

Canon Alberic's Scrapbook

BY M.R. JAMES

Saint Bertrand is a decayed French town on the spurs of the Pyrenees Mountains. In the spring of 1883 an Englishman arrived at this old-world place. He was a Cambridge professor by the name of Dennistoun, who had come specifically from the city of Toulouse to see Saint Bertrand's Church. The Englishman had traveled early intending to fill a notebook describing and use several plates in photographing every corner of the wonderful church that dominates the little hill. In order to carry out this plan, it was necessary to spend the day with the priest of the church. The priest was sent for, and when he came, the Englishman found him an unexpectedly interesting object of study. It was not the appearance of the little, dry, wizened old man that interested the Englishman, for he was precisely like dozens of other church-guardians in France. It was a curious furtive—or rather hunted and oppressed—air which he had. He was always half-glancing behind him. The muscles of his back and shoulders seemed to be hunched in a continual nervous contraction—as if he were expecting every moment to find himself in the clutch of an enemy. The Englishman hardly knew whether to peg him as delusional, oppressed by a guilty conscience, or incredibly henpecked.



However, the Englishman was soon too deep in his notebook and too busy with his camera to give more than an occasional glance to the priest. Whenever he did look at him, he found him at no great distance, either huddling himself back against the wall or crouching in one of the gorgeous stalls. The Englishman became rather fidgety after a time. He began to suspect he was keeping the priest from his duties.

"I'll be quite able to finish my notes on my own. Do go home," the Englishman said at last. "You can lock me in if you like. I'll be here probably two hours more. It must be cold for you, isn't it?"

"Good Heavens!" said the little priest. The suggestion seemed to throw into a state of unaccountable terror. "Such a thing cannot be thought of for a moment! Leave *Monsieur* alone in the church? No, no! Two hours. Three hours. All will be the same to me. I have breakfasted. I am not at all cold, with many thanks to *Monsieur*."

"Very well, my little man," said Dennistoun to himself. "You have been warned, and you must take the consequences."

Before the expiration of the two hours, the stalls, the enormous dilapidated organ, the choir-screen of Bishop John, the remnants of glass and tapestry, and the objects in the treasure-chamber, had all been examined by the Englishman. The priest still kept at his heels. Every now and then when one of the strange noises that often trouble a large empty building was heard, the priest would whip around as if he had been stung. Curious noises they were sometimes. Once the Englishman could have

sworn he heard a thin, metallic voice laughing high up in the tower. He darted an inquisitive glance at the priest. The little man was white to the lips.

"It is he!" hissed the priest. "I mean—it is no one. The door is locked."

The Englishman and the priest looked at one another for a full minute.

Later while the Englishman was examining a large dark picture that hung behind the altar, one of a series illustrating the miracles of St Bertrand. There was a Latin inscription below: *Qualiter S. Bertrandus liberavit hominem quem diabolus diu volebat strangulare.* [How St Bertrand delivered a man whom the Devil long sought to strangle.]

The Englishman turned to the priest with a smile and a joking remark of some sort on his lips, but he was confounded to see the old man on his knees, gazing at the picture with the eye of a suppliant in agony, his hands tightly clasped, and a rain of tears on his cheeks. The Englishman pretended to have noticed nothing, but he could not help thinking, "Why should a picture of this kind affect anyone so strongly?" He seemed to be getting some sort of clue as to the reason for the strange actions of the priest: The man must be mentally ill.

It was nearly five o'clock. The short day was drawing in, and the church began to fill with shadows. The curious noises—the muffled footfalls and distant talking voices that had been perceptible all day—seemed to become more frequent and persistent.

For the first time the priest began to show signs of hurry and impatience. He heaved a sigh of relief when the Englishman's camera and notebook were finally packed up and stowed away and hurriedly beckoned him to the western door of the church, under the tower. It was time to ring the Angelus. A few pulls at the reluctant rope, and the great bell Bertrande, high in the tower, began to speak, and swung her voice up among the pines and down to the valleys, loud with mountain-streams, calling the dwellers on those lonely hills to remember and repeat the salutation of the angel to her whom he called "blessed among women." With that a profound quiet seemed to fall for the first time that day upon the little town, and the Englishman and the priest went out of the church. On the doorstep they fell into conversation.

"*Monsieur* seemed interested in the old choir-books in the sacristy," said the priest.

