

# A SET OF ROGUES.

BY FRANK BARRETT AUTHOR OF THE GREAT HESPER "A REVENGING VENGEANCE" "OUT OF THE JAWS OF DEATH" ETC. ETC.

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## CHAPTER XII.

The house, like nearly all Moorish houses of this class, was simply one large and lofty room, with a domed ceiling built of very thick masonry, to resist the heat of the sun. There was neither window nor chimney, the door serving to admit light and air and let out the smoke if a fire were lighted within. One-half of this chamber was dug out to a depth of a couple of feet for the accommodation of cattle (the litter being thrown into the hollow as it is needed and naught removed till it reaches the level of the other floor), and above this about eight feet from the ground and four from the roof was a kind of shelf (the breadth and length of that half) for the storage of fodder and a sleeping place for the inhabitants, with no kind of partition or any issue for the foul air from the cattle below.

"Are we to live a year in this hothouse?" asks Moll in affright.

"Have done with your chatter, Moll," answers Jack testily. "Don't you see I'm a-thinking? Heaven knows there's enough to swallow without any bug-bears of your raising."

With that, having finished his inspection of the interior, he goes out and looks at it outside.

"Well," says Don Sanchez, "what think you of the house?"

"Why, senior, 'tis no worse than I can see than any other in these parts and not this advantage, which they have not, of being in a sweet air. With a bit of contrivance we could make a shift to live here well enough. We should do us neither for furniture, seeing that 'tis the custom of the country to eat off the floor and sit upon nothing. A pot to cook the victuals in is about all we need in that way. But how we are to get anything to cook in is one mystery, and," lacking his tongue, "what we are going to drink is another, neither of which I can fathom, for, look you, senior, if one may judge of men's characters by their faces or of their means by their habits, we may dance our legs off ere these Moors will bestow a penny piece upon us, and as for their sour milk I'd as lief drink hemlock, and liefer now, if this town had been as we counted on, like Barcelona, all had gone as merry as a marriage bell, for then might we have gained enough to keep us in collity as long as you please, but here, if we die not of colic in a week, 'twill be to perish of starvation in a fortnight. What say you, Kit?"

I was forced to admit that I had never seen a town less likely to afford a subsistence than this.

Then Don Sanchez, having heard us with great patience and waited a minute to see if we could raise any further objections, answers us in measured tones.

"I doubt not," says he, "that with a little ingenuity you may make the house habitable and this wilderness agreeable. My friend, Sidi ben Ahmed, has offered to provide us with what commodities are necessary to that end. I agree with you that it would be impossible to earn the meanest livelihood here by dancing. It would not be advisable if we could. For that reason, my knowledge of various tongues making me very serviceable to Sidi ben Ahmed, who is the most considerable merchant of this town, I have accepted an office in his house. This will enable me to keep my engagement with you. You will live at my charge, as I promised, and you shall want for nothing in reason. If the Moors drink no wine themselves, they make excellent for those who will, and you shall not be stinted in that particular."

"Come, this sounds fair enough," cries Dawson. "But pray, senior, are we to do nothing for our keep?"

"Nothing beyond what we came here to do," replies he, with a meaning glance at Moll.

"What?" cries poor Moll in pain. "We are to dance no more?"

The don shook his head gravely, and remembering the jolly, vagabond, careless, adventurous life we had led these past two months, with a thousand pleasant incidents of our happy junkettings, we were all downcast at the prospect of living in this place—though a paradise—for a year without change.

"Though I promised you no more than I offer," says the don, "yet if this prospect displeases you we will cry quits and part here. Nay," adds he, taking a purse from his pocket, "I will give you the means to return to Alicante, where you may live as better pleases you."

It seemed to me that there was an unfeigned carelessness in his manner, as if he would as lief as not throw up his hazardous enterprise for some other more sure undertaking. And indeed I believe he was then balancing another alternative in his mind.

