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A Romancer's Local Colour

S.R.Crockett

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A Romancer's Local Colour

I sing 'N.&G'! Very modest are Messrs. Newman & Guardia, but there is no need that I should be modest for them. So far as I am concerned they have added to life a new and wealthy province, a kingdom of the earth and air, a sea domain wide as the waters to which men go down in ships, a large and cheerful place lighted with the light of love and merry with children's laughters. Also because they have in one very important direction, lightened my life's labour, and in another given an edge of enjoyment to every holiday, I mean to put my gratitude on record for the sake of others, - and that without request on their part or reluctance on mind.

But in order fully to explain how they have done that it is necessary to be somewhat autobiographical, a privilege generally reserved for men in their dotage. 'Mr. So-and-So, the distinguished author, is writing his reminiscences' – the notice in the Literary Gossip column intimates without reading between the lines that the aforesaid D.A. had better be looked after by his friends. But on this occasion I hope that my slip from virtue may be forgiven, in that, like the French lady's accident, 'it is such a little one'!

From my youth up, then, I have been the possessor of a memory which, remarkable enough in its way, is yet at times inconvenient, and even sufficiently exasperating. Not that I have ever knowingly 'cultivated' it by any of the thousand systems which have come into vogue during the last twenty years. I never set it a single task with the intention of strengthening its fibre. Like my compeers at school and college I learned no more than I could help. I never could get anything accurately 'by heart' all the days of me. It is a sheer impossibility for me to 'quote correctly' – as a distinguished critic says every gentleman ought to be able to do. What is of infinitely less moment is that I cannot recall any couplet or line of prose I have ever written.

Yet for all this I have a somewhat unique memory – of a kind. Perhaps you have seen, in the darksome shadow of a mine, a grimy little imp sitting deep in the gloom, a pencil and notebook in his hand, a modicum of Sixth Standard arithmetic in his head, taking note of the truck-loads of coal as they are brought out under the pit ‘eye.’ He scuttles out into the half-light for a moment, jots down a figure or two, and is back in his den again before the next trolley comes clattering by.

That is just the kind of memory I have – with this important exception, that whereas this grimy ‘checker’ takes note only of facts apposite, useful, pertinent to his master’s purpose, my particular imp delights to let the really serviceable and important slip unrecorded past, while, if there be any series of facts particularly useless and offensively gratuitous, these he will toil after and record with a fulness of detail and a precision of statement worthy of a British Museum Catalogue. For instance, I am prepared to furnish to the Great Northern Railway Company a correct list of carriages composing their East Coast Express upon the last half-dozen occasions on which I have travelled by that excellent route. I know the numbers of the engines, the order of the carriages, the position and general content of the luggage compartments. I could also, if called upon, supply the police with fair working descriptions of the officials on duty on these occasions, the loiterers about the stations, and the passengers, ordinary and extraordinary. None of this information can ever be of the slightest use to me. It does not, happily for myself, remain always as vivid, but is gradually regulated to a limbo or cobwebby mental garret of similar debris. But yet I do not forget even this, I only mislay it. For scraps from this rubbish heap often stand clear again after years in the visions of the night or when I get my next slight return of an old malarial fever.

In fact this Imp of Memory never seems to forget anything absolutely, save what is useful and necessary. He will carefully preserve old washing lists marked ‘paid’, pages of ancient college text-books scored in red and blue and green against the next examination day, the exact appearance of a bank of grasses and flowers and brambles which all went to mere top-dressing thirty long years ago. But ask the fellow to turn up something useful at a moment’s notice, and will he? No – several thousand times no, indeed!

He is like our northern Brownie – the domestic spirit and Lob-lie-by-the-fire of a Scottish farm town; he will work – so long as he is not pressed, so long as no one by a look or a whisper hints that he is expected to work. But the instant the slightest compulsion is laid upon him, at the least hint of bit or bridle, he firms his legs beneath him like a balky horse, and will not move one inch either for whip or spur.

It was long before I learned to humour this tricky Puck, and stern necessity alone taught me how. But I have well learned now, and during these last years the notable Shaftesbury Avenue firm have aided me beyond all hope in the task of putting the harness upon my jerky Pegasus, and helped me also to hold the carrots to his nose.

