



A SET OF ROGUES.

BY FRANK BARRETT AUTHOR OF "THE GREAT NEPHEW," "A RECOLLING VENGEANCE," "OUT OF THE JAW OF DEATH," ETC., ETC.

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CHAPTER VIII.

"We will go on when you are ready," says Don Sanchez, turning to us. "Aye," growled Jack in my ear, "with all my heart." For if these friends be of the same kidney as Don Lopez, we may be persuaded to take a better road, which God forbid it be a sample of their preference.

So being in our saddles forth we set once more and on a path no easier than before, but worse—like a very horse top for steepness, without a tinge of any living thing for succor if one fell, but only sharp, jagged rocks, and that which now added to our peril was here and there a patch of snow, so that the mules must cock their ears and feel their way before advancing a step, now halting for dread, and now scuttling on with their tails betwixt their legs as the stones rolled under them.

But the longest road hath an end, and so at length reaching that gap we had seen from below, to our great content we beheld through an angle in the mountain a tract of open country looking moorland, green and sweet in the distance. And at the sight of this Moll clapped her hands and cried out with joy; indeed, we were all as mad as children with the thought that our task was half done. Only the don kept his gravity. But turning to Moll, he stretches out his hand toward the plain and says with prodigious pride, "My country!"

And now we began the descent, which was actually more perilous than the ascent, but we made light of it, being very much enlivened by the high mountain air and the relief from dead uncertainty, shouting out our reflections one to another as we jolted down the rugged path.

"After all, Jack," says I to him at the top of my voice, being in advance and next to Don Sanchez, "after all, Don Lopez was not such a bad friend to us."

Upon which the don, stopping his mule at the risk of being cast down the abyss, turns in his saddle, and says:

"Fellow, Don Lopez is a Spaniard, a Castilian of noble birth." But here his mule, deciding that this was no fit place for halting, bundled onward at a trot to overtake the guides, and obliged his rider to turn his attention to other matters.

By the look of the sun it must be about 2 in the afternoon when, rounding a great bluff of rock, we came upon a kind of tableland which commanded a wide view of the plain below, most dazzling to our eyes after the gloomy recesses of the pass, and here we found trees growing and some rude attempt at cultivation, but all very poor and stunted, being still very high and exposed to the bleak winds issuing from the gorges.

Our guides, throwing themselves on the ground, repaired once more to their store of onions, and we, nothing loath to follow their example, opened our saddlebags, and with our cold meat and the hogskin of wine made another good repast and very merry. And the don, falling into discourse with the guides, pointed out to us a little white patch on the plain below, told us that was Ravellos, where we should find one of the best posadas in the world, which added to our satisfaction. "But," says he, "'tis yet four hours' march ere we reach it, so we had best be packing quickly."

Thereupon we finished our meal in haste, the guides still lying on the ground eating onions, and when we were prepared to start they still lay there and would not budge. On this ensued another discussion, very indignant and passionate on the part of Don Sanchez, and as cool and phlegmatic on the side of the guides, the upshot of which was, as we learned from the don, that these rascals maintained they had fulfilled their bargain in bringing us over into Spain, but as to carrying us to Ravellos, they would by no means do that without the permission of their padrone, who was one of those they had whistled to from our last halting place, and whom they were now staying for.

Then, beginning to quake a bit at the strangeness of this treatment, we looked about us to see if we might venture to continue our journey alone. But, Lord, one might as easily have found a needle in a bundle of hay as a path amid this labyrinth of rocks and horrid fissures that environed us, and this was so obvious that the guides, though not yet paid for their service, made no attempt to follow or to stay, as knowing full well we must come back in despair. So there was no choice but to wait the coming up of the padrone, the don standing with his legs astride and his arms folded, with a very storm of passion in his face, in readiness to confront the tardy padrone with his reproaches for this delay and the affront offered to himself, we casting our eyes longingly down at Ravellos, and the guides silently munching their onions. Thus we waited until, the fine ear of our guides catching a sound, they rose to their feet, muttering the word "padrone," and pulled off their hats as two men, mounted on mules tricked out like our own, came round the corner and pulled up before us. But what was our surprise to see that the foremost of these fellows was none other than the Don Lopez de Calvados we had entertained to supper the night before, and of whose noble family Don Sanchez had been

prating so highly, and not a thread better dressed than when we saw him last and fall as dirty. That which gave us most uneasiness, however, was to observe that each of these "friends" carried an ugly kind of musket slung across his back and a most unpleasant long sheath knife in his waistcloth.

