

## A MAN OF EXTREMES.

BY A. E. W. MASON.

(Continued from yesterday)

Christina dropped her arms to her sides, moved altogether from the door, and rang a bell. "Esteban shall come here; he will see you outside the gates; he will set you safely on your way to Olvera." She spoke now quite quietly; all the panic and agitation had gone in a moment from her face, her manner, and her words. But the very suddenness of the change in her increased Shere's suspicions. A moment ago Christina was standing before the door with every nerve a-strain, her face white, and her eyes bewildered with horror. Now she stood easily by the table with the lighted lamp, speaking easily, playing easily with the gloves upon the table. Shere watched for the secret of this sudden change.

A servant answered the bell and was bidden to find Esteban. No look of significance passed between them; by no gesture was any signal given. "No harm was intended to any man," Christina continued as soon as the door again was closed; "I insisted—I mean there was no need to insist; for I promised to get the letter from the bearer once he had come into this room."

"How?" Shere asked with a blunt contempt. "By tricks?"

Christina raised her head quickly, stung to a moment's anger; but she did not answer him, and again her head dropped.

"At all events," she said quietly, "I have not tried to trick you," and Shere noticed that she arranged with an absent carelessness the gloves in the form of a cross beneath the lamp; and at once he felt that her action contradicted her words. It was merely an instinct at first. Then he began to reason. Those gloves had been so arranged when first he entered the room. Christina and Esteban were bending over the table. Christina was explaining something. Was she explaining that arrangement the reason of her ready acceptance of his refusal to part with his orders? Was it, in a word, a signal for Esteban—a signal which should tell him whether or not she had secured the letter? Shere saw a way to answer that question. He was now filled with distrust of Christina as half an hour back he had been filled with faith in her; so that he paid no heed to her apology or to the passionate pleading voice in which she spoke it.

"So much was at stake for us," she said. "It seemed a necessity that we must have that letter, that no sudden orders must reach Olvera to-night. For there is some one at Olvera—I must trust you,

you see, though you are pledged enemy—some one of great consequence to us, some one we love, some one to whom we look to revive this Spain of ours. No, it is not our King, but his son—his young and gallant son. He will be gone to-morrow, but he is Olvera to-night. And so when Esteban found out to-day that orders were to be sent to the commandant there it seemed we had no choice. It seemed those orders must not reach him, and it seemed therefore—just so that no hurt might be done, which otherwise would surely have been done, whatever I might order or forbid—that I must use a woman's way and secure the letter."

"And the bearer?" asked Shere, advancing to the table. "What of him? He, I suppose, might creep back to Ronda, broken in honor and with a lie to tell? The best lie he could invent. Or would you have helped him to the lie?"

Christina shrank away from the table as though she had been struck.

"You had not thought of his plight," continued Shere. "He rides out from Ronda an honest soldier and returns—what? No more a soldier than this glove of yours in your hand," and taking up one of the gloves he held it for a moment, and then tossed it down at a distance from its fellow. He deliberately turned his back to the table as Christina replied.

"The bearer would be just our pledged enemy—pledged to outwit us, as we are to outwit him. But when you came there was no effort made to outwit you. Own that at all events; you carry your orders safely, with your honor safe, though the consequence may be disaster for us, and disgrace for that we did not prevent you. Own that! You and I, I suppose, will meet no more. So you might own this, that I have used no tricks with you."

The appeal coming as an answer to his insult and contempt, and coming from one whose pride he knew to be a real and dominant quality, touched Shere against his expectation. He faced Christina on an impulse to give her the assurance she claimed, but he changed his mind.

"Are you sure of that?" he asked, slowly, for he saw that the gloves, while his back was turned, had again been crossed. He at all events was now sure. He was sure that those crossed gloves were a signal for Esteban, a signal that the letter had not changed hands. "You have used no tricks with me?" he repeated. "Are you sure of that?"

The handle of the door rattled; Christina quickly crossed towards it. Shere followed her, but stopped for the fraction of a second at the table and deliberately and unmistakably placed the gloves in parallel lines. As the door opened he was standing between Christina and the table, blocking it from her view, but not from the view of Esteban in the doorway, and it was Esteban who looked to the table, not Christina. She kept her eyes upon her brother, and when he in his turn looked to her, Shere noticed a glance of comprehension swiftly interchanged. So Shere was confident that he had spoiled this trick of the gloves, and when he took a polite leave of Christina and followed Esteban from the room it was not without an air of triumph.

