

FONTENAY, THE SWORDSMAN.

A MILITARY NOVEL.

BY FORTUNE DU MISGOBBY.

(Translated by H. L. Williams.)

CHAPTER XI.—Continued.

The officer was about to turn back when he remarked at the end of this corridor, a broad flight of stairs which seemed to lead into the chief officer's rooms. Perhaps they had remained at their posts after the disaster, like those senators of ancient Rome who sat in their curule chairs when the barbarians violated the majesty of the Forum. From the rarity of such an event and to appease his curiosity, the creole went up the stairs. At the first floor, he arrived before a door on which was painted in large black letters a Spanish inscription signifying "Governor's Bureau." The governor was probably in and not alone, as two voices speaking tolerably loudly were audible.

Fontenay gently knocked. The conversation continued. He rapped more loudly, and it suddenly ceased. A scuffling sound of chairs being pushed back indicated that the speakers had arisen but the door did not open. The impatient soldier turned the knob, but there was some pressure inside preventing the door giving more than a little, so that it stood ajar. This most unexpected resistance excited him. He shoved with all his force so abruptly that he almost overthrew the man who opposed his entry and sent him to come into collision with a table in the middle of the cabinet, whither he rushed after him.

During this jostling, Fontenay caught a glimpse of a second person who disappeared in another room and hastened to barricade himself within it. The officer divined without difficulty that he had surprised a conference of persons evilly disposed towards the invaders. Interruption of a business talk would not have so greatly frightened the speakers.

Upon examining the one who stayed in the office, he had the greatest difficulty in not bursting into laughter, for the person was grotesque. Short and obese, he resembled a pumpkin stood upon thick posts. He was clothed in black from top to toe in the old Castilian mode, and clean shaven as a canon of the church. His terrified countenance would have been a fortune to a comic actor. He had staggered back to the bureau loaded with papers, against which he propped himself erect, with haggard eyes and gaping mouth. He wanted to speak, but the words stuck in his throat.

Fontenay took pity on the poor gentleman, and asked him in Spanish:

"Are you the governor here?"

"Yes," faltered the worthy; "that is, I mean I was the governor—and if your lordship comes to deposit funds—"

"Not precisely. I am an officer on the staff of his majesty the Emperor of the French."

Far from encouraging the unfortunate financial director, the declaration threw him into indescribable agitation.

"I have nothing left—not a *maravedi*," he protested, lifting his hands to heaven; "your general commanding over Madrid took possession of our bullion in the name of the French Government."

"Calm yourself, señor! I am not charged with any additional requisition, and I present myself purely in my personal capacity. I simply ask for information."

The governor's features cleared and he mumbled an "*A la disposición de usted!*" which was contradicted by the frightened expression he still wore in some degree. Evidently he wished all inopportune callers in hades.

"I forewarn you that the matter may take some time," went on the visitor wickedly. "You must excuse my disturbing you and detaining you, as you are not disengaged."

"I beg your pardon. I vow there is nobody here."

"So," thought the lieutenant, "it is plain the person I surprised is hidden in the next room. Why did he run in there when he might have got away by the backstairs? In that case," he proceeded, out aloud, "allow me to take a seat. I have been enjoying a long walk through Madrid and I am not sorry to rest before returning to our quarters at Chamartin."

The governor hastened to offer an armchair to the visitor, whom he would have preferred to brain with it, and he went round the table to sit there as if behind a rampart.

"Señor," Paul commenced, "you hold on deposit an important sum legitimately belonging to a young lady whose mother, a Spaniard, became French by her marriage."

The governor stared at the ceiling, pinching his chin between his fingers like one trying to recall a forgotten matter.

"Her mother was a Segura—of the town of Teruel," resumed Fontenay.

At that moment he heard the inner-door faintly creak; the disappeared visitor must have had his ear to it and pressed too hard; he was listening.

"It is an illustrious name among us, señor," exclaimed the Spaniard. "That family goes back to the time of the early kings of Aragon."

"I know it, but—"

"Still, I do not remember the bank receiving any deposit from a Segura."

"It should have been made by the young lady's uncle seven or eight months ago. He has died since, and she is his inheritor."

"That she will have to prove to enter into possession; but, I repeat to your lordship, I have no memory of such a deposit."

"It should appear on your books."

