

FONTENAY,
THE SWORDSMAN.
A MILITARY NOVEL.

BY FORTUNE DU BOISGOBEY.
(Translated by H. L. Williams.)

CHAPTER VIII.—Continued.

Paul did not seek to detain this "Agreeable Rattle," who, in the heart of Spain and the height of a frightful war, still thought of the pleasures of Paris, whither he was not sure of ever returning. Paul continued his way to find Jean Tournesol smoking his pipe at the lodging house door. He raised a loud wail on learning that his master was going off on an adventure without him. Paul cut his lament short by commanding him to bring his cloak and weapons, and as Tournesol inquired what he should say to M de Prigny he bade him let him sleep and inform him when he awoke that his host was forced to go on special service to be no more than twenty-four hours absent.

What was the good paining him by speaking of the dangers he ran? In an instant after this summary colloquy, Paul, armed for battle, sat in the saddle, and he rode out of Chamartin, flanked by his guide, who appeared proud of having a French officer to conduct.

Sullen though his aspect was, the young man had an intelligent aspect. He was young—five-and-twenty, at the most—and rather well built. Although clad like any of those *arrieros* to be met on the highways of Spain leading their mules, his demeanor might cause him to be taken for one of those Salamanca students who go upon their travels with cocked hats ornamented with a wooden spoon by way of cockade, and ring for their supper.

Why should such a one betray his country for the foreigner's gain. Fontenay, who deemed him a suspicious character, resolved skillfully to question.

He opened proceedings by asking his name, which he learned was Diego Perez. He came from Segovia, where he had studied for the priesthood, but not feeling any call for this ecclesiastical status, he had become a postboy when the royal post existed in Spain. Since it ceased to be in activity, he earned his livelihood by carrying from one branch of the French army to another those messages with which the great Napoleon's generals intrusted him; he boasted of his admiration for Caesar, and of his pride in serving him, as he considered him the liberator of his country. His enthusiasm seemed a little strained, and it had not needed this to fill Paul with distrust. He was more on his guard than previously against this partisan of new ideas, but, for the present, he abstained from further questioning. Taciturn, like most of his race, Diego did not seek to keep up the conversation.

The country which they traversed was dry and barren; a desert of stones, as Chateaubriand describes Judea. Not a tree or a rivulet, not a house or a mountain peak, was to be spied. All was flat and yellow, and although they were near the capital they met nobody.

Diego had his own peculiar way of riding, which was not to Fontenay's taste. He changed frequently from the walking gait into a gallop, fell back into the trot, and then to pacing; the officer's horse imitated his mate, however hard he tried to regulate the speed, and this ill-trained brute trotted so hard that the rider was broken in every bone at the end of three hours of this varied race. But they had progressed, and would soon be near the shelter where they would have to stop for the night's sleep, as Diego declared that it was impossible to reach the Escorial in this first stage.

In November, night comes on soon, and day was fading when Fontenay asked the name of this refuge. With an equivocal smile the guide replied:

"Senor, it is the village of Torre Ludones. It has not the best of reputations. The saying runs of this vile spot: *Cinco vecinos y siete ladrones*."

Paul clearly comprehended the significance of this local proverb, but he had the presence of mind to ask for the explanation, which the obliging cicerone hastened to furnish him by thus translating it: "Five inhabitants, of which seven are thieves"—the alcade and his clerk counting double!

"Gracious! your *senor* has sharp teeth, and, it is not inviting. Why should we stop here if it is a den of thieves?"

"Oh, senor, our proverbs are not all articles of faith—we have so many! Torre Ludones is better than its fame, and, anyhow, we will not find even five inhabitants. They all ran away as soon as they heard that the French were before Madrid. The only one remaining is an old gypsy of my acquaintance, who will get supper, if your lordship is not too hard to please. Since he has set up as an hotel-keeper in this hole, he does not entertain many travellers, but he always has food in his larder—and he will tell us what is going on at the Escorial."

Our adventurous American was not hard to please, especially since his late journey from Irun to Chamartin, but this stoppage for sleep did not promise any thing worth the loss of time. Diego was altogether too amiable, and Fontenay began to debate with himself whether he were not led into a trap. Unfortunately, there was no time to recede.

Before him he desisted, upon a height to the left of the road, an old fortress in ruins, with its towers mingling in the evening haze. At the base was the village composed of twenty low houses of the saddest appearance. Pressed to arrive, Diego spurred his nag.

