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CONTENTS FOR JULY, 1935

Number 1

Cover Design	M. Brundage	
<i>"The Avenger from Atlantis"</i>		
The Avenger from Atlantis	Edmond Hamilton	2
<i>An amazing tale that sweeps across the dusty centuries to our own time</i>		
Waiter Number 34	Paul Ernst	22
<i>A powerful weird story of war and death</i>		
Why Was My Dream So Real?	June Power Reilly	29
<i>Verse</i>		
Jirel Meets Magic	C. L. Moore	30
<i>A tremendous adventure beyond the castle windows, by the author of "Shambleau"</i>		
There Is a Might	Elma Dean	53
<i>Verse</i>		
Satan in Exile (part 2)	Arthur William Bernal	54
<i>An astounding weird-scientific story about a Robin Hood of the airways</i>		
The Curse of the Valedi	Captain S. P. Meek	78
<i>An evry tale of the dark powers that infest the slopes of the Carpathians</i>		
A Grave Must Be Deep	Aalla Zaata	88
<i>A strange weird story of India and a child's grave</i>		
On a Train with a Madman	Roy Temple House	97
<i>A tale of stark terror, adapted from the German of Pan-Appan</i>		
The Honor of Don Pedro	Wallace J. Knapp	103
<i>A bizarre ghost story of old Spain</i>		
The Violet Death	Gustav Meyrink	108
<i>A story of Tibet and the gruesome power of a shouted word</i>		
Weird Story Reprint:		
The Wondersmith	Fitz-James O'Brien	112
<i>A fascinating novelette of eighty years ago</i>		
The Eyrie		138
<i>The readers express their opinions</i>		

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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

The Honor of Don Pedro

By WALLACE J. KNAPP

A bizarre ghost story of old Spain

NOTHING appeared to be unusual about Major Stuart d'Aubigny as he stood in the plaza of Toledo, immaculate from the yellow collar of his blue uniform to where his trousers tucked into his cavalry boots, yet his three friends stared at him in bewilderment.

"You mean you were the—the guest last night of a Spanish *señora*?" Coarse-looking Captain Poiret of the artillery rubbed his tongue over his thick lips. "But where was her husband?"

"He did not interfere."

The hazel eyes of sleek Captain Jules Marteau, attached to the French staff, gleamed in amazement.

"*Mais, mon ami,*" he burst forth, "I know these Spaniards, I. For three years I fight here to help Napoleon keep King Joseph on the throne, but never have I heard of a Spanish don willingly permitting another man to visit his wife. Is he, perhaps, a friend of your family?"

Until now, Major d'Aubigny might have been called handsome. In his face, as well as in his name, lurked evidence of the romance of a bygone Scotch soldier of fortune with a demoiselle of the d'Aubigny family. Fair-haired, taller than most of the Frenchmen in that army in Toledo making its final stand against Wellington's combined British, Portuguese and Spanish force, he had always been sure of a smile from even the black-eyed *señoritas* who hated the foreign intruders. But none of them would have dreamed romance, seeing the black look of hatred now on his face.

"Friend?" he exploded. "He's the

worst enemy our family ever had, the treacherous beast! He stole the sweetheart of an ancestor of mine. He used her to get French military secrets which he and the Great Captain used to defeat my country. Indeed he is no friend."

"Yet he let you visit his wife," Marteau insisted.

Before Major d'Aubigny could explain, the fourth member of that little group in the Zocodover interrupted. Jesus-Marie Constans—the sort that could give grace and charm even to a misfit lieutenant's uniform—brought his gaze reluctantly back from the winding Tagus River, seen over the walls of the market place.

"But El Gran Capitán is of the Sixteenth Century," he pointed out.

"This happened in 1503," the major agreed calmly.

Captain Poiret's head came back with such a jerk that he almost displaced his eye-glasses.

"The husband of the *señora* alive in 1503!" he cried. "What is this, a joke? How old is your companion of last night?"

"What matters her age if she be beautiful?"

Lieutenant Constans nodded slightly. Rumor had it that while still a student in Paris he had published a remarkable volume of lyrics whose imaginative charm still stood in the way of his military advancement, blinding his superiors to his bravery in battle. His wide-set, baby blue eyes looked anything but war-like.

"Tell us about her," he begged.

"What can I tell?"

"How did you happen to meet her?" Captain Poiret showed his crooked teeth in a grin of anticipation.

"When we arrived last night, we found you early comers had all the good quarters. They billeted my cavalry in a church beyond the Alcazar, a gloomy old ruin. The moment I stepped inside, I had a queer feeling like—well, once sailing home from the Indies I had the same feeling just before a tornado struck our ship. I get these warnings sometimes."

