

The Trabucayras
by Percy B. St. John

The very morning that gave to the world the narrative in connection with Vigo prison, I called upon my worthy friend Don Gulielmo, who was reading the paper to his very excellent and agreeable wife. He received me with his usual cordiality, and after the ordinary interchange of salutations, observed that, of course, I came in search of ideas. I protested against any so egotistical a project, but as the ex-agent of Don Carlos appeared in reality to have made up his mind to tell a story, I, nothing loth, whatever to hear his reminiscence, sealed myself, and prepared to give every attention to his narrative. "I am not," he said, "about to give you exactly one of my own escapes, but to tell you what I heard from the lips of one who acted in the scene I described. You have heard, doubtless, of the ravages committed by certain banditti of late, who, in Catalonia, have under the name of Trabucayras, earned a very unenviable notoriety. The name is derived from the *trabucos*, a kind of blunderbuss with which they are armed, and some years back they were organized in a very powerful and strong hand which was the terror of all Catalonia. How I became acquainted with the following adventure you shall hear.

During one of my expeditions, I had occasion to journey from the frontier, and instead of following the high road from Barcelona to Girona, turned off into a path with which I was well-acquainted, and which led me by a shorter route to the same place. It was afternoon when I entered the lane, and I felt that it would be a matter of no small difficulty to reach the termination of my journey, but this was a matter of little moment to me, and I therefore by no means hurried myself. I had a good stock of creature comforts, that same stone bottle which served you and I so often on the prairies, and I was not expected until the morrow. Conscious of this state of things I did not hurry, and was pursuing my way, meditating as usual on my strange fate, which had tossed me from Peru to Portugal, and Portugal to Spain, in the diplomatic service of Don Carlos, when I heard the loud trampling of horses in my rear. I drew up and listened, not without some alarm. Could I be pursued? I was within the territory occupied by the Carlists, and feared not them—As, therefore, those behind were advancing at a rapid pace, I made no effort to avoid them—My gratification was great that I hadn't done so when a cavalier and a lady followed by a mounted servant joined me. I halted and accosted them in Spanish, to which the gentleman replied, with an accent which made me interrupt him again to accost him in English. He was a countryman, and one holding no mean position in society, who had crossed the frontier with Christino and Carlist passports. I explained my position, and we proceeded in company with mutual expression of delight. I knew him, but he did not know me under my Spanish costume. The lady was, I at once discovered, an Andalusian, and the wife of my fellow-countryman. Her female servant followed the high road in their carriage, which contained moreover their children.

Conversing as we went, I found that my new friends had been told that a traveler who knew the road was in advance, and not knowing the way, had chased me. Evening gradually approached as we entered a thick and somber wood, the huge branches of whose trees interlaced over our heads and veiled the whole in impenetrable darkness. I observed that the lady, who up to this moment had been merry and jocund, now grew silent, drew nearer to her husband, and cast uneasy glances into the vistas of the forest. Each bush and gnarled trunk she doubtless fancied a Spanish bandit, waiting, like 'Gill Blas's beggar,' to extort forcible alms. At length, after a few moments of general silence, she turned to me, and inquired how much further we had to go.

‘Twelve miles,’ said I, with a slight laugh.

‘Twelve miles,’ cried the husband; ‘it is impossible! We can never advance that distance this night.’

‘I do not intend we should,’ said I, ‘that is, if you are willing to pass the night in an old ruined mill.’

‘A mill!’ exclaimed my companions, in one voice.

I made no reply, but dashing forward left the cover of the wood, and emerged upon the open plain, pointing, at the same time, to the dilapidated and ancient dwelling where I proposed camping for the night. My companions were silent, and we reached the place without another word being exchanged. The mill was silent and solitary; the wings, which once had formed gaily round, were motionless; huge stones had fallen from the wall, while the half-burnt door, the blackened beams within; the marks of gun shots, which riddled several planks, showed what a struggle had once occurred upon this very spot.