At this generous offer Moll dashed away the tears that had sprung to her eyes, brightening up wonderfully, but then, casting her eyes upon the don, her face fell again as at the thought of leaving him, for we all admired him and he prodigiously for his great reserve and many good qualities which commanded respect, and this feeling was mingled in her case, I believe, with a kind of growing affection.

Seeing this sentiment in her eyes, the don was clearly touched by it, and so laying his hand gently on her shoulder he says:

"My poor child, remember you the old women we saw dancing at Barcelona? They were not more than 40.

What will they be like in a few years? Who will tolerate them? Who will love them? Is that the end you choose for your own life—that the estate to which our little princess shall fall?"

"No, no, no!" cries she in a passion, clinching her little hands and throwing up her head in disdain.

"And no, no, no, say I," cries Dawson. "Were our case ten times as bad, I'd not go back from my word. As it is, we are not to be pitied, and I warrant ere long we make ourselves to be envied. Come, Kit, rouse you out of your lethargies and let us consult how we may improve our condition here, and do you, senior, pray order us a little of that same excellent wine you spoke of, if it be but a pint, when you feel disposed that way."

The don inclined his head, but lingered, talking to Moll very gravely and yet tenderly for some while, Dawson and I going into the house to see what we could make of it, and then, telling us we should see him no more till the next day, he left us. But for some time after he was gone Moll sat on the side of the well. Very pensive and wistful, as one to whom the future was opened for the first time.

Anon comes a banging at our garden gate, which Moll had closed behind the don, and, going to it, we find a Moorish boy with a barrow charged with many things. We could not understand a word he said, but Dawson decided these chattels were sent us by the don by perceiving a huge hogskin of wine, for which he thanked God and Don Sanchez a hundred times over. So these commodities we carried up to the house, marveling greatly at the don's forethought and generosity, for here were a score of things over and above those we had already found ourselves lacking—namely, earthen pipkins and wooden vessels, a bag of charcoal, a box of carpenter's tools, which did greatly delight Dawson, he having been bred a carpenter in his youth; instruments for gardening, to my pleasure, as I have ever had a taste for such employment; some very fine Moorish blankets, etc. So when the barrow is discharged Dawson gives the lad some rials out of his pocket, which pleases him also mightily.

Then, first of all, Dawson unties the leg of the hogskin and draws off a quart of wine, very carefully securing the leg after, and this we drink to our great re-



The don lingered, talking to Moll very gravely.

freshment, and next, Moll, being awake from her dreams and eager to be doing, sets herself to sort out our goods, such as belong to us—as tools, etc.—on one side, and such as belong to her—as pipkins and the rest—on the other. Leaving her to this employment, Dawson and I, armed with a knife and bagging hook, betake ourselves to a great store of cages stacked in one corner of the garden, and sorting out those most proper to our purpose we lopped them all of an equal length, and shouldering as many as we could carried them up to our house. Here we found Moll mightily jubilant in having got her work done, and admirably she had done it, to be sure, for having found a long recess in the wall she had brushed it out clean with a whisk of herbs and stored up her crocks, according to their size, very artificial, with a dish of oranges plucked from the tree at our door on one side and a dish of almonds on the other, a pipkin standing betwixt 'em with a handsome posy of roses in it. She had spread a mat on the floor and folded up our fine blankets to serve for cushions, and all that did not belong to her she had bundled out of sight into that hollowed side I have mentioned as being intended for cattle.

After we had sufficiently admired the performance she told us she had a mind to give us a supper of broth. "But," says she, "the don has forgotten that we must eat, and hath sent us neither bread nor flesh nor salt."

This put us to a stumble, for how to get these things we knew not, but Moll declared she would get all she needed if we could only find the money.

"Why, how?" asks Jack. "You know not their gibberish."

"That may be," answers she, "but I warrant the same language that bought me this petticoat will get us a supper."

So we gave her what money we had, and she went off a-marketing, with as much confidence as if she were a born Barbary Moor. Then Jack falls to thanking God for blessing him with such a daughter, at the same time taking no small credit to himself for having bred to her such perfection, and in the midst of his encomiums, being down in the hollow searching for his hammer, he cries:

"Fragne take the careless baggage. She has spilled all our nails, and here's an hour's work to pick 'em up!"

