

THE FAIRY OMNIBUS

BY H. BELLOC

WHEN you come to think of it, there are two kinds of surprises: that is, there are two kinds of contrasts for a civilized and traveled man to-day. The first I will call plain contrast or surprise, and the second compound contrast or surprise, after the fashion of steam-engines, which are compound or simple, poor things!

A plain contrast or surprise, for example, is falling off a pier into the sea; or getting a blow in the face; or coming round a corner never having heard of that mountain, and seeing Ingleborough; or finding out that a lord of whom you have only heard the name, is black; or discovering that a rich man of your acquaintance is poor; or learning intimately for the first time any one of the chief and more common events of human life, such as death.

Now, your compound surprise is an inversion of this. It is finding something which is rather commonplace in one situation, but finding it in a situation wholly odd; getting most expected things in unexpected places, and coming across the common experience of life where such an experience is most uncommon. In this category we should also place the unexpected concomitants of expected things; for instance, if you are waiting in a railway station it is normal enough to see a train come in, and it is normal enough to see a train go out, but it is not normal to see one trying to go in and another trying to go out on the same track. There, then, is an unusual conflict of wills.

Anyhow, summon up, I beseech you, the following ordinary things: a motor-bus; a good road; men in one company possessed of different languages; a walking-stick; a canon of a cathedral chapter, one of the ancient sees of Europe (delightful thought!); the sport of shooting wild birds, incidentally a quail. Consider all

these things. Is there anything remarkable in any one of them? Why, no. Yet the coming together of all these, and their coming together all in one place, preserves forever in my mind the town of Elizondo.

THE Basque people are worthy of a fame as enduring as their imperishable stock. We have the records of the Pyrenees for more than 2000 years, and the Basque people have always been the Basque people. The sort of men called scientists, who correspond to the later scholastics and who talk in the void, love to make up theories about them; but the facts are plain enough. The facts are these: they inhabit the fastnesses of the hills, and they have chosen for their pastures and their plowlands the very best valleys. They neither advance nor recede; their boundaries are strict. They never grow fat; the energy of each endures until his or her death. They cultivate the land by sticking into it a gigantic three-pronged hoe, at which they tear and snatch until the roots of the earth come up with it. They actively play, and perhaps invented, the game of ball. They speak a language utterly different from any other language in France, or in Navarre, or in all Europe, for that matter, or in the whole world—a language quite unconnected with any others. They are exceedingly fond of wealth and they acquire it; in other nations the two things do not always go together. They are orderly beyond all other men. The devil failed to learn their language (it is important to remember this). They build their churches with three gables all side by side upon one spire. They were the only people that could stand up to the soldiers of Charlemagne. They did something to the Romans. What it was we do not know, for the Romans, resembling in this

the domestic cat, did not like to dwell upon a humiliation. But, anyhow, the Roman influence stops at the Basque boundary. They do not come into the Nine Peoples. There was, I think, no original bishopric among them. No Basque, I think, was conscript to the Roman armies: something happened.

Well, then, there lies in the country of the Basques—and though a little town, it is one of their chief towns—the town of Elizondo, which means, if I am rightly informed, the Church under the Hill, for I suppose that *ondo* means under, since it sounds like that, and *Eliz* is certainly *Ecclesia*, in which the Basque sound is like the Welsh sound for the same thing: indeed, the Basques and the Welsh have much in common, saving that the Basques are sad and speak a totally different tongue. I have a mind at this point to digress again upon the Basques and to describe the mournfulness of their songs, but I will refrain.

Elizondo, then, a town of the Basques, lay, to the knowledge of myself and two companions, beyond the high hills, beyond the crest of the Pyrenees; and we said to ourselves: "We will climb over the pass, we will climb up from the French side, where there are roads and railways and inns and newspapers and scandal, and we will come down into the untutored valleys of the farther slope. We shall find a strange and pastoral people; we shall see something new and fresh which shall make us forget the fever of our time." So said my two companions and I; but in the event it was easily proved that if only men will walk, they will come upon as many adventures as would sink a ship, and that adventure is a thing no man need seek: he has only to walk straight before him without a plan, and it will grip him within twenty miles.