This time, Fontenay managed to constrain his to keep a walk, and, in slowly advancing, he distinguished in the middle of the road, an enormous tree of which the horizontal branches spread out into so broad a dome that a whole squadron of cavalry might be sheltered beneath it. It seemed planted there to favor an ambuscade; night having come, the time was propitious.

The guide was twenty paces ahead of Fontenay, who heard a voice call out in Spanish:

"Is that you, Diego?"

Fontenay did not hear the reply, but the voice arose again:

"Who are you with?"

"A Frenchman," said Diego, riding nearer the bush.

Thereupon, in the most profound obscurity, a conference took place between half-a-dozen men who spoke too low for their words to reach the officer. It seemed beyond doubt that the guide had lured him among assassins who would not miss him.

Paul believed himself lost, but he did not think of flight. He meant to sell his life dearly. He had that coolness not uncommon to his blood, and he reasoned that these men would have shot at him already if they had meant to use their guns. It followed that they preferred their national weapon, the knife, and would assail him with it as he arrived under the tree.

Diego, their jackal, continued to confabulate with them. Fontenay's horse was never accustomed to pass the guide's, and he feared that he could not spur it out of a slow pace.

Suddenly Diego drove in both spurs, without turning round in the saddle. The moment had come for the officer to risk all in one dash.

Determined to try this sole chance of safety, he had silently made ready for the charge. After drawing his sabre, which he allowed to hang from his wrist by its knot, he took out his holster pistols to carry one in each hand as, with the bridle between his teeth, he waited for the instant to rush onward.

His sensations were those of a man who leaps into a gulf in the hope of saving his life; they did not endure twenty seconds.

Two vigorous plunges with the spurs inspirited the horse into starting off like a cannon-ball. He flew closely past a cluster of men whom he could not count. They did not attempt to stop him—did not even insult him, and he could not see that they carried arms.

He was saved—for the nonce—and he soon caught up with Diego, who had ceased to trot. He could not dispense with demanding an explanation of the occurrence, but he remained sufficiently master of himself to continue to feign ignorance of Spanish.

"Who are those men?" he began.

"Peasants of the neighborhood who dare not return to their farms because they fear the coming of the French."

"What did you say to them?"

"They wanted to know who I was with and when they learned, they had as much fight as though I had led all the demons! They thought you preceded a detachment of your soldiers. But heaven forgive me if I am mistaken! It looks to me, senor officer, as if you had a fright also—for you have your sword drawn!"

"I never have a fear; but I am mistrustful of everything and I take precautions."

"You are very wrong to distrust me. Every day I risk my neck in the service of the French, the Spanish would hang me without respite if they knew the trade I carry on. I answer for your life, and if any mishap befalls you, the French will shoot me. I like better to receive the fifty *piastres* promised me for bringing you back to Chamartin to-morrow."

This was neatly reasoned. Fontenay had to confess inwardly that his suspicions were only founded on appearances, and that one is often wrong to judge people that way.

"If I should not bring you back," resumed Diego, "it will not be my fault. I cannot answer for our not falling into a band of rebels who will treat us both badly; even then, I should try to get you out of it. I should invent some story to explain that you were not travelling on military service. That lie would work, unless you are the bearer of dispatches from head-quarters and they were found on you—"

"I do not carry any dispatches. To whom should I be carrying them? there are no French at the Escorial. Besides, I am simply a foreigner—an American of the West Indies, who, with the curiosity of natives of the other hemisphere, wishes to view your world-famous palace—and the Spaniards who are there, I was told."

"Then we have nothing to fear. We will take supper and have sleep at old Laguna's. We may find some neighbors there, but do not be uneasy about them. Early on the morrow, we will be at the village of the Escorial and you will see with your own eyes the Eighth Wonder of the World. If you are not slow over your sight-seeing," he added, with no

quaver in his grave voice to suggest doubt of his principal's story, "we may re-enter Chamartin to-morrow at dusk."

This was said so frankly and with an accent of such sincerity that our lieutenant's disquietude gave way to relative security. If this guide entertained the project of betraying him, he would not have dallied so long to deliver him to the Spaniards. For all that, as prudence is the mother of safety, our hero resolved not to cease to watch him for an instant.

