

The Storyteller

ESTABAN.

I.

The first of all to attract a stranger's eye in any village group at Astorgia in the Pyrenean Hills was young Estaban Nueces. His high, clean, white brow and his great, staring blue eyes made something of a rare picture in a Spanish hamlet where skins were usually of a swarthy brown and where eyes were generally small and dark. His were the only pair of blue eyes anywhere in that long thin soaring district which is down deep in the valley, where men sit all day in the open air making churns, to the fifth village beyond it, which is called Novelle and has much fame locally for the excellence of its pinkish cheese.

It was thought at first that the lad's father, Alonzo Nueces, who hailed originally from the suburbs of Barcelona and was, therefore, a Catalan of Catalans, might boast in his usual vain way that the child's fair complexion was merely the sign of good, rich Catalonian blood. Alonzo's brother, however, the Senor Manuel, a member of the distant city police and an adherent of the anti-clericals in his politics, came out to Astorgia to be sponsor at the Christening, and Manuel, who certainly should know, declared at once that there had never been any blue eyes on the Nueces side of the family.

It was on this occasion that the officiating ministrant and the visiting policeman got into a wordy wrangle which came about in an unintentional manner. The priest, it seems, conversing with the parties after the ceremony, happened to forget that the Senor Manuel was not indigenous to the locality and so addressed him a few conventional things which bore a Basque name. This was a patois in which Manuel was totally without knowledge. Moreover, he despised everything which bore a Basque name. For the language, people, and customs he professed deep, unborn contempt. It was not a worse dialect than the jargon of the Catalonian patois, which he usually spoke when conversing at home with his own wife and children. This fact, however, it never dawned upon him to admit. To be mistaken for a Basque was to be grossly offended, it was like a Swede mistaken for a Finn, or a Lorrainer for a Prussian, or a son of Killarney for a crabbed Far Down.

Manuel bowed, therefore, with only iron. "I come from Spain, sn," he said resentfully, "and there they speak Castilian."

"The sweetest of all languages," exclaimed the priest, pocketing the reproof.

"As, perhaps, is the Basque—the sourest," growled Manuel.

"Perhaps," answered the priest firmly, his own pride now awakened. "Yes, perhaps as you say—and yet troubadours have attuned their guitars to its rugged words, and in its syllables poets even have not been ashamed to clothe their happy rhymes. Down in the plain, and in your cities you do not hear it. There the national tongue, the soft Castilian, suffices, but here, on the hills, something stronger and bolder seems to be a need. When Francia long ago crowded our dear Spanish land with vandal revolutionaries, when her Napoleon came hither in his folly to tear away the King's own crown, then it was that the language of the Basques made its accents resound in stalwart protest. "A queer language is the Basque," said a great marshal of Francia, "they write a word Jerusalem and pronounce it Constantine." "Soldiers," said conveying love, the Basque is the

quickest to awaken fear." And so I say to you now, sir, the Basque may have its defects as a language, but brave men have spoken it long before you were born, and its glories will remain long after you have died."

"And its shame, too, will remain as long as it pleads the cause of treason."

"Thank you." In the lifetime of Columbus there were those who reproached that great admiral with ignorance, and so to-day there are others foolish enough to reproach the Basque mountaineer with even treason.

"Then why are these mountains a hot-bed of disloyal Carlism?"

"Why? Because, perhaps, the mountaineer has yet his old belief in legitimacy and law, and in constitutionality and justice and right. Unquestionably, too, he possesses the faults of his very virtues, stubborn to the point of imprudence, resisting, for truth's sake, even when resistance signifies merely the rush of hopeless bravery against the cold steel of bayonets. His is the heart which never gives up, even though conquered. Yes, respect him for all he is worth. Alot in his pure, native atmosphere, nearest living neighbor to heaven, he drinks in inspirations as the wild crocus flower drinks in the morning dew. Inspirations, moreover, which are semi-divine; courage, unselfishness, fealty and unswerving honor. These also, he it said, are the virtues which made our nation of Spain glorious in the days of old, these added to unflinching faith. All I have to hope now is that some day these will again return, that, perhaps with the generations rising up with this young, blue-eyed infant, these same strong gifts may come back to redeem our land anew and to gild her annals once more with the lustre of true, soulful greatness."