"Certainly it must, if effected. But, alas! I am no longer in a position to verify the fact, for all our registers were seized at the same time as our cash and securities. The bank has been considered a state one. Since your fellow-countrymen occupied Madrid, it has been managed by one of them, who will inform your lordship on application."

"I will make it," said the disappointed Fontenay.

"I am grieved at having no power to serve you on this occasion, sir officer, but I am nobody now! You must have seen below that the house has closed its clerks' wickets. All our staff has gone."

"Except yourself, señor."

"Oh, I only came to-day to empty my desk-drawers, where I left my correspondence, and I am not coming again."

"No more am I," muttered Fontenay, vexed at having taken a useless step.

"Adios, señor!"

He rose, and the host hastened to do likewise, only too happy at coming out so nicely of a thorny interview. He showed the officer to the staircase with profuse salutations, and did not return into his office until he had seen him go down a dozen steps.

The lieutenant departed discontentedly. He was fully aware that he had acted blunderingly and ought to have made enquiries at head-quarters before applying to a dismissed functionary, Spanish in spirit and sworn foe to the French. He did not doubt this obsequious official executed the invaders who had stripped him of his lucrative functions. The ex-governor's patriotism was redoubled with personal rancor.

"I should not be surprised if he were conspiring against us," the sub-lieutenant said to himself. "Who's the person confabulating with him, I wonder? Some leader of a band like those I found disguised as country clowns in the Torre Lociones tavern. Why may it not be one of them—their chief? He stole away as though he feared my recognizing him, but he must come out some time. I have a mind to lie in wait for him in the street."

The supposition was rather far fetched, for the man could not have seen Fontenay bursting into the bureau; but, since his recent adventures, our once trustful colonial friend doubted everything and everybody. Besides, he had been mystified and he felt bound to obtain revenge.

On leaving the house, as silent as the castle of the Sleeping Beauty, he looked about in the street for a corner where he could post himself to watch the bank, without being seen. He spied a dark alley appearing suitable and plunged into it, keeping close to a wall, with the resolve not to budge until he saw the suspicious visitor emerge.

CHAPTER XII.

THE KING OF THE BEGGARS.

The vigil self-imposed might be long, and it was doubtful that it would finish in an interesting discovery, yet Fontenay had a presentiment that he would not lose his time.

After five minutes waiting, a man showed himself without leaving the bank, and stood as sentinel by the door. This was the obliging Spaniard from the Calle San Geronimo whom Fontenay had wholly forgotten.

The situation was becoming complicated.

Why should this person retrace his steps if, as he said, he lived in this ward and should have been home. Was he also waiting for the individual whom Paul waylaid, or for the bank director? What link united these three men? If they knew one another, what were they plotting together? Fontenay understood nothing of it, but he vowed to watch to the end.

The man in the archway continued to smoke his everlasting cigarette and moved no more than a statue. The passers-by did not seem astonished at his immobility, and did not pause to stare at him. They even seemed to envy him, for to bask in the sun is the preferential pleasure of your true-born Spaniard.

Fontenay also took care not to trouble the peaceful enjoyment of this honest citizen. He did not lose sight of him, while wandering afar on the vast field of conjecture. He marveled why this man had so eagerly offered to guide a French officer, whom he would perhaps have stabbed if he had met him alone in the country. It could not have been to decoy him into a trap, as he had quitted him after pointing out the bank.

These meditations were interrupted by the appearance of another man under the archway. This one wore a hat, larger at the crown, like a bell inverted, and had pulled it down on his eyes. He said nothing to the former, but in passing him by, he exchanged a sign of intelligence which did not escape the creole's attentive eye. Without a word, the pair trudged off, side by side.

Fontenay let them gain an advance be-

fore leaving the no-thoroughfare on tip-toe and following them at a distance in expectation that the last-comer would show his countenance, though he visibly sought to screen it. This happened ere long.

Fontenay saw him stop to ask his companion for a light for his *pipelito*, and he could be discerned by the glow. An exclamation of surprise almost broke from the pursuer. The colloquist of the Madrid bank president was the thief of La Malmaison, and the insurgent of Somo Sierra—the dare-devil who had twice tried to kill Marguerite de Gavre's intended. It was Blas de Montalvan, *Tio Blas*, as the insurgents called him—the distant relative of Josephine's reader, the furious captain of irregulars who had sworn the extermination of the French. This was the unseizable Proteus who wore all disguises and seemed to possess the gift of ubiquity fitting from Paris to Somo Sierra and thence into Madrid with unheard-of rapidity.

