

# FROM 'THE ADVENTURER IN SPAIN' S.R.CROCKETT

## CHAPTER FIVE THE STRANGE THOUGHTS OF A BEGGAR MAN

After the romantic guilt of smuggling, easy was the descent to mere strolling and vagabondage. But then, in the Spains, no man is thought the less of for being, as we say in Scotland, a 'solicitor.' The expression 'you beggar' has almost its playful English sense. There is, in addition, that universal Spanish brotherhood in aristocracy which they express in the proverb, 'Call no man dog, lest one day the dog bite you!'

So, having during previous sojourns in the Pyreneean country, obtained some introduction to that highly respectable and respected class - the United Society of Beggars and Bettlers trafficking in the Spains - I was not in the least surprised to hear Biño, when I asked him as to his prospective bride and father-in-law, answer without constraint and without shame, 'He is a travelling merchant. No, neither mendicant nor yet suppliant - as the Señor might misunderstand. For Rodil possesses a waggon of his own - and his mule is an excellent one - of the true mouse-colour.'



NEITHER MENDICANT NOR BEGGAR

'And you, Biño,' I said, to try him, 'who are a householder in two countries, can it be that you are taken with the daughter of a - travelling merchant?'

I repeated his word, and it was perhaps well that I did so, because Biño was a proud man and a stickler for the distinctions. He shrugged his shoulders.

'What would you?' he said, 'when a fish is caught, what matters whether the line be twisted of hemp or of silken cord?'

'And do you mean to marry the lady?' I hazarded.

'That depends,' said Biño; 'I have it in my mind that I will travel some time in their company. I will observe this girl. If she be sage - or at least sage enough for me, assuredly I will wed her. You are surprised?'

'But of all this I have heard nothing!'

'Nor hath any other!' he cried, 'not even I myself. Indeed I am astonished that your honour should have been so well informed as to my liking for the maid.'

Without answering in words I showed him a rough, untuned print, and he cried out in wonder. It was that of himself and his ladylove leaving the little fountain opposite the Fonda in El Seo.

'I know many things,' he said; 'but this is enchantment. Even so did I carry her water-pots while she walked a little behind! I will go now and show it to Marinessia (I spell by ear), and also to her father, who is a wise man - fit to be governor of a province!'

It is worth noting here that Marinessia is the Basque corruption for Maria Ignacia, and a popular name. Now I shall have much to say of Marinessia, but of Rodil, her father, infinitely more. It was true, as I found, what Biño had said - his father-in-law's company was far to be preferred to that of the governor of any province.

For Rodil was no mere ganger of roads. He was in his way a capitalist, owning a waggon, blue-tilted, capacious, from which rolls of cloth could be extracted, with silks and cheap jewellery, all done up in mysterious waterproof packages - indeed all the paraphernalia of a regular smugglers' receiver upon his travels. In addition Rodil had a daughter, who, however, did not often travel with the outfit, that Marinessia for whose sake our Biño had become a water-carrier. Rodil had also a wife, Concepcion, and a son, Tobarito, more frequently referred to as Penique, or 'the Copper.' But in spite of all these possessions Rodil would very frequently leave the other members of his family to run the

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main establishment alone, while he went off by himself, his pockets filled to bursting with Geneva watches and crucifixes of unmarked silver and unguaranteed ebony to 'bettle' and barter it cross country towards a prearranged rendez-vous.



RODIL OWNED A WAGGON, BLUE-TILTED, CAPACIOUS

It was on such occasions that I found his acquaintance to be of the greatest advantage. Biño's description set my soul instantly in a flame. I coveted my neighbour's beggar. No one had ever made an intimate study of North Spanish vagrancy. Even the excellent 'Vagabond in Spain' vagabondised much further to the south and west, while the beggar of Ford, with his open sores, amputations, and long filthy beard, is out of date in the north today - except perhaps in the vicinity of the Shrine of our Lady of the Pillar in Zaragoza, or painfully climbing the mountain of Montserrat about the time of the great September pilgrimage. Indeed in the vicinity of such very holy places he has existed unchanged from the days of Martial. He was the Tartuffe of Domitian's temples, and he remains the pest and scourge of the shrines of Spain unto this day. To quote a very ancient record: 'No poverty or needy toil compels him to live thus. The sheep (his neighbour's) gives him a fleece. The field gives him corn. His horse approves thereof. What need of a house for him? It is only to be entered on rare occasions.' Or again: 'See in the porch of Domitian's new temple of wisdom - yes, yonder old man! 'Reverend,' say you? Why, so he is, if a wallet and a staff, hair like a door-mat, a beard of which the less said the better, a sad-coloured cloak descending to his heels, and a crowd that gives him alms to be rid of him, make a man holy! A Cynic, say you? I own it, but I am closer to the word than you - a dog, say I!'

But Biño's introduction of his prospective kinsman soon proved him to be of another stamp from such ancient props and parasites of church porches.

'Señor,' he said, 'this is my friend concerning whom I spake. Don Buenaventura Rodil y Alva is his name; but he will be well content if, after the first time, you call him Rodil!'

So in obedience to Biño's hint, I greeted the nobleman upon his travels with what courtesy I was master of. And such was his dignity of manner and the solidity of his character and conversation, that I never felt the least desire to treat him save with the utmost respect.