The lady alighted, and we entered. There were two rooms; one a small, inner one, which had suffered less than the outer, and in which it was decided my new friends should, as well as they could, pass the night. Cloaks and horse-cloths, with a few fresh boughs of trees and long grass torn from the wayside, made a tolerably comfortable couch for the lady, who, however, whether at anxiety at being parted from her children for a whole night, or from some other cause, was sad and low-spirited. Such rude arrangements as circumstances permitted being made, we opened our wallets, which, I must say, were provided in no very romantic guise. There was both plenty and excellent fare; the whole washed down by some common wine of the country, while both I and the husband found even *cigarette* (paper-cigars), whereat to whiff; and, like most all travelers, being partial to the intoxicating weed, we sat together indulging therein until a late hour of the night. At length the lady retired to her rustic bed, and I and the Englishman remained alone. For some moments he was silent, and then, after listening, and calculating from the gentle breathing of his fair companion within the little room, that she slept, he addressed me—‘I dare say, my good sir,’ said he, ‘you will be surprised to learn how intimately this mill is connected with my history. It was a recollection of days gone by, when this unhappy country was not deluged with blood as it is now, which made me somewhat sad when first we entered here. If you object not, I will narrate the circumstance, and you can judge of my feelings.’ I expressed my readiness, and he continued: ‘It is now ten years back since I left home, a mere lad, to travel alone throughout Europe. I took no servant or companion with me, but journeyed as circumstances happened, in a public conveyance, or in a hired carriage. At length I reached Spain; and one night on the frontier entered an old lumbering vehicle that was to transport me to Madrid. It was too dark for me to see who were my companions, but I soon found that a young person, attended by her mother, was travelling the same way as myself. We entered into conversation, and I found my fair friend most pleasant and agreeable, so much so, that I could not help feeling an interest in her before I was able to discover her features.’ A faint and smothered laugh from the inner room made us aware that the lady was listening; but my companion paid no attention, simply smiling, and continued: ‘Somehow or other we talked the

whole night, and when morning came, I was sufficiently pleased to find the lady as lovely as she was admirable.' Another laugh. 'I had, however, scarcely time to discover how very beautiful indeed she was, when I felt the old lumbering coach stop. Putting my head out of the window, I found that we were on the summit of a steep declivity. A valley of great picturesqueness lay before us. To the right was a small chapel dedicated to the Madonna, behind which rose thick and lofty trees. I was about to draw back to my seat, when an exclamation from the driver made me pause.

'Trabucayras, Trabucayras,' he exclaimed.

'What means he?' said I calmly.

'Oh!' cried the two women, with looks of unmitigated terror, 'the Trabucayras!'