For to a journeyman of letters, specially if he work in the importunate province of

serial fiction, nothing is more necessary than a ready memory. He must carry every fact and impression indexed, arranged, and filed for reference, each in its own snug cell up there among the grey matter of his brain – or, if not there, somewhere else equally handy.

He is writing, let us say, a tale of the later seventeenth century in Scotland. The long-parted lovers are escaping. The stern parent, cruel persecutor that he is, follows hot on the trail. Well wots the romancer that if the story is to be read with a rush, it must be written with a rush. The eye of the reader will not brighten or his breath slacken till it well nigh stands still, unless his own fingers trip it feately over the paper. After imagination gets the steam up it will not do to stop and find out if there were really carriages and carriage roads in that part of the country in 1689. He must know as well as he knows the best ten miles of cycling road in his neighbourhood what bridges were built, what fords over great waters were to be crossed, what hills the heroine looks upon when like a dove she mourns at the windows of her captivity. What is more, he must not pause to look up Slezer's invaluable 'Theatre' nor yet to pull down the dog-eared oblong Road-book, nor hunt in the crabbed italic of Pont's Atlas for what he wants. Even the most jog-trot and pedestrian muse will desert him on such provocation. Pegasus, an he were the veriest cart-horse, is off with a flourish of heels. The romancer, in fact, must keep all his exhibitionary facts in a cabinet with labelled drawers, of which the fittings slide easily and the contents lie ready to his hand. He must make no mistakes or Nemesis waits. The reviewer has also (generally recently) passed the sixth standard.

There is now no more any seacoast to Bohemia. Even the mighty Wizard himself dare not write 'Guy Mannering' without ever having set foot in Galloway, or Defoe be content to make his acquaintance with Selkirk's Island upon the quays of Bristol. The critic has made an Iron Age and called it realism. Imagination must lurk behind the most perfect knowledge. To one belong the shining steel muscles and iron bowels of the steamship, to another the moving shuttles and kindly peat-hearths of a northern village, to yet another the 'one-horse' towns of the West, past which the steamers with their thirty-foot wheels plough the great Mississippi. But of each it is required that his facts shall be so and not otherwise. He may idealise, but he must know what the real is. He may 'learn to drop the *'By'r-lady's* from every word he slings,' but though he omits them on paper they must ring in his ear as he writes.

For this new demand of the closing years of the century upon imaginative writers, the term 'local colour' has been transferred from the painter's kindred art. It is convenient but inaccurate, and the term has been much abused. It is by no means sufficient to visit a district with notebook and camera during a brief summer holiday in order to write a book about it, with the 'local colour' ground out to order by the mere 'pressing of a button.'

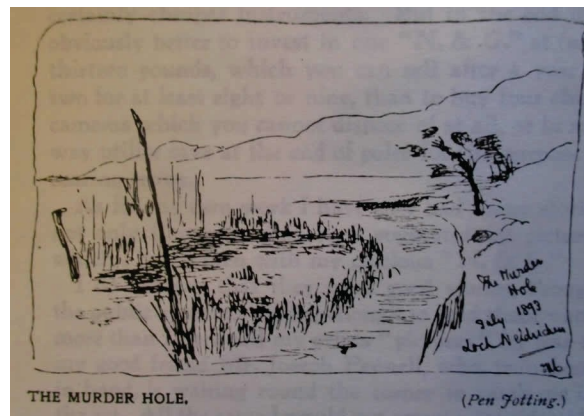
For myself I like at the very least three years of prolonged residence and extensive walking tours, living with the people in cottage and farm house, rest-house and roadside inn, before I begin even to draw up chapter-headings. And this is just as

necessary upon ground with every foot of which I have been familiar from youth as upon the tawny hills of Spain or the Baltic marshes.

