

A Gallows-Bird

By Bernard Capes

In February of the year 1809, when the French were sat down before Saragossa—then enduring its second and more terrific siege within a period of six months—it came to the knowledge of the Duc d’Abrantes, at that time the General commanding, that his army, though undoubtedly the salt of the earth, was yet so little sufficient to itself in the matter of seasoning, that it was reduced to the necessity of flavouring its soup with the saltpetre out of its own cartridges. In this emergency, d’Abrantes sent for a certain Ducos, captain on the staff of General Berthier, but at present attached to a siege train before the doomed town, and asked him if he knew whence, if anywhere in the vicinity, it might be possible to make good the deficiency

Now this Eugene Ducos was a very progressive evolution of the times, hatched by the rising sun, emerged stinging and splendid from the exotic quagmires of the past. A facile linguist, by temperament and early training an artist, he had flown naturally to the field of battle as to that field most fertile of daring new effects, whose surprises called for record rather than analysis. It was for him to collect the impressions which, later, duller wits should classify. And, in the meantime, here he was at twenty a captain of renown, and always a creature of the most unflagging resourcefulness.

‘You were with Lefebvre-Desnouettes in Aragon last year?’ demanded Junot.

‘I was, General; both before the siege and during it.’

‘You heard mention of salt mines in this neighbourhood?’

‘There were rumours of them, sir—amongst the hills of Ulebo; but it was never our need to verify the rumours.’

‘Take a company, now, and run them to earth. I will give you a week.’

‘Pardon me, General; I need no company but my own, which is ever the safest colleague.’

Junot glared demoniacally. He was already verging on the madness which was presently to destroy him.

‘The devil!’ he shouted. ‘You shall answer for that assurance! Go alone, sir, since you are so obliging, and find salt; and at your peril be killed before reporting the result to me. Bones of God! is every skipjack with a shoulder-knot to better my commands?’

Ducos saluted, and wheeled impassive. He knew that in a few days Marshal Lames was to supplant this maniac.

Up and away amongst the intricate ridges of the mountains, where the half-unravelling knots of the Pyrenees flow down in threads, or clustered threads, which are combed by and by into the plains south of Saragossa, a dusky young goatherd loitered among the chestnut trees on a hot afternoon. This boy’s beauty was of a supernal order. His elastic young cheeks glowed with colour; his eyebrows were resolute bows; his lips, like a pretty phrase of love, were set between dimples like inverted commas. And, as he stood, he coquetted like Dinorah to his own shadow, chasséd to it, spoke to it, upbraiding or caressing, as it answered to his movements on the ground before him—

‘Ah, pretty one! ah, shameless! Art thou the shadow of the girl that Eugenio loved? Fie, fie! thou wouldst betray this poor Anita—mock the round limbs and little feet that will not look their part. Yet, betray her to her love returning, and Anita will fall and kiss thee on her knees—kiss

the very shadow of Eugenio's love. Ah, little shadow! take wings and fly to him, who promised quickly to return. Say I am good but sad, awaiting him; say that Anita suffers, but is patient. He will remember then, and come. No shadow of disguise shall blind him to his love. Go, go, before I repent and hold thee, jealous that mine own shadow should run before to find his lips.'

She stooped, and, with a fantastic gesture, threw her soul upon the winds; then rose, and leaned against a tree, and began to sing, and sigh and murmur softly:

At the gate of heaven are sold brogues
For the little bare-footed angel rogues—

'Ah, little dear mother! it is the seventh month, and the sign is still delayed. No baby, no lover. Alack! why should he return to me, who am a barren olive! The husbandman asks a guerdon for his care. Give me my little doll, Santissima, or I will be naughty and drink holy water: give me the shrill wee voice, which pierces to the father's heart, when even passion loiters. Ah, come to me, Eugenio, my Eugenio!'

She raised her head quickly on the word, and her heart leaped. It was to hear the sound of a footstep, on the stones far below, coming up the mountain-side. She looked to her shirt and jacket. Ragged as they were, undeveloped as was the figure within them, she had been so jealous a housewife that there was not in all so much as an eyelet hole to attract a peeping Tom. Now, leaving her goats amongst the scattered boulders of the open, she backed into the groves, precaution-ally, but a little reluctant, because in her heart she was curious.

The footsteps came on toilfully, and presently the man who was responsible for them hove into sight. He wore the dress of an English officer, save for the shepherd's felt hat on his head; but his scarlet jacket was knotted loosely by the sleeves about his throat, in order to the disposition of a sling which held his left arm crookt in a bloody swathe. He levered himself up with a broken spear-shaft; but he was otherwise weaponless. A pistol, in Ducos's creed, was the argument of a fool. He carried *his* ammunition in his brains.

Having reached a little plateau, irregular with rocks shed from the cliffs above, he sat down within the shadow of a grove of chestnut and carob trees, and sighed, and wiped his brow, and nodded to all around and below him.