We were surrounded the same instant by about a dozen of the most ferocious-looking banditti I ever witnessed. Stalwart, half-clad, and swarthy, the wild Catalonians of Las Illas; for such they proved to be, were armed to the teeth; several of them carrying the heavy trabucos or blunderbusses. A more picturesque set of rascals I had never seen, but their proceedings were far too serious to allow of my finding any leisure to admire their costume and striking group. 'Descend,' said the chief, a command we hesitated not to obey, and were instantly led to the side of the road, while the robbers proceeded to search the carriage, a course of action our driver appeared to regard with the utmost complacency, as he never made the slightest remonstrance, but conversed in familiar tones with the pilferers. Their booty was considerable, for I had been foolish enough to bring with me into Spain some hundreds of sovereigns in gold. Everything was found by these expert rogues, who then advanced to us and signified their intentions. The chief, addressing me, said 'Whatever you and the ladies have about you, give up.' We readily complied; and watches, rings, and purse quickly followed the same way my guineas had already gone. 'Now, then, we must have a hostage and a prisoner. Plain speaking goes a long way.— Now, listen, you and the young lady must to the hills, while this worthy dame will join your friends and treat a ransom. Our terms are plain. We give you six days; if in that time a thousand ounces of gold are not placed on the altar of this chapel, we send one of your ears to jog the memory of your friends; in six days more we send another ear.' I interrupted the ruffian warmly. 'One prisoner is enough,' said I, with a look of encouragement toward my fair young friend. 'You shall have the ransom, but I alone must remain as hostage. The signora must go.' The robber gazed at me for an instant in silence; he interpreted my pity for the young Spanish girl's position into warmer and more tender feelings, and acted accordingly. 'No, signor,' he replied, with an audacious look of intelligence, 'you are free. The signora shall be our hostage, and, if the thousand ounces are not ready in time, you must take the consequences.' I begged, I implored, I offered any sum to the calculating rascal, but they believed they had a hold on me; and after appointing a spot where the ransom was to await them, were about to depart. I, however, requested a moment's conference with the young and fair prisoner, to which the robbers consenting, I drew my fair companion aside, and said, 'Lady, I have known you but a few hours, and yet I take a deep interest in your fate. I am about to make a very singular speech. I do not, cannot say I love you, but I am as firmly convinced I shall do so, as that I am here. Have courage, then, and be sure I shall not desert you.' She replied not, her whole faculties were

overcome with the horror of her situation; while her poor mother sat wringing her hands and shrieking like one demented.

The robbers now departed with their prize, taking a path through the woods which I carefully watched. As soon as they were out of sight, however, I hurriedly seized my travelling desk and wrote three letters, which I handed to the driver with an order to proceed instantly on his journey. ‘And you, sir,’ he said.

‘I remain; you must take the mother in safety to the town—deliver my letters—be quick, and I will reward you handsomely.’

The postilion needed not twice telling, and in a quarter of an hour I was quite alone. I was armed; a short sword depended from my side, while a brace of double-barreled pistols were in my belt. I was determined that the unfortunate girl, borne into captivity by a band of ruthless ruffians, should not be left unprotected. And here let me put in one word with regard to the romance generally thrown around robbers. Nothing can be a greater mistake; you and I, who have seen them,—know what a pitiful set of hardened knaves they are, without one of those high-souled qualities which romance writers, to serve a purpose, so ill-advisedly bestow upon them. This is an evil which I should be glad to see corrected. There can be no nobleness of mind, nothing to admire in a cut-throat and pilferer.

Following the path which the banditti had taken, it was not very long before I came up with them, at a sufficiently respectable distance, however, to avoid being discovered. As of course they never imagined any man mad enough to adventure into their very dens, I, with ease, tracked them unobserved, listening even to their ribald conversation and coarse jests, as to the good prize they had made, who had a lover rich enough to pay a heavy ransom, and fool enough to offer himself, in lieu of the lady, as hostage. Of Leila—such was her name—I could distinguish nothing, and was growing anxious to gain even a glimpse of her, when the skirts of the wood were reached, and the robbers, advancing into the open space, halted before this very mill. You are surprised, and begin, doubtless, to understand many things which have puzzled you.’ I nodded, in a very significant manner, and he proceeded: ‘I now saw a woman come out and offer her services to Leila, who, scarcely able to stand, entered, followed by her captors. I, meanwhile, looked around me, and found a dense thicket close at hand in which to shelter myself. For hours I remained ensconced therein, but all to no purpose; the robbers were carousing within, and I could gain no insight into the progress of events. At length fatigue overcame me and I slept. My slumber lasted several hours, for it was night when I awoke, and the mill was in perfect repose. After listening some time, and assuring myself that not a living being was on the watch, I stepped boldly out into the clearing, and advanced towards the habitation. I gained the door in safety—not an effort was made to impede me—I gazed in upon the robbers. Overcome by wine and carousing, they slept heavily. While looking across them on the threshold of the chamber where my wife now sleeps—‘Listen,’ said the lady—‘listen,’ continued my friend, ‘I discovered Leila standing and viewing the scene, with a vague hope of escape depicted on her speaking face. I held my breath, and drew back, expecting her to cross the hall and join me, but her courage failed. Unaware that a friend was so near, I suppose that she dreaded the woods as much as the bandits, and trusting to the exertions making in her favor, retired within her prison and closed the door.

