through the shoulder and his body rolled back upon his fellows. A second and third discharge, fired point-blank into the mob, left a second and a third of the company prone upon the stairs. For an instant, the tide of the assault rolled back. A hush as the hush of storm fell upon those below. I heard the leader's voice, loud and sonorous, as he called upon his men to come down. I heard a new and angrier roar of refusal; and then, as the mob gathered itself together for a last great rush, I, of a sudden moved by one of those clear ideas which come to us often in the heat of danger, sprang headlong from the gallery to the snow below, and was at the leader's side even before those who pressed upon me had marked my intention.

"For God's sake, look what you do," cried I, shouting with all my lungs. "I am an Englishman, and your people will pay for this night's work."

"What do you here, then?" he asked, turning upon me a pair of eyes horribly bloodshot and watering.

“I was passing through the mountains, and I came for a night’s shelter. I have friends at Isaro, who will look for me to-morrow. There is my passport.”

[Illustration: “I SHOT HIM THROUGH THE SHOULDER.”]

It was a terrible moment. The crowd, as crowds will, had paused directly their chief exchanged a word with me. I saw about me hundreds of wild eyes and horrid faces, knives glistening, features drawn with ferocity. Hands raised here and there; bared breasts, legs showing through rags which swathed them, told me of what sort these men were. They were cagots, the lepers of Biscay, those hunted, driven wolves of the mountains of which even tradition speaks with a hushed voice. And now they pressed upon me, while the dread and the loathing of them which I suffered is not to be set down.

The chief made a pretence of reading my passport. His fellows waited for his word. I knew that it was the supreme moment of my life. A sign from him—a hesitating word, and the mob would tear me limb from limb. So great was the agony of suspense that the sweat rolled from my face and fell in cold drops upon my hands.

“Well,” said the chief at last, and hours seemed to pass before he spoke, “I see that you are an Englishman. But I must ask again, what brought you to this house?”

“The request of the Duke of Trevino, whom I met last month at Pau.”

The thing was said without a thought of the consequence. Yet it proved to be the turn of the crisis.

“The Duke is at Pau!” almost screamed the leader.

“He was there when I left,” said I, “but he is to be at Santander directly.”

I had raised my voice again, so that all the Spaniards in the court could hear me. The result was remarkable beyond any expectation.

“Listen to that,” cried the chief; “the Duke is to be at Santander directly.”

The others answered him with turbulent shouts.

“You swear that you are not lying to us?” cried the leader, turning upon me suddenly, as the possibility occurred to him.

“I swear it,” said I.

“Then let him lead us there,” cried a young girl in the throng—and her suggestion moved the mob to raptures of delight. The crowd began to pour out of the great gateway, some of the crew calling for my horse, some bidding their

friends to fire the building, others again wringing their hands in delight at the news I had given to them. Soon I found myself, how I know not, once more in the saddle, with the army of repulsive lepers gibbering about my horse's girths. A hundred torches lit up the darkness of the mountain road. The brown cloaks of the men (not a few of them stamped with the duck's foot, the sign of the leper in Biscay), the bright dresses of the girls, the music of guitars, and the clash of tamboureens added to the wonders of the scene. And the drama of it all culminated when, suddenly and terribly, great, red flames burst from the building we had left, and a newer, fiercer light shone out over the mountains. The assassins had fired the House of Snows, and made it a beacon of the hills.

[Illustration: "GREAT RED FLAMES BURST FROM THE BUILDING."]

The burning of the house, and this was not strange, modified, in some measure, the ardour of the mob. There were many who turned their backs upon the company and slipped away in the darkness directly we left the gateway. That which had been a band of a hundred or more when we set out was a company of fifty when we gained the summit of the pass. At a mile from the burning building there was but a score of men with me, and they had lost their tongues.

Turning round in my saddle, I looked down the mountain road upon the house I had left. It burned with a lurid red

light; but soldiers were moving in its courtyard, and with them were many villagers come to see the meaning of the beacon. Elsewhere all was still in the heights; of all the throng that had set out so gaily to the murder of the Duke of Trevino but one remained, and she was a girl; a girl whose age, allowing for her Southern maturity, could not have been more than sixteen years. Pretty, piquant, quaintly dressed, with large, round eyes, and coarse, black hair—she now stood timidly holding to my stirrup-strap. I saw that she wished to speak with me.

"Well, pretty one," said I, "why do you wait? Do you not see the soldiers?"

"Señor," said she, avoiding my question, but holding the tighter to my strap, "will you take me away from here?"

"Take you away, child?—where should I take you?"

"To Santander—to the Duke, my master."

"And what would you do at Santander?"

"I would warn him. Oh, I can tell him what he will never hear. Do not be afraid of me—I am not as the others."

By this she meant that the fearful disease to which so many of her companions were victims had not put its dreadful seal upon her, and she held up a pair of exquisitely white

arms, to convince me of the truth. Yet how to answer her, I did not know.

“See, little one,” said I at last, “there is but one horse.”

“I will ride on the saddle before you,” she protested; and giving me no time to answer her, she sprang up suddenly from the ground, and soon was resting in my arms.

An argument pressed home like this was irresistible. I gave the beast his head, and we began to descend the pass to Bilbao. But at the next posting-station, where I left her to see if I could procure another horse, she rewarded me roughly for my pains. For when I came out of the post-house, there was not a trace of her to be seen. She had ridden off with my cob; and I did not doubt that her destination was my own.

I arrived at Santander on the eve of the following day, thinking it imperatively necessary to make known to the Duke of Trevino the whole circumstances attending the sack and destruction of his house. With this intention I descended at the principal inn, La Fonda de Boggio, and asked the landlord for news of him I sought. He met me with a look of surprised incredulity.

“How,” said he, “have you not heard? The Duke was assassinated in the Calle de Bacedo at two o’clock this

afternoon. The whole town is full of it. He was struck down by a girl as he was coming from the house."

I listened, silent, in amazement. Then I asked:—

"Have they caught the creature?"

"Indeed, no—and yet she was only a child. Oh, trust a cagot for craftiness."

"And to what do they attribute the crime?"

"To the fact that he prevented the slut's marriage to one of his servants because she was the daughter of a leper. Oh, he has hunted them merrily, those poor devils, and now they have repaid him. God rest his soul."

I muttered an Amen—and it seemed to me that the whole story of the night was now made clear. The Duke had sent me to the House of Snows to bring him news of those he had persecuted. I knew well that roving bands of hunted lepers were still to be found in the mountains and caves of Biscay. And it was such a band that had worked so deadly a vengeance upon Juan Bazán and his master. Every year for many years, they told me afterwards, these nomadic lepers had held carnival at Christmas Eve somewhere upon the Duke's estate, always swearing vengeance and nursing their hate. But upon the night when I crossed the mountains, they had conceived the daring notion of supping in the Duke's very house. Juan Bazán must have heard of this intention,

and was preparing to defend himself when I arrived. I reflected bitterly that if, in his panic, he had not mistaken me for one of those whom he feared, I might have saved his life and that of his master. It was clear that they had caught him as he fled to the village, and had carried him back to be the passive victim of that memorable scene I had witnessed.

As for the Duke, I have never doubted that the hand which struck him down was the hand of the child I had carried in my arms through the mountains.

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