

A Pyrenean Adventure

By G. R. Gleig

CHAPTER I

At the period when the left column of the British army occupied the pass of Irun, the particular regiment of which I was a member, pitched its tents on a sort of platform, or natural terrace, in the side of the Quatracone mountain. The situation of the camp was one of extreme beauty. Sheltered from the rays of the sun by a grove of graceful dwarf oaks, our background was formed by the bald rocks and giant shapes of the mountain, which, tier above tier, and precipice above precipice, rose in barren majesty into the clouds. On either side of our platform was a ravine: that upon the right, abrupt and of considerable depth, was darkened both to its base, and to the brow of the opposite hill, by the foliage of a dense forest; that upon the left, more gradual in its declivity, afforded room for a few cornfields and other cultivated spots, as it sloped away into the level country. In front, again, were the mouth of the pass, the high-road, the Bidassoa, Fontarabia, and the ocean, all of them hemmed in by the heights of Audaye and San Marcial, as to compose one of the most splendid vistas which it has ever been my good fortune to behold.

Whilst the corps was stationed here, and indeed as often as circumstances would allow, it was my custom to wander away from the camp, with a gun over my shoulder, and a dog at my heels, for the double purpose of picking up a little *proviend* for the mess, and indulging a spirit of roving and adventure which was then natural to me.

One fine day towards the end of September, in the year 1813, my faithful Juno and her master set out, in high health and spirits, to pursue their wonted occupation.

I have said that on the right of the terrace occupied by our tents was a wooded ravine of considerable depth and steepness. At the bottom of that hollow ran a beautiful rivulet, which, after falling from a sort of detached shoulder of the Quatracone, wound onwards through the valley, till it joined the Bidassoa near the ruined bridge. I had often experienced a desire to trace that stream to its source, partly because I felt satisfied that the labour of the journey would be more than compensated by the magnificence of the scenery to which it must lead, and partly because I longed to shoot one or more of the many eagles, which, from their nests among the cliffs, looked down upon us, as if in anxious expectation of the moment when the fortune of battle should consign us to their talons. This morning I resolved, at all hazards, to gratify that inclination; so, striking off by the rear of the camp, I made at once for the waterfall.

I may not so much as attempt a description of the various and magnificent spectacles, which the progress of that toilsome, and occasionally hazardous excursion, from time to time spread out before me. As long as my route conducted up the face of the cliff, from a basin on the summit of which the rivulet tumbled, I could, as often as I chose to turn round, look down upon towns and villages, cornfields and meadows, tents and ships, redoubts and cottages; but from the instant that the ridge was passed, every vestige of human skill and human exertion was shut out. A long, narrow, winding vale lay beneath me; gloomy with forests, apparently trackless, and of the growth of ages; and girdled in by rocks and precipices hurled into every variety of fantastic shape. On either hand, and far off in my front, hill rose above hill, and cone above cone, as if a thousand earthquakes had been at work, or the globe had never, in this corner at least, escaped from a state of chaos. But words are wanting to describe such a panorama. It is sufficient to

observe that, accustomed as I had been, from childhood, to highland scenery, this perfectly astonished me, insomuch that I remained for several minutes riveted to the spot, from which it first burst upon me. Nor was I more struck by the objects which affected my sense of sight, than by the sort of preternatural stillness which prevailed. Either the breezes blew not at all, or the trees and shrubs in the valley were entirely sheltered from them; for not a bough or a leaf was in motion. The only sounds, indeed, which reached me were a sort of indistinct murmur, produced by the waterfall, now many hundred feet below me, and the occasional shrill cry of an eagle, as it sailed overhead, at a height which placed it far beyond the reach of danger from any power except that of the storm.

Having indulged, for some time, the feelings which such a scene was calculated to excite, as well as recovered my breath and rested my limbs, I began to look around for the purpose of ascertaining how I might most easily attain the object of my present ambition, by reaching the top of the mountain. You will understand, that I was now seated upon a sort of sugar-loaf hill, connected on both sides with other hills three or four times more lofty than itself. That upon the right seemed peculiarly rough and uneven; that upon the left, besides that the stream trickled down its surface, was more grassy and accessible; so I resolved to scale it. But I found, on putting my determination into force, that even it was far from being devoid of difficulties. Projections, which, when viewed from a distance, appeared trifling and easy of ascent, proved, when attained to, wholly impervious; whilst the grass itself was in many spots so dry and slippery, as to render it exceedingly hazardous to pass along. Nevertheless, I had proceeded too far to return now. I pushed on, winding round the base of such rocks as I found myself unable to scale, and creeping on all fours, when to walk upright became impossible; and I was rewarded, after two hours and a half of severe labour, by beholding what I took to be the last of the ridges. It was a large perpendicular cone; but there seemed to be a pass, or, as an Highlander would call it, a Balloch, on one side of it, and to that I directed my steps.