The man whom Biño brought forward was a roughly-attired, frieze-coated Spaniard of middle age, with the shrewd, melancholy, bearded visage of a herd upon the Galloway hills, and when he spoke, he had the same slow speech, as if before delivery each word had been weighed and not found wanting. It was a face to respect - a plain, sane, quietly humorous face to which I took from the first. I was blood-brother to the type. At home they call each other 'Tammass' and 'Jone,' crying stormily athwart the mists of the mountain tops.

Like them too Rodil never did anything in a hurry. If he only filled his pipe, he did it with a gesture of one taking part in a religious ceremony. And this thoughtful air was genuine - the product of years of mountain winds and nights spent in the dens and caves of the earth.

I have seen something of the same look about an ancient seaman - a certain wise simplicity and childish innocence preserved through a world of experiences. Loose-limbed was Rodil, bowed in the shoulder, his rough 'Bill Sykes' cap tossed carelessly on his head. He looked habitually lazy, his appearance betraying nothing of the daring and ready resource which really characterised him through life.

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By profession Rodil was a mender of umbrellas. That was his proper task when the police inquired or when the fit of manual activity came to him. But in the latter case he needed either Penique or Concepcion to assist him. The unlicensed peddling of smuggled goods he could manage alone. As for Marinessia, she had always been a thing apart, generally dwelling with her uncle in the town of El Seo. Her father's pet, she must not be subjected to the rough and tumble of the caravan or the huddle of the parador chamber in which Penique rejoiced. Marinessia's uncle, with whom she abode, was a bien man in comfortable circumstances, with a house within the city walls, as well as a little cane-built farmhouse of his own outside in the valley.



BY PROFESSION RODIL WAS A MENDER OF UMBRELLAS

It took me a day or two to acquire the confidence of my new friends. Biño's recommendation went some way. Still more, the report of our joint smuggling adventure (though, truth to tell, this was a little marred by my visit to the Bishop in his carriage), carried weight with Rodil and his household. Most of all the averted looks and steady espionage of the local authorities pleaded eloquently for me. It was felt that he could not be other than a man of virtue and probity upon whom the government frowned.

Day by day I spent a larger number of hours with the far-descended son of the Rodils and Alvas. When I was first introduced we had found him breakfasting in the brumous haze of the morning, with the tower of a little church immediately behind. Rodil had been cutting an inscription on a tombstone, for graveyard sculpture was also one of his assets in the battle of life. The family was at its early meal, and I had just manipulated my innocent-looking Newman and Guardia camera when the sharp eye of Penique (or 'the Copper') observed me. Indeed his hand has been caught in the very act of reaching out to warn his mother of our approach.



BUSY AT THEIR TRADE UNDER THE SHELTER OF THE TOWN WELL-HOUSE

There was not much said at the time, except by Biño. I was on my probation, and Rodil was inclined to speak but little. He offered us very courteously a portion of their fare, and we as ceremoniously wished that it might be for their honours' own healths to eat it. But later in the day I encountered Rodil and his son Penique busy at their trade under the shelter of the town well-house. They sat under the eaves, Penique handing his father bits of wire and sprigs of steel as these were required. He wanted badly to be off playing at soldiers down under the fort with the other boys of El Seo, or raiding the Bishop's garden in its owner's absence. But the 'Copper' was a wise boy and desired no difficulties with his father. Health and happiness were best preserved by a strict, if sometimes irksome, filial piety.

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Such combinations of well and wash-house as that under whose eaves I found them, are peculiar to the Eastern Pyrenean country on both sides of 'the snow saddle.' The women gossip there pleasantly enough with much clicking of slippery washing boards and slapping of dirty linen. Penique would dearly have loved to bandy words with them. For he had a good conceit of his tongue, and remembered occasions when his triumph had won applause and dragées (sweetmeats). But to sit still and hand his father spare umbrella ribs and bits of wire commended itself more to Penique's sober judgment than all the glory of successful word-combat.

As I came forward the principal lawyer, in company with the alcalde of El Seo, was passing through the square, in clothes which would not have appeared odd in the Strand. They had doubtless heard of my adventure with the Bishop, and if I did not promptly do something desperate, they were capable of asking me to accompany them to the Café or even of giving me the freedom of the city. So I passed them with a desperate calmness, lifted my hat to Rodil the umbrella-mender, and - sat down beside him. I had chosen my faction. The declaration was formal, and constituted authority did not again recognise me, save by sending the gendarmes in my absence, to go through every article I had in my room.

And Rodil! Well, he only tapped away at his umbrella; but I could see by the slant of one wary eye and the slow rare smile that percolated up about the corners of his mouth that his mind was quite awake to all the issues. He said nothing for perhaps five minutes, and then he sent Penique for some more copper wire. Penique, who did not now wish to absent himself, desiring, doubtless, to perfect his imitation of the stranger's blundering speech for the benefit of his comrades, produced another little roll of wire from his pockets. Rodil's brows instantly clouded, and his hand dropped in the direction of a switch which lay, as one might say, 'convenient.'

'Put it down and go!' he thundered.

Penique obeyed instantly, with a humble and even prayerful expression; but I am convinced that he made a face behind our backs ere he disappeared.

'You have chosen the better part!' remarked Rodil, nodding approvingly. 'They are dull - dull - all these little officials! Yes, they and the priests - for me, I call them God's asses - and the devil's!'