This accident was repaired, however, and Moll's transgression forgotten when she returned with an old woman carrying her purchases. Then were we forced to admire her skill in this business, for she had bought all that was needful for a couple of meals, and yet had spent but half our money. Now arose the difficult question how to make a fire, and this Jack left us to settle by our own devices, he returning to his own occupation. Moll resolved we should do our cooking outside the house, so here we built up a kind of gate with stones, and contriving to strike a spark with the back of a jack-knife and a stone upon a heap of dried leaves we presently blew up a fine flame, and feeding this with the ends of came we had out and some charcoal we at last got a royal fire on which to set our pot of mutton. And into this pot we put rice and a multitude of herbs from the garden, which by the taste we thought might serve to make a savory.

And indeed when it began to boil the odor was so agreeable that we would have Jack come out to smell it, and he having praised it very highly, we, in return, went in to look at his handiwork and praise that. This we could do very heartily and without hypocrisy, for he had worked well and made a rare good job, having made a very seemly partition across the room by nailing of the canes perpendicularly to that kind of floor that hung over the hollowed portion, thus making us now three rooms out of one. At one end he had left an opening to enter the cavity below and the floor above by the little ladder that stood there, and these came were set not so close together but that air and light could pass betwixt them, and yet from the outer side no eye could see

within, which was very commodious; also upon the floor above he had found sundry bundles of soft, dried leaves, and these, opened out upon the surface of both chambers, made a very sweet, convenient bed upon which to lie. Then, Dawson offering Moll her choice, she took the upper floor for her chamber, leaving us two the lower, and so, it being near sundown by this time, we to our supper in the sweet, cool air of evening, all mightily content with one another, and not less satisfied with our stew, which was indeed most savory and palatable. This done, we took a turn round our little domain, admiring the many strange and wonderful things that grew there, especially the figs, which, though yet green, were wondrous pleasant to eat, and I laying out my plans for the morrow, how to get this wilderness into order, tear out the worthless herbs, dig the soil, etc., Dawson's thoughts running on the building of an outhouse for the accommodation of our wine, tools and such like and meditating on dishes to give us our repast, and at length, when these divers subjects were no more to be discussed, we turned into our dormitories and fell asleep as happy as princes.

## CHAPTER XIII.

The surprising activity with which we attacked our domestic business at Elche lasted about two days and a half, Dawson laboring at his shed, I at the cultivation of the garden and Moll quitting her cooking and household affairs, as occasion permitted, to lend a helping hand first to her father and then to me. And as man, when this fever of enterprise is upon him, must forever be seeking to add to his cares, we persuaded Don Sanchez to let us have two she goats to stall in the shed and consume our waste herbage, that we might have milk and get butter, which they do in these parts by shaking the cream in a skin bag (a method that seems simple enough till you have been shaking the bag for 20 minutes in vain on a sultry morning) without cost. But, the novelty of the thing wearing off, our eagerness rapidly subsided, and so about the third day, as I say, the heat being prodigious, we toiled with no spirit at all.

Dawson was the first to speak his mind. Says he, coming to me while I was still sweating over my shovel:

"I've done it, but hang me if I do more. There's a good piece of work worth 30 shillings of any man's money, but who'll give me a thank ye for it when we leave here next year?"

And then he can find nothing better to do than fall a-commenting on my labors, saying there was but precious little to show for my efforts; that had he been in my place he would have ordered matters otherwise, and began digging t'other end, wagering that I should give up my job before it was quarter done, etc., all which was mighty discouraging, and the more unpleasant because I felt there was a good deal of truth in what he said.

Consequently I felt a certain malicious enjoyment the next morning upon finding that the goats had burst out one side of his famous shed and got loose into the garden, which enabled me to wonder that two such feeble creatures could undo such a good 30 shillings' worth of work, etc. But ere I was done galling him I myself was mortified exceedingly to find these mischievous brutes had torn up all the plants I had set by the trees in the shade as worthy of cultivation, which gave Jack a chance for gibing at me.