'Yes, and yes, and of a truth,' thought he: 'here is the country of my knowledge. And yonder, deep and far amongst its myrtles and mulberries, crawls the Ebro; and to my right, a browner clod amongst the furrows of the valleys, heaves up the ruined monastery of San Ildefonso which Dagenet sacked, the radical; whilst I occupied (ah, the week of sweet malvoisie and sweeter passion!) the little inn at the junction of the Pampeluna and Saragossa roads. And what has become of Anita of the inn? Alack! if my little *fille de joie* were but here to serve me now!'

The goatherd slipped round the shoulder of a rock and stood before him, breathing hard. Her black curls were, for all the world, bandaged, as it might be, with a yellow napkin (though they were more in the way to give than take wounds), and crowned rakishly with a dusky sombrero. She wore a kind of gaskins on her legs, loose, so as to reveal the bare knees and a little over; and across her shoulders was slung a sunburnt shawl, which depended in a bib against her chest.

Now the one stood looking down and the other up, their visions magnetically meeting and blending, till the eyes of the goatherd were delivered of very stars of rapture.

Was this a spirit, thought Ducos, summoned of his hot and necessitous desire? But the other had no such misgiving. All in a moment she had fallen on her brown knees before him, and was

pitifully kissing his bandaged arm, while she strove to moan and murmur out the while her ecstasy of gratitude.

‘Nariguita!’ he murmured, rallying as if from a dream; ‘Nariguita!’

She laughed and sobbed.

‘Ah, the dear little happy name from thy lips! A thousand times will I repeat it to myself, but never as thou wouldst say it. And now! Yes, Nariguita, Eugenio—thine own “little nose”—thy child, thy baby, who never doubted that this day would come—O darling of my soul, that it would come!’—(she clung to him, and hid her face)—‘Eugenio! though the blossom of our love delays its fruitage!’

He smiled, recovered from his first astonishment. Ministers of coincidence! In all the fantastic convolutions of war, the merry, the *danse macabre*, should not love’s reunions have a place? It was nothing out of that context that here was he chanced again, and timely, upon that same sweet instrument which he had once played on and done with, and thrown aside, careless of its direction. Now he had but to stoop and reclaim it, and the discarded strings, it seemed, were ready as heretofore to answer to his touch with any melody he listed.

He caressed her with real delight. She was something more than lovable. He made himself a very Judas to her lips.

‘Anita, my little Anita!’ he began glowingly; but she took him up with a fevered eagerness, answering the question of his eyes.

‘So long ago, ah Dios! And thou wert gone; and the birds were silent; and under the heavy sky my father called me to him. He held a last letter of thine, which had missed my hands for his. Love, sick at our parting, had betrayed us. O, the letter! how I swooned to be denied it! He was for killing me, a traitor. Well, I could not help but be. But Tia Joachina had pity on me, and dressed me as you see, and smuggled me to the hills, that I might at least have a chance to live without suffering wrong. And, behold! the heavens smiled upon me, knowing my love; and Señor Cangrejo took me to herd his goats. For seven months—for seven long, faithful months; until the sweetest of my heart’s flock should return to pasture in my bosom. And now he has come, my lamb, my prince, even as he promised. He has come, drawing me to him over the hills, following the lark’s song of his love as it dropped to earth far forward of his steps. Eugenio! O, ecstasy! Thou hast dared this for my sake?’

‘Child,’ answered the admirable Ducos, ‘I should have dared only in breaking my word. *Un honnête homme n’a que sa parole*. That is the single motto for a poor captain, Nariguita. And who is this Señor Cangrejo?’

Some terror, offspring of his question, set her clinging to him once more.

‘What dost thou here?’ she cried, with immediate inconsistency— ‘a lamb among the wolves! Eugenio!’

‘Eh!’—he took her up, with an air of bewilderment. ‘I am Sir Zhones, the English capitaine, though it lose me your favour, mamselle. What! Damn it, I say!’

She fell away, staring at him; then in a moment gathered, and leapt to him again between tears and laughter.

‘But this?’ she asked, her eyes glistening; and she touched the bandage.

‘Ah! that,’ he answered. ‘Why, I was wounded, and taken prisoner by the French, you understand? Also, I escaped from my captors. It comes, blood and splint and all, from the smashed arm of a sabreur, who, indeed, had no longer need of it.’

‘For the love of Christ!’ she cried in a panic. ‘Come away into the trees, where none will observe us!’

‘Bah! I have no fear, I,’ said Ducos, But he rose, nevertheless, with a smile, and, catching up the goatherd, bore her into the shadows. There, sitting by her side, he assured her, the rogue, of the impatience with which he had anticipated, of the eagerness with which he had run to realize this longed-for moment. The escapade had only been rendered possible, he said truthfully, by the opportune demand for salt. Doubtless she would help him, for love’s sake, to justify the venture to his General?

But, at that, she stared at him, troubled, and her lip began to quiver.

‘Ah, God!’ she cried; ‘then it was not I in the first place! Go thy ways, love; but for pity’s heart-sake let me weep a little. Yes, yes, there is salt in the mountains, that I know, and where the caves lie. But there are also Cangrejo—whom you French ruined and made a madman— and a hundred like him, wild-cats hidden amongst the leaves. And there, too, are the homeless friars of St Ildefonso; and, dear body of Christ! the tribunal of terror, the junta of women, who are the worst of all—lynx-eyed demons.’

