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THE CONDEMNED

By MAX PEMBERTON, Author of "The Iron Pirate," Etc.

THEY carried cigarettes and Turkish coffee to a terrace above the glacis of the castle, and thither I followed the Governor when dinner was done. A radiant sunset followed upon a day of torrid heat and burning winds. The distant Adriatic had that shimmer of hazy light which is the aftermath of a summers day, as the sun of Dalmatia knows it. Even the dwellers upon the mountain side complained.

I had been through Montenegro and was returning home by Trieste and the Adriatic sea. All the world nowadays knows those glorious waters, and the countless islands are marked down in every tourist's yodomenquin. Then it was very different. Austria had just entered upon her dominion of the States. There were brigands abundant. You could be held to ransom and robbed almost on any island you cared to name. Travel was adventure worthy the name. I remember that an Austrian officer at Metkovich cautioned me not to venture among the people of the hills on any pretence whatever. "They are all thieves," he said, "even the soldiers. Keep on the ship and you will be all right. Our folks cannot help you ashore. We are still shooting, but the work is slow."

The advice was wholesome, and I took it. Not until we touched at the port of Spalato did I leave the Austrian-Lloyd steamer at all, and then it was merely to carry a letter of introduction to the Governor, given me by this timorous friend at Metkovich. Here, as elsewhere, I found the Austrian official the most delightful person in Europe. The Governor was up at the fortress in the hills, said the young captain in charge, and, if I cared to go as far, he would send an escort with me. The invitation had a nice sound, and I determined to miss a steamer and take advantage of it. After all, there is something picturesque in being robbed by mountain brigands—and what a tale would it be for smoking rooms until the end of my days.

Let me state at once that this pious hope of polite brigandage was not destined to be fulfilled. I had an escort of half-a-dozen splendidly mounted hussars, and they were as unlike brigands as any half-a-dozen hussars could be. The road itself, winding up from the sea amidst green mountains and sweet-smelling pines, I found, beyond words picturesque. Here fresh breezes tempered the pursuing heat and bade the traveller live again. The solitudes were im-

mense, and of insurpassable majesty. Nor did the castle itself strike a discord in this gamut of pleasing harmonies. Such a castle it was as the second Mahomet might have built, or Caesar himself have overthrown; a veritable fortress of the hills; a granite keep, superb in its isolation and its dignity. As for the Governor, he received me with the characteristic hospitality of his race. Strangers were rare enough in that lonely mountain vastness that he would readily part with one.

"I will show you the hills," he said, earnestly, "we have fishing which cannot be bettered, and shooting as good. I can promise you anything from a bear to an African snipe. The country is remarkable—so are the people, a little too remarkable sometimes. We are shooting one of them at dawn to-morrow—a young trooper from Zara. I don't know whether you have ever seen a man shot, but if you haven't, this affair may interest you. I'll tell you the story after dinner—it's characteristic of the place and of the temper I have to deal with."

All this, mind you, from a pleasant-faced old gentleman with white whiskers and bright blue eyes, and the aspect of a saint in the picture. Had he been speaking of the contemplated execution of a fowl, he could not have referred to the subject less seriously. For myself I but dimly understood that a man was to be shot, and that I was invited to witness his execution. A truly British horror of such spectacles found some expression, I suppose, in my manner and bearing. I was profoundly interested and yet frankly a coward in the matter. The Governor perceived as much and turned the subject adroitly.

"I must tell them to get a good horse for you," he said, "we will start out early to-morrow and see what we can kill. Or, if you prefer to fish, I can arrange it. Perhaps you may play piquet? That would be great good news."

I told him that I did play piquet and so filled his heart with joy. Evidently he had determined to make a prisoner of me and he, it appeared, was the veritable social brigand against whom I had been warned. The lonely life he led up there in the hills undoubtedly accounted for his earnest desire that I should remain his guest for some weeks. It is true that he had a squadron of hussars in the citadel, but the officers were not much to his liking, and I imagined that the presence of a stranger who shot and fished and played piquet was a god-send—even if that stranger had display-

ed no overmastering joy when he heard that there was a man to be executed at dawn to-morrow.