But that which bittered us as much as anything was to have Moll holding her sides for laughter at our attempts to catch these two devilish goats, which to our cost we found were not so feeble after all, for getting one up in a corner she raises herself up on her hind legs and brings her skull down with such a smack on my knee that I truly thought she had broken my cramp bone, while t'other, taking Dawson in the ankles with her horns as he was reaching forward to lay hold of her, lay him sprawling in our little stream of water. Nor do I think we should ever have captured them but that, giving over our endeavors from sheer fatigue, they of their own accord sauntered into the shed for shelter from the sun, where Moll clanked to

the door upon them and set her back against the gap in the side until her father came with a hammer and some stout nails to secure the planks. So for the rest of that day Jack and I lay on our backs in the shade doing nothing, but exceedingly sore one against the other for these mischances.

But our heartburnings ended not there, for coming in to supper at sundown Moll has nothing to offer us but dry bread and a dish of dates, which, though it be the common supper of the Moors in this place, was little enough to our satisfaction, as Dawson told her in pretty round terms, asking her what she was fit for if not to give us a meal fit for Christians, etc., and stating very explicitly what he would have her prepare for our dinner next day. Moll takes her upbraiding very humbly, which was ever a bad sign, and promises to be more careful of our comfort in the future. And so ended that day.

The next morning Dawson and I make no attempt at work, but after breakfast, by common accord, stretch us out under the palms to meditate, and there about half past 10 Don Sanchez, coming round to pay us a visit, finds us both sound asleep. A sudden exclamation from him aroused us, and as we stumbled to our feet, staring about us, we perceived Moll coming from the house, but so disfigured with smuts of charcoal all over her face and hands we scarce knew her.

"God's mercy!" cries the don. "What on earth have you been doing, child?"

To which Moll replies, with a courtesy: "I am learning to be a cook wench, senior, at my father's desire."

"You are here," answers the don, with a frown, "to learn to be a lady. If a cook wench is necessary, you shall have one" (this to us), "and anything else that my means may afford. You will do well to write me a list of your requirements, but observe," adds he,

turning on his heel, "we may have to stay here another twelvemonth if my economies are not sufficient by the end of the first year to take us hence."

This hint brought us to our senses very quickly, and overtaking him ere he reached our garden gate Dawson and I assured the don we had no need of any servant and would be careful that Moll henceforth did no menial office; that we would tax his generosity no more than we could help, etc., to our great humiliation when we came to reflect on our conduct.

Thenceforth Dawson charged himself with the internal economy of the house, and I with that part which concerned the custody and care of the goats, the cultivation of pot herbs and with such instruction of Moll in the Italian tongue as I could command. But, to tell the truth, we neither of us did one stroke of work beyond what was absolutely necessary, and especially Dawson, being past everything for indolence, did so order his part that from having two dishes of flesh a day we came, ere long, to get-



A sudden exclamation from the don aroused us.

ting but one mess a week, he forcing himself and us to be content with dates and bread for our repasts rather than give himself the trouble of boiling a pot. Beyond browsing my goats, drawing

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their milk (the making of butter I quickly renounced) and watering my garden night and morn, which is done by throwing water from the little stream broadcast with a shovel on either side, I did no more than Dawson, but joined him in yawning the day away, for which my sole excuse is the great heat of this region, which doth beget most slothful humors in those matured in cooler climes.