He smiled indulgently. Her terror amused him.

‘Well, well,’ he said; ‘well, well. And what, then, is this junta?’

‘It is a scourge,’ she whispered, shivering, ‘for traitors and for spies. It gathers nightly, at sunset, in the dip yonder, and there waters with blood its cross of death. This very evening, Cangrejo tells me

She broke off, cuddled closer to her companion, and clasping her hands and shrugging up her shoulders to him, went on awfully—

‘Eugenio, there was a wagon-load of piastres coming secretly for Saragossa by the Tolosa road. It was badly convoyed. One of your generals got scent of it. The guard had time to hide their treasure and disperse, but him whom they thought had betrayed them the tribunal of women claimed, and tonight—’

‘Well, he will receive his wages. And where is the treasure concealed?’

‘Ah! that I do not know’

Ducos got to his feet, and stretched and yawned.

‘I have a fancy to see this meeting-place of the tribunal. Wilt thou lead me to it, Nariguita?’

‘Mother of God, thou art mad!’

‘Then I must go alone, like a madman.’

‘Eugenio, it is cursing and accurst. None will so much as look into it by day; and, at dusk, only when franked by the holy church.’

‘So greatly the better. Adios, Nariguita!’

It took them half an hour, descending cautiously, and availing themselves of every possible shelter of bush and rock, to reach a strangely formed amphitheatre set stark and shallow amongst the higher swales of the valley, but so overhung with scrub of myrtle and wild pomegranate as to be only distinguishable, and that scarcely, from above. A ragged track, mounting from the lower levels into this hollow, tailed off, and was attenuated into a point where it took a curve of the rocks at a distance below.

As Ducos, approaching the rim, pressed through the thicket, a toss of black crows went up from the mouth ahead of him, like cinders of paper spouted from a chimney He looked over. The brushwood ceased at the edge of a considerable pit, roughly circular in shape, whose sides, of bare sloping sand, met and flattened at the bottom into an extended platform. Thence arose a triangular gibbet, a very rack in a devil’s larder, all about which a hoard of little pitchy bird scullions were busy with the joints. Holy mother, how they squabbled, and flapped at one

another with their sleeves, it seemed! The two carcasses which hung there appeared, for all their heavy pendulosity, to reel and rock with laughter, nudging one another in eyeless merriment.

Ducos mentally calculated the distance to the gallows below from any available coign of concealment.

‘One could not hide close enough to hear anything,’ he murmured, shaking his head in aggravation; ‘and this junta of ladies—it will probably talk. What if it were to discuss that very question of the piastres? Nariguita, will you go and be my little reporter at the ceremony?’

Anita, crouching in the brush behind him, whispered terrified: ‘It is impossible. They admit none but priests and women.’

‘And are not you a woman, most beautiful?’

‘God forbid!’ she said. ‘I am the little goatherd Ambrosio.’

He stood some moments, frowning. A scheme, daring and characteristic, was beginning to take shape in his brain.

‘What is that clump of rags by the gallows?’ he asked, without looking round.

‘It is not rags; it is rope, Eugenio.’

He thought again.

‘And when do they come to hang this rascal?’ he said.

‘It is always at dusk. O, dear mother!’ she whimpered, for the young man had suddenly slipped between the branches, and was going swiftly and softly down the pit-side.

Already the basin of sand was filled with the shadows from the hills. Ducos approached the gibbet. The last of the birds remaining arose and dispersed, quarrelling with nothing so much as the sunlight which they encountered above.

‘It is an abominable task,’ said the aide-de-camp, looking up at the dangling bodies; ‘but—for the Emperor—always for the Emperor! That fellow, now, in the domino—it would make us appear of one build. And as for complexion, why, he at least would have no eyes for the travesty, Mon Dieu! I believe it is a Providence.’

There was a ladder leaned against the third and empty beam. He put it into position for the cloaked figure, and ran up it. The rope was hitched to a hook in the crosspiece. He must clasp and lever up his burden by main strength before he could slacken and detach the cord. Then, with an exclamation of relief, he let the body drop upon the sand beneath. He descended the ladder in excitement.

‘Anita!’ he called.

She had followed, and was at hand. She trembled, and was as pale as death.

‘Help me,’ he panted—‘with this—into the bush.’

He had lifted *his* end by the shoulders.

‘What devil possesses you? I cannot,’ she sobbed; ‘I shall die.’

‘Ah, Nariguita! for my sake! There is no danger if thou art brave and expeditious.’

Between them they tugged and trailed their load into the dense undergrowth skirting the open track, and there let it plunge and sink. Ducos removed the domino from the body, rolling and hauling at that irreverently. Then he saw how the wretch had been pinioned, wrists and ankles, beneath.