At last Fontenay had found him, but he could not go and grasp him immediately, as he would have done in France, for he did not perceive a French soldier, and the Madridians would not have failed to defend their compatriots. This is saying nothing of "Uncle" Blas not being alone and his acolyte looking a sturdy blade.

The best course was to follow them up to passing a ticket, where the officer would find soldiers to lend him a helping hand. The watch that could ensue was their entering some house before meeting an armed post or a patrol. In this case, Fontenay would have to note the house, and send, by virtue of his rank, a squad of troopers to break down the door if there were a refusal to open it.

He set to trailing the two Spaniards, as the hunters say, in his native cane-brakes, but he was out of practice and he had no vocation for man-hunting. The detective is born and requires a long apprenticeship to become perfect.

Fontenay followed too closely and was not slow in seeing that he had been noticed at their heels.

This was the more unfortunate as the Tio must have seen him through the key-hole of the inner-room, where he was hiding, and heard him speak of Mlle. de Gavre to the bank governor. Hence he knew with whom he had to cope and would manoeuvre in consequence.

Already their direction changed, now suddenly turning to the left, a little farther to the right, and sometimes going over passed ground—in a word, they tried to baffle the tracker.

Unacquainted with Madrid he did not at all know where he was, and the region was a true labyrinth—a tangle of ways where *Dædalus* would have been puzzled, and to cap the climax of defeat, a whole population of beggars swarmed the sordid alleys; such mendicants as Callot has etched, and seen only in Spain; tattered-millions transformed into thieves after dark.

At every corner one whined for alms, perhaps hiding a blunderbus under the perforated cloak. To Tio Blas and his companion they did not hold out the hand; they merely bowed to them, but when Fontenay came up they would not let him pass and sprawled beneath his feet.

The blind-from-birth suddenly recovered their sight and the maimed found limbs again. Soon Paul had a dozen at his heels; the only sound was from crutches on the pavement. This ragged army no doubt waited only for a signal to fall upon him all at once and fell him with clubs and wooden legs.

The pair he followed did not have the air of perceiving this, as they jogged on without turning, and let the unclean cortege grow.

Patience was not the American's virtue. He could bear no more, and facing round, he thundered to the shabby crew:

"Keep off, vermin!"

They receded, most likely from not having received the expected mandate to attack him; and, seeing that he kept them in respect, the officer renewed the briefly interrupted chase.

This check had occurred at the corner of a narrow street, and when he turned it, he saw nobody before him. Yet the empty street was too long for the Tio and his accomplice to have gone through it even at a run. Therefore some door must have opened to admit them.

The lieutenant searched for it without finding. On both sides, from end to end, it was closed in by high walls without apertures. A ladder or wings would be needed to surmount them. Still the two Spaniards had disappeared there, whether credible or not, like phantoms, in broad daylight and the heart of Madrid.

Here was ample to stupefy the explorer from the New World, but he did not know when he was beaten.

He stepped up to scrutinize the walls closely, as well as the paving-stones. He could not discover secret doors, traps, or gratings, marking the ingress to some subterranean, and he was tempted, on finishing this minute investigation, to believe that Uncle Blas was a wizard.

It was a bad idea of his to stop to disperse the ragged pack. Montalvan and his confederate had profited by the delay to disappear by some process known to them alone, and Paul did not doubt that the trick had been preconcerted between the insurgent leader and the rabble in this kind of *Alsatia*.

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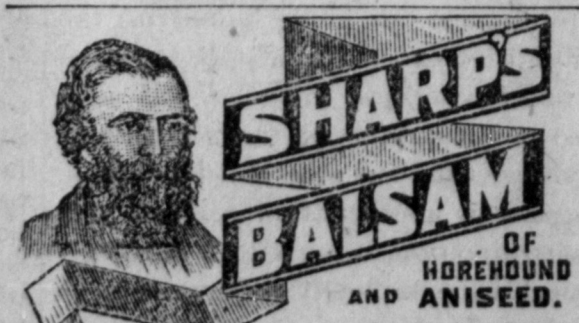
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