

QUASTANA THE BRIGAND

FROM THE FRENCH OF
ALFONSE DAUDET



thing which made it advisable for him to keep clear of the police, he generally bolted to Sardinia instead of turning brigand. This was not to our liking; for no brigand, no promo-

tion. However, our Prefect had succeeded in finding one; he was an old rascal, Quastana by name, who, to avenge the murder of his brother, had killed goodness knows how many people. He had been pursued with vigour, but had escaped, and after a time the hue and cry had subsided and he had been forgotten. Fifteen years had passed, and the man had lived in seclusion; but our Prefect, having heard of the affair and obtained a clue to his whereabouts, endeavoured to capture him, with no more success than his predecessor. We were beginning to despair of our promotion; you can, therefore, imagine how pleased I was to receive the note from my chief.

I found him in his study, talking very confidentially to a man of the true Corsican peasant type.

"This is Quastana's cousin," said the Prefect to me, in a low tone. "He lives in the little village of Solenzara, just above Porto-Vecchio, and the brigand pays him a visit every Sunday evening to have a game of *scopa*. Now, it seems that these two had some words the other Sunday, and this fellow has determined to have revenge; so he proposes to hand his cousin over to justice, and, between you and me, I believe he means it.

I.



ISADVENTURES? Well, if I were an author by profession, I could make a pretty big book of the administrative mishaps which befell me during the three years I spent in Corsica as legal adviser to the French Prefecture. Here is one which will probably amuse you:—

I had just entered upon my duties at Ajaccio. One morning I was at the club, reading the papers which had just arrived from Paris, when the Prefect's man-servant brought me a note, hastily written in pencil: "Come at once; I want you. We have got the brigand, Quastana." I uttered an exclamation of joy, and went off as fast as I could to the Prefecture. I must tell you that, under the Empire, the arrest of a Corsican *banditto* was looked upon as a brilliant exploit, and meant promotion, especially if you threw a certain dash of romance about it in your official report.

Unfortunately brigands had become scarce. The people were getting more civilized and the *vendetta* was dying out. If by chance a man did kill another in a row, or do some-

But as I want to make the capture myself, and in as brilliant a manner as possible, it is advisable to take precautions in order not to expose the Government to ridicule. That's what I want you for. You are quite a stranger in the country and nobody knows you; I want you to go and see for certain if it really is Quastana who goes to this man's house."

"But I have never seen this Quastana," I began.

My chief pulled out his pocket-book and drew forth a photograph much the worse for wear.

"Here you are!" he exclaimed. "The rascal had the cheek to have his portrait taken last year at Porto-Vecchio!"

While we were looking at the photo the peasant drew near, and I saw his eyes flash vengefully; but the look quickly vanished and his face resumed its usual stolid appearance.

"Are you not afraid that the presence of a stranger will frighten your cousin, and make him stay away on the following Sunday?" we asked.

"No!" replied the man. "He is too fond of cards. Besides, there are many new faces about here now on account of the shooting. I'll say that this gentleman has come for me to show him where the game is to be found."

Thereupon we made an appointment for the next Sunday, and the fellow walked off without the least compunction for his dirty trick. When he was gone, the Prefect impressed upon me the necessity for keeping the matter very quiet, because he intended that nobody else should share the credit of the capture. I assured him that I would not breathe a word, thanked him for his kindness in asking me to assist him, and we separated to go to our work and dream of promotion.

The next morning I set out in full shooting costume, and took the coach which does the journey from Ajaccio to Bastia. For those who love Nature, there is no better ride in the world, but I was too busy with my castles in the air to notice any of the beauties of the landscape.

At Bonifacio we stopped for dinner. When

I got on the coach again, just a little elevated by the contents of a good-sized bottle, I found that I had a fresh travelling companion, who had taken a seat next to me. He was an official at Bastia, and I had already met him; a man about my own age, and a native of Paris like myself. A decent sort of fellow.

You are probably aware that the Administration, as represented by the Prefect, etc., and the magistrature never get on well together; in Corsica it is worse than elsewhere. The seat of the Administration is at Ajaccio, that of the magistrature at Bastia; we two therefore belonged to hostile parties. But when you are a long way from home and meet someone from your native place, you forget all else, and talk of the old country.