Carrying the cloak, he hastened back to the gallows. There he cautiously selected from the surplus stock of cord a length of some twelve feet, at either end of which he formed a loop. So, mounting the ladder, over the hook he hitched this cord by one end, and then, swinging himself clear, slid down the rope until he could pass both his feet into the lower hank.

'*Voilà!*' said he. 'Come up and tie me to the other with some little pieces round the waist and knees and neck.'

She obeyed, weeping. Her love and her duty were to this wonder of manhood, however dreadful his counsel. Presently, trussed to his liking, he bade her fetch the brigand's cloak and button it over all.

'Now,' said he, 'one last sacramental kiss; and, so descending and placing the ladder and all as before, thou shalt take standing-room in the pit for this veritable dance of death.'

A moment—and he was hanging there, to all appearance a corpse. The short rope at his neck had been so disposed and knotted—the collar of the domino serving—as to make him look, indeed, as if he strained at the tether's end. He had dragged his long hair over his eyes; his head lolled to one side; his tongue protruded. For the rest, the cloak hid all, even to his feet.

The goatherd snivelled.

'Ah, holy saints, he is dead!'

The head came erect, grinning.

'Eugenio!' she cried; 'O, my God! Thou wilt be discovered—thou wilt slip and strangle! Ah, the crows—body of my body, the crows!'

'Imbecile! have I not my hands? See, I kiss one to thee. Now the sun sinks, and my ghostly vigil will be short. Pray heaven only they alight not on that in the bush. Nariguita, little heroine, this is my last word. Go hide thyself in the bushes above, and watch what a Frenchman, the most sensitive of mortals, will suffer to serve his Emperor.

It was an era, indeed, of sublime lusts and barbaric virtues, when men must mount upon stepping-stones, not of their dead selves, but of their slaughtered enemies, to higher things. Anita, like Ducos, was a child of her generation. To her mind the heroic purpose of this deed overpowered its pungency. She kissed her lover's feet; secured the safe disposition of the cloak about them; then turned and fled into hiding.

At dusk, with the sound of footsteps coming up the pass, the crows dispersed. Eugene, for all his self-sufficiency, had sweated over their persistence. A single more gluttonous swoop might at any moment, in blinding him, have laid him open to a general attack before help could reach him from the eyrie whence unwearying love watched his every movement. Now common instance of the providence which waits on daring, the sudden lift and scatter of the swarm left his hearing sensible to the tinkling of a bridle, which came rhythmical from the track below. Immediately he fell, with all his soul, into the pose of death.

The cadence of the steely warning so little altered, the footsteps stole in so muffled and so deadly, that, peering presently through slit eyelids for the advent of the troop, it twitched his strung nerves to see a sinister congress already drawn soundless about the gibbet on which he hung. Perhaps for the first time in this stagnant atmosphere he realized the peril he had invited. But still the gambler's providence befriended him.

They were all women but two—the victim, a sullen, whiskered Yanguesian, strapped cuttingly to a mule, and a paunchy shovel-hatted Carmelite, who hugged a crucifix between his roomy sleeves.

Ducos had heard of these branded *vengeresses*. Now, he was Frenchman enough to appreciate in full the significance of their attitude, as they clustered beneath him in the dusk, a veiled and voiceless huddle of phantoms. 'How,' he thought, peeping through the dropped curtain of his hair, 'will the adorables do it?' He had an hysterical inclination to laugh, and at that moment the

monk, with a sudden decision to action, brushed against him and set him slowly twirling until his face was averted from the show.

Immediately thereon—as he interpreted sounds—the mule was led under the gallows. He heard the ladder placed in position, heard a strenuous shuffling as of concentrated movement. What he failed to hear (at present) was any cry or protest from the victim. The beam above creaked, a bridle tinkled, a lighter drop of hoofs receded. A pregnant pause ensued, broken only by a slight noise, like rustling or vibrating—and then, in an instant, by a voice, chuckling, hateful—the voice of the priest.

‘What! to hang there without a word, Carlos? Wouldst thou go, and never ask what is become of that very treasure thou soldst thy soul to betray? The devil has rounded on thee, Carlos; for after all it is thou that art lost, and not the treasure. That is all put away—shout it in the ears of thy neighbours up there—it is all put away, Carlos, safe in the salt mines of the Little Hump. Cry it to the whole world now. Thou mayst if thou canst. In the salt mines of the Little Hump. Dost hear? Ah, then, we must make thee answer.’

With his words, the pit was all at once in shrill hubbub, noise indescribable and dreadful, the shrieking of harpies bidden to their prey. It rose demoniac—a very Walpurgis.

‘No, no,’ thought Ducos, gulping under his collar. He was almost unnerved for the moment. ‘It is unlawful—they have no right to!’

He was twisting again, for all his mad will to prevent it. He would not look, and yet he looked. The monk, possessed, was thrashing the torn and twitching rubbish with his crucifix. The others, their fingers busy with the bodkins they had plucked from their mantillas, had retreated for the moment to a little distance.