When we had surmounted the pass we came down upon the farther side through a delightful valley which was spoon-shape and of an easy slope. It was a hollow rather than a valley. Low trees and bushes, some of them scented, grew sparsely upon the rising sides of it; a little brook rose from a fountain half-way down, and sprang clearly from grassy ledge to ledge along the lowest line of the vale. And at its foot we found a pond, a grove of trees, and an old cross upon

which wandering Gipsies had carved their hatred of the Christian name. And so on we went in one way and another, asking our direction at the first house, and watching the new people among whom we had come, until we struck the town of Elizondo; and here it was that our unexpected experience of common things began.

Let me first beg the reader to believe that what I am about to write is true; for in this sort of tale truth is of the essence of the contract. It is not, indeed, the kind of tale any one could make up, but it is the kind of tale that reads as though any one could make it up, because there are no hippogriffs or centaurs or any difficult-to-be-described emotions, but only common things set together in an uncommon circumstance and order, to wit, those common things, a canon, a motor-bus, a good road, the shooting of a quail, divers languages, and so forth.

Well, into Elizondo we came, and as we approached the place our first shock was a magnificent highroad. "Was it for this," I said to my companions, "that we crossed the hills and invaded the land of unknown men? And what is there primitive about this road? Though it is upon the wrong side of the hills, it might be the road from Staines to London, so broad it is and so well made; or, again, the road from Lyons into Auvergne."

There it stood, an exceedingly well-made road of great breadth, uniformity, and careful surface: and that was the first surprise. But the next morning, after we had slept in the inn,—there are two inns, and the first is the last, and the last is the first; that is, the cheapest is the best,—we rose rather stiff, but gratified to remember how good a road would lead us on the very long march to Pamplona.

"Even if we cannot reach Pamplona," said one of my companions, "with so excellent a road to guide us nothing could go wrong. And there must be many inns along a road like this."

Nay, not only inns, but on such a road surely every product of that civilization which we thought we had left behind. It would not have astonished me to find some boy shrieking the news of a murder and selling newspapers of it on such a road, nor see buzzing along it in a motor-car some one who had but recently de-

frauded the widow and the orphan. There was nothing primitive about the road.

While, therefore, we were taking our chocolate in the very early morning and talking of the road together, the young woman, the wife of the man who kept the inn, said to us courteously:

"I would not have listened to the conversation of these lords, but since these lords are going to Pamplona, your graces would do well to await the motor-bus, which will take you thither at a small charge and more rapidly and conveniently than on your graces' feet."

To which we replied (not in her own tongue, for we did not know it, but in the tongue she had chosen, which was Castilian):

"You give us good news, my lady. At what hour does this self-moving coach appear?"

And she said: "At about seven, Knights."

So we doffed and waved and spread, and did all things proper to the occasion, and paid our bill, and, sure enough, there came along a well-appointed, nicely lacquered, new, properly engined motor-bus, wherein we took our places, wondering more and more. It was not for this that we had crossed the hills, but we were finding things more wonderful than we could have imagined.

Very quickly the motor-bus took us out of Elizondo. In the motor-bus were several human beings: an old lady who had been marketing, a solid peasant worth money, and this man and that man, and this woman and that woman, and the conductor hanging on outside, but not shouting, as you might have imagined, "Liverpool Street," nor even "Benk, Benk," though the thing was so familiar we wondered why he did not give these ritual cries. Among those who sat in the motor-bus and looked at us oddly, believing us to be bears who had come off the hills, for we were rough and untidy with the mountains, were two priests, one tall and thin, the other short and fat. The tall, thin one said, after looking at us long, and he said it in Spanish, nay, in Castilian, "You are perhaps Frenchmen?"

To which one of my companions who could speak that tongue answered, "No, we are Irish, every one."

Then said the tall, thin priest: "Ah? Irish? It is well." And after a little pause of reflection and perhaps of internal prayer, he added, "I speak all languages."

"You speak all languages?" said I eagerly in French.

"Yes," he repeated, a little embarrassed, in Castilian, "I speak all languages." Then he added in his native tongue, "How beautiful is the prospect of these hills!"

We were at that moment climbing up a hill to the first of the passes which lie between Elizondo and Pamplona, that ancient capital of Navarre, that ancient stronghold of the Basque race.

