

A MAN OF EXTREMES.

BY A. E. W. MASON.

(Continued from yesterday)

Shere rode past the man and through the gates into the courtyard. There were three servants lounging there, and they came forward almost as if they had expected Shere. He gave his horse into their charge and impetuously mounted the flight of stone steps to the house. A servant in readiness advanced at once and preceded Shere along a gallery towards a door. Shere's impetuosity led him to outstep the servant, he opened the door, and so entered the room unannounced.

It was a long, low room with a wainscot of dark walnut, and a single lamp upon the table gave its shadows rather than light. He had just time to notice that a girl and a man were bending over the table in the lamplight, to recognize with a throb of the heart the play of the light upon the girl's brown hair, to understand that she was explaining something which she held in her hands, and then Esteban, raising his head, came quickly to him with a certain air of perplexity and a glance of inquiry towards the servant.

"Of course, of course," he said, "I might have known you stopped and came in of your own accord."

"Of my own accord, indeed," said Shere, who was looking at Christina instead of heeding Esteban's words. His unexpected coming had certainly not missed its effect, although it was not the effect which Shere had desired. There was, to be sure, a great deal of astonishment in her looks, but there was also consternation; and when she spoke it was in a numbed and absent way.

"You are well? We have not seen you this long while. Two years is it? More than two years?"

"There have been changes," said Esteban. "We have had war, and, alas, defeats."

"Yes, I was in Cuba," said Shere, and the conversation dragged on impersonal and dull. Esteban talked continually with a forced heartiness, Christina barely spoke at all, and then absently. Shere noticed that she had but lately come in, for she still wore her hat, and her gloves lay crossed on the table in the light of the lamp; she moved restlessly about the room, stopping now and then to give an ear to any chance noise in the courtyard, and to glance alertly at the door, so that Shere understood that she was expecting another visitor, and that he was in the way. An opportune intrusion, it seemed, was the sole outcome of the two years' anti-

pations, and, utterly discouraged, he rose from his chair. On the instant, however, Esteban signed to Shere to remain, and with a friendly smile himself made an excuse and left the room.

Christina was now walking up and down one particular seam in the floor with as much care as if the seam was a tight-rope, and this exercise she continued. Shere moved over to the table and quite absently played with the gloves which lay there, disarranging their position, so that they no longer made a cross.

"You remember that night in London," said he, and Christina stopped for a second to say simply and without any suggestion that she was offended; "you should have spoken that night," and then resumed her walk.

"Yes," returned Shere. "But I was always aware that I could not offer you your match, and I found, I thought, quite suddenly that evening a way to make my insufficiency less insufficient."

"Less insufficient by a strip of brass upon your shoulder," she exclaimed passionately. She came and stood opposite to him. "Well, that strip of brass stops us both. It stops my ears, it must stop your lips too. Where did we meet first?"

"In Paris."

"Go on!"

"At a Carlist—" and, looking into her set face, Shere broke off and took a step towards her. "Oh!" he exclaimed, "I never thought of it, I imagined you went there to laugh as I did."

"Does one laugh at one's creed?" she cried violently; and Shere, with a helpless gesture of the hands, sat down in a chair.

Esteban had fooled him, and why the padre had shown Shere that afternoon. Esteban had fooled him irreparably; it did not need a glance at Christina, as she stood facing him, to convince him of that. There was no anger against him, he noticed, in her face, but, on the contrary, a great friendliness and pity. But he knew her at that moment. Her looks might soften, but not her resolve. She was heart-whole a Carlist. Carlism was her creed, and her creed would be more than a creed—it would be a passion too. So it was not to persuade her, but rather in acknowledgement that he said:

"And one does not change one's creed."

"No," she answered, and suggested, but in a doubtful voice, "but one can put off one's uniform."

Shere stood up. "Neither can one do that," he said simply. It is quite true that I sought my com-

mission upon your account. I would just as readily have become a Carlist had I known. I had no inclination one way or the other, only a great hope and longing for you. But I have made the mistake, and I cannot contrive it. The strip of brass obliges me to good faith. Already you will understand the uniform has had its inconvenience: It sent me to Cuba, and set me armed against men almost of my own blood. There was no escape then; there is no escape now."