We were fast friends in less than no time, and were consoling each other for being in "exile" as we termed it. The bottle of wine had loosened my tongue, and I soon told



"I SET OUT IN FULL SHOOTING COSTUME."

him, in strict confidence, that I was looking forward to going back to France to take up some good post as a reward for my share in the capture of Quastana, whom we hoped to arrest at his cousin's house one Sunday evening. When my companion got off the coach at Porto-Vecchio, we felt as though we had known each other for years.

II.

I ARRIVED at Solenzara between four and five o'clock. The place is populated in winter by workmen, fishermen, and Customs officials, but in summer everyone who can shifts his quarters up in the mountains on account of fever. The village was, therefore, nearly deserted when I reached it that Sunday afternoon.

I entered a small inn and had something to eat, while waiting for Matteo. Time went on, and the fellow did not put in an appearance; the innkeeper began to look at me suspiciously, and I felt rather uncomfortable. At last there came a knock, and Matteo entered.

"He has come to my house," he said, raising his hand to his hat. "Will you follow me there?"

We went outside. It was very dark and windy; we stumbled along a stony path for about three miles—a narrow path, full of small stones and overgrown with luxuriant vegetation, which prevented us from going quickly.

"That's my house," said Matteo, pointing among the bushes to a light which was flickering at a short distance from us.

A minute later we were confronted by a big dog, who barked furiously at us. One would have imagined that he meant to stop us going farther along the road.

"Here, Bruccio, Bruccio!" cried my guide; then, leaning towards me, he said: "That's Quastana's dog. A ferocious animal. He has no equal for keeping watch." Turning to the dog again, he called out: "That's all right, old fellow! Do you take us for policemen?"

The enormous animal quieted down and came and sniffed around our legs. It was a splendid Newfoundland dog, with a thick, white, woolly coat which had obtained for him the name of Bruccio (white cheese). He ran on in front of us to the house, a kind of stone hut, with a large hole in the roof which did duty for both chimney and window.

In the centre of the room stood a rough table, around which were several "seats" made of portions of trunks of trees, hacked into shape with a chopper. A torch stuck in a piece of wood gave a flickering light, around which flew a swarm of moths and other insects.

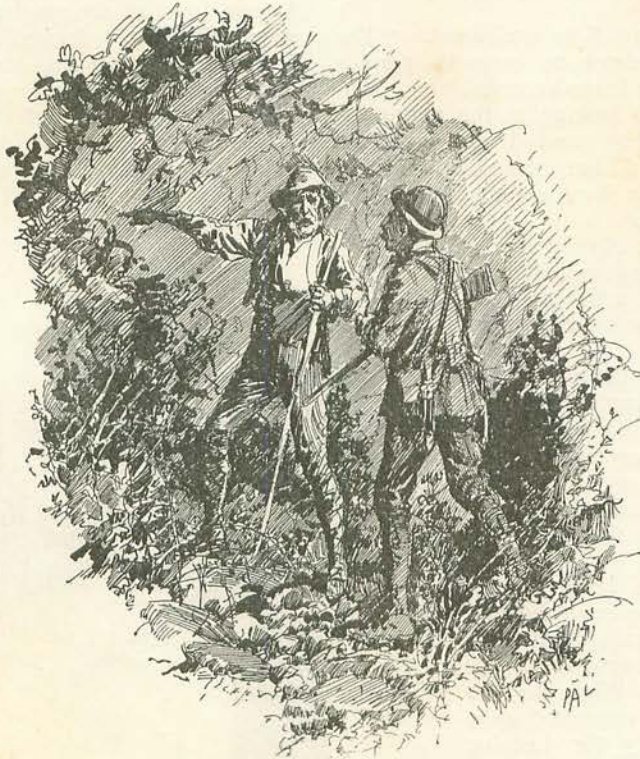
At the table sat a man who looked like an Italian or Provençal fisherman, with a shrewd, sunburnt, clean-shaven face. He was leaning over a pack of cards, and was enveloped in a cloud of tobacco smoke.

"Cousin Quastana," said Matteo as we went in, "this is a gentleman who is going

shooting with me in the morning. He will sleep here to-night, so as to be close to the spot in good time to-morrow."

When you have been an outlaw and had to fly for your life, you look with suspicion upon a stranger. Quastana looked me straight in the eyes for a second; then, apparently satisfied, he saluted me and took no further notice of me. Two minutes later the cousins were absorbed in a game of *scopa*.

It is astonishing what a mania for card-playing existed in Corsica at that time—and it is probably the same now. The clubs and cafés were watched by the police, for the young men ruined themselves at a game



"THAT'S MY HOUSE," SAID MATTEO.

called *bouillotte*. In the villages it was the same; the peasants were mad for a game at cards, and when they had no money they played for their pipes, knives, sheep—anything.