"How beautiful is this country!" he repeated, looking lovingly at the woods, and straining his eyes to see whether he might not catch beyond the successively lowering crests the distant sea.

"They are very beautiful," said that one of my companions who had first answered him.

"I am not of this country; I am from Valladolid," said the priest, still speaking in Spanish; "but I recognize beauty when I see it even in this strange land," and to our astonishment he kissed his hand four or five times to various points of the landscape. Then we were silent again until the summit of the pass was reached, and the motor-bus, having traversed a village and dropped a passenger, began rumbling and buzzing down the farther side.

Here was a great, open, sloping sward, a little marshy, and the gaunt rocks of the Pyrenees beyond. Then it was that the short, fat priest spoke rapidly to the conductor—so rapidly that I could not know what he said—and tapped the conductor on the shoulder. The conductor nodded, and as he nodded, the brakes were suddenly put on, and the machine stopped.

I should here mention that on this warm summer morning all the glass windows of the bus were let down. The sides were open to the air and divided only by the perpendiculars of the window-sashes. As the bus stopped, the shorter and the stouter of the priests—he who had tapped the conductor upon the shoulder and had spoken rapidly in a language we could not follow—jumped suddenly to his feet, stood up in the vehicle, lifted his walking-stick—yes, his walking-stick—to his

shoulder, and with a gleam of precision in his eye handled it as though it were a gun. The forefinger of his right hand moved; there was a tremendous bang; nobody shrieked or started; smoke curled from the end of the walking-stick; and the priest leaped smartly to the ground, past the conductor who opened the door as smartly for him, ran a few yards across the sward by the roadside, and came back radiant, holding up by its legs a quail. He had shot that quail! His walking-stick was made to shoot!

When the sportsman came back into the motor-bus, the engine, which had been purring in front, was put to work again, there was a scurring and clutching, the connection was made, and we began to go forward.

Meantime in that ark congratulations poured upon the successful hunter. The women praised him, the young woman with smiles, the elder ones with gestures and appeals to heaven. His tall, thin companion, who spoke all languages, pointed the moral to us.

"He is no fool," said he; "he misses nothing; he is famous for his skill."

"Yes, indeed," said the conductor through the window door at the back (apparently such scenes were among the commonest in his life); "he misses nothing; he may be known as the Doom of Quails."

"My companion," said the tall, thin priest, with a sigh, "is a canon; he is a canon of our cathedral."

The shorter and stouter priest nodded

cheerfully at us, as much as to say, "Yes, and a good eye for quails, too!"

So buzzed we and buzzed not, so thought we and thought not, in that land of dreams.

But they were real men, and it was a real motor-bus, and the quail was a real quail, and the walking-stick was a real shooting-stick. For all about us was real; only our astonishment was odd.

We came to a place where these admirable men had reached the term of their journey. It was a little village a few miles from Pamplona, and they had occasion to stop there; they both got down. The engine wanted a drink, whether of petrol or water I do not know, and there was a general ease-up while it was satisfied. Most of the passengers got out, among them my companions and I.

As we did not know the customs of the Basque land, nor whether it was right in such a place to drink with a priest or not, for customs of this sort differ very much among the varied and divided provinces of Christian Europe, we simply sauntered round the village fountain with them, talking about sportsmanship and quails and canonries. When our conversation was over, we shook hands, and the tall, thin priest said:

"*Aha, the shake-hand? All right!*" And then again in his own tongue, smiling gently, "I speak all languages."

So we left him forever.

Now were not these astonishing things to discover on the wrong side of the Pyrenees?



REBEL TALK (1775)

BY HORATIO WINSLOW

THE King eats bread that comes from grain the hungry scythemen reap;
 The King is dressed by ragged boys who nurse and crop his sheep;
 The King is sleek in houses built by those who freeze o' nights;
 The King sleeps safe because of swords made red in bitter fights;
 The King sits warm in winter's cold by dint of blood-bought fires;
 The King is jeweled by men who die to fill the King's desires;
 The King's wise thoughts his wise men plan, his deeds his footboys do;
 Nor need the King be wise or kind or brave or just or true;
 Nor need he think or do or be this, that, or anything;
 So riddle me and riddle me the reason for the King.