I was approaching rapidly to this object of my wishes, when the cry of an eagle, coming, as it appeared to me, from the opposite side of the brow, attracted my attention. In a whisper, I ordered Juno to heel; and putting a ball in one barrel, instead of small shot, I lay down on my belly, and in that position dragged myself towards the summit. I gained it with some difficulty; but you may imagine what my feelings were, when, on peeping over the ridge, I beheld in a sort of narrow glen or hollow, the diameter of which could not exceed twenty or thirty yards, the bones and mutilated remains of not fewer than forty or fifty human beings. Upon these some dozen or two of eagles were sitting;—not in the act of gorging, for in truth nothing now remained upon which they or other carnivorous animals could feed; but scraping and turning the bones about, and with their beaks tearing, as if in mockery, into minute shreds, a few remnants of what had once been military clothing.

So little had I anticipated such a spectacle in these wild regions, that surprise, and, to a certain extent, horror, completely overcame me. I lay with my finger on the trigger, but abstained from firing, till my dog sprang upon the brow, and the alarmed birds, rising in an instant, escaped.

Less annoyed at having thus permitted my prey to elude me, than curious to ascertain how so many bodies could have come into a situation so singular, I looked about for some path or sloping declivity by which I might descend into this place of the dead; but I looked in vain. The skeletons lay in a hole, which I can compare to nothing more nearly than a disused coal-pit of extraordinary dimensions; that is to say, they occupied a spot closed in on three sides by perpendicular rocks. The fourth was, indeed, open, but as far as I could judge, by examining it from my present position, it was open only to a precipice. Having indulged in a few vague

conjectures, therefore, and satisfied myself that I could do nothing more, I turned away, and, striking off to the right, soon entered the precincts of a thick wood. Here my dog beginning to quest, I had the satisfaction to find that I had at last arrived where game promised to be abundant. She led the way down the side of the mountain—I followed; and my attention being wholly engrossed, I went on, sometimes firing with success, at other times missing, till the gradual diminution of light warned me that it was high time to think of returning to the camp.

If there be a sportsman here, and a keen one, he will readily comprehend how a man, busied in the pursuit of hares, rabbits, and red-legged partridges, may become wholly unconscious both of the space of ground over which he passes, and the passage of time over his own head. Such, at least, was my case that day. For the last hour or two I had wandered on, through brake and briar, across hill and valley, without taking any note of my bearings, or of the approach of evening; and now I found myself deserted by the sun at the bottom of a tangled glen, and surrounded on all sides by a pathless forest of cork-trees.

To confess the truth, I was very far from being delighted with either my situation or prospects. It failed not to occur to me that I had ventured within the legitimate territories of wolves and bears; and that, as darkness came on, they were not unlikely to resent so bold an intrusion. For aught I knew, the enemy's outposts might be close at hand; and, above all, there was the risk, in case I should venture to seek my way back in the dark, of falling over some one of the numerous precipices, which lay, as I well knew, between me and the camp. The idea that my game-bag was filled hardly sufficed to compensate for these gloomy reflections. But though I sincerely repented of my rashness, and wished myself a thousand times safe and sound in my tent, I by no means lost heart. On the contrary, resolving that no efforts should be wanting on my part, let the consequences be what they might, I gladly took advantage of the slight remains of twilight which still glimmered; and turning my face, as well as I could guess, in the direction of Irun, I strode forward.

But the progress which I had made in this random journey was slight indeed, when a thousand obstacles, of which the rapidly increasing darkness constituted not the least, compelled me to pause. There was no longer light sufficient to distinguish objects at three yards before me; the underwood became more and more rough, and the ground more and more broken; till, at last, all hope of escape from the labyrinth left me. I now looked around for a convenient spot in which I might spend the night: not, indeed, free from apprehension that if I slept, it would be to awake in the clutch of some wild beast, but determined to keep awake as long as possible, and trust the rest to Providence. On my dog I knew that I could rely as a vigilant guardian; and I hoped, with the assistance of my double-barrelled gun, to repel any attack that might be made upon me.