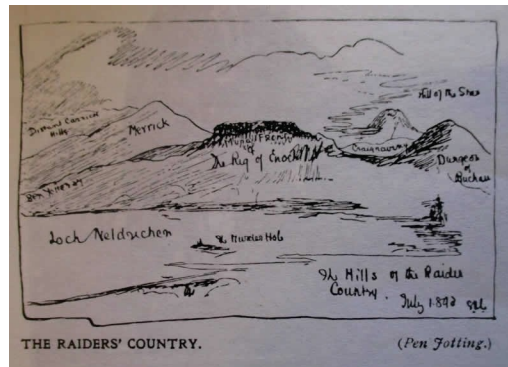
Possessing as I do so tricksome and fallacious a memory, I had of necessity to take strong steps in the matter. And now at the time of writing, over two hundred volumes of indexed cuttings, over a thousand notebooks, and a great multitude which no man can number of shorthand scribblings that it were arrant flattery to call sketches, attest at least diligence and good intent.

With a callousness born of many years' suffering at the hands of reviewers I now proceed to lay bare the nakedness of the land. These methods of mine may do no good to human soul, but at least they have a certain psychological interest as showing how a fairly accurate and serviceably indexed memory has been formed out of very imperfect materials.

It is possible that some of my readers may have looked into a book called 'The Raiders.' If so, they may be interested to see the original fountain-pen dot-and-dash which served while writing to recall the grim Murder Hole on the western shores of Loch Neldricken.



Or again, here is a memorandum of a few lines and several scribbled names, each one of which touches the spring of a drawer up aloft in the dominions of the Mnemonic Imp. The lines are nothing, but to me the written words recall all the great array of the central Highlands of Galloway – Ben Yelleray, the Hill of the Eagle, the weird and lonesome Nick o' the Dead Wife, the murder-haunted Hill of the Star, treacherous granite-girt Loch Neldricken, utmost Enoch, and that vast Dungeon of Buchan out of whose gigantic cauldron the mists bubble up like the boiling of a pot – these with their tales, legends, crimes, come back to me in all the glory of their changeful beauty as I look at that crabbed arrangement of names.



Still the method was undeniably cumbrous, and I had to return again and again to the same spot in order to carry away a working impression. Indeed, like one of their own steadfast ghosts I grew to haunt these headquarters of legend. But I yearned for some method more complete, certain, and permanent, of recording and filing these impressions.

So in a moment of inspiration it chanced that I strolled into a railway terminus. I stood a moment undecided at the bookstall and then demanded a copy of 'Nature.' brisk young gentleman behind the counter offered me a choice between 'Tit-Bits' and 'The British Journal of Photography.' Being at the moment frivolously inclined I chose the latter, and lo, on the second page I saw for the first time the mystic letters 'N.&G.' It was a modest advertisement, drawn up with the lack of enthusiasm of a builder's specification. Messers. Newman & Guardia did not announce themselves as the 'Great and Only' of photography. They did not offer a selection of cameras at prices varying from seven and sixpence to fifty pounds, each only representing various superlatives of the adjective 'perfect.' They did not abuse other makers. In fact, they employed none of the time-honoured methods of the photographic advertiser who 'keeps abreast of the times.' All the same their straightforward offer to provide a scientific instrument capable of infallibly producing certain results sent them direct from the station book-stall not the least constant and grateful of their customers.

I was not exactly new to photography.

From my youth up I had dabbled (literally) in the great trouser-staining science. Sixteen years before Mr Hume of Edinburgh had sent to the Alps the first camera with which I had ever any practical acquaintance. To this day I possess some of the proofs of that early enthusiasm. At that time I had a friend with me, and we assisted

each other with kindred ignorance, light-hearted and various. We had an English camera, Swiss chemicals, Belgian plates (made by a Dr. Somebody), German weights and measures, a lack of information at once complete and cheerful, and our results were, to say the least of it, remarkable.

Yes, they certainly have a right to be called so. We anticipated, indeed, some of the most remarkable photographic discoveries of the present day. We discovered, for instance, that it is possible to develop and fix (in spots) at the same time. Colour photography is new, is it? Why, I have a print of an ascent of the Matterhorn coloured as brilliantly as an anatomical drawing, and that without the use of pigments. Another of a lady would be even more beautiful if the delicate pink of her cheeks had not overrun, or as it were, culminated at the point of her nose! Another has been supposed by frivolous persons to represent Dante's first view of the infernal regions, with attendant devils, and I admit that to the hasty and inaccurate observer there is much which might support this view. It is really a collection of guides standing at gaze upon a mountain summit. The brown of their weather-stained leggings is remarkably lifelike, and I have little doubt that the papers would now be squabbling as to which of us was the inventor and which the dupe (the Niepce and Daguerre of colour photography) had it not been that by some chance of chemical action or imperfect washing in hotel basins the snow-clad mountain tops came out a vivid crimson. Indeed our process broke down just at that point. By no possibility could we produce the same result twice running.