Not a word says our Don Sanchez, but feigning still to believe him a man of quality he returns the other don's salutation with all the ceremony possible. Then Don Lopez, smiling from ear to ear, begs us, as I learned afterward, to pardon him for keeping us waiting, which had not happened, he assures us, if we had not suffered him to oversleep himself. He then informs us that we are now upon his domain and begs us to accept such hospitality as his castello will furnish in return for our entertainment of last night.

To this Don Sanchez replies with a thousand thanks that we are anxious to reach Ravellos before nightfall, and that, therefore, we will be going at once if it is all the same to him. With more bowing and scraping, Don Lopez amiably but firmly declines to accept any refusal of his offer or to talk of business before his debt of gratitude is paid. With that he gives a sign to our guides, who at once lead off our mules at a brisk trot, leaving us to follow on foot with Don Lopez and his companion, whom he introduces as Don Ray del Puerto—as arrant a catthroat rascal to look at as ever I clapped eyes on.

So we with very dismal forebodings trudge on, having no other course to take, Don Sanchez, to make the best of it, warranting that no harm shall come to us while we are under the hospitable protection of a Spaniard, but to no great effect—our faith being already shaken in his valuation of Spaniards.

Quitting the tableland, ten minutes of leaping and scrambling brought us to a collection of miserable huts built all higgledy piggledy on the edge of a torrent, overtopped by a square building of more consequence, built of graystone and roofed with slate shingles, but with nothing but ill shaped holes for windows, and this Don Lopez, with some pride, told us was his castello. A ragged crew of women and children, apprised of our coming, by the guide maybe, trooped out of the village to meet us and hailed our approach with shouts of joy, "for all the world like a pack of hounds at the sight of their keeper with a dish of bones," whispers Jack Dawson in my ear ominously. But it was curious to see how they did fall back in two lines, those that had hats taking them off as Don Lopez passed, he bowing to them right and left, like any prince in his progress.

So we up to the castello, where all the men of the village are assembled and all armed like Don Lopez, and they greet us with cries of "Holla!" and throwing up of hats. They making way for us with salutations on both sides, we enter the castello, where we find one great ill paved room with a steepladder on one side leading to the floor above, but no furniture save a table and some benches of wood, all black and shining with grease and dirt. But indeed the walls, the ceiling and all else about us was beyond everything for blackness, and this was easily to be understood, for a wench coming in with a caldron lights a fagot of wood in a corner, where was no chimney to carry off the smoke, but only a hole in the wall with a kind of eaves over it, so that present-

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ly the place was so filled with the fumes 'twas difficult to see across it. Don Lopez (always as gracious as a cat with a milkmaid) asks Moll through Don Sanchez if she would like to make her toilet while dinner is preparing, and at this offer all of us jump—choosing anything for a change, so he takes us up the steepladder to the floor above, which differs from that below in being cut up into half a dozen pieces by some low partitions of planks nailed loosely together like cribs for cattle, with some litter of dry leaves and hay in each, but in other respects being just as naked and grimy, with a cloud of smoke coming up through the chinks in the floor.

"You will have the sole use of these chambers during your stay," says Don Lopez, "and for your better assurance you can draw the ladder up after you on retiring for the night."

But for the gravity of our situation and prospects I could have burst out laughing when Don Sanchez gave us



In an instant all his fellows spring to their feet.

the translation of this promise, for the idea of regarding these pens as chambers was not less ludicrous than the air of pride with which Don Lopez bestowed the privilege of using 'em upon us.

Don Lopez left us, promising to send a maid with the necessary appointments for Moll's toilet.

"A plague of all this finery!" growled Dawson. "How long may it be, think you, senor, ere we can quit this palace and get to one of those posadas you promised us?"

Don Sanchez hunched his shoulders for reply and turned away to hide his mortification. And now a girl comes up with a crock of water on her head, a broken comb in her hand and a ragged cloth on her arm that looked as if it had never been washed since it left the loom and sets them down on a bench, with a grin at Moll, but she, though not overnice, turns away with a pout of disgust, and then we go to get a breath of fresh air to a hole in the wall on the windward side, where we stand all

dumb with disappointment and dread until we are called down to dinner. But before going down Don Sanchez warns us to stand on our best behavior, as these Spaniards, for all their rude seeming, were of a particularly punctilious, ticklish disposition, and that we might come badly out of this business if we happened to displease them.

"I cannot see reason in that, senor," says Dawson, "for the less we please 'em the sooner they are likely to send us hence, and so the better for us."