"Undoubtedly. I was going to ask you if there were a library in the town."

"No, *Monsieur*. Perhaps there used to be one." The priest paused—a strange pause of irresolution—and then, with a sort of plunge, he went on. "But if *Monsieur* is interested in books, I have something at home that might interest him. It is not a hundred yards."

At once all the Englishman's cherished dreams of finding priceless manuscripts in untrodden corners of France flashed up—only to die down again the next moment. It was probably nothing worth collecting. However, it would be foolish not to go. He would reproach himself forever if he refused. So they set off.

They were soon at the house, which was one rather larger than its neighbors, stone-built, with a shield carved over the door. The upper windows of the mansion were boarded up, and the whole place bore the aspect of decaying age. Arriving on his doorstep, the priest paused a moment.

"Perhaps," he said, "perhaps, after all, *Monsieur* has not the time?"

"Not at all. I have lots of time—nothing to do till tomorrow. Let us see what it is you have got."

The door opened at this point, and a face looked out—a face far younger than the priest's, but bearing something of the same distressed look. It was the priest's daughter, and—except for her expression—she was a pretty enough girl. She brightened up considerably seeing her father accompanied by an able-bodied stranger. A few remarks passed between father and daughter, of which Dennistoun only caught these words of the priest: "He was laughing in the church." These words were answered only by a look of terror from the girl.

But in another minute they were in the sitting-room of the house—a small, high chamber with a stone floor, full of moving shadows cast by a wood-fire that flickered on a great hearth. On one wall there was a tall crucifix, which reached almost to the ceiling. The figure of Christ was painted in natural colors; the cross was black. Under this stood a solid, aged chest. When the priest had brought a lamp and his daughter set out chairs, the priest went to this chest, and produced from there, with growing excitement and nervousness, a large book, wrapped in a white cloth, on which cloth a cross was rudely embroidered in red thread. Even before the wrapping had been removed, Dennistoun began to be interested by the size and shape of the volume. "Perhaps it may be something good, after all," he thought. The next moment the book was open, and Dennistoun felt that he had at last lit upon something better than good. Before him lay a large folio, bound, perhaps, late in the seventeenth century, with the arms of Canon Alberic de Mauléon stamped in gold on the sides. There may have been a hundred and fifty leaves of paper in the book, and on almost every one of them was fastened a leaf from an illuminated manuscript. Such a collection Dennistoun had hardly dreamed of in his wildest moments. Here were ten leaves from a copy of Genesis, illustrated with pictures, which could not be later than 700 A.D.. When he saw it, his mind was made up. That book must return to Cambridge with him, even if he had to draw the whole of his balance from the bank and stay at Saint Bertrand till the money came. He glanced up at the priest to see if his face yielded any hint that the book was for sale. The priest was pale, and his lips were working silently.

"If *Monsieur* will turn on to the end," he said. So *Monsieur* turned on, meeting new treasures at every rise of a leaf. At the end of the book he came upon two sheets of paper, of much more recent date than anything he had yet seen, which puzzled him considerably. He decided they must be from the time period of the unprincipled Canon Alberic, who had doubtless plundered the library of Saint Bertrand to form this priceless scrap-book. On the first of the paper sheets was a plan, carefully drawn and instantly recognizable by a person who knew the ground, of the south aisle and cloisters of Saint Bertrand's. There were curious-looking signs like planetary symbols, and a few Hebrew words in the corners, and in the north-west angle of the cloister was a cross drawn in gold paint. Below the plan were some lines of writing in Latin, which ran thus:

Responsa 12^{mi} Dec. 1694. Interrogatum est: Inveniamne? Responsum est: Invenies. Fiamne dives? Fies. Vivamne invidendus? Vives. Moriarne in lecto meo? Ita. [Answers of the 12th of December, 1694. It was asked: Shall I find it? Answer: Thou shalt. Shall I become rich? Thou wilt. Shall I live an object of envy? Thou wilt. Shall I die in my bed? Thou wilt.]