Suddenly the Carmelite, as if in an uncontrollable frenzy, dropped his weapon, and scuttling to the mule, where it stood near at hand, tore a great horse pistol from its holster among the trappings, and pointed it at the insensible body

‘Scum of all devils!’ he bellowed. ‘In fire descend to fire that lasts eternal!’

He pulled the trigger. There was a flash and shattering explosion. A blazing hornet stung Ducos in the leg. He may have started and shrieked. Any cry or motion of his must have passed unnoticed in the screaming panic evoked of the crash. He clung on with his hands and dared to raise his head. The mouth of the pass was dusk with flying skirts. Upon the sands beneath him, the body of the priest, a shapeless bulk, was slowly subsiding and settling, one fat fist of it yet gripping the stock of a pistol which, overgorged, had burst as it was discharged.

The reek of the little tragedy had hardly dissipated before Ducos found himself. The sentiment of revolt, deriving from his helpless position, had been indeed but momentary. To feel his own accessibility to torture, painted torture to him as an inhuman lust. With the means to resist, or escape, at will, he might have sat long in ambush watching it; even condoning it as an extravagant posture of art.

With a heart full of such exultation over the success of his trick that for the moment he forgot the pain of his wound, he hurriedly unpicked the knots of the shorter cords about him, and, jumping to the ground, waited until the shadow of a little depressed figure came slinking across the sand towards him.

‘Eugenio!’ it whispered; ‘what has happened? O! art thou hurt?’

She ran into his arms, sobbing.

‘I am hurt,’ said Ducos. ‘Quick, child! unstrap this from my arm and bind it about my calf. Didst hear? But it was magnificent! Two birds with a single stone. The piastres in pickle for us.

Didst see moreover? Holy Emperor! it was laughable. I would sacrifice a decoration to be witness of the meeting of those two overhead. It should be the Yanguesian for my money, for he has at least his teeth left. Look how he shows them, bursting with rage! Quick, quick, quick! we must be up and away, before any of those others think of returning.'

'And if one should,' she said, 'and mark the empty beam?'

'What does it matter, nevertheless! I must be off tonight, after thou hast answered me one single question.'

'Off? Eugenio! O! not without me?'

'God, little girl! In this race I must not be hampered by so much as a thought. But I will return for thee—never fear.'

He still sat in his domino. She knelt at his feet, stanching the flow from the wound the pistol had made in his leg. At his words she looked up breathlessly into his face; then away, to hide her swimming eyes. In the act she slunk down, making herself small in the sand.

'Eugenio! My God! we are watched!'

He turned about quickly

'Whence?'

'From the mouth of the pass,' she whispered.

'I can see nothing,' he said. 'Hurry, nevertheless! What a time thou art! There, it is enough of thy bungling fingers. Help me to my feet and out of this place. Come!' he ended, angrily.

He had an ado to climb the easy slope. By the time they were entered amongst the rocks and bushes above, it was black dusk.

'Whither wouldst thou, dearest?' whispered the goatherd.

He had known well enough a moment ago—to some point, in fact, whence she could indicate to him the direction of the Little Hump, where the treasure lay; afterwards, to the very hill-top where some hours earlier they had forgathered. But he would not or could not explain this. Some monstrous blight of gloom had seized his brain at a swoop.

He thought it must be one of the crows, and he stumbled along, raving in his heart. If she offered to help him now, he would tear his arm furiously from her touch. She wondered, poor stricken thing, haunting him with tragic eyes. Then at last her misery and desolation found voice—

'What have I done? I will not ask again to go with thee, if that is it. It was only one little foolish cry of terror, most dear—that they should suspect, and seize, and torture me. But, indeed, should they do it, thou canst trust me to be silent.'

He stopped, swaying, and regarded her demoniacally. His face was a livid and malignant blot in the thickening dusk. To torture her? What torture could equal his at this moment? She sought merely to move him by an affectation of self-renunciation. That, of course, called at once for extreme punishment. He must bite and strangle her to death.

He moved noiselessly upon her. She stood spell-bound before him.

All at once something seemed to strike him on the head, and, without uttering a sound, he fell forward into the bush.

Ducos opened his eyes to the vision of so preternaturally melancholy a face, that he was shaken with weak laughter over the whimsicality of his own imagination. But, in a very little, unwont to dreaming as he was, the realization that he was looking upon no apparition, but a grotesque of fact, silenced and absorbed him.

Presently he was moved to examine his circumstances. He was lying on a heap of grass mats in a tiny house built of boards. Above him was a square of leaf-embroidered sky cut out of a cane roof; to his left, his eyes, focusing with a queer stiffness, looked through an open door-way down precipices of swimming cloud. That was because he lay in an eyrie on the hillside. And then at once, into his white field of vision, floated the dismal long face, surmounted by an ancient cocked-hat, slouched and buttonless, and issuing like an august Aunt Sally's from the neck of a cloak as black and dropping as a pall.

The figure crossed the opening outside, and wheeled, with the wind in its wings. In the act, its eyes, staring and protuberant, fixed themselves on those of the Frenchman. Immediately, with a little stately gesture expressive of relief and welcome, it entered the hut.