Christina moved closer to him. The reticence with which Shere spoke, and the fact that he made no claim upon her, made her voice very gentle.

"No," she agreed. "I thought that you would make that answer. And in my heart I do not think that I should like to have heard from you any other."

"Thank you," said Shere. He drew out his watch. "I have still some way to go. I have to reach Olvera by eleven; and he was aware that Christina at his side became at once very still, so that even her breathing was arrested. For her sign of emotion at the abrupt mention of prating he was thankful but it made him keep his eyes turned from her lest a sight of any distress of hers might lead him to falter from his purpose."

"You are riding to Olvera?" she asked after a pause, and in a queer muffled voice.

"Yes. So I must say goodbye," and now he turned to her. But she was too quick for him to catch a glimpse of her face. She had already turned from him and was walking towards the door.

"You must also say good-bye to Esteban," said she, as though to gain time. With her fingers on the door handle she stopped. "Tell me," she exclaimed. "It was Esteban who advised the army, who helped you to your commission? You need not deny it? It was Esteban." She stood silent, turning over this revelation in her mind. Then she added, "Did you see Esteban in Ronda this afternoon?"

"No, but I heard that he was there. I must go."

He took up his hat and turning again towards the door, saw that Christina stood with her back against the panels and her arms outstretched across them like a barrier.

"You need not fear," he said to reassure her. "I shall not quarrel with Esteban. He is your brother, and the harm is done. Besides, I do not know that it is all years before I wore the uniform. In those times it was all one's own dissatisfactions and trivial dislikes and trivial ambitions. Now I find a repose in losing them, in becoming a little necessary part of a big machine, even though it is not the best machine of its kind and works creakily. I find a dignity in it too."

It was the man of extremes who spoke, and he spoke quite sincerely. Christina, however, neither answered him nor heard. Her eyes were fixed with a strangeness upon him; her breath came and went as if she had run a race, and in the silence seemed unnaturally audible.

"You carry orders to Olvera?" she said at length. Shere fetched the sealed letter out of his pocket. "So I must go, or fail in my duty," said he.

"Give me the letter," said Christina.

Shere stared at her in amazement. The amazement changed to suspicion. His whole face seemed to narrow and sharpen out of his own likeness into something foxy and mean.

"I will not," he said, and slowly replaced the letter. "There was a man in the road," he continued slowly, "who whistled as I passed—a signal, no doubt. You are a Carlist. This is a trap."

"A trap not laid for you," said Christina. "Be sure of that! Until you spoke of Olvera I did not know."

"No," admitted Shere, "not laid for me to your knowledge, but to Esteban's. You were surprised at my coming—Esteban only at the manner of my coming. He asked if I had ridden into the gates of my own accord, I remember. He was in Ronda this afternoon. Very likely it was he who told my colonel of my knowledge of the neighborhood. It would suit his purposes well to present me to you suddenly, not merely as an enemy, but an active enemy. Yes, I understand that. But," and his voice hardened again, "even to your knowledge the trap was laid for the man who carries the letter. You have your share in the trick." He repeated the word with a sharp laugh, savouring it, dwelling upon it as upon something long forgotten and now suddenly remembered. "A murderous trick, too, it seems! I wonder what would have happened if I had not turned in at the gates of my own accord. How much farther should I have ridden towards Olvera, and by what gentle means should I have been stopped?"

"By nothing more dangerous than a hand upon your bride and an excuse that you might do some small service at Olvera."

"An excuse, a falsity! To be sure," said Shere bitterly. "Yet you still stand before the door, though you know the letter will not be yours. Is the trick after all so harmless? Is there no one—Esteban, for instance—in the dark passage outside the door or on the dark road outside the gates?"

"I will prove to you you are wrong."

(To be continued.)

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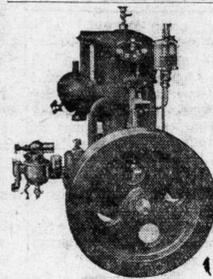
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