However, let it be said for us that we did not intend our prints to come out coloured in prismatic hues. And if we achieved so much without trying, what might we not have done if we had really tried!

My next adventure was made with a roller-film, wind 'em-round-the-spool-*click*-and

—away-she-goes machine. I never was master of that tricksome instrument. Perhaps I had not the necessary hydraulic machinery to keep the film from rolling itself as tight as a cigar as soon as the developer was poured on. It may be that I did not possess the right kind of scissors, for the negatives came up uniformly cut through the middle, except when the leading figure was placed at the side according to the correctest canons of composition. Then he was accurately divided as Solomen proposed to do with the babe claimed by two mothers. I also discovered, while in possession of this camera, to what a number of uses thin roller-film may be put after it is spoiled. It makes good fire crackers when stuffed with sporting powder. No Glorious Fourth can be truly glorious without them. Cut into thin strips it makes good bait for minnows. No despicable sticking-plaster may be manufactured therefrom. With the addition of fish-glue it mends windows to admiration. It makes pretty finger-plates for doors. With it you can construct the loveliest navies that sail the waters of any tub, and afterwards the boy can for a brief space 'stand on the burning deck' as soon as you put a match to them.

This refers to the dear old roller-film of ten or twelve years ago, which was thinner, crinklier, more generally loveable article of commerce. Of the new kind I have no experience. As my friend Mr. Bassano says, 'You can photograph with it, but it will not catch fish.' Our acted quite contrariwise. We caught minnows but no masterpieces.

So much for the boasted march of improvement! Is not this enough to make us all ask ourselves the question – well, I don't know what question – but some question?

Since then I have tried nearly every kind and sort of camera that has been put upon the market. I was not happy till I got them. I was even less happy until I got rid of them – generally (though not inevitably) at some pecuniary loss. I became, in fact, an amateur of failures. I think I must have the finest collection of spoilt plates in England. Once I was showing a friend of mine a good tomato-frame, entirely constructed of spoiled ***** plates, and advising him always to use that quality of glass for his, if he wanted the best table vegetables, when he turned to me and said, shaking his head, 'Sir, I have *no* spoilt plates. I never make a failure!'

So I went into the house and got him a little hatchet and a book called 'The Early Years of George Washington.'

I know well that these failures were by no means the fault of the cameras I bought. They were due to my own carelessness, or haste, or idiocy, or something. I know this, because the advertisements were generally accompanied by prints which the makers had made with the identically same camera they sold me. Besides which, there were enlargements six feet square to be seen in their windows – also made with the camera by turning it back side first. I could not do this, so I cleared out at a loss.

No, I could not do these things; and – to tell the truth, I don't think the other fellows who bought second-hand from me could either. For they generally wanted me to take the camera back after a week. It took them about that time to discover that the shutter jarred with a recoil like that of an elephant gun; that the beautiful changing-gear generally changed all the plates at once instead of one at a time, or that the splendidly-adjusted patent springs jammed and refused to change at all. I would have none of this because (so I pointed out) this was entirely the other fellow's fault. For the makers continued to produce the most beautiful pictures with the self-same instrument, with never a failure (at least in their shop windows).

At this point my friends usually asked me why I had misled them into the belief that I only said 'because I was giving up photography.' But again I referred them to the maker's advertisements, and in addition told them this little moral tale.

'Said the chairman of one Scottish school-board to the chairman of another Scottish school-board, 'Why did you give that teacher you sent us so good a character? Why, the fellow is perfectly useless!'

His friend replied, 'Eh, man, ye'll hae to gie him a far better character before *ye* get rid o' him!'

Thus, through suffering, personal and vicarious, the way was being prepared for 'N.&G.'

Now I am no special pleader. Mr. Guardia has not offered me a percentage on sales.