'Which might be which?' I inquired, eager for a further taste of the beggar-man's quality.

'Oh, I would have you understand I am no scoffer,' said Rodil, with seriousness. 'The holy fathers are God's asses, and the lawyers the devil's! The wire? Thank you a thousand times, Señor. Where is that young son of perdition, Penique? Oh, I remember, I sent him away. He is too fond of listening to that which it does not concern the young to hear. Moreover, the pricked ears of youth are a halter on a grown man's tongue!'

All the while he was tapping away with a slender iron-shafted hammer, and picking tacks and pieces of wire out of his mouth, as quick as you could wink.

'I have heard,' he said, 'of your smuggling and carrying the case of jewellery. I got some of the very load from Don Mark this morning. He stood next me in church, in the dark behind the great altar, where the gendarmes never come, and where it is so safe to make exchanges! Religion is always blessed, and no one can say that I, Rodil y Alva, am a pagan. At first, it is true, I mistrusted you - in the matter of the visit to the Bishop. But now I see it was only that you might know things - to see deep into people, bishops and basketmakers, umbrella-menders and beggar-men. Ah, I know part - some things I have seen that are hidden even from you. But if it had been my fate to be rich, I would have travelled the world even as you!'

'But I am not rich,' I hastened to assure him, for there is no worse character to possess in an unsettled country. 'I was born in a land as poor as yours, and the craft of the writer is in all lands none of the best considered!'

'Yes,' he assented, 'so I have heard. Yet once when I rented a little farm, I had to pay a whole duro for a letter that was written for me, threatening my neighbour, who had moved the fence of canes a yard in his favour, anent the time of the ploughing for the winter wheat!'

'Ah,' said I, eager to be poor among the poor, 'but the man who wrote that letter was a lawyer, I'll warrant him - and very likely alcalde as well, or perhaps even deputy!'

'Indeed he was - all the three,' said the umbrella-mender, nodding his head at my sagacity; 'I am glad you are not that species of writer who charges a whole duro for only a

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sheet and a half - and even then the words widely written and few on a page!

There was a slight noise behind, the flutter of bare feet, an uncertain scuffling, a cough. Rodil and I turned our heads with the instinctive suspicion of the seasoned tramp. But it was only Penique. He hastened to forestall any movement towards the rod of correction with his hand raised palm outwards in deprecation.

'I have 'borrowed' some fine wire, both sizes,' he said, hurriedly, 'and taken back Señor Menaldo's umbrella, the green one that was ripped away from the ferule, and brought two parasols to mend from the great house on the hill. Now what more shall I do, my father?'

'Go and wash your face, Penique!' said Rodil, and went on with his tapping. Penique started, and the parasols dropped from under his arm.

'I would rather be beaten - and stay!' he muttered, beginning to whimper.

'Go,' said his father grimly, 'or I will bid thy mother to wash thee!'

'I will go,' said Penique, with fresh alacrity. 'I will borrow the soap without her knowing. For when she washes me she scrubs till my ears are like beetroot!'

'Go hastily,' said his father, 'or by all the saints and martyrs, not your ears only shall be as red as beetroot, but your body also from nape to heel. Off with you, little frog!'

Thus it was that Rodil and I began our friendship. After I began to know him better he proved full of the wisest of saws and the most modern of instances.

'There is no converse between a man and a boy save with the shadow of a birch rod between them!' he would say. 'Now there is Penique. His mother spoils him, and yet he will not go near her if he can help it. But as for me, I keep young Don Rascal at the stick's end, and, lo! I cannot be rid of him from morning to night!'

Then he gave me in short the philosophy of Beggar-land.

'It is as good a trade as another,' he said, 'and fully as honest. The Sangrador bleeds, and so do we. The lawyer cheats, but as for us, we say plainly what we want, and in time of need - take it. (Do not let Penique hear that!) The priest prays, and so at a pinch can I - yet for all that one sees, my prayers are just as efficacious as his. I have my waggon, my horse, my tools, my ten fingers. Those who call me mendicant do so at their peril, for I possess a knife ready in my sash. I have also a wife - good as wives go, failing only in obedience and the power to hold her tongue, the two common ills of the sex. I have a daughter, the like of whom has no man. She is no ways beautiful, I grant you. Yet I think not that it is altogether for her money that your friend, Biño the Frenchman, hangs a foot after her!'

'Ah, I have seen! An old hound knows the tricks of the young dogs! He is a Frenchman, indeed, and all Frenchmen are - that which it is better not to express. But - Biño, I have known him many seasons - I have no fault to find with Biño. But when he comes seeking my daughter and her money - why, that is another tale!'

'Her money?' I said. 'You must have done well with your umbrellas to be able to give her a dowry - one that would tempt a man well-to-do in the world like Biño.'

'I give her money!' - Rodil laughed. 'I have not an ochaviño to give her. What her uncle may do I know not. He is an old sedate hunk, and sits close on his money bags. But Marinessia has no need of any man's bounty. She has received 'the palms.' She has also a medal and - what do you call it - a pension!'

'From the government?' I inquired. 'I had not thought that you stood so well with the officials. You are the first man I have known in Spain who did not take his dues, or more than his dues, out of the governmental pouch - not as a suppliant but with the strong hand!'