Five minutes after the incident which might have turned out badly, Diego dismounted before a ruined house, helped the officer to alight, and went to knock roughly upon the door. It opened. An old man showed himself, who held a dialogue with the guide in a jargon of which Fontenay comprehended but little; it may have been the gypsy tongue intermixed with old Castilian. But it was short, and he introduced the travellers into an immense hall, serving at once for kitchen, sleeping-room and stable.

CHAPTER IX.

A TERRIBLE ORDEAL.

A huge kettle sang over a fire of twigs burning in one corner, and on a rickety table stood some jars full of wine. These preparations indicated, that the old Bohemian expected some customers that evening, and, indeed, five or six individuals were not slow in silently making their entrance. They went to sit on benches at the tables and drank to one another, passing the wine-pitcher from hand to hand, and drinking sometimes out of the vessel.

Fontenay supposed that these might be the men who held their *folklore* under the tree in the highway, and was not astonished to see them here. He went and sat at one end of the board while Diego tied up the horses to a portable manger which contained only some bran thinned out with water. The customers were dressed like boors, but they might be taken for disguised grandees from their lofty carriage. This is not a rare contrast in Spain where the meanest day-laborer prides himself upon being an *Old Christian*, and as noble as the king.

The stranger had met Spaniards in his own quarter of the globe, and was not astonished at their grave and arrogant demeanor. Above all the others, one was remarkable for the dignity of his attitude. He let the jar pass without touching it, and the rest seemed to wait for him to lead the talk before unlocking their jaws. He did not hurry himself, for some time elapsed before he called Diego to say to him:

"You know that the French came up on the Valladolid road. Yesterday their vanguard was at Villacastin."

"I know it, senor. But it is not known at their Chamartin headquarters. Napoleon believes that the Escorial is occupied by a division of our troops."

"Nonsense! there are only half a dozen monks in the monastery, and not a soul in the village."

This was spoken in pure Castilian, which Fontenay perfectly followed, but he let nothing appear while mentally noting the piece of information.

"The officer whom I bring is sent expressly to see how things stand there," proceeded Diego. "Their generals are always badly informed."

"They will be better informed—if this lieutenant returns to them to make his report."

"I believe, senor, he will not see any more clearly than his chiefs. We can manage to hoodwink him."

"There is a surer means of sealing up his eyes—it is to hang him."

The scene was shifted. It had not required all the above to let Fontenay divine that the sham ploughmen were intents, and very probably important leaders; the old gitano's *posada* served as their meeting-place and that Diego was in perfect intelligence with them. The unfortunate sub-lieutenant's last illusions vanished, and he was astonished at his having cherished them so long. Nothing remained to him but to prepare to die creditably.

"Senor," said Diego, "I beg your excellency to excuse me for not being of his advice. I believe there are better things to do than to kill this Frenchman."

"Do you really dare to undertake his defence?" sternly demanded the person who seemed to command this band. "Are you, then, a traitor?"

"I, a traitor?" echoed Diego; "I, who risk my life daily to bring you information? Your excellency forgets that—if I were bent on betraying you—I could have done so on more than one occasion with impunity. Your excellency also forgets that if I do not bring back this man alive I can no longer do our holy cause any service, for if I appear alone at the French head-quarters, it is I whom they will hang."

"You need not reappear there. You will go and join your brothers up in the mountain. You will take up the musket and do nothing but fight for the independence of Spain. That will be better than playing the spy."

"The spy plays a glorious part when he deceives the oppressors of his country. I am ready to give up all my blood to Spain, but I serve her better by watching her enemies and cheating them. The death of a sub-lieutenant will not check the march of their army. If you let me execute the plan which I have conceived,

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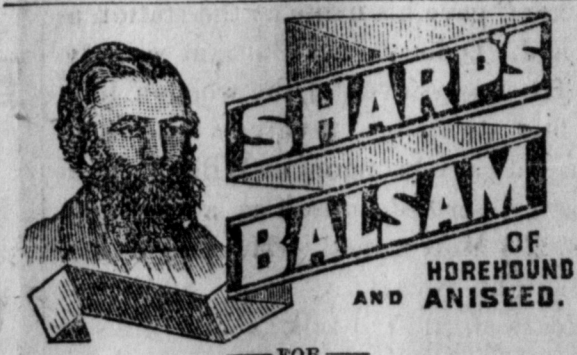
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