I had arrived, at this determination, and was preparing to act in accordance with it, when a couple of chance paces taken to the right brought me, to my no small delight, upon a beaten footpath. Thanking Heaven with all my heart, I at once determined to follow it, let it lead where it might; so I pushed on, though perfectly conscious that I was increasing my distance, at every step, from the tents of my regiment.

I had proceeded thus, as near as I could guess, about a mile and a half, when, the wood ending, I found myself at the corner of a bare green hill, and in the gorge of a valley. It was not, however, without a sense of serious apprehension that I discovered signs of the valley being occupied. A strong light issued from the doorless apertures and broken roof of a ruined cottage a few hundred yards off; and the sound of many voices, distinctly heard in the stillness of evening, gave proof that the ruin in question was filled with people. Who were they?—that was the question which demanded an answer. If Frenchmen, as was by no means improbable, death or

captivity would reward my further progress. If Spaniards!—I did not relish that idea much more keenly than the others; for I well knew that Spanish guerillas were seldom very scrupulous when plunder fell in their way. Nevertheless, I resolved to advance at all risks. I did so, my dog keeping close to my heel, and moving, like her master, in profound silence, till the challenge of a sentinel, whom I had not observed, arrested my steps.

“Now, then,” thought I, “it only remains for me to sell my life at as dear a rate as possible.” I cocked my gun, and stood still. The man challenged again, and I recognised the full broad dialect of a Biscayan. I answered without further delay; upon which the man, commanding me to halt, shouted aloud, and in a moment the picket was under arms. It was soon discovered that I was alone; I was permitted to advance, and, having satisfied my captors that I was an English officer, they conducted me, with much civility, into the house. The officer, however, being absent to arrange his sentries, they could neither furnish me with a guide, nor permit me to depart alone; but they offered me a snug place beside their fire, made no attempt to deprive me of my weapon, and kindly supplied me with what was probably the sole refreshment which they had to offer—a cigar. I was not displeased with this treatment, but sat contentedly enough among them till their commander arrived.

This person, on whose entrance they all rose, was a young man of very peculiar and striking appearance. His hair and moustaches, like those of Spaniards in general, were coal-black, and his complexion was of that deep olive hue which the faces of men much exposed to the sun and winds of a southern climate usually obtain. But there was a brightness and penetration in his eye which pierced through the individual on whom it rested; and a strong expression of daring—I might almost call it ferocity—overspread his whole countenance. In stature he did not greatly exceed the middle size, if indeed he exceeded it at all; but his well-knit limbs, full chest, and broad shoulders indicated a surpassing degree of bodily strength and activity. His dress, too, was abundantly picturesque. A brown cloak, buckled round the neck, felt so far over one shoulder as to expose a rich green uniform beneath it, whilst appended to an embroidered belt, in which, by the way, were stuck a brace of steel-mounted pistols, hung a sabre of unusual size and weight. On his head he wore a richly-laced foraging-cap; a pair of tan-leather boots encased his legs; and to complete his resemblance rather to a robber-chief than a soldier, he carried a short rifle over his right shoulder. I have seldom seen a better subject for a painter than the whole group presented by the light of a large fire of wood.

The Spanish officer stopped short the instant he beheld me, and fixing a keen and half suspicious glance upon me, demanded my quality and business. I informed him on both heads at once, explaining that I had been overtaken by darkness when shooting in the woods hard by, and considered myself fortunate in having arrived at a place from whence a guide might be procured, or, at least, shelter obtained for the night.

“May I believe this fine tale?” said he, in a tone of voice which I was far from relishing. “Here you are, within half-musket-shot of the enemy’s lines, professing to have lost your way in an attempt to reach Irun.”

I could only reply by repeating my assertion, and by reminding him, that I was quite ignorant of the very points of the compass amid these mountains.

The Spaniard was silent for a moment, and then said, “You are an Englishman, I perceive; and the English are in general honest, as well as brave; but there may be traitors even among them. Perhaps, you are one; perhaps, you designed to desert to the enemy.”