I imitated her prudence, and hastily regained the cover of the woods. I no longer, however, remained concealed in the thicket, but, returning on my path, was once more, before long, in sight of the Madonna's chapel, where I for the present took up my quarters. After some hours spent in thought, and speculations on my course of action with regard to the fair Leila, when I should have rescued her—speculations which only served to add to a rapidly increasing passion, I again slept. It was dawn when I awoke, and to my surprise I was not alone. A lad was seated on the steps which led to the altar.

'How came you here, and what ask you?' said I, somewhat angrily.

'You are the English traveler who have been robbed,' he replied, respectfully.

'I am.'

'Then I come from the magistrate of Gerona; at twelve to-night you will have twenty soldiers at your disposition, signor.'

The lad, who was very sharp and intelligent, then spread out a cloth, and disburdening his wallet, laid before me a very welcome supply of creature comforts, on which, assisted by Zaneto, I made a hearty meal. I then asked the lad a thousand questions, all leading to learn why greater expedition could not have been used, to which he answered to the best of his abilities.—Never did I pass such a day; for, from fear of being discovered by the Trabucayras, I remained all the time within the chapel, walking up and down, counting the minutes, and inveighing against the dilatoriness of Spanish officials. But as with the happiest day, it will run with rapidity to an end, so even such a day as that I then passed comes at length to termination. Night drew in, dark, gloomy, and threatening. I began to think the lazy soldiers were alarmed at the prospect of a storm, when a heavy measured tramp was heard along the road, and in a few minutes more I was engaged in earnest conference with the officer in command. After some difficulties incident to all acts where duty impels only on one part and absorbing feeling on the other, I succeeded, by promise of great rewards, in persuading my auxiliaries to act at once. This decided, we started at once, and after a journey of about an hour, reached the mill. The robbers were again carousing, and as noisily as usual. Creeping up with cautious steps, we surrounded the place, and then some six or seven, armed to the teeth, pushed the door open, and, headed by me, dashed into the room. A desperate fight ensued, which I heeded not—Crossing the chamber, I entered the apartment that contained Leila, who advanced joyously to meet me, and fell powerless in my arms. The bandits meanwhile, after a desperate struggle, were overcome; not before, however, one of them had set fire to the mill. With great difficulty the fire was quenched, and then I stood, where I now am seated, complete master of the scene. The robbers were furious when they found that I had been the cause of their capture. However, they suffered no very long period of imprisonment, for on breaking out of the civil war they became useful. Some turned Carlists, some patriots; and I believe one or two are guerilla chiefs, of no mean standing at the present moment. As for myself, after a few weeks once more visited England—'

'And Leila?'

‘By the way, my friend,’ said the wife, ‘do you mean to talk all night? One thing is certain, that I shall never sleep, and so I may as well get up and join you.’

‘Do so,’ replied the husband, ‘for I shall be glad to introduce my countryman to Leila Munro.’

The heroine of the mill in a few minutes stood before me, and as in reality the excitement of her position precluded the possibility of slumber, some hours were spent in the mutual explanations afforded me by this happy couple of the circumstances which they met. They were married one month after the deliverance of Leila, and formed one of the rare instances where wisdom presided over a hasty marriage. It was nearly morning before we slept, and the next day we mounted and gained the town, where their servants and children awaited them in some alarm. I spent a few hours with them (and many since in London), and rode on my way. That is one of my adventures at the mill of Las Illas. Another which happened a few weeks afterwards, I may narrate on a future occasion.”

I thanked my friend, and I shall take care to make him redeem his promise.

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