That night the priest sat chatting with his friend, Dr. Alta, the local physician.

"Bah!" exclaimed the latter, "it served him right."

"You speak of——"

"That piping jackdaw from the plain who must needs spread his wings in our, eh? castle fashion on our free hill."

"You speak of the Senor Manuel?"

"Aye, of that poor unconscious creature, unsatisfied with long ears to listen, but who would fain be in addition long-tongued, and for and tire us with his ignoble braying. The unlucky ass. And I'm so glad above all that even in the speech of Castilian he found you his match."

"An ass, his match?" Well, that's complimentary, Doctor."

"Excuse me, I didn't mean——"

"Didn't you indeed?" said the priest with a laugh. Well, I suppose I'm much obliged to you. But tell me, what think you of the child's blue eyes?"

"That's the point I'm coming to. I was just going to propose that you search the parish records and hunt up the family on the mother's side. She was a Casanova. I knew her as a little girl, even Maria Casanova, there was a twin brother who died."

"Well, we shall look it up as you say. Take the candle with you, Doctor, and we'll step out for the books. I'm afraid you'll find them pretty dusty."

Never mind, soap and water are getting cheap.

They passed on together into the old dingy room where the parish archives lay sheathed in gloomy dust and spider-webs. The search was forthwith undertaken. It was slow work in the dim candle-light, but Castilian is the fittest language for

eventually it brought a satisfactory result, for when the maternal grandparents of Maria Casanova were reached, the name of O'Donoghue was encountered—evident indication of a foreign strain. Those who bore it, the record said, had been castaways from a shipwrecked vessel."

"A strange, rough name!" ejaculated the doctor, looking up.

"Barbarous!" answered the priest. "So heavy, and so uncouth," continued the physician. "Did you ever see anything like it?"

"Never."

"It's one of those unpronounceable things which takes a crooked tongue to utter. If I had but a single guess I would say it was Hebrew."

"What! Blue eyes in a Jew? You know better."

"Then English."

"Yes, or to be more precise—Irish."

"But isn't that the same thing as English?"

"The very same exactly, Doctor; although the Irish themselves do not seem to think so. I knew a young man from Ireland, named Micann, who was a student with me at College. One day I happened, while conversing with him, to allude to him as an Englishman."

"English?" he exclaimed,

"Don't call me English."

"Why not?" I asked him.

"Because I'm not English," he said.

"Aren't you a subject of the English Crown?"

"Yes."

"Your country is a country which belongs to England?"

"Yes."

"And governed by English laws?"

"Yes."

"Your representatives are elected to the English Parliament?"

"Yes."

"You assist at all its sessions and may vote upon any measure which comes up?"

"Yes."

"The language you speak is the English language?"

"Yes."

"And even your religion—"

"My religion!"

"Is it not also the old English religion?"

"Yes."

"Then, for heaven's sake tell me in what you are less English than and other Englishman? I am well aware," I added, "that you do not inhabit London, but, then, neither do I inhabit Madrid. Nevertheless, I am heart and soul a Spaniard, and it seems to me, Senor, that in just the same proportion are you an Englishman."

"And what did he say to that?"

"Bah! He told me I was crazy; that he knew what he was talking about. Poor fellow, he was a rabid one. And to tell me I was crazy just for showing him how two and two made four!"

"Yes, yes, he was like the man in the asylum who kept telling everybody he met, 'I'm all right, but those other fellows in there are crazy.'"

It was late and they tarried a few moments. Both were satisfied with the result of the short delving into the old dust-covered registries. Before going to bed that night the priest totted down the record of the day's christening. Estaban Nueces de los O'Donoghue was the manner which he inscribed the child's name. It was under the same inscription that Estaban was later on entered in the village school lists. His full, blue eyes emphasised his foreign ancestry, and on the parish priest's suggestion Estaban was taught the foreign English language of his forefathers. When the lad reached his seventeenth year, he went down to the city to draw lots in regard to military service. Poor Estaban drew a "bad number," and so was enrolled to serve under the banner of his country for the next three years. Worst luck of all! Hardly had he

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