"As you please," replies the don, "but my warning is to our advantage."

Down we go, and there stands Don Lopez with a dozen choice friends, all the raggedest dirty villains in the world, and they saluting us we return their civility with a very fair pretense and take the seats offered us—they standing until we are set. Then they sit down, and each man lugs out a knife from his waistcloth. The caldron, filled with a mess of kid steved in a multitude of onions, is fetched from the fire, and being set upon a smooth board is slid down the table to our host, who, after picking out some tidbits for us, serves himself, and so slides it back, each man in turn picking out a morsel on the end of his knife.

Bearing in mind Don Sanchez's warning, we do our best to eat of this dish, but heaven knows, with little relish, and might glad when the caldron is empty and that part of the performance ended. Then, the bones being swept from the table, a huge skin of wine is set before Don Lopez, and he serves us each with about a quart in an odd shaped vessel with a spout, which Don Sanchez and his countrymen use by holding it above their heads and letting the wine spurt into their mouths, but we, being unused to this fashion, preferred rather to suck it out of the spout, which seemed to them as odd a mode as theirs was to us. However, better wine, drink it how you may, there is none than the wine of these parts, and this reconciling us considerably to our condition we listened with content to their singing of ditties, which they did very well for such rude fellows, to the music of a guitar and a tambourine.

And so when our pots came to be replenished a second time we were all mighty merry and agreeable save Jack Dawson, who never could take his liquor like any other man, but must fall into some extravagant humor, and he, I perceived, regarded some of the company with a very sour, jealous eye because, being warmed with drink, they fell to casting glances at Moll with a certain degree of familiarity. Especially there was one fellow with a hook nose, who stirred his bile exceedingly, sitting with his elbows on the table and his jaws in his hands and would scarcely shift his eyes from Moll, and since he could not make his displeasure understood in words, and so give vent to it and be done, Jack sat there in sullen silence watching for an opportunity to show his resentment in some other fashion. The other saw this well enough, but would not desert, and so these two sat fronting each other like two dogs ready to fly at each other's throats. At length, the hook nosed rascal, growing bolder with his liquor, rises as if to reach his wine pot, and stretching across the table chunks Moll under the chin with his grimy fingers.

At this Jack flings out his great fist with all the force of contained passion, catches the other right in the middle of the face, with such effect that the fellow flies clean back over his bench, his head striking the pavement with a crash. Then in an instant all his fellows spring to their feet, and a dozen long knives flash out from their sheaths.

CHAPTER IX.

Up starts Jack Dawson, catching Moll by the arm and his joint stool by the leg, and stepping back a pace or two not to be taken in the flank he swings his stool ready to dash the brains out of the first that nears him, and I do likewise, making the same show of valor with my stool, but cutting a poor figure beside Dawson's mighty presence.

Seeing their fellow laid out for dead on the floor, with his hook nose smashed most horribly into his face, the others had no stomach to meet the same fate, but with their Spanish cunning began to spread out that so they might attack us on all sides, and surely this had done our business but that Don Lopez, flinging himself before us with his knife raised high, cries out at the top of his voice, "Rekkbah!"—a word of their own language, I am told, taken from the Moorish, and signifying that whosoever shall outrage the laws of hospitality under his roof shall be his enemy to the death. And at this word every man stood still as if by enchantment and let fall his weapon. Then in the same high voice he gives them a harangue, showing them that Dawson was in the right to avenge an insult offered his daughter, and the other justly served for his offense to us. "For his offense to me as the host of these strangers," adds he, "Jose shall answer to me hereafter if he live. If he be dead, his body shall be flung to the vultures of the gorge, and his name be never uttered again beneath this roof."

"I bear no grudges, not I," says Dawson, when Don Sanchez gave him the English of this. "If he live, let his nose be set, and if dead let him be buried decently in a churchyard. But hark ye, senor, lest we fall out again and come out worse the next bout, do pray ask his worship if we may not be accommodated with a guide to take us on our way at once. We have yet two hours of daylight before us, there's not a cloud in the sky, and with such a moon as we had the night before last we may get on well enough."

Poor Moll, who was all of a shake with the terror of another catastrophe, added her prayers to Dawson's, and Don Sanchez, with a profusion of civilities, laid the proposal before Don Lopez, who, though professing the utmost regret to lose us so soon, consented to gratify our wish, adding that his males were so well accustomed to the road that they could make the journey as well in the dark as in broad day.