It was astonishing, upon my part, how this hint of a grim tragedy, so soon to be played within these monstrous walls, ran in my head and would not be disturbed. I could think of nothing else. The very isolation of the scene, the majesty of the hill-lands, the stories I had heard of their romance and their danger accentuated the sense of awe with which the Governor's callous words had filled me. A man to die at dawn to-morrow! Had I been a son of the Adriatic such an intimation would have left me quite indifferent. Life is cheap in Dalmatia and what is it to any man that another must die? My very judgment of the old Governor may have been harsh and misplaced. He was there to rule these provinces in the name of Austria and duty must be done. A moment's reflection, as I dressed for dinner, reminded me that I knew but little of the condemned man's story and must wait to hear it before I could pronounce an opinion. The young trooper might be nothing better than a common brigand of the hillside. The Governor alone could tell me.

This confidence came when our dinner had been eaten and the coffee carried to the terrace above the glacis. It was at this moment that we were joined by an old Italian priest, old enough, it appeared, to remember the days when Spalato belonged to Italy—and he, to my satisfaction, at once raised the subject in which the Governor had interested me so profoundly. I gathered that he was but lately come from the condemned man's cell and not only this, but that some question of the lad's guilt or innocence yet remained unsolved. A rapid conversation between priest and Governor in the tricky Italian dialect of the coast left me little wiser than before; but when our cigars had been lighted and liquors served, my amiable host at once gratified my curiosity and spoke of the prisoner.

"It is a most serious case," he said—"there is a young soldier named Sandra accused of striking an officer in defence of a young woman to whom he was passionately attached. He is condemned by the court at Livno, not for striking the officer—about which there is some doubt—but for murdering the very girl who was the author of the trouble. This district, as you may know, is, for the time being, under what is practically martial law. There have been so many outrages, so much disorder everywhere that my Government is determined to establish its authority at any price and will do

so as successfully in Dalmatia as we have already done it in Herzegovina and the South. I am sorry for the lad and there is an element of mystery in this case which I do not altogether like. That, however, is not my business. Sandra must die at dawn. I could not pardon him against the judgment of the Court unless the evidence in his favour were overwhelming. My own prerogative is really very limited."

He appealed to the old priest, who supported his view with animation. "The fact is, signor," he said, "we are not—his excellency and I—we are not absolutely convinced that the girl is dead."

I stared at them in amazement. "Not convinced that she is dead and yet you will shoot the man! Is that Dalmatian justice, excellency?"

The priest shrugged his shoulders. "There had been a brawl at the inn and the girl, Lucy, was picked up insensible. I saw her myself that night and certainly she appeared to be dead. What follows then? We learn that they carried the body to Strepitza to bury it. I send some hussars over to Strepitza and they can learn nothing of the matter. We know that the man-keeper, Lucy's father, did not wish her to marry Sandra. I confess my perplexity. His excellency cannot help me. What would you do under such circumstances, signor?"

"Suspend all judgment until the truth is known. You cannot shoot a man for a murder he has not committed, reverence. That would be a crime against our common humanity."

"There is no official crime in Dalmatia but that of official backwardness," the Governor rejoined.

I could see none the less that he was not convinced. There were seeds of hesitation already taking root in a disposition which did not lack sympathy.

"Governments which rule savage countries cannot do so with a white rose in the button-hole," he ran on—"I must show them in Vienna that I mean to make the mountains safe. What would be said if I pardoned this man without further evidence? Would they not call me a faintheart who was also something of a coward. No, no, I must do my duty. It can be nothing to me officially whether the girl be alive or dead."

He persisted in this, and yet I perceived plainly that his duty was abhorrent to him. We had argued the point a hundred times, I suppose, when he proposed to me that I should see the prisoner, and jumping at his invitation, I followed him from the terrace

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