Indignant beyond measure at this allegation, I would have picked a quarrel with him on the spot, had not a single glance round the room sufficed to convince me, that such a measure could

only end in my own destruction. I repelled it, however, in such a way, as to show him, that he had seriously wounded my feelings; nor was my hint lost upon him. His suspicions appeared to subside, and motioning to me to resume my seat, -he put several other questions to me, in more friendly language. At length, he became satisfied, and desired to know my wishes. I replied, that I required only a guide as far as the camp above Irun, and that I would cheerfully compensate the person who undertook the office. He then said something, not very courteously, it is true, about abiding where I was till morning; but on my declining the invitation, he did not press it. A non-commissioned officer, whom he named Manillo, was accordingly commanded to see me safe; and without having either given or received a salute from this discourteous warrior, I withdrew. Before going, however, I pulled out a hare and a couple of rabbits from my bag, and gave them to the soldiers—a present for which these poor fellows appeared exceedingly thankful.

CHAPTER II

My guide and I continued our journey for some time in silence; till at last, my mind being full of the remarkable appearance, and no less remarkable behaviour, of the Spanish officer, I asked him whether or not he knew anything of his history.

“Yes, sir,” replied the man; “I know it all—as well I may; for we were both born in this very valley, and have been friends from our cradles.”

“In this valley!” replied I; “did you say in this valley—and that you have been friends from infancy?”

“Even so,” answered Manillo, “and might have gone further; I might have added that we were brothers, for Francisco was to have married my sister. Was to have married?—He did marry her though the hell-hounds tore the marriage-tie asunder.” My curiosity was now excited to the highest pitch, and I entreated my companion to gratify it. He complied, though not without the endurance of considerable pain; and the following is the story which he told me:

“You see these ruined cottages below us,” said he: “they are all that remain of the homes of our fathers.”

I looked where the soldier pointed; and with the help of the stars which now shone out, beheld eight or ten huts in the hollow beneath. “And now look up,” continued my conductor, just as we reached the bottom of a deep cut, or rather an old water-course, in the side of the hill. “Do you observe that high rock, not far from the summit of the mountain?”

I gazed upwards, and saw distinctly enough a bold bare cliff, projecting from amid a thick forest of underwood.

A strange idea crossed my mind at this moment, and I hastily asked whether there was not a deep hollow beyond the precipice? He assented. “And it is full of human bones,” continued I. “Aha!” exclaimed the Spaniard, “have you seen them? Then,” added he, violently raising his clenched fist in the air, “you have looked upon the bones of those who butchered our fathers and our children, and violated and murdered our wives and sisters. But you shall hear all.

“Three years have hardly elapsed since the cottages which I lately pointed out to you were inhabited by eight as poor, but as contented families as are to be found in Spain. We had no laws, yet there was not a dishonest person amongst us; and, instead of a magistrate, we looked up to and obeyed Señor Albarcho, because he was the oldest and wisest member of the community. Señor Albarcho, you must know, was the father of our present Captain Francisco, and a better man never walked the earth. We had our priest likewise, one of ourselves, whom we all revered and respected. Our business was to tend a few goats, which we all had in common; to

cultivate a few fields, the fruits of which we shared in common; to hunt bears and chamois, and to make one another comfortable. We were completely shut out from the rest of the world; but that we never regretted; for our priest told us, and we believed him, that there was no real good in the world of which we were not already possessed.

“You will easily believe, that persons thus situated felt rather like the members of one family, than the inhabitants of the same village; indeed, we composed, properly speaking, but one family; that is, we all married among ourselves, and so became connected by ties of blood, as well as of friendship. Well, sir, an attachment had long subsisted between Francisco and my sister Amante, and the 8th of June, was fixed for the wedding day. We were not ignorant that at this time the country swarmed with foreign troops; we had even hesitated, more than once, whether we were not bound, as true Spaniards, to take up arms for their expulsion; but our father, as we called Señor Albarcho, protested strongly against it, and we could not go in opposition to his will. We accordingly remained at peace; and as no soldiers came near us, we gradually ceased to believe that King Ferdinand was really driven from his throne.

“I told you that the 8th of June was fixed as the wedding day of Francisco and Amante. We all accompanied them to church, heard them receive the priest’s benison, and followed them home; where the remainder of the morning, and some portion of the afternoon, were devoted to sports and merriment. Oh, what an interruption to that mirth took place! We had spread out our supper under the chest-nut-tree before the bridegroom’s door, and were making ready to partake of it, when the sudden appearance of armed men at the bottom of the valley threw us into the greatest alarm. The women fled into the house; the old men stood irresolute, and the young ran for their rifles. But the hand of God was upon us. These were Frenchmen, sir—bloody, barbarous Frenchmen, who had discovered our peaceful retreat, and came to destroy it for ever. I cannot go on—imagine what followed, if you can. The miscreants sprang upon our women and our goods; we were too feeble, and too few, successfully to oppose them; and we heard in our retreat shrieks to which we could not reply, and wailings which we could not soothe.”