'The government!' he cried, dropping his pincers in his haste to correct my mistake. 'Why, I do not mean the government of Madrid, but the government of France - which is a true government, and knows how to keep its promises. It happened thus. My girl, Marinessia, is very strong and loves horses. So that from Bayona to Banyuls all call her La Dompteuse.

'You have seen her, Señor? A plain face, but a head like a blessed Madonna painted up in a church, a man's shoulders, arms - sir, you should see her at the plough with a team of young horses - and an eye! Ah, Excellency, the life is in the eye! She has her father's eye. Watch! There is no man in El Seo can do this, but Rodil y Alva alone!'

A great hulking dog, of the sort which butchers keep (called on the other side of the mountains Danois), came with a sullen slouch across the little Plaza. He was walking in our direction, probably homeward bound after spending the night in urgent personal affairs. All

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at once the brute grew visibly uneasy under Rodil's steady glance, looked up, stopped dead, gave a short sharp growl more of protest than anger, let fall his stub tail, and turning, trotted off the way he had come. As I looked at Rodil, I was in time to catch the last spark of something that burned ruddy as a danger signal, dying out of the enlarged pupil of his eye.

'My daughter,' he went on, 'can do that and more. She can temper a young mule without the breaker's cruel bridle. The thing happened last year, that of which I tell you, in the time of the early falling snow. Perhaps you remember the storm. We were going north, my wife and Penique and I, Marinessia being with us. She wished to see France, and the frost having come early at her uncle's, there was no more work to be done on the farm. So we dwelt in the caravan, we four - or rather for warmth Penique slept in the boot underneath, along with the watch dog.

'You have been by Puymorens across the Col de la Perche? What - many times? Well then, you remember the steep descent from Mont Louis as you go towards Villefranche? There is a bridge at the bottom, very narrow, and as God willed it, only half of it passable at the moment, the rest being under repair.

'Now in Mont Louis there are many soldiers, very many. It is the greatest of all the fortresses in the south. Ah, they would not let you take your pictures there with the photograph machine? That I can well believe! I also have experienced their foolish rigour. I was once in gaol at that place. But not this time - no, for when we went through it again they turned out the soldiers to salute us, and the band played.

'But that was my daughter's doing, who is a noble girl and too good for any man - though, as I grant you, plain of face. We were resting in a field by the roadside, and our old beast was turned out to graze. Little enough, God knows, was there for him to champ his teeth upon! And Marinessia, who hates to be idle, was helping a neighbouring farmer's wife to break the clods with a great stone roller and a team of oxen! Ah, Señor, what a wife she will make, that girl! Her man will have no need to work!

'Well, sudden as cannon shot, from above there came a great crying and a growing rumble. I ran to the roadside, but because there was a bend I could see nothing. Yet more and more men cried, as the rumble came nearer, and I hastened to the bridge-head thinking that mayhap there had been an ice-break high among the mountains, and that the floods were threatening the river-lands! Such things have been. I have seen them. Twice have I lost all by camping too near a hill water before the spring ice broke.

'But as I stood and looked - I and many men, Italians and Sardes mostly, who were working at the bridge - lo, round the corner rocking and swaying came a carriage - a great man's carriage, not a hired hack of the roads. The horses were galloping wild with fear, their necks stretched out, and in the carriage there were two ladies. The coachman had leaped off long before, where he found a soft place, for he knew of the bridge. He was a Frenchman and cared only for his own skin.



PRESENTLY SHE GOT HER FOOTING AND RAN A LITTLE WAY WITH THEM, HOLDING BACK WITH ALL HER WEIGHT.

'Then the Sardes cried out, 'Scatter and let them pass!' But I knew that never a passage was there over the bridge for horses mad as these were. They would strike the parapet, and then - I shuddered to think what would come then. I drew a little back. Yes, I who have the name of a brave man - I, Rodil y Alva - and who deserve it. But, Señor, if you had seen those mad horses, that bridge littered with great blocks of stone knee-high, and heard the river growl below, you also, Señor, might have done the same.

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'So I stood like one mazed, a dry prickling heat tingling behind my eye-balls, and the silence of waiting in my heart. As one waits breathless while the tall tree sways uncertainly to the fall, so I stood.

There was a copse at the last bend - a little, little clump of trees, all wind-driven away from the north by the fierce even thrust of the mistral - your honour knows it. It is just at the angle of the road before the bridge. And as I stood thus, I saw one spring out of the pine shadows. It was my daughter - yes, that same Marinessia whom you have seen, and where no man would venture, she leaped and clung. They dragged her, the mad creatures beating her from side to side as they tossed their heads, like a bladder on a jester's staff. But presently she got her footing and ran a little way with them, holding back with all her weight. They slackened, but already the bridge was near, and nearer still the scattered stone blocks the Sardes had left. Almost they were over. The side of the carriage carried away the wooden rail before the stone baluster begins.

'God in his heaven!' I cried, 'they are gone!'

'But suddenly my daughter Marinessia caught the reins in both hands, and with a gesture grand and simple and strong, wrenched the horses' heads as it were across her chest. They stopped, trembling - and the breast of the leader scraped the parapet of the bridge! Señor, it was the wife and daughter of the commandant of Mont Louis who were in that carriage.