Christina stood without changing her attitude, except perhaps that she pushed her head forward that she might the better hear the last of her lover's receding steps. When they ceased to sound she ran quickly to the window, opened it, and leaned out that she might the better hear his horse's hooves on the flagged courtyard. She heard besides Esteban's voice speaking amiably, and Shere's making amiable replies. The sharp hard clatter upon the stones softened into the duller thud upon the road, the voices became fainter and lost their character. Then one clear "Good-night" rang out loudly, and was followed by the quick beats of a horse trotting. Christina slowly closed the window and turned her eyes upon the room. She saw the lamp upon the table, and the gloves in parallel lines beneath it.

Now Shere was so far right in that the gloves were intended as a signal for Esteban; only owing to that complete revulsion of which the padre had foreseen the possibility Shere had mistaken its intention. The passionate believer had become the passionate cynic. He saw the trick, and setting no trust in the girl who played it, heeding neither her looks nor words nor the sincerity of her voice, had no doubt that it was aimed against him; whereas it was aimed to protect him. Shere had no doubt that the gloves crossed meant that he still had the seal

letter in his keeping, and therefore he disarranged them. But in truth the gloves crossed meant that Christina had it, and that the messenger might go unhindered upon his way.

Christina uttered no cry. She simply did not believe what her eyes saw. She needed to touch the gloves before she was convinced, and when she had done that she was at once not sure but that she herself in touching them had ranged them in these lines. In the end, however, she understood, not the how or why, but the mere fact. She ran to the door, along the gallery, down the steps and in to the courtyard. She met no one. The house might have been a deserted ruin from its silence. She crossed the courtyard to the glimmering white walls, and passed through the gates on to the road. The night was clear; and ahead of her far away in the middle of the road a lantern shone very red. Christina ran towards it, and as she approached she saw faces like miniatures grouped above it. They did not heed her until she was close upon them, until she had noticed one man holding a riderless horse apart from the group, and another coiling up a stout. Then Esteban, who was holding the lantern, raised his hand to keep her back.

"There has been an accident," said he. "He fell, and fell awkwardly, the horse with him."

"An accident," said Christina, and she pointed to the coil of rope. "Are ropes stretched across the road by accident?" It was no use for her now to say that she had forbidden violence. Indeed, at no time, as she had told Shere, would it have been of any use. She pushed through the group to where Dennis Shere lay on the ground, his face white and shiny and tortured with pain. She knelt down and took his head in her hands as though she would raise it on to her lap, but one man stopped her, saying, "It is his back, señora." Shere opened his eyes and saw who it was that bent over him, and Christina, reading their look, was appalled. It was surely impossible that human eyes could carry so much hate. His lips moved, and she leaned her ear close to his mouth to catch

the words. But it was only one word he spoke and repeated: "Tricks! Tricks!"

There was no time to disprove or explain. Christina had but one argument. She kissed him on the lips.

"This is no trick," she cried, and Esteban, laying a hand upon her shoulder, said, "He does not hear, nor can his lips answer"; and Esteban spoke the truth. Shere had not heard, and never would hear, as Christina knew. He had died at the moment when her lips touched his.

"He still has the letter," said Esteban. Christina thrust him back with her hand and crouched over the dead man, protecting him. In a little she said, "True, there is the letter." She unbuttoned Shere's jacket and gently took the letter from his breast. Then she knelt back and looked at the superscription without speaking. Esteban opened the door of the lantern and held the flame towards her. "No," said she, strangely calm. "It had better go to Olvera."

She rode to Olvera that night. They let her go, deceived by her composure and thinking that she meant to carry it to "the man of great consequence." But Christina's composure meant nothing more than that her mind and her feelings were numbed. She was conscious of only one conviction, that Shere must not fail in his duty, since he had staked his honor upon its fulfillment. And so she rode straight to the commandant's quarters at Olvera, and telling of an accident to the bearer, handed him the letter. The commandant read it, and was most politely distressed that Christina should have put herself to so much trouble, for the orders merely recalled his contingent to Ronda in the morning. It was about this time that Christina began to understand precisely what had happened.

(Concluded.)

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