The Spaniard became here so violently agitated, that his very voice failed him; but recovering his self-command in a few minutes, he proceeded:

“Nothing now remained for us but vengeance. We betook ourselves, eighteen in number, to the neighbouring fastnesses, and choosing Francisco for our leader, we became guerillas. But we went not beyond the precincts of our own valley. No; our cry, day and night, was for vengeance, and to obtain it, we hovered round the ruins of our houses like beasts of prey. Not a Frenchman strayed from his cantonments who returned alive; and many and many a time have we roused the whole band from their unholy slumbers with our war-shout. Exasperated at this behaviour, the miscreants completed the bloody work which they had begun. Every male, and every aged female, who fell into their hands, perished on the first day; now they butchered, and threw out to us, our wives and little ones. But there was mercy in this; for how could we again receive those whom the dogs had defiled?

“You have seen the hollow on the top of that rock. It is called the Fuente; for tradition says, that it was once a small lake, and that the ravine, across which we passed, was the channel of the river that flowed from it. I know not whether there be truth in this, but its situation is one of the most remarkable in all these districts. You observed how it is enclosed on three sides; on the fourth, there is a fall of many feet; and the rocks stretching out on either hand beyond the fall, render it perfectly inaccessible. At one corner, however, it is separated from the mountain by a chasm of little more than eighteen feet in width; we laid a narrow bridge of plank over the

chasm, and made the old lake our fortress. From this point we were in the daily habit of sallying out upon the enemy; and at last we made it the scene of a glorious revenge.

“At the suggestion of our leader, we determined, if it were possible, to lure the monsters into our den, and to destroy them there. For this purpose, we laboured hard at a huge rock, which hung immediately over our bridge, till we had so loosened it, as that a push from the arm of a child would roll it down the gulf. That being effected, we proceeded to carry the rest of our scheme into execution, thus: One morning, as usual, we rushed down upon the valley, and having maintained a skirmish rather longer and more animated than usual, the bloodhounds were so enraged as to pursue us up the hill. As soon as we reached the forest, all except Francisco, who was the object of their bitterest hatred, avoided the old channel, and escaped into the woods. Francisco, affecting to be wounded, made for the bridge. He crossed, and forty-five of the miscreants, including their commander, followed. This was all that we desired. Instantly the crag fell, and striking the planks exactly in the middle, it dashed them down into the abyss, cutting off all hope of escape from those within the Fuente.

“In the meanwhile we had taken our stations on the ridges, and looked down in savage exultation upon our prey. For Francisco we feared nothing, because we knew his intention; and we shouted aloud in order to give him an opportunity of carrying it into effect. We were successful. Whilst the Frenchmen, paralysed with horror, were gazing upwards upon the death which hung over them, Francisco, uttering a loud cry, ran towards the chasm, and with one desperate bound, cleared it. Oh, sir, had you seen the expression of the murderers’ countenances then; had you beheld their uplifted hands, and heard their scream for mercy, your blood would have boiled within you, as mine boils now! Our captain answered them. “Mercy!” cried he, “ay, such mercy as ye granted. Look down, fiends, upon the village ye have destroyed! behold the bodies of the aged and the feeble whom ye have butchered! listen to the cry of those whom ye have violated!—and now take your reward.” This was the signal, and we opened our fire upon them. It was in vain that they ran from side to side, seeking for a place of shelter or escape, or reached the brink of the chasm in hopeless despair. Three wretches only tried the leap, and they were dashed to pieces. The rest died, one after another, as our bullets took effect; and we left them where they fell, that their bones might bleach in the rains of heaven, after their flesh should have been devoured by the eagles.”

The Spaniard here ended his story, and to my astonishment I found that we were already in the camp. I offered him money, but he refused it: indeed he seemed like one beside himself with the recollection of the scenes which he had been describing. Having satisfied me that I was at home, he abruptly turned away, and I could hear the boughs and leaves crash before him, as with the speed of a racehorse he rushed down the glen.