What Dennistoun then saw impressed him more than he could have thought any drawing or picture capable. And, though the drawing he saw is no longer in existence, there is a photograph of it which fully bears out that statement. The picture in question was a sepia drawing at the end of the seventeenth century, representing, one would say at first sight, a Biblical scene. The architecture and the figures have that semi-classical flavor about them which the artists of two hundred years ago thought appropriate to illustrations of the Bible. On the right was a king on his throne—the throne elevated on twelve steps, a canopy overhead, lions on either side—evidently King Solomon. He was bending forward with outstretched scepter, in attitude of command. His face expressed horror and disgust, yet there was in it also the mark of imperious will and confident power. However, the left half of the picture was the strangest, however. The interest plainly centered there. On the pavement before the throne were grouped four soldiers, surrounding a strange crouching figure. A fifth soldier lay dead on the pavement—his neck distorted, and his eyeballs starting from his head. The four surrounding guards were looking at the king. In their faces the sentiment of horror was intensified. They seemed only restrained from bolting by their implicit trust in their master. All this terror was plainly caused by the being that crouched in their midst.

The impression which this figure makes upon anyone who looks at it cannot be conveyed by words. A photograph of the drawing was once shown to a lecturer on morphology, a person of abnormally sane and unimaginative habits of mind. He absolutely refused to be alone for the rest of that evening, and for many nights he had not dared to put out his light before going to sleep.

At first only a mass of coarse, matted black hair was visible. Then it became apparent that this covered a body of fearful thinness—almost a skeleton—but with the muscles standing out like wires. The hands were of a dusky pallor, covered like the body with long, coarse hairs, and hideously taloned. The eyes, a burning yellow, had intensely black pupils, and were fixed upon the throned king with a look of beast-like hate. It seemed to be one of the awful bird-catching spiders of South America translated into human form and endowed with intelligence just less than human. One remark is universally made by those who have seen the photograph: "It was drawn from the life."

As soon as the first shock of fright had subsided, Dennistoun stole a look at his hosts. The priest's hands were pressed upon his eyes. His daughter, looking up at the cross on the wall, was grasping her rosary feverishly.

At last Dennistoun asked, "Is this book for sale?"

There was the same hesitation, the same plunge of determination that he had noticed before, and then came the welcome answer. "If *Monsieur* pleases."

"How much do you ask for it?"

"I will take two hundred and fifty francs."

"My good man!" Dennistoun said, "Your book is worth far more than two hundred and fifty francs, I assure you. Far more."

But the answer did not change: "I will take two hundred and fifty francs, not more."

There was really no possibility of refusing such a chance. The money was paid, the receipt signed, a glass of wine drunk over the transaction, and then the priest seemed to become a new man. He stood upright. He ceased to throw those suspicious glances behind him. He actually laughed or tried to laugh. Dennistoun rose to go.

"May I have the honor of accompanying *Monsieur* to his hotel?" said the priest.

"Oh no, thanks! It isn't a hundred yards. I know the way perfectly, and there is a moon."

The offer was pressed three or four times and refused as often.

"Then *Monsieur* may summon me if—if he finds occasion. He should keep to the middle of the road. The sides are so rough."

"Certainly, certainly," said Dennistoun, who was impatient to examine his prize by himself, and he stepped out into the passage with his book under his arm.

Here he was met by the priest's daughter. She, it appeared, was anxious to do a little business on her own account.

"A silver crucifix and chain for the neck. Would *Monsieur* be good enough to accept it?"

"Well, really, I don't have much use for these things. What do you want for it?"

"Nothing—nothing in the world. *Monsieur* is more than welcome to it."

Her tone was unmistakably genuine, so that Dennistoun was forced to say, "Thank you," and the girl placed the chain around his neck. It really seemed as if Dennistoun had done the father and daughter some service which they hardly knew how to repay. As he set off with his book, they stood at the door looking after him, and they were still looking when he waved them a last good night from the steps of the *Chapeau Rouge*.

When Dennistoun told the landlady that he had paid a visit to the priest and bought an old book from him, she had watched him closely. When dinner was over, and Dennistoun was in his bedroom—shut up alone with his acquisition—he thought, too, that he had heard a hurried dialogue between the landlady and the priest in the passage outside his door. "Pierre and Bertrand would be sleeping in the house" had closed the conversation.

All this time a growing feeling of discomfort had been creeping over Dennistoun—perhaps a nervous reaction after the delight of his discovery. Whatever it was, it gave Dennistoun a feeling that there was someone behind him. He found that he was far more comfortable with his back to the wall. And now, he was alone in his bedroom, taking stock of Canon Alberic's treasures, in which every moment revealed something more charming.

