



ST. BENEDICT'S TRUNCHEON (CLUB)

One evening, toward the end of the twelfth century, a knight attended by his squire and a slave, all on horseback, might have been seen riding down the descent to the valley wherein are now the ruins of the Benedictine monastery of San Cugat des Valles. The knight's visor was lowered, his shield hung from his neck, and it was evident that the escutcheon (emblem) it had borne was now effaced; these signs, and his wholly unarmed state, showed that he had been vanquished in some encounter.

On reaching the abbey he told his squire call at the gate; a lay brother answered, and the knight inquired for the abbot. "What name am I to give him?" asked the brother. Tell him," replied the knight, in a low voice and without uncovering," that Giraldo de Mataplana desires speech of him."

All three dismounted and waited a while, for the lay brother had to traverse many a court and corridor before he could find the father abbot. At last he came back and announced that the abbot would see the knight with pleasure. "I suppose," added the brother, "that you will pass the night here, so I will have your mounts taken to the stables, and your servant to one of the habitations outside the monastery, as we cannot admit a pagan within our cloister. You and your squire can have lodging in the abbey." The knight expressed his thanks and followed the brother into the interior of the monastery, and was conducted by him to the superior's apartments. At length they reached a door decorated with beautiful bas-relief carving. A voice from within bid them enter, and opening the door and crossing the threshold, they stood within the large vaulted cell of the abbot.

The lay brother withdrew. Then the knight took off his helmet, and shaking aside the abundant hair which had fallen over his face displayed to the abbot's eyes a handsome face and masculine features of the pure Spanish type. His pallor and the deep dark circles round his eyes betokened a man of strong passions or heavy sorrows. Tall and slightly built, he was barely thirty years old. He saluted the abbot with dignified courtesy, and waited for the latter to address him. The abbot looked at him, and at once recognized in his visitor a knight of noble stock.

"You are a Mataplana and of noble birth," said the father. "You are welcome to our house. How can the abbot of San Cugat serve you?" "What I have to tell you, father, will take some time," said the knight; "can you hear it?" "I am at your service until we are summoned to choir for our evening office said the prelate pointing to a seat. The knight sat down and began his tale, the color of his cheeks going and coming several times, a circumstance which did not escape his listener's attention.

"When I was a child," began the knight, "I had a sister called Ines, and she could not have been better named, for she was as sweet and lovable as a lamb. My elder brother and I loved her with all the tenderness brother can have for sister, and she not only felt the same toward us, but even when our father, a man of severe ways, was inclined to punish us for our boyish delinquencies, Ines, who was younger than we, would throw her arms round his neck and by her tears and prayers obtain our pardon, whereat he used to say: "This lass will be the cause of all your faults."

"But Ines used to close his mouth with kisses. How beautiful she was! I seem to see her now, standing on the platform of our castle, in her white dress, her ample tresses reaching to the ground.

"The years of our youth sped on. One day there came to visit us the Lady Eleonora de

Heril, a relative of my mother, and with her came her daughter Alemanda. Ines and she became close friends, and when the Lady de Heril was about to take her leave my mother asked her to allow her daughter to remain with us.

"'You have sons,' replied the Senora de Heril to my mother, 'and I hardly think it would be well to leave my Alemanda here. Our neighbors would think I had brought her in search of a husband.'

"'And even if it were so,' said my mother 'what is there so objectionable?' "'Nothing at all, Beatriz,' replied the visitor; 'still I should not like it to be thought I had come with such a purpose.'

"The Lady de Heril, however, yielded to my mother's instances, and Alemanda herself desired nothing better than to remain with her young friend, and so it was decided she should stay with us for two months.

"Alemanda de Heril could not be called a beauty, but she was attractive. She had already seen something of the world, although generally living in her parents' castle. At the time I was quite young my sister Ines was almost the only damsel I had seen; simple and innocent, I was at once captivated with the grace and elegant manners of Alemanda and fell madly in love.

"Although at first she seemed inclined to laugh at me, she afterward gave me hopes. However, she was more intimate with my brother Hugo, who was two years my senior and the heir to our family estates, a circumstance which, I felt, told much against me.

"Hugo and I were deeply attached to each other, and one day when we were alone in our room I told him all that I had on my mind and my apprehensions that he had the chief place in Alemanda's affections.

