



Ulpiano Checa.

AN UNLUCKY MEETING *

PAINTED BY ULPIANO CHECA

By Philip Gilbert Hamerton

M. CHECA is passionately fond of painting galloping horses, which he represents with extraordinary energy. The following short biography will lead the reader up to the crisis in the artist's life, which suddenly developed this power in him and his peculiar interest in this class of subject.

He was born at Colmenar de Oreja, in the province of Madrid, on April 3, 1860. Colmenar de Oreja is a village situated at a distance of forty kilometres

to the northeast of Madrid. It had belonged formerly to the region of La Mancha, and was then in the province of Toledo. It is a country of vineyards and stone-quarries. The quarries have supplied the stones for the principal edifices in Madrid. Colmenar must have been formerly a great place for bees, as the name, in its Spanish signification, refers to beehives. Oreja is a corruption from the name of the Emperor Aurelian.

The names of M. Checa's father and

* See Frontispiece.

mother (that of the mother was Saiz) are both of Moorish origin; so he is probably descended from those ingenious Moorish artificers to whom the Spaniards owed much of their advancement in the industrial and ornamental arts. From such arts to what we call the fine arts the transition has always been natural and easy.

At Colmenar nearly two thousand work-people are occupied in making amphoræ in terra-cotta for the storage of wine, each of them big enough, speaking generally, to hold five thousand litres. In the time of Philip II. the village of Colmenar was enriched with several extensive religious buildings—a fact which was of great importance in the artistic development of young Checa, as it was in the churches of Colmenar that he received his first impressions from pictures. His interest in these paintings even led him to be a chorister-boy, so that he might get nearer to the works of art that interested him during the service. Meanwhile, like all children born with a taste for art (and like many who are born without it), the boy amused himself by sketching everything that came in his way. There must have been some extraordinary talent in these sketches, as they were passed from hand to hand, and some of them even found their way to the capital and made a little beginning of reputation. So one day there came a gentleman, named Jose Ballester, to Colmenar, who found out young Checa, and told him that he ought to study seriously and be an artist. The only objection made to this project by Checa's father was his own poverty, which made it impossible for him to bear the expenses of the long preparation required for an artistic career. To this the stranger answered (the story reads like a romance) that he himself kept a restaurant in Madrid, and that he offered young Checa free board and lodging during his student years. Was ever such a restaurateur before or since, and will there ever be such a restaurateur again? This wonderful visit took place in the month of March, 1875, and decided all Checa's future. He immediately became an Academy student, and after four years of hard study an-

other most extraordinary thing happened to him. He was then nineteen years old, and the minister who had the fine arts under his direction, at that time, Señor Fomento, appointed Checa assistant Professor of Perspective in the Royal Academy of Madrid, an appointment made knowingly against the rule that no one could be a professor under the age of twenty-two. From that time until the year 1884 he went on with his own studies in the school, besides professing perspective, and accepted engagements with several artists as an assistant. In this way he worked with Dominguez at the Church of St. Francis the Great, in Madrid, and also with Ferrant and Faberner y Gonzalvo.

The next remarkable event in Checa's life was his winning the Spanish *Prix de Rome* in 1884. Not only did he win this prize, but all the votes of the judges were unanimously in his favor.

Several of the famous cities of Spain were already known to him. He had been strongly impressed by Granada, Cordova, Toledo, and other picturesque and grandly situated towns, but he was far more delighted by Rome and other Italian cities. During the years of his life in Italy he took the liveliest interest in that country and visited the whole of it, staying in every town that had any artistic interest. I may say, in passing, that I never met with an artist, except Sir Frederick Leighton, whose interest in things had kept so fresh and lively. Both of them, too, are linguists, but with this difference that Leighton is accurate as well as fluent in his use of foreign languages while Checa has a rough and ready way of dealing with them which catches their spirit wonderfully, as by a kind of inspiration, but puts anything like scholarship quite hopelessly beyond his reach. As for other studies, Checa told me that during his residence in Italy he acquired a taste for historical reading and he has an archæological instinct which, being combined in his case with a most forcible realizing imagination, gives him a vivid vision of the past and makes a Roman chariot-race, for example, as real to him as if he had actually witnessed it.