"Well, then," says Dawson, when this was told us, "let us settle the business at once and be off." And now, when Don Sanchez proposed to pay for the service of our guides, it was curious to see how every rascal at the table craned forward to watch the upshot. Don Lopez makes a pretense of leaving the payment to Don Sanchez's generosity, and he, not behindhand in courtesy, lugs out his purse and begs the other to pay himself, whereupon, with more apologies, Don Lopez empties the money on the table and carefully counts it, and there being but about a score of goldpieces and some silver he shakes his head and says a few words to Don Sanchez in a very reproachful tone of remonstrance, to which our don replies by turning all the trifles out of his pocket, one after the other, to prove that he has no money.

"I thought as much," growls Jack in my ear. "A pretty nest of hornets we've fallen into."

The company, seeing there was no more to be got out of Don Sanchez, began to murmur and scowl eyes at us, whereupon Dawson, seeing how the land lay, stands up and empties his pockets on the table, and I likewise, but betwixt us there was no more than some French pennies and some odds and ends of no value at all. Fetching a deep sigh, Don Lopez takes all these possessions into a heap before him, and tells Don Sanchez that he cannot believe persons of our quality could travel with so little; that he feels convinced Don Sanchez must have dropped a purse on the way, and that until it is found he can on no account allow us to leave the neighborhood.

"This comes of being so mighty fine!" says Dawson, when Don Sanchez had explained matters. "Had we traveled as became our condition, this brigand would never have ensnared us higher. And if they won't believe your story, senor, I can't blame 'em, for I would have sworn you had £1,000 to your hand." "Do you reproach me for my generosity?" asks the don. "Nay, master, I love you for being free with your money while you have it, but 'tis a queer kind of generosity to bring us into these parts with no means of taking us back again. However, we'll say no more about that if we get out of this cursed smoke hole, and as we are like to come off ill if these Jack thieves keep us here a week or so and get nothing by it, 'twill be best to tell 'em the honest truth and acquaint them that we are no gentle folk, but only three poor English mountebanks brought hither on a wild goose chase."

This was a bitter pill for Don Sanchez to swallow. However, seeing no other cure for our ills, he gulped it down with the best face he could put on it. But from the mockery and laughter of all who heard him 'twas plain to see they would not believe a word of his story. "What would you have me do now?" asks the don, turning to us when the clamor had subsided, and he told us how he had tried to persuade them we were dancers he was taking for a show to the fair at Barcelona, which, by our looks, would not believe, and especially that a man of such build as Jack Dawson could foot it, even to please such heavy people as the English.

"What," cries Jack, "I can't dance! We will pretty soon put them to another complexion if they do but give us space and a fair trial." You can strum a guitar, Kit, for I've heard you. And Moll, my chick, do you dash the tears from your cheek and pluck up courage to show these Portugals what the English lass can do."

The brigands agreeing to this trial, the table is shoved back to give us a space in the best light, and our judges seating themselves conveniently Moll brushes her eyes (to a little murmur of sympathy, as I thought), and I strike out the tune. Jack, with all the magnificence of a king, takes her hand and leads her out to a French pavan, and sure no one in the world ever stepped it more gracefully than our poor little Moll (now put upon her mettle), nor more lightly than Dawson, so that every rascal in our audience was won to admiration, clapping hands and shouting "Holla!" when it was done. And this warming us we gave 'em next an Italian coranto, and after that an English pillow dance, and in good faith had they all been our dearest friends these dirty fellows could not have gone more mad with delight. And then, Moll and her father sitting down to fetch their breath, a dispute arose among the brigands which we were at a loss to understand until Don Sanchez explained that a certain number would have it we were real dancers, but that another party, with Don Lopez, maintained there were but court dancers, which only proved the more we were of high quality to be thus accomplished.

"We'll convince 'em yet, Moll, with a fix of their doubts," cries Dawson, starting to his feet again. "Tell 'em we will give 'em a stage dance of a nymph and a wild man, senor, with an excuse for our having no costume but this. Play us our pastoral, Kit. And sing you your ditty of 'Broken Heart,' Moll, in the right place, that I may get my wind for the last caper."

Moll nods, and with ready wit takes the comb from her head, letting her pretty hair tumble all about her shoulders, and then, whipping up her long skirt, tucks one end under her girdle, thereby making a very dainty show of pink lining against the dark stuff and also giving more play for her feet. And so thus they dance their pastoral, Don Sanchez taking a tambourine and tapping it lightly to the measure, up to Moll's song, which so ravished these hardy, stony men by the pathetic sweetness of her voice—for they could understand nothing save by her expression—that they would not let the dance go on until she had sung it through again. To conclude, Jack springs up as one enamored to madness and flings out his last steps with such vigor and agility as to quite astound all.