"Bless Canon Alberic!" said Dennistoun, who had a habit of talking to himself. "I wonder where he is now?" He heard a muffled sound. "Dear me! I wish that landlady

would learn to laugh in a more cheering manner. It makes one feel as if there was someone dead in the house." He looked down to notice that the pipe he had been smoking had gone empty. "Hmmm. I think half a pipe more before bed." As he tended to his pipe, his arm brushed across the crucifix that dangled from his neck. "I wonder what that crucifix is that the young woman insisted on giving me? Last century, I suppose. Yes, probably. It is rather a nuisance of a thing to have 'round one's neck—just too heavy. Most likely her father had been wearing it for years. I think I might give it a clean-up before I put it away."

He had taken the crucifix off and laid it on the table, when his attention was caught by an object lying on the red cloth just by his left elbow. Two or three ideas of what it might be flitted through his brain with incalculable quickness. A rat? No, too black. A large spider? No, no. Good God! A hand like the hand in that picture! Pale, dusky skin covering nothing but bones and tendons of appalling strength—coarse black hairs longer than ever grew on a human hand—nails rising from the ends of the fingers and curving sharply down and forward, grey, horny and wrinkled.

Dennistoun flew out of his chair with deadly, inconceivable terror clutching at his heart. The shape, whose left hand rested on the table, was rising to a standing posture behind his seat, its right hand crooked above his scalp. There was black and tattered garment about it. The coarse hair covered it as in the drawing. The lower jaw was thin, shallow like a beast's. Teeth showed behind the black lips. There was no nose. The eyes were of a fiery yellow, against which the pupils showed black and intense, and the exulting hate and thirst to destroy life which shone there were the most horrifying features in the whole vision. There was a kind of intelligence in them—intelligence beyond that of a beast, below that of a man.

What did he do? What could he do? He has never been quite certain what words he said, but he knows that he spoke, that he grasped blindly at the silver crucifix, that he was conscious of a movement towards him on the part of the demon, and that he screamed with the voice of an animal in hideous pain.

Pierre and Bertrand, the two sturdy little serving-men who rushed in at the sound of his scream, saw nothing but felt themselves thrust aside by something that passed out between them. They found Dennistoun lying on the floor in a swoon.

They sat up with Dennistoun that night, and two of his friends were at Saint Bertrand by nine o'clock next morning. Dennistoun, though still shaken and nervous, was almost himself by then, and his story found acceptance with them, though not until they had seen the drawing and talked with the priest.

Almost at dawn the little priest had come to the inn on some pretense and had listened with the deepest interest to the story retailed by the landlady. He showed no surprise.

"It is he! It is he! I have seen him myself," was his only comment; and to all questionings but one reply was vouchsafed: "*Deux fois je l'ai vu; mille fois je l'ai senti.*" He would tell them nothing of the origin of the book, nor any details of his experiences. "I shall soon sleep, and my rest will be sweet. Why should you trouble me?" he said.⁽²⁾

We shall never know what he or Canon Alberic suffered. At the back of that

fateful drawing were some lines of writing which may be supposed to throw light on the situation:

Contradictio Salomonis cum demonio nocturno.

Albericus de Mauleone delineavit.

V. Deus in adiutorium. Ps. Qui habitat.

*Sancte Bertrande, demoniorum effugator,
intercede pro me miserrimo.*

Primum uidi nocte 12^{mi} Dec. 1694: uidebo mox ultimum.

Peccaui et passus sum, plura adhuc passurus. Dec. 29,1701.⁽³⁾*

I have never quite understood what Dennistoun's view of the events I have narrated was. He quoted to me once a text from Ecclesiastes: "Some spirits there be that are created for vengeance, and in their fury lay on sore strokes." On another occasion he said: "Isaiah was a very sensible man. Doesn't he say something about night monsters living in the ruins of Babylon? These things are rather beyond us at present."

The book is in the Wentworth Collection at Cambridge. The drawing was photographed and then burnt by Dennistoun on the day when he left St. Bertrand on the occasion of his first visit.

* *The Dispute of Solomon with a demon of the night. Drawn by Alberic de Mauléon. Versicle. O Lord, make haste to help me. Psalm. Whoso dwelleth (xci).*

Saint Bertrand, who putttest devils to flight, pray for me most unhappy. I saw it first on the night of Dec. 12, 1694: soon I shall see it for the last time. I have sinned and suffered, and have more to suffer yet. Dec. 29,1701.