

CHAPTER III

I must say that for the next three months I threw myself into my unlawful trade with a sort of desperation, dogged and hopeless, like a fairly decent fellow who takes deliberately to drink. The business was getting dangerous. The bands in the South were not very well organized, worked with no very definite plan, and now were beginning to be pretty closely hunted. The arrangements for the transport of supplies were going to pieces; our friends ashore were getting scared; and it was no joke to find after a day of skilful dodging that there was no one at the landing place and have to go out again with our compromising cargo, to slink and lurk about the coast for another week or so, unable to trust anybody and looking at every vessel we met with suspicion. Once we were ambushed by a lot of "rascally Carabineers," as Dominic called them, who hid themselves among the rocks after disposing a train of mules well in view on the seashore. Luckily, on evidence which I could never understand, Dominic detected something suspicious. Perhaps it was by virtue of some sixth sense that men born for unlawful occupations may be gifted with. "There is a smell of treachery about this," he remarked suddenly, turning at his oar. (He and I were pulling alone in a little boat to reconnoitre.) I couldn't detect any smell and I regard to this day our escape on that occasion as, properly speaking, miraculous. Surely some supernatural power must have struck upwards the barrels of the Carabineers' rifles, for they missed us by yards. And as the Carabineers have the reputation of shooting straight, Dominic, after swearing most horribly, ascribed our escape to the particular guardian angel that looks after crazy young gentlemen. Dominic believed in angels in a conventional way, but laid no claim to having one of his own. Soon afterwards, while sailing quietly at night, we found ourselves suddenly near a small coasting vessel, also without lights, which all at once treated us to a volley of rifle fire. Dominic's mighty and inspired yell: "A plat ventre!" and also an unexpected roll to windward saved all our lives. Nobody got a scratch. We were past in a moment and in a breeze then blowing we had the heels of anything likely to give us chase. But an hour afterwards, as we stood side by side peering into the darkness, Dominic was heard to mutter through his teeth: "Le métier se gâte." I, too, had the feeling that the trade, if not altogether spoiled, had seen its best days. But I did not care. In fact, for my purpose it was rather better, a more potent influence; like the stronger intoxication of raw spirit. A volley in the dark after all was not such a bad thing. Only a moment before we had received it, there, in that calm night of the sea full of freshness and soft whispers, I had been looking at an enchanting turn of a head in a faint light of its own, the tawny hair with snared red sparks brushed up from the nape of a white neck and held up on high by an arrow of gold feathered with brilliants and with ruby gleams all along its shaft. That jewelled ornament, which I remember often telling Rita was of a

very Philistinish conception (it was in some way connected with a tortoiseshell comb) occupied an undue place in my memory, tried to come into some sort of significance even in my sleep. Often I dreamed of her with white limbs shimmering in the gloom like a nymph haunting a riot of foliage, and raising a perfect round arm to take an arrow of gold out of her hair to throw it at me by hand, like a dart. It came on, a whizzing trail of light, but I always woke up before it struck. Always. Invariably. It never had a chance. A volley of small arms was much more likely to do the business some day—or night.

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At last came the day when everything slipped out of my grasp. The little vessel, broken and gone like the only toy of a lonely child, the sea itself, which had swallowed it, throwing me on shore after a shipwreck that instead of a fair fight left in me the memory of a suicide. It took away all that there was in me of independent life, but just failed to take me out of the world, which looked then indeed like Another World fit for no one else but unrepentant sinners. Even Dominic failed me, his moral entity destroyed by what to him was a most tragic ending of our common enterprise. The lurid swiftness of it all was like a stunning thunder-clap—and, one evening, I found myself weary, heartsore, my brain still dazed and with awe in my heart entering Marseilles by way of the railway station, after many adventures, one more disagreeable than another, involving privations, great exertions, a lot of difficulties with all sorts of people who looked upon me evidently more as a discreditable vagabond deserving the attentions of gendarmes than a respectable (if crazy) young gentleman attended by a guardian angel of his own. I must confess that I slunk out of the railway station shunning its many lights as if, invariably, failure made an outcast of a man. I hadn't any money in my pocket. I hadn't even the bundle and the stick of a destitute wayfarer. I was unshaven and unwashed, and my heart was faint within me. My attire was such that I daren't approach the rank of fiacres, where indeed I could perceive only two pairs of lamps, of which one suddenly drove away while I looked. The other I gave up to the fortunate of this earth. I didn't believe in my power of persuasion. I had no powers. I slunk on and on, shivering with cold, through the uproarious streets. Bedlam was loose in them. It was the time of Carnival.