'Great folk they were, for their father was a general, and in favour with the government. The which is a rare thing and brings much power. For in France not all the generals love the government. But by wondrous good chance this one had favour. So for his wife's sake, and still more for his daughter's, he obtained the 'laurels' for my girl. No, I do not well know what they are, but they are of great respect, and they were presented at Prades to my daughter Marinessia. The prefect put something on her head - palms or laurels - I know not which. I only know that Marinessia cried all night and part of the morning because she had to appear before these great folk. Indeed she only stopped when Penique told her that she was making her eyes red and ugly like half-baked earthenware saucers.

'But at the ceremonial everything passed well. Even the soldiers presented arms to my Marinessia, yes, and every year there is a paper comes to the care of the cure of Puymorens, who is a friend of mine. Then when I take it, with Marinessia's name written thereon to the bank in Prades, and wait a while behind wire, after much writing here and there and showing of papers, the money is paid - all in gold and each Napoleon worth many, many of the pesetas of hungry Spain.

'That is the tale, and Marinessia is a good girl, having that which is better than beauty. No, Señor, I do not mean the money - though it is true that money also is good. But if Biño, your friend, is an honest man, and he and my daughter of a liking, I shall not say them nay. But all must be regular and done by the priest of Puymorens, my friend. For we Alvas are no road-gangers, no hen-roost thieves, no heathen Gitanos; but good Christians and of an ancient family. Here, Penique, come and let me look at your face.'

The man of ancient family stopped in his monologue. His son had crept up noiselessly behind us, and without doubt had been listening unobserved to the concluding sentences of the father's eulogy of his daughter.

'It is somewhat cleaner, Penique,' he said, after inspection; 'now be off!'

The boy lingered uncertainly.

'Marinessia has all the luck,' he grumbled; 'uncle thinks the world of her, and stones me out of the garden if I so much as look at one of his old fig trees! The government gives me no pension.'

'My friend,' said Rodil to his son, without stopping even for a moment his tick-tacking, 'unless you mend your manners the government will give you free quarters, and something worse to do than holding wire for your father's umbrella mending!'

'I want to go 'across the mountains' with Biño!' whimpered the boy; 'he has promised that I shall, if you will permit!'

For there comes a time at which Basque and Aragonese boys take to the hills to prove their manhood. In France the age at which great crimes are committed is from eighteen to twenty-one. In Spain, the crude materialism which gives rise to the choice of murder as a career, does not exist. But instead, the young men go north to the Pyrenees or south to Ronda and Tarifa. In either case they become smugglers. The hard life weeds them off

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rapidly, but those who return gradually settle down as traders, merchants, and distinguished citizens. Some, on the other hand, enter the government service and hunt their old comrades with zeal and discretion - and without too much ill-feeling on either side.

After Rodil had, as it were, perused me for some days, and assured himself that I was neither a government spy, nor trying to find out the secret of a gold mine - the two favourite explanations of my presence among the mountains - we took to each other amazingly.

'We will leave my wife with her brother,' he said; 'she is of little use at any rate, on such a journey, and she and Penique can at least 'eat off' him! He has never paid me the last quarter of his sister's dowry to this day. Or at least, not that part of it which we differed about - and if they cannot eat the amount at his house, I shall never see a penny of it. Besides, we shall see so much the more, being disembarrassed of women, and' (said as an afterthought) 'it is more becoming that Marinessia should have her mother with her, if so be that your friend persists in making his court to her!'

Rodil broke off suddenly.

'Penique - Penique,' he cried, making a trumpet of his hand, 'go forthwith to your mother and tell her that she is to clear the caravan and take her things and yours to your Uncle Esteban!'

The boy appeared with suspicious alacrity from nowhere in particular, and upon hearing the order repeated, set up a howl of despair.

'I will not go to my Uncle's,' he cried. 'I want to go with you, father - to travel the land - to be a man!'

I was sorry for Penique, and said so because I foresaw that for some time I might be deprived of Biño's services. Also, because I much desired an excuse for sleeping outside Rodil's caravan, I pled for the boy. He watched with eager eyes, knowing full well that his fate hung in the balance. His father did not answer directly. It was not his way. But all the same Penique knew that every tap without a peremptory order was so much in his favour.

'I would work so hard,' he murmured as if talking to himself; 'none could find fodder for the mule like me - or acquire barley for his supper, or currycomb him with thoroughness, or wake in the night to see that he had not pulled up his head-stake!'

'Vaya, green croaking froglet,' growled his father - 'you wake! You would not awaken if all the thunderbolts of heaven were unloosed, and the solid hills fell crashing into the valleys.'

At this Penique precipitated himself along the square in somersaults and cartwheels of joy. He had achieved his permission. As for me, I also was content. I liked Rodil. I was overjoyed to study vagabondage from the life. But all the same - I was glad of an excuse to sleep elsewhere than in the airless caravan.



DON TOMAS OF THE MURDERS

As a travelling companion Rodil was perfect. He never went too far. He never went too fast. He was amenable to hints as to stopping-places. Being one of the few Spaniards who habitually smoke a pipe, he was not eternally 'twizzling' cigarette papers night and day - a thing which ultimately grows irritating to one not to the manner born. He had the long silences of the northerner, and was content to sit and push the 'dottle' down with his thumb, till he had something to say worth saying.