(I wish he would!) I do not know anything whatever about the firm save that they have made my work easier and my life brighter, and so, with the easy benevolence which costs nothing, I am eager that others should go and do likewise. There may be cameras as good – though I have never seen them, and I believe I have tried all that aspire to that honour. There are certainly cheaper instruments. But in the end it is obviously better to invest in one ‘N.&G.’ at (say) thirteen pounds, which you can sell after a year or two for eight or nine, than to buy four cheap cameras which you cannot dispose of at all, or in any way utilise at the end of poles for the purpose of scaring crows.

As for my own work I have not had many stories not only illustrated but even suggested by pictures which I have taken with my precious ‘N.&G.’

I do not say that they were good stories, though the public appeared willing enough to read them – any more than I dare call my prints ‘pictures’ for fear of my good friend Mr Joseph Pennell, who, truncheon in hand, is waiting round the corner to catch me in the act. All the same I would not accept a considerable sum for my collection of some 6,000 ‘records’ taken in half-a-score of countries – few of them in large towns or of buildings which have been photographed before, but of highways and byways, of land-thieves and water-thieves. Portuguese muleteers, Iberian shepherds, naked Berber children playing under the scanty edge-wise shade of palms

– a thousand types of human folk and a thousand nooks and corners of landscape before set down by the quick pencil of the sun



Look, for instance at this idyll of the street which I seized at the great door of the Cathedral of a certain Gascon city altogether given up to the dull horrors and the speculative builder. ‘*Voilà des Anglais!*’ is its name. For a party of English, dust-

wrapped and red-Baedecker-ed is gazing upwards at the towers from the little square of the market-place. At the door of the Cathedral the old vendor of votive candles and pictures of the Virgin has been sitting. To her enter a 'friend of the country,' market-basket in one hand, great blue cotton umbrella in the other. She sets her treasures down to remain under the care of the seller of holy things while she goes within to say her faithful prayers. She has concluded her bargainings not unsuccessfully, and now, like a good Christian, does not wish to leave the town till she is on the best of terms with God and man.

But the quick eye of her friend, ever sedulous after a new thing, is caught by the strange uncivilized tribe, who yet carry all the money of the world in their breeches pockets.

'*Vite! – Vite!*' she cries, turning her gossip about and pointing with a hand in which you can still see the knitting thread. 'See the English!' Are they not a people *fort curieux?*'

So the poor old peasant woman follows the index finger hastily and tremulously, and I can see all her life that look. No! You are right. None other can see it but I – all the shrewdness, the self-repression, the humour which through a long life has supported her under the strange ways of Providence and the peculiarities of men. She lost a son (or was it two?) in the war. It was Metz in the days of the Great Betrayal.

But she is not yet too old to be amused. 'That people should live like that! That they should dress so outlandishly, and go staring about at what nobody else ever glances at. There is a great slate loose somewhere! But after all – time speeds – to prayers!'

And so presently, with basket on arm and blue umbrella tapping the cobbles, she wends her way out of the city, along the dusty highways, and so home – where Jules will be already ravening for his dinner!

That is only a part of what I see that you do not – because I was there, and glancing momentarily along the top of my 'N.&G.', caught the idyll, as like a bubble it hung suspended in mid-air.

No – they are not pictures in any proper sense of the word, Mr. Pennell is right. But to me at least almost every one of these six thousand is a trigger-pull, an 'Open Sesame,' a key-word, the label on a full drawer which contains many rich things.

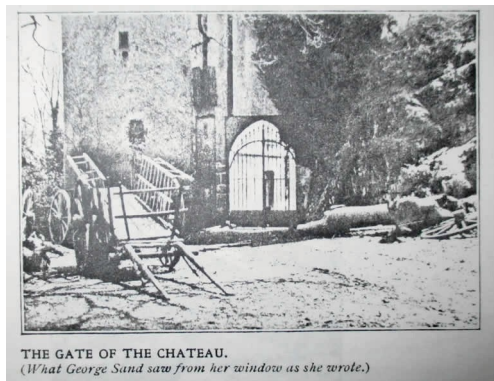
I can only select a few of the most suggestive, nor can I in a brief paper like this do the least justice to what they tell me.



GEORGE SAND'S COTTAGE: HIGH NOON.

