

## Literature, &amp;c.

## THE BRIGANDS OF USSAT.

USSAT is a little village of the department of the Ariège, situated on the right of that river, at an hour's distance from Tarascon. Though its bathing establishment and dwellings are anything but comfortable, its hot mineral waters are reputed so powerful in nervous complaints, that every season attracts a large number of *baigneurs* and *daigneuses*, the latter visitors being five or six times more numerous than the former. Indeed were suitable accommodations provided for strangers, Ussat would perhaps be the rendezvous most frequented along the Pyrenees. The promenades are few in number; but, in ascending the Ariège, the traveller meets with picturesque scenery both right and left, and with ruins worthy attention. The most curious spots, however, are the grottos of Echelles and Bedeyac. Last year I visited the former, which opens into the very side of the mountain, almost facing the bathing establishment, and I have never seen any cathedral with bolder arches and more spacious naves, nor any palace whose galleries are vaster, more sonorous, and more regularly prolonged. I still recollect the emotion I and my three companions felt, when, having reached the largest part of that wonderful grotto, each holding a feeble light, which imperfectly exhibited the whitish stalactites hanging from above, and the fantastic forms rising from below, we sang together the first stanzas of the melancholy *Dies iræ*, and next the admirable chorus in the second act of *Robert le Diable*. That subterranean excursion would, however, have made a far deeper impression upon us, if, before accomplishing it, we had been acquainted with the following facts, which our aged guide told us after we left the cavern, and when he lay down on the grass to take some rest.

In the first months of the year 1802, the grotto, long celebrated for its curiosities, became the haunt of a band of formidable brigands, consisting mostly of refractory conscripts, under the command of an able and enterprising native of the Spanish frontier, where he had long been an active smuggler. It soon became impossible to venture on the road to Foix, without being robbed. The diligences were often stopped; the Government money was repeatedly plundered, and its escort cut to pieces; several robberies were committed with extreme boldness, in the richest houses of Tarascon, Ax, and even Foix; for, encouraged by the success of their first depredations, reinforced by some young miners of the valley of Sos, and stimulated by the bravery of their leader, and the boundless confidence he inspired, the band, who then reckoned not less than forty determined men, armed to their teeth, extended their operations to ten or twelve leagues from the grotto, which was their den or fastness.

Banditti could scarcely have hit upon a retreat safer and easier to defend; the mouth of the grotto is very spacious, and the first gallery one enters is between twenty and thirty feet broad, and between fifteen and eighteen high; but after some hundred steps, it lowers towards the ground to such a degree that it almost touches it, and scarcely admits, in one place, of a man creeping in on all fours. Thus was that defile crossed until M. de Mortarieu, one of the prefects of the Ariège, ordered that opening to be made in the rock itself, by which one now penetrates into the grotto. The natural state of the place rendered its defence very easy, and when the band was absent, a man or two sufficed for guarding the avenue to the den.

The brigands had for fifteen months past terrified the country by the audacity and impunity of their enterprises, and the police had succeeded only in seizing the dead body of one of them, who had been shot in an engagement with the gendarmerie on the St. Geron's road, when at length the prefect determined to put a stop to their crimes, and came to an understanding with the military authorities, for marching to Tarascon a detachment of gendarmerie and a battalion of the 65th of the line, then quartered in the Ariège. To extirpate the evil by its root, and seize the whole band, they resolved to surprise the robbers in their very den. Spies were stationed in the rock holes which cover the mountain opposite the cavern, and two companies of foot, and a dozen gendarmes were secretly kept ready to march from Tarascon on the first signal.

Two days after, at three in the morning, one of the spies hastened to Tarascon, and informed the commandant that very night he had seen, by the light of

the links they carried, the robbers return to the haunt loaded with bags and portmanteaus. The soldiers immediately set out, in silence, with loaded arms, and an ample supply of cartridges.

When the first company reached, with the assistance of a few dark lanterns, the extremity of the gallery, at the very entrance of the narrow aperture through which the robbers passed, the party stopped, the commanding officer formed the thirty grenadiers composing the vanguard into a circle, and whispered to them that he wanted a man who would volunteer to venture first, after the guide, into that dark and narrow cavern. There might be less danger than there appeared to be; it was known that the banditti, emboldened by long impunity, were in the habit of keeping guard negligently enough; the band had returned but two hours before from a long expedition: fatigue had no doubt plunged them into deep sleep; besides, picked, young, vigorous, and bold soldiers had been selected for this important expedition, and double rations of brandy had been distributed to them on their departure: ten men, therefore, volunteered, instead of one that the officer demanded. They were ordered to observe profound silence both before and after passing, unless an attack from the enemy obliged them to call for assistance. On emerging from the aperture along which they were to creep, each of them was to rise gently with his arms, and stand aside in order to leave a free passage for his comrades.