As he opened out he gave me the biographies of the passers-by while we sat together under the pleasant tilt of his cart, with Penique running on ahead and stimulating Babieca with incentives literally of the stone age. We had left the pleasant City of Dream by its

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southern gate, and on a post overlooking the canal near the barracks sat a man fantastically robed in a striped mantle of brown and yellow.

'Can I take him?' I demanded of Rodil. For though he himself had no scruples as to being photographed, others might not be equally large-minded. However, it soon appeared that the object on the post had no objections. Yet I well-nigh missed him, for in descending hastily from the front seat of the caravan I dropped my 'finder,' and had to chance the exposure. I succeeded, however, in getting my beggar on the very edge of the plate. 'It is well,' said Rodil, 'that is old Don Tomas of the Murders - no common man, Tomas! In his day he committed many. But that time is long past, and now he only tramps upon the roads from shrine to shrine!'

'But why,' I asked, 'has he not been tried and condemned? I thought all these things were of the past in Spain!'



HIS WIFE'S VENTORILLA

'That is just it,' said Rodil with much philosophy. 'These things happened long ago - in a time of war, and besides the dead people were all his own kinsfolk. If you give him a Great Dog (a penny) he will tell you all about it. That is, indeed, how he makes his living, both here and in his wife's Ventorilla!'

As my experiences of life had not included hearing a Troppman of the family circle relate the story of his slayings for so small a consideration, I decided to invest in a pennyworth of the stock-in-trade of Don Tomas of the Murders.

The old man, his mouth all adroop, was basking in the sun, which warmed his limbs and doubtless sent a drowsy bliss inward to his heart. He blinked upon us as we came near, but equally without expectation and without fear. Rodil addressed him familiarly.

'Ah, father Tomas,' he said, 'we are fortunate indeed to find you. This great foreign nobleman has come from England to see and to hear you speak!'

The old man cackled out a clucking, toothless laugh. 'Ah, yes,' he muttered, 'they all come. They all listen to old Tomas. When he speaks every one is silent. Tomas is the most famous man in Aragon - aye, in all the Spains - that is, since they slew José Maria.'

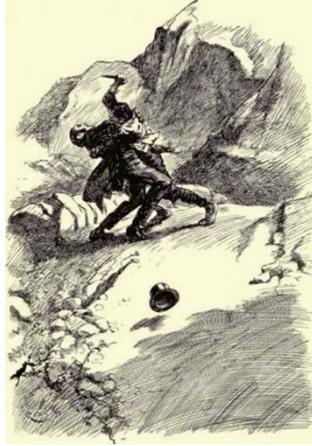
He lifted up his hand and pointed to the long white line of the cavalry barracks whose windows seemed positively to blink in the fierce sunshine.

'Aye, aye,' he laughed in that horrible soft cloopy way (like boots pulled out of the mud), 'the lads over yonder have fought with the Yen-kees, and they are brave. But no one of them has ever put down so many men as old Tomas - and lived to tell the tale!'

And then the dreadful old man leaned forward suddenly and thrusting his staff in my face, he added in his unctuous shivering whisper, 'also they were all of my family!'

He had a series of little rings of brass let into his staff just below the handle.

'All my kinsfolk,' he chuckled again triumphantly, 'and all grown men. Never unfairly I slew one, and never behind backs! Any one will tell you so!'



MY KNIFE WAS THE BETTER 'SANGRADOR!'

At this point Rodil nudged my elbow and I gave the old villain certain small coins, which he slipped into a greasy rag-bag slung about his neck. As I did so I saw many crosses and medals, such as are given to pilgrims at holy places for the accomplishment of pilgrimages. Tomas was on the way to make an edifying end. But for the present his thoughts were far other, and not well beseeming in a visitant of shrines.

'That,' he said pointing to the first ring on his staff, 'is my brother Barbalu, the wise one, the medico. He was so strong and so wise that he had me cast out of the house. But I met him in the way - by the Sierra Moncayo it was - where the red rock is, shaped like a lion. And, ha! ha! Barbalu was wise, and Barbalu was a physician. But the physician could not cure himself, and he found that my little knife was the better Sangrador (blood-letter)!'

The jest was manifestly an ancient one, from the extreme enjoyment of the old bandit as he mumbled it out. But Rodil hurried him on to other tales.

'The great cannot wait all day on your foolish gossip, Don Tomas,' said Rodil, 'what do the other rings betoken?'

'The next,' said Tomas, glimmering at it through his stubby dead-white eyelashes, 'was - let me see - yes, my brother-in-law, the husband of my sister, he was - a big strong man that would have taken everything for himself. He had the vineyard, but he died before he had gathered in the first vintage. Then comes my cousin Esteban, the miller, who went about with evil tales against me, and my youngest brother Julio, against whom I had no quarrel till he provoked me at the entering in of El Seo, when I came down one Easter Sunday to make my year's peace, with my money for the priest ready in the stitching of my Montera cap. I was walking á la birlonga, that is, at mine ease. But my father, the old man, having disinherited me, had set the youngling on. So Julio died - yes, at the gate of El Seo he died, and when his father heard of it, he took to his bed and died also. I have always been grieved for that! I had meant it to happen otherwise. That is why there is no ring in this place on the staff! I was not a son for any father to disinherit - that is, with safety!'

Don Tomas waggled his head sadly as he gazed at the gap.

