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THE HIGHWAYMAN

(Unsalteador)

Francisco Monterde

Translated by R. M. Duncan

[Instead of hanging up stockings on Christmas Eve, it is the custom of children in Spanish countries to put out their shoes on Twelfth Night for the Magi to fill with gifts in commemoration of their visit to the Christ Child in Bethlehem centuries ago.

Though not so well known in this country, the names of the "Three Kings," as they are called, have had wide currency in Europe since the Middle Ages.—R. M. D.]

The mouth of the blunderbuss has swallowed the powder and the rifle balls. The highwayman, in order to gorge it, pounds the wadding in with the ramrod . . . once, twice, three times . . . There!

Now the careless travelers can come along the road; the highwayman will await them behind those stones to surprise them, in the classic pose of bandits, with knee on ground, weapon outstretched, left eye closed, and the lower part of the face covered by a red handkerchief.

As time passes and nobody appears on the road, the highwayman sits down to rest and look over the landscape.

A careless hand had let fall the dice-like white houses down below. From them rises unsteadily a column of blue smoke. A large black bird has gone to sleep in the air and wheels in broad circles without moving its wings.

The stream of the waterfall lets go the side of the mountain; it leaps, runs, halts, and leaps again.

Up above, a group of white clouds meets a group of dark trees. They struggle. At first the white prevails; but later it is the black; night falls.

* * *

The highwayman yawns, stretches his arms and lies down on the ground. "Bad luck," he thinks; "I shall have to spend the night on the
mountain, while down below, in the town, all will be sitting by the fire in their homes sheltered from the cold and the wind which snatches the snow from the distant peaks.

"My children, who are in bed now, will weep tomorrow when they find neither toys nor sweets. Their empty shoes will be filled with tears, and I shall have to run away in order not to hear their weeping. If I could only climb a tree, one of those snow-covered trees, and pull down the moon . . . ."

The highwayman has taken off his hat and holds it in his hands as if it were the moon.

"How surprised they will be on seeing it on a plate, sliced! They will say, clapping their hands: 'Daddy has brought us cheese from the moon!'"

* * *

As he cannot sleep under the fierce glare of the stars, the highwayman turns his face down; he closes his eyes, presses them hard, and they fill again with stars. His hands and feet are frozen.

How cold!

Nobody comes along the road; nobody will come with this cold. Sleep doesn't come either.

If he knew how to count to a hundred, he might go to sleep before reaching that number; but . . . .

What is it? He senses someone advancing along the path. A shadow. The highwayman picks up his weapon and gets to his feet: "Halt! who goes there?"

The shadow is silent; it does not move. The highwayman approaches. It is an old man. His mustache trembles . . . . From fear or from age?

"Your money or your life!"

The old man hands over his purse, and the highwayman allows him to continue on his way.

The highwayman has scarcely had time to place the purse on the ground when another shadow appears on the road: "Halt! who goes there?"

The shadow is silent, it is another old man with a silken beard.

"Your money or your life!"

The highwayman places the second purse near the first one. He starts to open them, when another shadow appears on the road.

"Halt! Who goes there?"
The shadow is silent and his face blends into the night. He is a negro.

"Your money or your life!"

After gently handing over the bag which he carries over his shoulder, the shadow fades into the darkness.

The highwayman leaves the bag on the ground and waits, blunder-buss in hand, for another shadow to appear; but the road, white with snow and moonlight, is deserted on one side; on the other, the three shadows depart separately, from the largest to the smallest.

Seated on the ground the highwayman examines his booty.

The first bag, made of cloth, seems to be full of gold coins. On the outside in golden letters it says: MELCHIOR.

The second bag, of brightly colored paper, is larger than the first and contains sweets. It smells good and has printed on it a name: GASPAR.

The third bag, larger and heavier than the other, is of leather. In it there are toys. Painted on the outside are some signs. The highwayman cannot read them; but he guesses that they signify: BALTHASAR.

The highwayman empties on the ground the contents of the three bags; he contemplates the gold, toys, and sweets piled up and thinks that his children will be the only ones who can receive the traditional gift the next day.

He wishes to get up, in order to go home; but his legs do not obey him.

* * *

A traveler found the frozen highwayman, near the road, at dawn on the Day of the Three Kings.