"'You need have no fear on that score, Giraldo,' said my brother. 'I will tell you a secret, which none but yourself will know. I have already plighted my troth to Columba de Monsonis, and I do not doubt but the match will prove acceptable to my parents and to hers, and if I do not say anything about the matter at present it is simply because we are both too young. And now, having let you into this secret in order to relieve your anxiety, I may warn you in brotherly confidence to beware of Alemanda, for she will deceive you. She has much knowledge of the world and you have very little. As for me, even if I did not love another woman, I should never have placed my affections on Alemanda. Columba is as simple and innocent as Ines, and what I so much prize in her is precisely her unworldliness.'

"I threw myself on my brother's neck and we embraced each other with emotion." 'I feel deep compassion for you, Giraldo,' said Hugo, sadly, 'for I see no remedy for your condition.'

"I pressed my brother to my heart, as I said: 'It is true, Hugo, there is no remedy.' "An affliction was hanging over our household. One day Ines was unable to rise from her bed. An unknown malady-one of those so common at this time, and which devastate whole towns and provinces-had attacked her. Each member of the household vied with every other in his attention to the invalid, and Alemanda scarcely moved from the bedside of her friend. In a few days she died -the angels had a new companion- I had lost my sister, and since have never known happiness."

The knight was silent and buried his face in his hands. He was a man and felt ashamed of weeping, but the abbot saw his tears as they escaped between his fingers.

"Weep, my son, weep," said the abbot. "Tears are not forbidden to us men. I also have shed many tears in my life, for I have lost, as you, those who were near and dear to me."

Dashing away his tears the knight proceeded with tremulous voice: "Ines was interred in the chapel of the castle; all our relatives and friends attended the obsequies. You well know, father abbot, what happens on such occasions, and how for some days the solitary castle becomes peopled with guests and mourners. Ines had been universally beloved, and all acquaintances made a point of paying their last tribute of affection. Among the numerous visitors were the de Herils, and the de Monsonis with their daughter Columba.

"My parents warmly thanked the de Herils for all the kind offices which Alemanda had performed during the illness of Ines, and my mother added with sincere gratitude: 'There is nothing I should like better than that Alemanda were my daughter.'

"Eleonora de Heril felt a certain satisfaction at hearing this, and Alemanda blushed. As for me, I looked at the girl, and it appeared to me that she avoided my eyes.

"A few days passed and then came the eve of the day when our visitors were to leave the castle. "'Leave your daughter with me, Eleonora,' said my mother to the Lady de Heril.

"Impossible, Beatriz,' she answered; 'while Ines was alive it was well, but now when only your sons are in the castle the case is different.'

"My poor mother, bathed in tears, turned to my father, who was as deeply afflicted as she. "'You see, Arnaldo,' said she, 'we have no daughter, I shall die of sorrow;' and she began to weep despairingly.

"Not so, my mother,' said Hugo, kissing her hand. Now is the time to tell you what I have hitherto concealed, and what I had not intended to reveal till later. But I see you feel so desolate, that with my father's permission I will embolden myself to present you another daughter, very like Ines.'

"And taking the hand of Columba de Monsonis, who was seated close by my mother, they both threw themselves on their knees at the feet of my parents, and Hugo said: 'If you consent, I present you a new daughter.'

"And I,' said Columba, 'will do my best to resemble Ines.'

"My parents embraced Hugo and Columba, for she pleased them both, and I embraced my new sister. Eleonora de Heril lost color, and her daughter Alemanda bit her lips.

"Next day our guests departed. On taking leave of Alemanda I said to her: 'And after my brother's wedding, may not I, too, hope to give my parents another daughter? Will not you be Ines' sister, as you were her friend when she was alive?'

"That requires consideration,' said her mother.

"And you, what answer do you make me?' said I to Alemanda.