And now the show being ended, and not one but is a-crying of "Holla!" and "Brava!" Moll snatches the tambourine from Don Sanchez's hand, and stepping before Don Lopez drops him a courtesy and offers it for her reward. At this Don Lopez, glancing at the money on the table by his side, and looking round for sanction to his company, which they did give him without one voice of opposition, he takes up two of the goldpieces and drops them on the parchment. Thus did our Moll, by one clever hit, draw an acknowledgment from them that we were indeed no fine folks, but mere players, which point they might have doubted in their cooler moments.

But we were not quit yet, for on Don Sanchez's begging that we should now be set upon our road to Ravellos the other replies that, though he will do us this service with great pleasure, yet he cannot permit us to encounter the danger again of being taken for persons of quality. "Fine dress," says he, "may be necessary to the senor and his daughter for their court dances, and they are heartily welcome to them for the pleasure they have given us, but for you and the musician who plays but indifferent well, meaner garb is more suitable, and

He takes up two of the goldpieces and drops them on the parchment. so you will be good enough to step up stairs, the pair of you, and change your clothing for such as we can furnish from our store."



He takes up two of the goldpieces and drops them on the parchment.

And up stairs we were forced to go, and thus being stripped we were given such dirty fine rags and so grotesque that when we came down Jack Dawson and Moll fell a-laughing at us, as though they would burst, and in truth we made a most ludicrous spectacle, especially the don, whom hitherto we had seen only in the neatest and most noble of clothes, looking more like a couple of scarecrows than living men.

Don Sanchez neither smiled nor frowned at this treatment, taking this misfortune with the resignation of a philosopher, only to quiet Dawson's merriment he told him that in the clothes taken from him was sewed up a bond for £200, but whether this was true or not I cannot tell. And now, to bring an end to this adventure, we were taken down the intricate passes of the mountain in the moonlight, as many of the gang as could find mules coming with us for escort, and brought at last to the main road, where we were left with naught but what we stood in (save Moll's two pieces), and robbers bidding us their adios with all the courtesy imaginable. But even then, robbed of all he had even to the clothes off his back, Don

Sanchez's pride was unshaken, for he bade us note that the very thieves in Spain were gentlemen.

As we trudged along the road toward Ravellos, we fell debating on our case, as what we should do next, etc., Don Sanchez promising that we should have redress for our ill treatment; that his name alone would procure us a supply of money for our requirements, etc., to my great content. Dawson was of another mind.

"As for seeking redress," says he, "I would as soon kick at a hive for being stung by a bee, and the wisest course when you've been once hit by a dog is to keep out of his way for the future. With respect of getting money by your honor's name, you may do as you please, and so may you, Kit, if you're so minded. But for my part, henceforth I'll pretend to be no better than I am, and the first suit of rags I can get will I wear in the fashion of this country. And so shall you, Moll, my dear. So make up your mind to lay aside your fine airs and hold up your nose no longer as if you were too good for your father."

"Why, surely, Jack," says I, "you would not quit us and go from your bargain?"

"Not I, and you should know me well enough, Kit, to have no doubt on that score. But 'tis no part of our bargain that we should bustle anybody but Simon the steward."

"We have 400 miles to go ere we reach Elche," says Don Sanchez. "Can you tell me how we are to get there without money?"

"Aye, that I can, and I warrant my plan as good as your honor's. How many tens are there in 400, Kit?"

"Forty."

"Well, we can walk ten miles a day on level ground, and so may do this journey in six weeks or thereabouts, which is no such great matter, seeing we are not to be back in England afore next year. We can buy a guitar and a tabor out of Moll's pieces. With them we can give a show wherever we stay for the night, and if honest men do but pay us half as much as the thieves of this country we may fare pretty well."

"I confess," says Don Sanchez, "your scheme is the best, and I would myself have proposed it but that I can do so little for my share."

"Why, what odds does that make, senor?" cries Jack. "You gave us of the best while you had ought to give, and 'tis but fair we should do the same. Besides which, how could we get along without you for a spokesman, and I marked that you drummed to our dance very tunelessly. Come, is it a bargain, friend?"

And on Don Sanchez's consenting Jack would have us all shake hands on it for a sign of faith and good fellowship. Then, perceiving that we were arrived at the outskirts of the town, we ended our discussion.

(To be Continued.)

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