'By the mercy of God!' exclaimed the stranger in his own tongue. Then he added in English: 'The Inglese recovers to himself?'

Ducos smiled, nodding his head; then answered confidently, feeling his way: 'A little, sir, I tank you. Thees along night. Ah! it appear all one pain.'

The other nodded solemnly in his turn— 'A long night indeed, in which the sunsink tree very time.'

'Comment!' broke out the aide-de-camp hoarsely, and instantly realized his mistake.

'Ah! devil take the French!' said he explanatorily. 'I been in their camp so long that to catch their lingo. But I spik l'Espagnol, señor. It shall be good to us to converse there.'

The other bowed impenetrably His habit of a profound and melancholy aloofness might have served for mask to any temper of mind but that which, in real fact, it environed—a reason, that is to say, more lost than bedevilled under the long tyranny of oppression.

'I have been ill, I am to understand?' said Ducos, on his guard. 'For three days and nights, señor. My goatherd came to tell me how a wounded English officer was lying on the hills. Between us we conveyed you hither.'

'Ah, *Dios!* I remember. I had endeavoured to carry muskets into Saragossa by the river. I was hit in the leg; I was captured; I escaped. For two days I wandered, señor, famished and desperate. At last in these mountains I fell as by a stroke from heaven.'

'It was the foul blood clot, señor. It balked your circulation. There was the brazen splinter in the wound, which I removed, and God restored you. What fangs are theirs, these reptiles! In a few days you will be well.'

'Thanks to what ministering angel?'

'I am known as Don Manoel di Cangrejo, señor, the most shattered, as he was once the most prosperous of men. May God curse the French! May God' (his wild, mournful face twitched with strong emotion) 'reward and bless these brave allies of a people more wronged than any the world has yet known!'

'Noble Englishman,' said he by and by, 'thou hast nothing at present but to lie here and accept the grateful devotion of a heart to which none but the inhuman denies humanity'

Ducos looked his thanks.

'If I might rest here a little,' he said; 'if I might be spared—'

The other bowed, with a grave understanding.

'None save ourselves, and the winds and trees, señor. I will nurse thee as if thou wert mine own child.'

He was as good as his word. Ducos, pluming himself on his perspicacity, accepting the inevitable with philosophy, lent himself during the interval, while feigning a prolonged weakness, to recovery. That was his, to all practical purposes, within a couple of days, during

which time he never set eyes on Anita, but only on Anita's master. Don Manoel would often come and sit by his bed of mats; would even sometimes retail to him, as to a trusted ally, scraps of local information. Thus was he posted, to his immense gratification, in the topical after-history of his own exploit at the gallows.

'It is said,' whispered Cangrejo awfully, 'that one of the dead, resenting so vile a neighbour, impressed a goatherd into his service, and, being assisted from the beam, walked away. Truly it is an age of portents.'

On the third morning, coming early with his bowl of goat's milk and his offering of fruits, he must apologize, with a sweet and lofty courtesy, for the necessity he was under of absenting himself all day.

'There is trouble,' he said—'as when is there not? I am called to secret council, señor. But the boy Ambrosio has my orders to be ever at hand shouldst thou need him.'

Ducos's heart leapt. But he was careful to deprecate this generous attention, and to cry *Adios!* with the most perfect assumption of composure.

He was lying on his elbow by and by, eagerly listening, when the doorway was blocked by a shadow. The next instant Anita had sprung to and was kneeling beside him.

'Heart of my heart, have I done well? Thou art sound and whole? O, speak to me, speak to me, that I may hear thy voice and gather its forgiveness!'

For what? She was sobbing and fondling him in a very lust of entreaty.

'Thou hast done well,' he said. 'So, we were seen indeed, Anita?'

'Yes,' she wept, holding his face to her bosom. 'And, O! I agonize for thee to be up and away, Eugenio, for I fear.'

'Hush! I am strong. Help me to my legs, child. So! Now, come with me outside, and point out, if thou canst, where lies the Little Hump.'

She was his devoted crutch at once. They stood in the sunlight, looking down upon the hills which fell from beneath their feet—a world of tossed and petrified rapids. At their backs, on a shallow plateau under eaves of rock, Cangrejo's eyrie clung to the mountain-side.

'There,' said the goatherd, indicating with her finger, 'that mound above the valley—that little hill, fat-necked like a great mushroom, which sprouts from its basin among the trees?'

'Wait! mine eyes are dazzled.'

'Ah, poor sick eyes! Look, then! Dost thou not see the white worm of the Pampeluna road—below yonder, looping through the bushes?'

'I see it—yes, yes.'

'Now, follow upwards from the big coil, where the pine tree leans to the south, seeming a ladder between road and mound.'

'Stay—I have it.'

'Behold the Little Hump, the salt mine of St Ildefonso, and once, they say, an island in the midst of a lake, which burst its banks and poured forth and was gone. And now thou knowest, Eugenio?'

He did not answer. He was intently fixing in his memory the position of the hill. She waited on his mood, not daring to risk his anger a second time, with a pathetic anxiety. Presently he heaved out a sigh, and turned on her, smiling.