Small objects of no value have the secret of sticking to a man in an astonishing way. I had nearly lost my liberty and even my life, I had lost my ship, a money-belt full of gold, I had lost my companions, had parted from my friend; my occupation, my only link with life, my touch with the sea, my cap and jacket were gone—but a small penknife and a latchkey had never parted company with me. With the latchkey I opened the door of refuge. The hall wore its deaf-and-dumb air, its black-and-white stillness.

The sickly gas-jet still struggled bravely with adversity at the end of the raised silver arm of the statuette which had kept to a hair's breadth its graceful pose on the toes of its left foot; and the staircase lost itself in the shadows above. Therese was parsimonious with the lights. To see all this was surprising. It seemed to me that all the things I had known ought to have come down with a crash at the moment of the final catastrophe on the Spanish coast. And there was Therese herself descending the stairs, frightened but plucky. Perhaps she thought that she would be murdered this time for certain. She had a strange, unemotional conviction that the house was particularly convenient for a crime. One could never get to the bottom of her wild notions which she held with the stolidity of a peasant allied to the outward serenity of a nun. She quaked all over as she came down to her doom, but when she recognized me she got such a shock that she sat down suddenly on the lowest step. She did not expect me for another week at least, and, besides, she explained, the state I was in made her blood take "one turn."

Indeed my plight seemed either to have called out or else repressed her true nature. But who had ever fathomed her nature! There was none of her treachery volubility. There were none of her "dear young gentlemen" and "poor little hearts" and references to sin. In breathless silence she ran about the house getting my room ready, lighting fires and gas-jets and even hauling at me to help me up the stairs. Yes, she did lay hands on me for that charitable purpose. They trembled. Her pale eyes hardly left my face. "What brought you here like this?" she whispered once.

"If I were to tell you, Mademoiselle Therese, you would see there the hand of God."

She dropped the extra pillow she was carrying and then nearly fell over it. "Oh, dear heart," she murmured, and ran off to the kitchen.

I sank into bed as into a cloud and Therese reappeared very misty and offering me something in a cup. I believe it was hot milk, and after I drank it she took the cup and stood looking at me fixedly. I managed to say with difficulty: "Go away," whereupon she vanished as if by magic before the words were fairly out of my mouth. Immediately afterwards the sunlight forced through the slats of the jalousies its diffused glow, and Therese was there again as if by magic, saying in a distant voice: "It's midday". . . Youth will have its rights. I had slept like a stone for seventeen hours.

I suppose an honourable bankrupt would know such an awakening: the sense of catastrophe, the shrinking from the necessity of beginning life again, the faint feeling that there are misfortunes which must be paid for by a hanging. In the

course of the morning Therese informed me that the apartment usually occupied by Mr. Blunt was vacant and added mysteriously that she intended to keep it vacant for a time, because she had been instructed to do so. I couldn't imagine why Blunt should wish to return to Marseilles. She told me also that the house was empty except for myself and the two dancing girls with their father. Those people had been away for some time as the girls had engagements in some Italian summer theatres, but apparently they had secured a re-engagement for the winter and were now back. I let Therese talk because it kept my imagination from going to work on subjects which, I had made up my mind, were no concern of mine. But I went out early to perform an unpleasant task. It was only proper that I should let the Carlist agent ensconced in the Prado Villa know of the sudden ending of my activities. It would be grave enough news for him, and I did not like to be its bearer for reasons which were mainly personal. I resembled Dominic in so far that I, too, disliked failure.