'No,' he said, 'I am an honest man and no boaster, like some of those over yonder. I will take no credit for that which I have not done. My father died in his bed, and so there is only a ring of black on my staff - black, that is, in token of mourning!'

By this time I had had quite enough of Don Tomas of the Murders, and hastened away from the roll call of the remaining rings.

The old man rose and shouted after us. He had meant to detain us all day. 'Wait, wait - I have not told you of my wife's relations - not so much as one of them!'

Rodil and I went up the brae together, the dust boiling up hot and soft under our feet. It came up between my toes, through the alpargatas, with a feeling of comfort particularly soothing.

'How is it,' I asked of Rodil as we pushed on to join Penique, 'that such an old villain has not been garrotted long ago?'

Rodil shrugged his shoulders at the impossibility of ever making the foreigner understand the customs of Spain.

'It is just because it happened so long ago,' he said, 'as I told you it was a time of war, and there were many killings. Besides, Don Tomas was always a good religious man, and

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gave to the church, never doing evil to any, except to those of his own house with whom he had a quarrel. To which be it added, that they were all an evil tribe - his two brothers and his cousin Esteban the miller, and, worse than all, his wife's relations. So the people said, 'The thing is very well done!' And they even pointed out others to Don Tomas of whom the earth had been the better rid. But because of his kind heart and forgetfulness, somehow they were let live, which in the end was the worse for the land. But the worst of all is Don Tomas's own son, who will one day undoubtedly slay the old man, being set on by his mother to revenge her kindred. Even the priest spoke against filial ingratitude from the pulpit and said, 'It is a warning!' And so truly it was. For if you kill out a nest of snakes and spare one - that one will one day bite you to the death!

Then Rodil thought a little, and shook his head gravely at his own wisdom.

'No,' he said, 'when a man sets himself to clean his yard, it is better for him to sweep all the rubbish outside the gate!'

As we took the dusty road towards Moncayo, another man crossed us, so startlingly like Don Tomas of the Murders that I stood and gazed. The dress was a little different, the face was younger but far more evil.

'That is Tomas the younger!' whispered Rodil. 'Yes, take his picture - I am here. The serpent may hiss, but he dare not strike!'

So I took the picture and there it is - the picture of a man that had committed no bloodshed, yet whom a whole countryside recognises as worse than the father who in his day well-nigh exterminated two families. It was another warning not to judge hastily of the standard of morals among any people. For, as was afterwards made abundantly clear, of the two the shedder of blood was indeed incomparably the better man.



THE SERPENT MAY HISS, BUT HE DARE NOT STRIKE

'But how,' I said to Rodil, 'does such a man as Don Tomas live? Surely people are afraid when they see him come about a house?'

'Nay,' said Rodil, 'he is no beggar, no mendicant, not even a merchant supplicant like me. Don Tomas has a ventorilla, a wine-shop, and supplies many respectable people at three-half-pence the skin. For me I would not care to abide there all night, but on account of other living things than Don Tomas - aye, or his son either!'

'Yet the younger is the eviller beast,' continued Rodil, 'he would have slain Penique - who I admit often needs the stick, but no more. So now Penique waits for him at the dark ends of calles and behind doors - ready to smite and run. I have beaten him for it. But after all, they are an evil breed, and Penique is old enough to look after himself, and if not - why, it is high time that he learned.'

'And what had Penique done that the man should try to kill him?' I asked of this most philosophical parent.

'Done?' cried Rodil, 'why, no great things. Only, as boys will when threatened - there had been some little calling of names, and as I tell you, the matter of the smiting. Ah, there he is at this moment! Penique, you young good-for-nothing, what do you there, and where is the waggon?'



SO NOW PENRIQUE WAITS

For as we passed out of the last suburb, there was Penique, alert as a terrier at a rabbit-hole waiting at the end of a narrow calle for Don Tomas the younger, and the mule a little behind cheerfully improving the shining hour by eating clothes off a line.

But Rodil would have none of it, and he put the prohibition on high grounds.

'By-and-by, you shall do as you will, Tobalito,' he said soothingly to his offspring, 'strike and take! Have your quarrel out and God help the better man! But now there is the business, the caravan, and this stranger to remember!'

So to put Penique out of temptation he was sent on with the mule and caravan, by the long road which leads away across the parched plains, while Rodil and I took a short cut over the Sierra of Moncayo. There was plenty of time, and as we went Rodil discoursed yet more and further of his profession.

'You saw that fellow beneath the portico all covered with stone-working in the plaza of the city, as we came by?'

'The young man showing his stumps at the wrist? Yes, too often!' said I, shuddering. For the loathsome objects belonging to a man well enough dressed otherwise, had fascinated my unwilling eyes all the week.

'That,' he said, 'is Pedro of Villarasa - a most respectable man. The marquis at whose door he stands, was indebted to his father on an occasion, and so gave him that pitch to beg from. The son has done well there also. That young woman with the babe was his wife. They speak of making Pedro councillor for his Barrio.'

'But his arms? Is he not horribly disfigured?' I asked, though I began to understand.