"I will do what my parents wish,' said she. And so we took leave of each other. I was filled with doubts, but on retiring to my room I saw upon a box a beautifully embroidered scarf. I called some of the waiting-women of the household, and asked who had placed this in my room. Lucia, one of the most confidential servants, told me that Madona Alemanda de Heril had bid her to place in my apartment the scarf which she had embroidered for me. I was half mad for joy, and kissed and kissed the ribbon with all the violent transports of a first passion. "A year passed by, and again our castle was full of guests, but now, instead of the black draperies of mourning, the ancient abode was gay with festive hangings and alive with music and dancing, and Columba de Monsonis was my brother Hugo's bride. Among our visitors some members of the de Heril family were present, but Alemanda did not come. Her mother told me she had gone to stay with one of her aunts, abbess of the monastery of Vallbond, and when mine asked after her, Eleonora replied that she would soon be with us. I felt quite elated at this, for I looked upon it as a promise.

"Time, however, went by, and it was only by some troubadour, vassal, or kinsman that I had tidings of the Lady de Heril, or occasionally was able to send her a letter, which he caused to be read to her, for as you know, father, even princesses hardly know how to read. My life, however, was happy enough, for Columba was a true sister to me, and there was only one thing about which we disagreed.

"Alemanda is deceiving you,' she used to say to me; 'it was for Hugo she came here, not for you; she wanted the heir and not the cadet.'

"But I could not believe this, and grew angry with my sister-in-law; but these quarrels were soon over.

"In about a year after her wedding Columba gave birth to a daughter, who, it was agreed, should be called Ines.

"I was still living in my fool's paradise, when but a few months afterward Columba's brother and his wife came to pay us a visit. I told her of my attachment to Alemanda, which she seemed hardly able to believe.

"Perhaps you consider I do not deserve her? I asked.

"On the contrary,' replied she, 'she does not deserve you.'

"That is the case, Magdalena,' said Columba, who was present; 'I constantly tell my brother that this girl is deceiving him.'

"Why, it is quite certain,' said Magdalena, 'that she will never marry him. She and her mother are destitute of a heart, and keep running about, from castle to castle, wherever there is an heir, on the chance of catching one. At last they have succeeded, as I hear from my brother Roger, at whom she set her cap at one time.'

"I can hardly tell you, father, what a shock this was to me. I perceived at last that Columba was right, and saw clearly enough now that Eleonora de Heril and her daughter had merely come to us to

try and get Hugo, and that they were looking out for an heir. Bursting with vexation, I escaped to my room, where I shut myself in and gave vent to my feelings in a flood of tears.

"She is jilting me for an heir,' thought I". I will be revenged.' I cautiously ascertained the name of Alemanda's betrothed, and next morning at daybreak, taking with me my squire and a Moorish slave, whom the young Monsonis had given me, without taking leave of any one, I set out for the castle of my rival, situated at some leagues' distance. I saw him and spoke to him and showed him the scarf which Aleruanda had embroidered for me. Young, hot-headed, impulsive, like myself, he retorted with insults, and I, quivering with anger, clutched my gauntlet and flung it in his face.

"You, father abbot, know what happens between noblemen in such cases. The combat was hard-fought and lasted long. I do not know all that occurred. He was the more dexterous or the stronger-his weapon entered my breast; I fell vanquished and covered with blood at the feet of my rival.

"I cannot give you the details of what happened afterward- I only know that when I recovered consciousness I found myself in my own room between my father and my mother. and at the foot of my bed were Hugo and his wife. How many days had passed I know not, but my beard had lengthened, my body seemed a skeleton, and the energy of early manhood and the fresh colors of youth had fled forever from my cheeks. Little by little I regained strength. When all that had occurred was brought back to my mind, I realized all the wretchedness of my situation. When I thought of my wasted love, my deceived hopes, and, to crown my woes, perceived that I had lost both honor and health, I thought I should die of very misery of spirit, and, God forgive me, was even minded to take my own life.

"My parents consoled me. Hugo and his wife did all they were able by affectionate converse to occupy my attention, but nothing seemed to alleviate my wretchedness.

"Dishonored! Vanquished!' I used to exclaim, 'I must die.' I erased from my shield the armorial bearings of my family, I sent my sword to my victorious antagonist, and three days ago I left home without taking leave of any one, fleeing almost from my own shadow, and here I have come to you, father, to ask a cell in your monastery, where I may hide my shame and sorrow beneath the monk's habit."