It is the custom for students who are maintained at the expense of their several states, in Rome, to send proofs of their diligence called in French "les envois de Rome." Checa's first sending was "Numa Pompilius and the Nymph Egeria," of which there is nothing further to be said, but the second and third had important consequences. The second was a copy of Mantegna's magnificent fresco of the Death of St. Cristoval at Padua, and this copy directed the attention of the authorities to the condition of the original, which was beginning to show signs of deterioration by damp, so they had it removed from the walls for its better preservation. The third work sent by Checa to Madrid was the cartoon of his picture "The Invasion of the Barbarians." The picture itself was finished in the course of the same year, and exhibited at Madrid in 1887, when it won a first-class medal. Before being sent to Spain, this important work was shown in the Spanish Academy in Rome, where it was seen by all the artists, the members of the diplomatic body, and other notabilities. The picture became famous in three days; King Humbert heard of it, and on the fourth day came to the Spanish Academy unannounced. Regretting that he could not have the picture itself, he asked for a photograph.

This picture was of great size and an audacious enterprise to undertake, as Checa had never before painted horses, and the barbarians were mounted on fiery steeds rushing at full gallop along a Roman street. The idea of it came to the painter by a flash of sudden inspiration. He was driving in the Corso with a friend when, as he saw the horses trotting rapidly past, he thought of other horses that must have been in ancient times in the same place. This led his mind to the barbarians and their wild cavalry riding into Rome. He saw the future picture as in a vision, asked permission to stop the carriage, left his astonished friend with scarcely a good-bye and not a word of explanation, and then ran to his studio, where he at once sketched the composition almost as it was afterward painted on a canvas measuring about twenty-three feet by eighteen. Considering that the painter

had never attempted horses in a picture before (he may have painted studies of them), the audacity of this attempt is scarcely less astonishing than its success. Of course he made studies as the picture was going forward. To facilitate these the Italian War Minister gave orders that cavalry soldiers should be placed at the disposal of the artist, who accordingly gave them much galloping to do, not entirely, he thinks, to their satisfaction, and he does not suppose that they appreciated the fine arts any the better for these exercises. The picture was exhibited at Madrid in 1887 and gained there a first-class medal. In the following year it appeared in the Vienna Exhibition and won a second-class medal there. The interest which the artist himself had taken in this picture, and the corresponding interest that it had excited in Rome, Madrid, and Vienna, led to further studies of horses in action, and the small picture we reproduce is a descendant of that important ancestor.

It is well known amongst artists that a big picture is a costly thing to the painter in various ways. It is a child that causes various little bills to be sent to its father. The immediate consequence of "The Invasion of the Barbarians" was a temporary financial difficulty that induced its young author to part with all his studies, a sale he has since regretted, as it included many projects that might have been developed into pictures afterward.

M. Checa was a juryman for the Spanish section at the Paris Universal Exhibition in 1889, and in the same year he made preparations for the great picture of "A Roman Chariot Race," which was exhibited in the following year at the Salon, and gained a Parisian reputation, as well as a medal, for its author. It is certainly a most remarkable picture for the energy of its action. The chariots are at the turning point. One, with four black horses, is upset and the horses all down in a fine struggling group, with the driver in the midst of it, entangled in his many reins. Directly on this scene of confusion rushes a chariot with four white horses suddenly checked and brought upon their haunches, while another with four blacks comes

sweeping in an outer curve, avoiding the wreck and ruin, and so destined to win the day. The spectators, with Roman heartlessness, are amused by the sight of perils in which they take no share. The whole scene is realized with astonishing vividness, as if the artist had seen it with his own eyes.

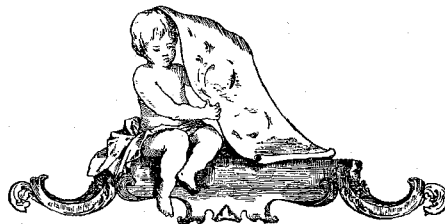
Since 1890 Checa has exhibited "Attila Leading his Hordes," "The Redskins," and "The Naumachia," besides several less important works. "Attila" and "The Redskins" are so full of galloping horses that the strength of human action in these pictures may be less appreciated, but the truth is that here, as in the "Chariot Race," men and horses are treated exactly in the same way, that is, as animals full of fiery life, in a moment of supreme excitement. The "Naumachia" is remarkable for the entire absence of horses and, for that reason, gives a more favorable opportunity for judging of the artist's power in the representation of men. Objections to this picture, which is now (May, 1894) exhibited in the Champ de Mars, have been raised on the ground that the artist has made too much of the subject, but this is due to simple ignorance.