Of one hundred men who filled up the first gallery, seventy five were thus to penetrate successively into the interior of the grotto; the twenty five others were to keep on the watch, listen, and be ready to assist their comrades the moment the firing was heard. Moreover, a second company, stationed at the foot of the mountain, was to ascend it on the first signal given by the sentinels *echelonnés* at various intervals.

The first who ventured into the aperture was a lad of Amolac, a village near Assat, who was acquainted with the interior of the cavern, and was to act as guide. He was a resolute and nimble youth. The boy was soon prostrate and began crawling like a worm; he was soon out of sight; a minute after a soldier followed him, his comrades did the same, and the silence and darkness which still prevailed betokened the success of these operations. The secret apprehension which had made more than one heart beat soon made room for a feeling of exultations and gaiety, expressions of which the officer was compelled repeatedly to check.

Seventy five men thus took up above an hour to penetrate one after another into that silent cavern, the echo of which was soon to reiterate the reports of the musket shot.

Half an hour had elapsed since the last of the brave fellows had vanished, and the same silence continued. The officer commanding the twenty five men who had remained in the gallery, was already feeling very anxious, when three successive discharges of musketry persuaded him that the affair was engaged. The sentinels apprised those at the foot of the mountain of the fight; the second company, frozen by the fog and inaction, rapidly ascended; two gendarmes galloped off with the news to Tarascon, and the twenty five men who had remained on guard at the aperture crept in, one by one, anxious to succour those whose firing they heard.

An hour after the firing had ceased, and save about thirty men who had remained with a sergeant to guard the passage, the second company had followed the first.

It was eight in the morning, the neighboring country people were assembled in groups at the foot of the mountain, when the colonel of the regiment, at the head of a third company, reached the end of the first gallery. He was a man of stern command, of high stature, with a thin face, and of few words. When he heard from the commandant of the detachment how matters had passed, what number of men had already entered the cavern, and the short time the firing had lasted, he frowned, and a cloud darkened his countenance. A whole hour passed in anxious expectation, and the most awful silence prevailed. After that lapse of time the colonel, without imparting his apprehensions or thoughts to any body, ordered one of the voltigeurs present to enter the perilous path which one hundred and fifty of his fellow soldiers had in the morning passed through. Two minutes after, the colonel, whose boots could still be descried in the obscurity, was heard loudly calling. Nobody answered his cries from the inside. A moment after he was seen

coming out backwards, alone, and looking very pale.

'Let no one budge,' said he, to the officer commanding the little party, 'two masons must be immediately fetched from Tarascon; let them bring with them their trowels, plaister, and water; in short, all that is required for building.' These few words surprised and terrified all who heard them.

The masons arrived, but the Colonel seemed not to notice their presence; he walked to and fro, gloomy and pensive.

At length, at six in the evening, twelve hours after the two companies had entered the grotto, not a musket's report, not a cry, not a groan, not a sigh, having been heard, on the Colonel beckoning to them, the masons set to work. Half an hour after, the aperture to the cavern was solidly walled up; twenty men guarded the approaches to it, and sentinels stationed along the road unto the Colonel's dwelling at Tarascon, kept ready to give the alarm.

Matters continued in that state three whole days. On the morning of the fourth the Receiver General of the Finances of the department de l'Ariège, who resided at Foix, was, on rising from his bed astounded at finding his coffer open, the locks broken, and instead of the heaps of money which almost filled it the day before, the following words, written on a sheet of white paper—*Les brigands de la grotte d'Ussat*.

It would be impossible to describe the consternation into which this occurrence threw the town and environs; this achievement of men who were believed to be completely walled up in their cave gave rise to the most absurd and superstitious comments, as the news passed from lip to lip. The only rational explanation was, that there existed some other aperture than the one walled up and guarded. But how was it to be discovered? In vain were the oldest people in the country sent for; none remembered having heard that the Echelles grotto, which was well known to them, had any other entrance than the one which was habitually used. At length, however, a man, reputed past a hundred years old, paralytic, almost deaf and blind, was found, who, so far as his words could be made out, said that in his youth he had penetrated into the grotto by another passage, much more difficult than the first, and that many years ago a fall of soil and rocks had rendered it almost impracticable.

This was a valuable piece of information, but how was the aperture to be detected after the mountain had already been carefully and minutely explored? The only thing devised was the surrounding the mountain with a sort of *cordon sanitaire*, and the stationing numerous posts of troops at short distances from one another. It was thought that the banditti must at length show themselves.

During a whole fortnight this blockade yielded no result, and yet in the meantime, two thefts, of trifling importance, indeed, were committed at Tarascon and Saint Girons, which were generally imputed to the Ussat thieves.