The knight ceased, nor did the abbot at once break silence. The pure lines of his countenance and his handsome features, unmarred by age, remained motionless like some sculptured saint of marble. After the lapse of some minutes he seemed, as it were, to return to himself from some profound meditation, and he said:

"My son, from what I have just heard I am convinced that chagrin and no a vocation has guided you to this cloister. God requires fervent souls or innocent souls, not desperate souls such as yours. The cloister is not for you."

"You reject me, father!" cried the young man, rising to his feet;" I cry to God in my tribulation and he does not hear; what remains to me but despair?"

"You are mad, young man," said the abbot severely. "I have been a knight like yourself. and know what should be done in a case like yours. Quit Catalonia and the kingdom of Aragon and go to Castile, offer your services to the king to combat the infidels, and when you have attained honor and reputation, say to your new sovereign: 'My shield is blank: grant me an escutcheon, your majesty,' and the Castilian monarch, who is a knight to the backbone, will accord your request. Then you will have no difficulty in finding in Castile a lady who, at the least, will be worth an Alemanda de Heril, and who will not jilt you, and there you may lay the foundation of a new knightly house."

"I feel all the excellence of your counsel, father," said Giraldo, "but although the Castilian king and the ladies of the land might know nothing of my dishonor, I could never chase it from my memory, and could never wish anyone to share it with me. No. Here I stay, father abbot, and if you reject me, mayhap you may have tomorrow to answer to God for my life."

"Do you think these threats of suicide frighten me? You have entered these walls in a state of sin, but I will not allow you to remain so in them. Of your life you alone, and not I, have to render an account to God. It is a sacrilege to talk as you do in this sacred enclosure, and I will not suffer it, I warn you. Be brave, as I have been brave; I have challenged death face to face, but have never been cowardly enough to think of taking my own life."

"S' death!" cried Giraldo, beside himself.

"Silence! No blasphemies," said the abbot, and, pointing to the door, added, "Go out."

At this moment the bell of the monastery tower chimed forth its measured summons, calling the monks to choir for the final offices of the day.

"On your knees," said the abbot.

And the knight kneeling, the monk erect-his majestic and athletic figure clothed in the ample folds of the cowl, together they recited the Ave Maria.

The knight felt moved. The silence, broken only by the solemn strokes of the great bell, seemed to be breathing peace into his soul. The abbot, too, on his side, was touched.

Giraldo remained kneeling, his eyes moistened with tears, and the unhappy man stretching out his arms exclaimed:

"Father!"

"My son!" said the abbot.

And they embraced.

"It is late," said the monk; "I will give orders for a cell to be allotted to you; you shall remain with us as long as you wish, and if, later on, Heaven call you to the cloister, I will admit you as a novice. If you elect to return to the world, I myself will give you letters to the King of Castile."

"I wanted to ask you a favor," said the young man with agitated voice; "let me put on the Benedictine habit at once."

"By all means, put it on, and wear it from devotion if you wish, but do not cut your hair until you become a novice, and I will tell you whenever the time for that comes."

"Tomorrow I will dismiss my squire and my servant," said the knight.

"With a letter to your parents telling them that you are here."

"I will do what you tell me, father abbot," said Giraldo, "since henceforth I consider myself your son."

He kissed the abbot's hand, and then a lay brother conducted him to a cell.

Some few minutes later the young knight, clothed in the Benedictine costume, was on his knees in the abbey church, his hands clasped in fervent prayer. The shades of night were beginning to enwrap the spacious temple, with its stout columns supporting the fine vaulting, the sculptured stalls of the choir, with their fretted canopies and finials, and the deep solemn unison of the psalmody added to the impressiveness of the scene as the monks chanted the evening office.

More than a year has passed, and Giraldo is about to enter the novitiate with the approbation of his parents. A great change has been wrought in him. His face, formerly sunburnt, has grown pale and wax-like; his eyes, meek and sad, have sunk and lost their brilliance, and his beard grown long and straggling. He has suffered much, but has conquered his worst enemy - himself - and now at length he can lay his hand upon his heart and say "Peace." But such struggles ever leave their trace. The dead pallor of Giraldo, his transparent hands, betoken the beginning of a terrible malady; and on this account the abbot dispensed him from many fasts and other severities of the Rule, and allowed him to take frequent walks. During one of these Giraldo came upon a monk who was gathering vegetables in the monastery garden and, during his work, humming some strains in honor of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

"You seem very happy, brother," said Giraldo. "No one can be more so in this world," said the lay brother; "there is only one thing which gives me anxiety - St. Benedict's cudgel."