(marked "paid")

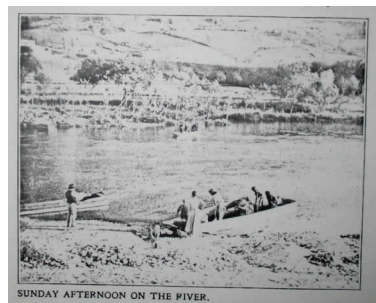
Here for instance is George Sand's house at Garglisse on the Creuse. Down those steps the great writer tripped many a day just as hot, with her morning's work behind her and the quiet of 'My Village' all about.



THE GATE OF THE CHATEAU.

(What George Sand saw from her window as she wrote.)

Here is the gate of the chateau through whose bars she looked, nor ever envied the great folk within. It also is now given over, if not to the moles and the bats, at least to the bleak boarded window and the scuttling indigent rat.



SUNDAY AFTERNOON ON THE RIVER.

Here again are boat-loads of summer-Sundaying happy folk on the loveliest river in France, where all rivers are lovely. But I will keep the name of it to myself. Here (and one of my most cherished is the great Moorish Waterwheel which lifts the

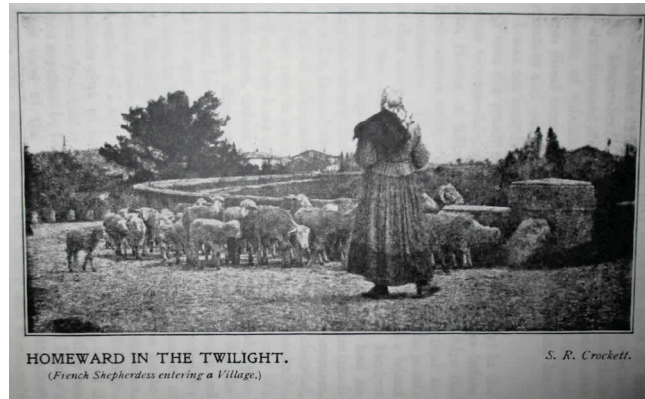
precious waters of the Segura eighty feet into the air, before sending them through a myriad runnels and rivulets to make yet more luxuriant the voluptuous huerta of Murcia.



Hundreds of years ago the Moors made it. It has been so often repaired that I question if any of the original wood remain unrotted. But there, with the last light of sunset streaming through it, the great circle moves round slow and stately, no derelict, but doing each day its full day's 'darg', spouting waste water, it is true, at every pore – but out of its superabundance, not from any infirmity of age.

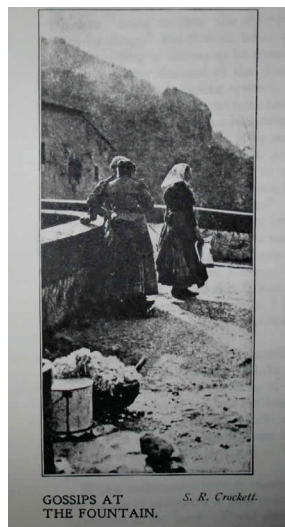


Next, almost at random, I lift an impression of the town drummer of Mende making a proclamation of M. Deroulede's meeting. The tap of his drumsticks is still as clear in my ear as the clatter of his pointed sabots over the *pavé*.



Again, in the mellow evening light see the shepherdess of Provence lead her easy-minded flock across the famous bridge of Beaucaire (which Tartarin so often crossed) into the shade of King Rene's grim fortress in the town of Tarascon.

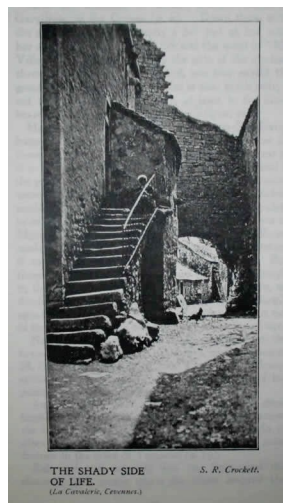
Soft and rose-coloured was the light, and the shadows dark purple where the sheep cropped the sweet grasses underneath the low coping of Beaucaire bridge.