The soldiers were beginning to complain of the arduous duty they were uselessly subjected to; the superstition of the peasantry ascribed to the supernatural interference the protection which the persons and den of the brigands seemed to obtain, whilst more rational people whispered the words *connivance* and *treachery*.

The mountain which contains the Echelles grotto ends to the north west on a little valley which the Vic de Sos road ascends, and which a torrent, throwing itself into the Ariège, between Ussat and Tarascon, descends. One evening, the Lieutenant commanding the post watching that part of the mountain, being overcome by fatigue, heat, and *ennui*, had seated himself on a little island covered with shrubs, rocks, and briars, and situate in the very middle of the torrent which lines the road, at about fifty steps from the bivouac, whose fires began to shine. On this refreshing spot the weary Lieutenant soon felt drowsy. He was about to indulge a nap when he suddenly fancied he heard a whisper close to him, which appeared to issue from a stone near which his head rested. His attention, roused for a moment, was about to give way again to the influence of sleep, when a rustling of branches again opened his eyes; he then very distinctly saw a man rise from the ground, slowly get on his legs in the cove, cautiously look about him in all directions, and then, no doubt sure of not having been seen, descend to the very bed of the torrent, follow its course for a few seconds, always concealed by the trees and rocks, and on reaching the

other bank, draw down his trowsers, put on a pair of shoes, and in a complete costume of the Ariège peasants, walk along the Tarascon road.

When this strange apparition was far off the Lieutenant rose, went round the stone he lay close to, and to his great astonishment, discovered between it and the neighboring rock, the entrance to a very narrow subterranean passage, though large enough to admit of a man finding his way through it. Various marks, though concealed with great care, of trodden herbs, and of bruised shrubs growing over the opening itself, denoted that it must be frequented by one or more persons. After carefully remarking the spot the Lieutenant hastened back to his post and made his report.

On the very night a strong detachment of infantry, under the command of an officer of tried courage and coolness, entered into this winding access to the cavern. At first it was almost perpendicular; it passed under the very bed of the torrent, and then rising into an abrupt slope, it penetrated by a rapid ascent into the mountain. They proceeded with caution and in silence, the light of a dark lantern scarcely enabling them to see before them. It was important to them that they should reach, without being discovered, some less narrow part of the cavern, that might enable a few men to be drawn up abreast: for in such a crooked pass a few determined men might easily have kept a whole army at bay.

The party had for some minutes pursued that dangerous path, when, on turning an angle formed by the rocks, a light was seen to glitter, which was reflected by a gun barrel; a man stood up immediately, and barring with his body the passage, the last defile of which he guarded, shouted, 'Qui va là?' The question received no reply, but the head of the detachment hurried on: the brigand's gun was lowered, and he bent as if about to discharge it, when a grenadier rushed at him with his bayonet; by an unlooked-for luck the bandit's gun flashed in the pan, and ere he had time enough to give the alarm within, his opponent's bayonet nailed him dead to the side of the pass.

The troops hastened onwards, and when they beheld a gallery broad enough to admit of twenty men drawing up abreast, their spirits were cheered, and the approach of danger produced on them that intoxicating effect it is wont to have on the brave.

The torches which they had brought having been kindled, the brigands were soon warned of the visit; their shouts arose from all sides, and a sharp firing commenced, which the cavern awfully and repeatedly re-echoed.

Inferior in numbers, the brigands had the advantage of knowing the windings, rugged parts, and secret and numerous sheltered spots of the cavern; at every step they presented a new ambush: expert and resolute marksmen, they stationed themselves in the inaccessible places, whence they fired at leisure on their foes, who could scarcely descry their enemy. The robbers were only thirty six in number, but their force was a hundredfold increased by their local advantages, and if continual reinforcements had not arrived, which permitted the line the soldiers formed to extend without breaking, the result might have been doubtful. At length after a combat of some hours, and a considerable loss of life on the military side, without the bandits having suffered much, the little lake in the middle of the cavern was traversed. The thieves had a small boat to cross it in; but the soldiers were compelled to ford it under a destructive fire, wading through the water and mud, which reached above their knees. Expelled from post to post, the brigands were driven to the very spot where visitors are now obliged to trust their lives to two ladders fastened together, without which it would be impossible to get from the first part of the grotto to the second.

Let the reader figure to himself two grottos following one another in the same direction, but situated at different heights, in such a manner that the orifice of the second is about fifty feet above the ground of the first. Between the two, at half height, is a narrow and slippery platform, whereupon eight or ten persons can scarcely hold: that platform is determined by a precipice of unknown depth, the vertical side of which is the wall itself which serves as a foundation and support to the upper grotto, whose plain is higher still by about twenty feet. On a slippery rock, which projects with a shelving on both sides, two arches have been cut to admit the feet of a long ladder, whose head rests on the summit of the wall rising in front, on a rugged