'It is well,' he said. 'Now conduct me to the spot where we met three days ago.'

It was surprisingly near at hand. A labyrinthine descent—by way of aloe-horned rocks, with sandy bents and tufts of harsh juniper between—of a hundred yards or so, and they were on the stony plateau which he remembered. There, to one side, was the coppice of chestnuts and locust

trees. To the other, the road by which he had climbed went down with a run—such as he himself was on thorns to emulate—into the valleys trending to Saragossa. His eyes gleamed. He seated himself down on a boulder, controlling his impatience only by a violent effort.

‘Anita,’ he said, drilling out his speech with slow emphasis, ‘thou must leave me here alone awhile. I would think—I would think and plan, my heart. Go, wait on thy goats above, and I will return to thee presently.’

She sighed, and crept away obedient. O, forlorn, most forlorn soul of love, which, counting mistrust treason, knows itself a traitor! Yet Anita obeyed, and with no thought to eavesdrop, because she was in love with loyalty.

The moment he was well convinced of her retreat, Ducos got to his legs with an immense sigh of relief. Love, he thought, could be presuming, could be obtuse, could be positively a bore. It all turned upon the context of the moment; and the present was quick with desires other than for endearments. For it must be related that the young captain, having manoeuvred matters to this accommodating pass, was designing nothing less than an instant return, on the wings of transport, to the blockading camp, whence he proposed returning, with a suitable force and all possible dispatch, to seize and empty of its varied treasures the salt mine of St Ildefonso.

‘Pouf!’ he muttered to himself in a sort of ecstatic aggravation; ‘this accursed delay! But the piastres are there still—I have Cangrejo’s word for it.’

He turned once, before addressing himself to flight, to refocus in his memory the position of the mound, which still from here was plainly visible. In the act he pricked his ears, for there was a sound of footsteps rising up the mountain path. He dodged behind a boulder. The footsteps came on—approached him—paused—so long that he was induced at last to peep for the reason. At once his eyes encountered other eyes awaiting him. He laughed, and left his refuge. The newcomer was a typical Spanish Romany—slouching, filthy, with a bandage over one eye.

‘God be with thee, Caballero!’ said the Frenchman defiantly.

To his astonishment, the other broke into a little scream of laughter, and flung himself towards him.

‘Judge thou, now,’ said he, ‘which is the more wide-awake adventurer and the better actor!’

‘My God!’ cried Ducos; ‘it is de la Platière!’

‘Hush!’ whispered the mendicant. ‘Are we private? Ah, bah! Junot should have sent me in the first instance.’

‘I have been hurt, thou rogue. Our duel of wits is yet postponed. In good time hast thou arrived. This simplifies matters. Thou shalt return, and I remain. Hist! come away, and I will tell thee all.’

Half an hour later, de la Platière—having already, for his part, mentally absorbed the details of a certain position—swung rapidly, with a topical song on his lips, down the path he had ascended earlier. The sound of his footfalls receded and died out. The hill regathered itself to silence. Ducos, on terms with destiny and at peace with all the world, sat for hours in the shadow of the trees.

Perhaps he was not yet Judas enough to return to Anita, awaiting him in Cangrejo’s eyrie. But at length, towards evening, fearing his long absence might arouse suspicion or uneasiness, he arose and climbed the hill. When he reached the cabin, he found it empty and silent. He loitered about, wondering and watchful. Not a soul came near him. He dozed; he awoke; he ate a few olives and some bread; he dozed again. When he opened his eyes for the second time, the shadows of the peaks were slanting to the east. He got to his feet, shivering a little. This utter silence and desertion discomfited him. Where was the girl? God! was it possible after all that she had betrayed him? He might have questioned his own heart as to that; only, as luck would

have it, it was such a tiresomely deaf organ. So, let him think. De la Platière, with his men (as calculated), would be posted in the Pampeluna road, round the spur of the hill below, an hour after sunset—that was to say, at fifteen minutes to six. No doubt by then the alarm would have gone abroad. But no great resistance to a strong force was to be apprehended. In the meantime—well, in the meantime, until the moment came for him to descend under cover of dark and assume the leadership, he must possess his soul in patience.

The sun went down. Night flowing into the valleys seemed to expel a moan of wind; then all dropped quiet again. Darkness fell swift and sudden like a curtain, but no Anita appeared, putting it aside, and Ducos was perplexed. He did not like this bodiless, shadowless subscription to his scheming. It troubled him to have no one to talk to—and deceive. He was depressed.

By and by he pulled off, turned inside-out and resumed his scarlet jacket, which he had taken the provisional precaution to have lined with a sombre material. As he slipped in his arms, he started and looked eagerly into the lower vortices of dusk. In the very direction to which his thoughts were engaged, a little glow-worm light was burning steadily from the thickets. What did it signify—Spaniards or French, ambush or investment? Allowing—as between himself on the height and de la Platière on the road below—for the apparent discrepancy in the time of sunset, it was yet appreciably before the appointed hour. Nevertheless, this that he saw made the risk of an immediate descent necessary.