But whether of shepherdess or of housewife, to woman's work there is no end. These three women in the next picture have been cleansing the fine wool for tomorrow's spinning, and drawing the water for the kitchen. Only for a single stolen minute have they stopped to gossip on the bridge under the rocky fortress of Gaston de Foix. But I was at their back, and there on the Bridge of Foix they will stand for many and many a year.



Yet even to such at last comes rest, and here – the picture lies to my hand – is the little Camisard village of La Cavalerie, which held out so long against all the forces of Le Grand Monarque. See she sits safe and snug behind the wall which the Protestant peasants built with their own hands, not one of them being skilled in masonry, yet which sufficed to keep His Grace of Guise at bay till the dark days were overpast.



The sunshine was slanting athwart it as I took the picture, and the grandmother sitting out her life peacefully in the shade, knitting away at her embroidery frame, while beneath, in the noonday glare, the village poultry with amateur scavengery improved the shining hour.



Again upon the bridge at Argenton (it will not be hid from my readers that I love bridges, and am accustomed to lie in wait upon them) behold Monsieur pause to speak with Madame. 'Why has she not sold her goat – so fine an animal! *Parbleu* – it has not to be understood – but doubtless Madame has put a large reserve price upon so noble a beast.' And in front of them sturdy little Jeanette trudges past with her umbrella and her yard-long loaf – a true staff of life indeed. For that is the way they do business at the pleasant little town of Argenton on the Creuse, a hidden and quite place which only Mr Augustus Hare and I, of all that go a wandering in France, seem to have studied. And if you go to Argenton, do not forget to put up at the Hotel de la Promenade.

The next picture is somewhat sad, for in it you see the latter end of the goat which pricked its tail so vivaciously upon the bridge over the Creuse. A rustic furrier dresses the skins which in Regent Street will one day be ticketed 'Finest Suedes' at 3s 11 ³/₄ d per pair. Meanwhile observe the canine Autolycus and his 'pal' who are in waiting to snap up unconsidered trifles.



Then again, we have, at his corner in the city of Valencia a legitimate and accredited beggar at his stance, his stick on his arm and his bag by his side – a capitalist and conservative he, his 'pitch' worth money of the realm, and his whole life certainly provided for among his own kindly charitable loveable Spanish townsfolk.



Would that we were all as certain of meat, drink and lodgement till the day when the sods rattle down on our coffins!



Next, for a peseta well expended, Esteban of Elche climbs to the top of a date palm, clutching his straw rope with both hands, and walking up the trunk as easily as on a plain road.



Last of all, and perhaps best of all, is a print of the Arriege flinging itself down headlong from the eastern precipices of the Pyrenees. It falls a thousand feet in almost as many seconds, the smoke of its anguish going up to the heavens like a perpetual incense, and the whole world filled with the tumult of its roaring – making such a picture of rage and bewilderment, such a seething mill race of torn and tortured water as will live for ever in my memory.

No, I do not say that all these things are apparent in the reproductions, only that the sight of the prints presses the button and my imagination does the rest. And so all my ‘records’ are precious. They unlock the shut doors of memory and bring some of the finest moments I have lived back to me, clear and untarnished out of the dust-heap of the years.

Neither do I affirm (lest some of my readers be tempted to send me also a little hatchet and a life of George Washington) that I make no failures. Nay, rather, from the standpoint of the ‘competition’ and the great photographic exhibitions, it may more truly be said that I never make any successes. But from the point of view of a bread-winning man-of-letters these scraps of sun-writing, hieroglyphic to others, are worth honest minted gold. In addition to which they bring with them laughter and tears, the brightness of rivers wherein the children paddle (I can see them with their bare brown legs) or the gloom of storm as the thunder cloud settles down upon the mountains. Patches of gold and blue shine on cathedral pavements, worn to the quick by the knees of faithful worshippers. In a word, if any desire to preserve such-like things, against the days when he shall not wander any more, when the gold shall have faded from the well-beloved tresses, and the voices that now greet him are silent— let him do as I have done. Let him go to them that sell - and buy, that he may garner precious memories, and, as it were, bottle his sunshine against the days of darkness. For assuredly they shall be many.

For more information about Crockett's life and works visit online
www.gallowayraiders.co.uk and/or www.srcrockett.weebly.com