"St. Benedict's cudgel! What is that?"

"You do not know! Well, as I have cut all my vegetables, I will tell you what every one here knows about St. Benedict's cudgel."

The brother sat down under the shade of a tree, taking up an unfinished basket upon his knees and began to complete it, and invited Giraldo to take a seat at his side.

"We have in our order a tradition many centuries old. Our holy father, St. Benedict, while in life so loved his children that, fearing they might grow lax after his death, he begged of God the favor that he might have power to warn them of their death.

"But such graces are accorded only to perfect souls, and the saint's prayer was granted so far that in any monastery of men or women of his order where a death was to happen there should be heard the sound of blows if delivered against a wall; and this was to serve as a monition to all to put themselves in a fitting state to die - and this warning is called St. Benedict's club."

"And have you ever heard it, brother?" inquired Giraldo.

"More than once, and others with me. The monk who died last said to me one day:

'Brother Raymond, one of us has to leave this world, for in the dead hours of this very night I heard St. Benedict's club;' and in fact he died very shortly afterward—a soul truly devoted to God, be it said by the way."

Giraldo rose pensively - what if this cudgel of St. Benedict should be true, he thought.

And when he next saw the father abbot he asked him.

"I know not what to say," answered the prelate; "the story finds much credit in all houses of our order; of course, no one need believe it, nor, on the other hand, has any abbot or abbess forbidden the belief, and so you may think as you like about it."

Giraldo took a turn round the cloister with the abbot.

The young man was pensive and silent; at last, however, he said to the superior:

"Will you not permit me to begin the novitiate before the mace of St. Benedict summons me?"

"I have great confidence in God," said the abbot, "and believe that it will be many years before you hear it. You are young. It will sound for me long before you are called. But that you may know my affection for you, prepare to receive our holy habit and enter the novitiate tomorrow."

Giraldo fell upon his knees and kissed the hem of the abbot's scapular.

"My son," said the elder, raising the younger, "I embrace you with all my heart," and as he clasped him in his arms Giraldo cried with moist eye: "Ah! now I would fain hear St. Benedict's mace! This is the only happy moment I have had since my dishonor."

"No," said the abbot, "you must live, in order one day to wield in this monastery the abbatial staff."

"No, master and father," said Giraldo, "I aspire no further than to put on the habit and become a child of your holy founder."

At this moment a lay brother presented himself and announced to the abbot that his nephew asked to see him.

"My nephew? _I am glad," said the abbot, and he went off to receive him, while Giraldo betook himself to his cell, repeatedly asking himself, "Is this mace of St. Benedict true?—"

When he had reached his cell Giraldo took up a volume of the Sacred Scripture, and began to read—it was one of the manuscripts written and illustrated with miniatures in the scriptorium of the monastery.

Giraldo had been some time absorbed in his reading; a voice which he seemed to know reached his ears. He went out into the cloister and saw the abbot and his nephew walking up and down. All color fled from the young man's face; in the abbot's kinsman he had recognized his vanquisher. He went back to his cell, where he sank into a desperate melancholy—he thought he should die. When the bell summoned to the midday meal he begged a lay brother to tell the father abbot that it was impossible for him to go to the refectory, as he felt very ill. A monk versed in medicine went to his cell, found him suffering from fever, and ordered him cooling drinks and complete repose. But who in Giraldo's situation could rest? His temples were burning, his heart bounded so that it seemed as if it would leap from his body, while a tempting demon whispered in his ears: "Dishonored, undone! and thy enemy, the author of thy ruin, here within reach of thy hand!"

The unhappy man, a prey to raging fever, rolled and writhed on the floor of his cell; he kept asking for God's forgiveness and aid, but the tempter cried in his ear: "This man is close by, and there is a dagger in your cell."

And Giraldo, with half-suppressed sobs and sighs, cried: "No, no, O God! I forgive him." ..

But the tempter kept saying to him:

"He overthrew you and trampled you on the ground."