I watched the two men with great interest as they sat opposite each other, silently playing the game. They watched each other's movements, the cards either face downwards upon the table or carefully held so that the opponent might not catch a glimpse of them, and gave an occasional quick glance at their "hand" without losing sight of the other player's face. I was especially interested in watching Quastana. The photograph was a very good one, but it could not reproduce the sunburnt face, the vivacity and agility of movement, surprising in a man of his age, and the hoarse, hollow voice peculiar to those who spend most of their time in solitude.

Between two and three hours passed in this way, and I had some difficulty in keeping awake in the stuffy air of the hut and the long stretches of silence broken only by an occasional exclamation: "Seventeen!" "Eighteen!" From time to time I was aroused by a heavy gust of wind, or a dispute between the players.

Suddenly there was a savage bark from Brucio, like a cry of alarm. We all sprang up, and Quastana rushed out of the door, returning an instant afterwards and seizing his gun. With an exclamation of rage he darted out of the door again

and was gone. Matteo and I were looking at one another in surprise, when a dozen armed men entered and called upon us to surrender. And in less time than it takes to

tell you we were on the ground, bound, and prisoners. In vain I tried to make the gendarmes understand who I was; they would not listen to me. "That's all right; you will have an opportunity of making an explanation when we get to Bastia."

They dragged us to our feet and drove us out with the butt-ends of their carbines. Handcuffed, and pushed about by one and another, we reached the bottom of the slope, where a prison-van was waiting for us—a vile box, without ventilation and full of vermin—into which we were thrown and driven to Bastia, escorted by gendarmes with drawn swords.

A nice position for a Government official!

III.

It was broad daylight when we reached Bastia. The Public Prosecutor, the colonel of the gendarmes, and the governor of the prison were impatiently awaiting us. I never



"HE DARTED OUT OF THE DOOR AGAIN."

saw a man look more astonished than the corporal in charge of the escort, as, with a triumphant smile, he led me to these gentlemen, and saw them hurry towards me with

all sorts of apologies, and take off the handcuffs.

"What! Is it *you*?" exclaimed the Public Prosecutor. "Have these idiots really arrested *you*? But how did it come about—what is the meaning of it?"

Explanations followed. On the previous

The unfortunate Matteo remained dumb with fright; he looked appealingly at me, and I, of course, could not do otherwise than explain matters. Taking the Prosecutor on one side, I told him that Matteo was really assisting the Prefect to capture the brigand; but as I told him all about the matter, his face assumed a hard, judicial expression.

"I am sorry for the Prefecture," he said; "but I have Quastana's cousin, and I won't let him go! He will be tried with some peasants, who are accused of having supplied the brigand with provisions."

"But I repeat that this man is really in the service of the Prefecture," I protested.

"So much the worse for the Prefecture," said he with a laugh. "I am going to give the Administration a lesson it won't forget, and teach it not to meddle with what doesn't concern it. There is only one brigand in Corsica, and you want to take him! He's my game, I tell you. The Prefect knows that, yet he tries to forestall me! Now I will pay him out. Matteo shall be tried; he will, of course, appeal

to your side; there will be a great to-do, and the brigand will be put on his guard against his cousin and gentlemen of the Prefecture who go shooting."

Well, he kept his word. We had to appear on behalf of Matteo, and we had a nice time of it in the court. I was the laughing-stock of the place. Matteo was acquitted, but he could no longer be of use to us, because Quastana was forewarned. He had to quit the country.

As to Quastana, he was never caught. He knew the country, and every peasant was secretly ready to assist him; and although the soldiers and gendarmes tried their best to take him, they could not manage it. When I left the island he was still at liberty, and I have never heard anything about his capture since.



"EXPLANATIONS."

day the Public Prosecutor had received a telegram from Porto Vecchio, informing him of the presence of Quastana in the locality, and giving precise details as to where and when he could be found. The name of Porto Vecchio opened my eyes; it was that travelling companion of mine who had played me this shabby trick! He was the Prosecutor's deputy.

"But, my dear sir," said the Public Prosecutor, "whoever would have expected to see you in shooting costume in the house of the brigand's cousin! We have given you rather a bad time of it, but I know you will not bear malice, and you will prove it by coming to breakfast with me." Then turning to the corporal, and pointing to Matteo, he said: "Take this fellow away; we will deal with him in the morning."