The Marquis of Villarel had of course gone long before. The man who was there was another type of Carlist altogether, and his temperament was that of a trader. He was the chief purveyor of the Legitimist armies, an honest broker of stores, and enjoyed a great reputation for cleverness. His important task kept him, of course, in France, but his young wife, whose beauty and devotion to her King were well known, represented him worthily at Headquarters, where his own appearances were extremely rare. The dissimilar but united loyalties of those two people had been rewarded by the title of baron and the ribbon of some order or other. The gossip of the Legitimist circles appreciated those favours with smiling indulgence. He was the man who had been so distressed and frightened by Doña Rita's first visit to Tolosa. He had an extreme regard for his wife. And in that sphere of clashing arms and unceasing intrigue nobody would have smiled then at his agitation if the man himself hadn't been somewhat grotesque.

He must have been startled when I sent in my name, for he didn't of course expect to see me yet—nobody expected me. He advanced soft-footed down the room. With his jutting nose, flat-topped skull and sable garments he recalled an obese raven, and when he heard of the disaster he manifested his astonishment and concern in a most plebeian manner by a low and expressive whistle. I, of course, could not share his consternation. My feelings in that connection were of a different order; but I was annoyed at his unintelligent stare.

"I suppose," I said, "you will take it on yourself to advise Doña Rita, who is greatly interested in this affair."

"Yes, but I was given to understand that Madame de Lastaola was to leave Paris either yesterday or this morning."

It was my turn to stare dumbly before I could manage to ask: “For Tolosa?” in a very knowing tone.

Whether it was the droop of his head, play of light, or some other subtle cause, his nose seemed to have grown perceptibly longer.

“That, Señor, is the place where the news has got to be conveyed without undue delay,” he said in an agitated wheeze. “I could, of course, telegraph to our agent in Bayonne who would find a messenger. But I don’t like, I don’t like! The Alphonsists have agents, too, who hang about the telegraph offices. It’s no use letting the enemy get that news.”

He was obviously very confused, unhappy, and trying to think of two different things at once.

“Sit down, Don George, sit down.” He absolutely forced a cigar on me. “I am extremely distressed. That—I mean Doña Rita is undoubtedly on her way to Tolosa. This is very frightful.”

I must say, however, that there was in the man some sense of duty. He mastered his private fears. After some cogitation he murmured: “There is another way of getting the news to Headquarters. Suppose you write me a formal letter just stating the facts, the unfortunate facts, which I will be able to forward. There is an agent of ours, a fellow I have been employing for purchasing supplies, a perfectly honest man. He is coming here from the north by the ten o’clock train with some papers for me of a confidential nature. I was rather embarrassed about it. It wouldn’t do for him to get into any sort of trouble. He is not very intelligent. I wonder, Don George, whether you would consent to meet him at the station and take care of him generally till to-morrow. I don’t like the idea of him going about alone. Then, to-morrow night, we would send him on to Tolosa by the west coast route, with the news; and then he can also call on Doña Rita who will no doubt be already there. . . .” He became again distracted all in a moment and actually went so far as to wring his fat hands. “Oh, yes, she will be there!” he exclaimed in most pathetic accents.

I was not in the humour to smile at anything, and he must have been satisfied with the gravity with which I beheld his extraordinary antics. My mind was very far away. I thought: Why not? Why shouldn’t I also write a letter to Doña Rita, telling her that now nothing stood in the way of my leaving Europe, because, really, the enterprise couldn’t be begun again; that things that come to an end can never be begun again. The idea—never again—had complete possession of my mind. I could think of nothing else. Yes, I would write. The worthy Commissary General of the Carlist forces was under the impression that I was looking at him;

but what I had in my eye was a jumble of butterfly women and winged youths and the soft sheen of Argand lamps gleaming on an arrow of gold in the hair of a head that seemed to evade my outstretched hand.

“Oh, yes,” I said, “I have nothing to do and even nothing to think of just now, I will meet your man as he gets off the train at ten o’clock to-night. What’s he like?”

“Oh, he has a black moustache and whiskers, and his chin is shaved,” said the newly-fledged baron cordially. “A very honest fellow. I always found him very useful. His name is José Ortega.”

He was perfectly self-possessed now, and walking soft-footed accompanied me to the door of the room. He shook hands with a melancholy smile. “This is a very frightful situation. My poor wife will be quite distracted. She is such a patriot. Many thanks, Don George. You relieve me greatly. The fellow is rather stupid and rather bad-tempered. Queer creature, but very honest! Oh, very honest!”