Then came the night—a terrible night—a night which, as if nature were in a sarcastic mood, was fine and bright as few nights are. The abbot's visitor had just retired to bed in a cell situated at the extremity of the cloister. The cells were without locks; they had only a bolt by which the door could be opened or closed from either side. The long arcade itself was almost in darkness; alone a tiny lamp burned before a great picture whereon the dark robed figure of St. Benedict stood out against a golden background. The monks had sought their cells; the abode of piety and recollection was wrapped in the stillness of repose, when a dark figure made its way along the cloister. It was the poor, delirious Giraldo. His eyes were suddenly met by the great picture of the founder, and a terror seized him which made him tremble in every limb.

"No, no," he reiterated aloud, "I cannot do it."

"It is thy victorious enemy and the husband of Alemanda."

The fever-stricken wretch cried, with a delirious laugh, as he clutched a dagger: " Yes, yes—he shall die! "And with his brain on fire, he made his way to the stranger's cell. And then it seemed to him as if all the strange and grisly figures which formed the capitals of the cloister columns had sprung from their places, and the imps and gargoyles and vestigios executed a weird dance around him, uttering unearthly shrieks and yells. But the desperate man, a prey to fever, beside himself with the struggle between passion and piety, had his finger on the bolt of the stranger's door. He was about to draw it back, when he heard the deep, dull sound of a blow, as if delivered from a mace or club against the wall hard by ; again he heard the blow and again a third time.

The unhappy man fell paralyzed to the ground. " St. Benedict's mace!" he cried, " oh, pardon, pardon."

When he returned to consciousness Giraldo found himself in his cell; close to his bed stood the abbot, pale and severe-looking.

The young man closed his eyes again, but the superior said dryly, " I am listening."

"Father," exclaimed Giraldo, "you are my master—you are sovereign here—order me what punishment you deem fitting—for I was about to commit a murder."

" I am listening," said the abbot again, in the same tone and maintaining his attitude.

Then Giraldo related to the prelate all that had happened during the night.

The abbot answered: " You were out of your mind—you were delirious from fever; that is the belief of all the monks."

" And you, father?"

" I believe that the God of mercies took pity on you and willed that you should not be an assassin."

" And your nephew, did he see me?"

" But with your long beard and in your monk's habit he did not know you and will not recognize you."

" Your goodness overwhelms me," said Giraldo.

The abbot was touched, and, yielding to an impulse of tenderness, kissed the young man's forehead.

" Poor, insensate man, how I compassionate you ! "

" Oh, thanks, thanks," said the invalid ; " God, too, will forgive me. No, no, it was not I myself that was about to commit a crime so dastardly."

Three days later the abbot's nephew quitted the monastery.

" I heard you had married," the abbot said to him at leave-taking.

"Yes" replied his visitor "with a young Frenchwoman, daughter of one of the best families of that kingdom."

" I was under the impression you had chosen a bride from the house of de Heril ."

" That was the case, uncle, but Alemanda de Heril has neither heart nor honor, and I broke with her; you may rest assured that a woman like her will never marry a nobleman who has any regard for his birth ."

Next day Giraldo entered the novitiate. It seemed as if a burden had been lifted from him—

he felt happy and even light-hearted; but the terrible mace had given its warning, and a few days later the new novice had taken to his bed.

" You are ill , " said the abbot, "and in these cases our Rule permits us to dispense with the usual term of noviceship. Tomorrow you shall be professed."

"Tomorrow!" said the sick man, " tomorrow will be too late. The consumption which is carrying me to the tomb has made progress during the past night. Let me take my vows today, father, and I entreat you to allow great picture of St. Benedict, which hangs in the cloister, to be brought into my cell."

Giraldo's wishes were granted, and he made his profession to the father abbot. As he lay outstretched on his bed with the black habit on his emaciated body, he confessed his sin before all the monks and asked pardon of God.

Then he sank into a kind of trance; his eyes, already glassy from the approach of death, remained fixed upon the painting of St. Benedict, and soon, fervently crossing his hands on his breast, a smile formed on his features. Then was heard the sound of three blows, which sent a thrill through the community, and the figure in the picture seemed to become animate" St. Benedict's mace!" exclaimed the brothers with one voice.

The abbot stood up and said solemnly, " Brethren, a soul appears this moment before the Eternal Judge. Pray for it."

The monastery bells rang out the funeral peal, while the strong-voiced choir of the monks chanted the office of the dead.