'His honour is not so simple as he amuses himself with pretending,' said Rodil. 'It is of course a mere matter of bandaging when young, and I will not deny that Pedro of Villarasa is clever - too clever for a Mendicant of the Pitch, with a stance outside a great man's gate. But then he married one of the household servants - a girl of Valencia, at the Marquis's request. And they do say - ah, yonder I declare is that raterillo, that thief-of-the-world, Pablo Puig, the Catalan, and with him his new blowen! See how he shoulders the empty bag, while she has all the heavy weight and the sticks for the fire to carry as well. Ah, the rascal of rascals! He came some while ago wanting my Marinessia, with lying tales dropping from his mouth as he talked. But I knew Pablo, the Catalan, yes, and all his people! Out of Francoli they are, and an evil lazy set! So I answered him, this right hand upon my knife, 'I will sell you a mule or a horse, or a donkey - that is, if you and I, my Pablo, can agree upon a price. But I will not give you my daughter Marinessia for nothing, that you may make her all three!' And at that he glared like a wolf, yet dared not strike, for I held him with the eye till he cringed like a beaten hound.'

It was noon when we came to Miranda. At the gate an old and respectable-looking man came out of a wooden hut, and after a glance at me he held out his hand for some coppers which Rodil gave him as a matter of course.

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THE MARQUIS AT WHOSE DOOR HE STANDS GAVE HIM THAT PITCH TO BEG FROM

'Who is that?' I asked, 'and why do you and not I give him money? Surely he is no beggar?'

'Oh, he is the chief of the customs of Miranda,' said Rodil, 'and he must have from each of my profession who enters - mendicant, supplicant, or merchant traveller - five Great Dogs.'

'But why do you pay - it is not his right?'

Rodil shrugged his shoulders and pointed back to the man at the receipt of custom.

'We do not speak of rights in Spain,' he said; 'see yonder is old Critóbal, the Cordovan beggar, fumbling for his coppers. This is older than the law and stronger. It is custom. For if we did not give to the chief of the octroi, the headman of the police would find some excuse to put us in prison. Here in Miranda they are cousins by the mother's side, he and the man of the customhouse! Oh! it is excellently arranged. Even so my brother and I had settled to do in the town of Tudela. But he died, my dear brother, and the man who succeeded him had a brother of his own. In which case, lucky it was that I did not sell my caravan.'



STANCE BEGGAR

'And were you once in the police?' I asked in wonderment. Rodil nodded and laughed.

'Aye,' he said, 'and even yet I enjoy some consideration because of that. For the good folk remember my past, and trust me because of it - while the evil think me still secretly in the service of the government, and so are afraid to meddle with me! Which thing serves equally.'

'And what made you leave the civil guards?' I asked.

'Why? Because I had a daughter whom I loved, even Marinessia! And when she married I did not wish that any one should be able to cast it up to her that - she was the daughter of a Miguelite, a policeman! Sir, I am a poor man but I have a pride of my own - at least, for my children!' And that night in the stony gorges of Moncayo, after the heath-plants had been gathered and the sacks laid straight upon them for a mattress in one of the many grottoes of the hillside, I wandered forth. And there under the arch of the stars, sparkling many-coloured in the falling dew (as through a pane which begins to be frosted) I

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thought of the strange prides and shames of men, and wondered how far above the earth one would need to be lifted, to see them all as one - aristocracy and mendicancy, honour and dishonour, the king among beggars and the beggar among kings.



HE SHOULDERS THE EMPTY BAG, WHILE SHE HAS ALL THE HEAVY WEIGHT TO CARRY

For when you take them foot to foot upon the same earth, men are curiously equal in mental stature - that is, among the highest in rank, and the lowest. Money and brains drain down or leaven up into the middle class. The clever aristocrat consorts with his peers of brain rather than with his peers of blood. The clever workman rises to a villa and the superintendence of a Sunday School. As for the others, in all lands I have found them about equal - the beggar as good a talker as the lord, with an advantage on the side of experience, as full of ideas, as pithy and sparing of words, equally barbaric of heart - both however, aristocrat and proletariat, haters of the bourgeoisie rather than of one another.

May not the Armageddon of the future be when these two join hands against the all-aggrandising middle-class? That would indeed be the revenge of barbarism. It has drawn to itself all, this Middle Estate, brains, money, wit, executive - all except the power and desire to fight. One day, be sure, the later Goths will once more glut their ire. And then - through the world from continent to continent, what a crying of ça ira! The Paris Commune of 1871 proved that the proletariat cannot supply its own leaders. But your aristocratic is a born fighting leader, and the two united might prove irresistible. Who knows? It is, at least, a dream of the City of Dream. One day, however, it may be more.



YONDER IS OLD CRITOBAL FUMBLING FOR HIS COPPERS

And as I thought on all these things and looked up at the stars, I did not wonder at the stern conclusion of a certain indicter of wise sayings, 'He that sits in the heavens shall laugh!' Though I also hoped that, being critically examined, the original might be found to bear the sense of 'smile.' 'He that sits in the heavens shall smile' upon mankind - a smile of understanding, of all-comprehension, of pity infinite, without mockery and without resentment.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "S.R. Crockett". The signature is written in a cursive style with a small flourish at the end of the name.

**You have been reading a chapter from *The Adventurer in Spain* first published in serial form in 1902 and book form in 1903. This chapter is part of the 'Discovering Crockett's Europe' project by the Galloway Raiders. To find out more about Crockett and his work visit our website [www.gallowayraiders.co.uk](http://www.gallowayraiders.co.uk)**

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