Bringing all his wits, his resolution, his local knowledge to one instant focus, he started, going down at once swiftly and with caution. The hills rose above him like smoke as he dropped; the black ravines were lifted to his feet. Sometimes for scores of paces he would lose sight altogether of the eye of light; then, as he turned some shoulder of rock, it would strike him in the face with its nearer radiance, so that he had to pause and readjust his vision to the new perspective. Still, over crabbed ridges and by dip of thorny gulches he descended steadily, until the mound of the Little Hump, like a gigantic thatched kraal, loomed oddly upon him through the dark.

And, lo! the beacon that had led him down unerring was a great lantern hung under the sagging branch of a chestnut tree at the foot of the mound—a lantern, the lurid nucleus of a little coil of tragedy.

A cluster of rocks neighboured the clearing about the tree. To these Ducos padded his last paces with a catlike stealth—crouching, hardly breathing; and now from that coign of peril he stared down.

A throng of armed guerrillas, one a little forward of the rest, was gathered about a couple more of their kidney, who, right under the lantern, held the goatherd Anita on her knees in a nailing grip. To one side, very phantoms of desolation, stood Cangrejo and another. The faces of all, densely shadowed in part by the rims of their sombreros, looked as if masked; their mouths, corpse-like, showed a splint of teeth; their ink-black whiskers hummocked on their shoulders.

So, in the moment of Ducos's alighting on it, was the group postured—silent, motionless, as if poised on the turn of some full tide of passion. And then, in an instant, a voice boomed up to him.

'Confess!' it cried, vibrating: 'him thou wert seen with at the gallows; him whom thou foisted, O! unspeakable, thou devil's doxy! on the unsuspecting Cangrejo; him, thy Frankish gallant and spy' (the voice guttered, and then, rising, leapt to flame)—'what hast thou done with him? where hidden? Speak quickly and with truth, if, traitor though thou be, thou wouldst be spared the traitor's estrapade.'

'Alguazil, I cannot say. Have mercy on me!'

Ducos could hardly recognize the child in those agonized tones.

The inquisitor, with an oath, half-wheeled.

‘Pignatelli, father of this accursed—if by her duty thou canst prevail?’ A figure—agitated, cadaverous, as sublimely dehumanized as Brutus—stepped from Cangrejo’s side and tossed one gnarled arm aloft.

‘No child of mine, alguazil!’ it proclaimed in a shrill, strung cry. ‘Let her reap as she hath sown, alguazil!’

Cangrejo leapt, and flung himself upon his knees by the girl.

‘Tell Don Manoel, chiquita. God! little boy, that being a girl (ah, naughty!) is half-absolved. Tell him, tell him—ah, there—now, now, now! He, thy lover, was in the cabin. I left him prostrate, scarce able to move. When the council comes to seek him, he is gone. Away, sayst thou? Ah, child, but I must know better! It could not be far. Say where—give him up—let him show himself only, chiquita, and the good alguazil will spare thee. Such a traitor, ah, Dios! And yet I have loved, too.’

He sobbed, and clawed her uncouthly. Ducos, in his eyrie, laughed to himself, and applauded softly, making little cymbals of his thumb-nails.

‘But he will not move her,’ he thought—and, on the thought, started; for from his high perch his eye had suddenly caught, he was sure of it, the sleeking of a French bayonet in the road below.

‘Master!’ cried Anita, in a heart-breaking voice; ‘he is gone—they cannot take him. O, don’t let them hurt me!’

The alguazil made a sign. Cangrejo, gobbling and resisting, was dragged away. There was a little ugly, silent scuffle about the girl; and, in a moment, the group fell apart to watch her being hauled up to the branch by her thumbs.

Ducos looked on greedily.

‘How long before she sets to screaming?’ he thought, ‘so that I may escape under cover of it.’

So long, that he grew intolerably restless—wild, furious. He could have cursed her for her endurance.

But presently it came, moaning up all the scale of suffering. And, at that, slinking like a rat through its run, he went down swiftly towards the road—to meet de la Platière and his men already silently breaking cover from it.

And, on the same instant, the Spaniards saw them.

‘Peste!’ whispered de la Platière. ‘We could have them all at one volley but for that!’

Between the French force, ensconced behind the rocks whither Ducos had led them, and the Spaniards who, completely taken by surprise, had clustered foolishly in a body under the lantern, hung the body of Anita, its torture suspended for the moment because its poor wits were out.

‘How, my friend!’ exclaimed Ducos. ‘But for what?’

‘The girl, that is all.’

‘She will feel nothing. No doubt she is half-dead already A moment, and it will be too late.’

‘Nevertheless, I will not,’ said de la Platière.

Ducos stamped ragingly.

‘Give the word to me. She must stand her chance. For the Emperor!’ he choked—then shrieked out, ‘Fire!’

The explosion crashed among the hills, and echoed off.

A dark mass, which writhed and settled beyond the lantern shine, seemed to excite a little convulsion of merriment in the swinging body. That twitched and shook a moment; then relaxed, and hung motionless.