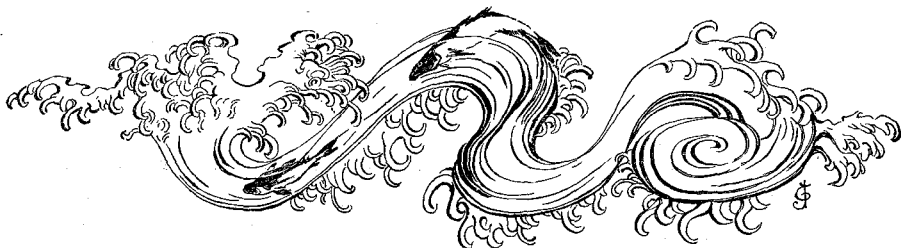
We know that the naval combats, got up for the amusement of the Roman public, were, in fact, contests of considerable importance, though the bloodshed in them only reddened the waters of a pond.

This painter of action, though still young, has received honors in Spain, being a Knight of the Royal Order of Charles III. A street in his native place already bears his name.

The picture here reproduced by the artist's permission was exhibited at the Champ de Mars in the present year.

I have tried to translate its original title, which is "Une Mauvaise Rencontre," into something like equivalent English; but in fact the situation is hardly what we call a meeting: it is an overtaking, as the train and carriage are both going in the same direction. A meeting is still more dangerous, as the frightened horse turns around quite suddenly before he bolts, and may easily upset the carriage in doing so, or sometimes he backs, in spite of whip and voice, a process still more dangerous with a four-wheeled than a two-wheeled vehicle. The situation depicted by M. Checa is that of horses bolting in consequence of a noise behind them, a noise that they do not understand. The position is, of course, perilous for the driver, but not by any means hopeless, as, if the horses can be kept on the road till the noisy train is past, they will slacken their speed shortly and become tractable again. Meanwhile, as we see in the picture, the driver is not easy in his mind; but in this case he is to be congratulated on not having ladies and children with him. The most trying of all situations is to have unruly horses and a lady by your side who is overcome with terror, and, in her eagerness to be doing something, seizes hold of the reins. In justice to the sex in general, and more particularly to conciliate the ladies who may read this, I hasten to add that such cases are exceptional, and that one's usual anxiety in dangerous driving is for the safety of the ladies themselves. As for children, they make one still more anxious, particularly when they begin to scream and want to jump out, and have to be held by somebody.





ELECTRICIAN-IN-CHARGE

By Herbert Laws Webb

I

HARLEY ATWOOD'S daily life was distinctly monotonous, and as he sat all alone in the veranda of the little club, smoking an after-dinner cigarette and gazing dreamily at the lights of the Almirante O'Halloran, he was in a very discontented frame of mind. He had left London some six months before on a telegraph ship bound for the west coast of South America, to lay cables there. Harley had expected to stay on the ship and visit interesting places. Instead of that he had been dumped down in a mud village, bounded, as the geographies say, on the west by the Pacific Ocean, and on the north, east, and south by a dreary desert that stretched a long day's ride in every direction. It was true that there was a ray of sunlight to temper the winter of his discontent. He was in sole charge of his post. At first there had been another man over him, but he had gone up in the big ship, and Harley was intrusted with the supervision of the two cables that parted north and south from the mud village. For the first few days of his solitary reign he felt quite proud of his responsible position, being only twenty, and signed himself, in his letters home, "electrician-in-charge," with a mighty flourish.

Every morning he mounted a pacing South American horse, climbed up a steep path at the back of the mud village, racked across the stony desert for three stony miles, and slipped and staggered down a rocky precipitous slope

to a sandy bight in the shore of the outer bay. There he tethered the india-rubber-footed animal to a bamboo pole and spent an hour in the galvanized iron stove, twelve feet square, that contained the ends of the cables and some shiny brass instruments. He fingered the shiny brass instruments lovingly for an hour or so, scanning meanwhile the quaverings of a streak of light reflected on a card-board scale, and writing down rows of figures. He had a little chat by means of the wiggly streak of light with one companion in the capital of the country that owned the mud village, and with another in the neighboring republic. Finally, with the aid of a big book of logarithms, he worked out his tests to five places of decimals and entered everything up with scrupulous care and detail in portentous record books. Then he locked up the galvanized iron stove and pattered back across the stony desert to the dirty little hotel in the mud village.

The mud village only boasted of a couple of thousand inhabitants, mostly half-breeds. There was absolutely no society. The country had lately been at war with a neighboring republic and had been vanquished. The conquerors had sent the Almirante O'Halloran, an insignificant sloop of war, with a company of infantry, to occupy the place, and the few well-to-do families had shut up shop and retired across the desert to some interior town which the invaders had yet been too lazy to march upon. There were two or three English merchants who had lived so long in the country that they had acquired