With Moll, however, the case was otherwise, for she, being young and of an exceeding vivacious, active disposition, must forever be doing of something, and lucky for us when it was not some mischievous trick at our expense—as letting the goats loose, shaking lemons down on our heads as we lay asleep beneath the tree, and the like. Being greatly smitten with the appearance of the Moorish women (who, though they are not permitted to wander about at will like our women, are yet suffered to fetch water from the public fountains), she surprised us one morning by coming forth dressed in their mode. And this dress, which seems to be naught but a long sheet wound loosely twice or thrice about the body, buckled on the shoulder, with holes for the arms to be put through in the manner of the old Greeks, became her surprisingly, and we noticed then for the first time that her arms were rounder and fuller than when we had last seen them bare. Then, to get the graceful, noble bearing of the Moors, she practiced day after day by carrying a pitcher of water on her head, as they do, until she could do this with perfect ease and sureness. In this habit the don, who was mightily pleased with her looks, took her to the house of his friend and employer, Sidi ben Ahmed, where she ingratiated herself so greatly with the women of his household that they would have her come to them again the next day, and after that the next—indeed, thenceforth she spent far more of her time with these new friends than with us. And here, from the necessity of making herself understood, together with an excellent memory and a natural aptitude, she learned to speak the Moorish tongue in a marvelously short space of time. Dawson and I were frequently asked to accompany Moll, and we went twice to this house, which, though nothing at all to look at outside, was very magnificently furnished within, and the entertainment most noble. But, Lord, 'twas the most tedious, wearisome business for us, who could make out never a word of the civil speeches offered us without the aid of Don Sanchez and Moll, and then could think of no witty response, but could only sit there grinning like Gog and Magog. Still it gave us vast pleasure to see how Moll carried herself with this company, talking as freely as they, yet holding herself with the dignity of an equal, and delighting all by her vivacity and shy, pretty ways.

I think no country in Europe can be richer than this Elche in fruits and vegetation, more beautiful in its surrounding aspects of plain and mountain, more blessed with constant, glorious sunlight, and the effect of these charms upon the quick, receptive spirit of our Moll was like a gentle May upon a nightingale, so that the days were all too short for her enjoyment, and she must needs vent her happiness in song. But on us they made no more impression than on two owls in a tower, but if anything they did add to that weariness which arose from our lack of occupation. For here was no contrast in our lives, one day being as like another as two peas in a pod, and having no sort of adversities to give savor to our ease we found existence the most flat, insipid, dull thing possible. I remember how, on Christmas day, Dawson did cry out against the warm sunshine as a thing contrary to nature, wishing he might stand up to his knees in snow in a whistling wind, and taking up the

crook Moll had filled with roses (which here bloom more fully in the depth of winter than with us in the height of summer) he flung it out of the door with a curse for an un-Christian thing to have in the house on such a day.

As soon as the year had turned we began to count the days to our departure, and thenceforth we could think of naught but what we would do with our fortune when we got it, and, the evenings being long, we would set the bag of wine betwixt us after our supper of dates and sit there for hours discussing our several projects. Moll being with us (for in these parts no womankind may be abroad after sundown), she would take part in these debates with as much gusto as we. For, though she was not wearied of her life here as we were, yet she was possessed of a very stirring spirit of adventure, and her quick imagination furnished endless visions of lively pleasures and sumptuous living. We agreed that we would live together and share everything in common as one family, but not in such an outlandish spot as Chiselhurst. That estate we would have nothing to do with, but selling it at once have in its place two houses—one city house in the Strand and a country house not farther from town than Bethnal Green, or Clerkenwell at the outside, to the end that when we were fatigued with the pleasures of the town we might, by an easy journey, resort to the tranquillity of rural life.

Dawson declared what wines he would have laid down in our cellars, I what books should furnish our library, and Moll what dresses she would wear (not less than one for every month of the year), what coaches and horses we should keep, what liveries our servants should wear, what entertainments we would give and so forth. Don Sanchez was not excluded from our deliberations; indeed he encouraged us greatly by approving of all our plans, only stipulating that we would guard one room for him in each of our houses, that he might feel at home in our society whenever he chanced to be in our neighborhood. In all these arguments there was never one word of question from any of us as to the honesty of our designs. We

naught settled that once and for all, before starting on this expedition, and since then, little by little, we had come to regard the Godwin estate as a natural gift, as freely to be taken as a blackberry from the hedge. Nay, I believe Dawson and I would have contested our right to it by reason of the pains we were taking to possess it.

(To be Continued.)

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