"Perhaps you owe it to your ancestors. The Scotch have always been fey," Constans remarked, but Poiret glared through his glasses.

"Something exciting is sure to happen," the major went on. "That's why I couldn't sleep. I had a place between a couple of tombs in a little chapel, but I just tossed and turned. Then I was conscious of someone crouching in the shadows. I couldn't see clearly. There was a spear of moonlight on the floor between us. I thought it might be a rebel Spaniard waiting to kill me, and here I lay unarmed. Even my cavalry sword I'd left with the rest of our weapons near the door. I drew my legs stealthily up under me, but before I leaped, either some of the guard threw more fuel on the fire or my eyes grew accustomed to the darkness. Anyway, I suddenly realized it was a woman, kneeling in prayer. She seemed slim, and from the angle of her head, young."

"Young?" echoed Marteau. "Didn't you say her husband—Sixteenth Century—is this a ghost story?"

Poiret, polishing his glasses, growled.

"It better not be!"

"But what was she doing in the church?" asked Constans.

"That I couldn't imagine at first. Why would a Spanish *señora* visit a church full

of billeted soldiers? Then I realized. This chapel was the shrine, probably, of her patron saint."

"And I suppose she was beautiful." Poiret, the artillery captain, licked his lips.

For a moment, that winter afternoon in 1812, the major remained silent, watching an ox-cart with wheels taller than his six feet of muscular perfection. After it had squeezed into one of the narrow streets opening off Toledo's main plaza, he nodded as though to himself.

"You would not believe my description," he announced. "I shall let you see her. Tonight we'll have a banquet at which she shall be the guest of honor. It will be my revenge."

All three of them echoed the last word.

"Yes, revenge. Her treacherous husband almost lost to my ancestor the patronage of Louis. I was going to put an end to his boasting about it. If you will be witnesses this evening, I agree. Among the regimental baggage I discovered a case or two of champagne, and if you like sherry—well, *messieurs*, shall we meet here in the Zocodover at eleven tonight and go to banquet with the *señora* Dorotea de Donoso?"

At their nod of agreement, he waved a casual salute and turned away.

HIS three friends watched him descend the sloping street past the inn where once Cervantes had lived. Marteau gave a characteristic shrug.

"Impossible!" he murmured. "She won't come tonight. The Spanish women are better guarded than Napoleon's diamonds."

Constans drew a long breath.

"Dorotea de Donoso," he repeated, rolling the syllables on his tongue like a savory morsel. "No wonder they call Spain the Land of Romance. Why, even

the names of the people embody its poetry and imagination."

"Well, that story of the major's better not be imagination," Poiret growled. "If it's a joke, I'll call him out and shoot him."

"We'll all massacre him," Marteau agreed. "No matter how much champagne he gives me, I'll never forgive him if he makes a fool out of me. I almost believe his story."

"I do believe it." Constans' handsome face was serious. "Stuart met someone last night who made a tremendous impression. I noticed the change the first moment I saw him."

"I, too," Marteau agreed. "But I thought he was tired from the ride."

"And now we know it was insomnia," Poiret leered. "You know the Spanish proverb: 'Insomnia near a beautiful woman is the gift of Heaven.' I hope we see something worth while tonight."

"We shall," Constans promised, and there was a far-away look in his blue eyes.

2

THROUGH the cobbled streets of Toledo, so narrow that cart hubs had worn ruts in the walls on either side, Major d'Aubigny guided his three guests about midnight, with a full moon trying to cast light into the canyons between the adobe houses. Of the *señoritas* leaning over the mantilla-draped balconies, few smiled and none spoke, since most of the inhabitants of Toledo sided with Wellington and hoped to throw off Napoleonic domination.

The officers still kept looking at him askance, half suspecting the whole thing was a joke. And when they reached the ruined church, it looked as though they had grounds for their suspicions. The sentinel, standing stiffly at the door, directed them into a gloomy place where

canvas and blankets curtained off even those windows behind which the moon should be visible.

Their boots echoed hollowly as they clanked across the stone floor to a table set before the great altar. A few smoking lanterns and a half-dozen candles on the table let them barely make out the bottles and glasses. They sat on carved larchwood choir benches, the only wood that had escaped the bonfires.

"But where's the *señora*?" Captain Poiret demanded with a grin that revealed his disfiguring teeth. "Will she come?"

"She'll be here." The calm assurance of the major's voice fell upon them like a chill. "It is not time yet for you to meet her."

"But you weren't serious about her husband being a general back in the time of the Gran Capitán?" he persisted.

"When you have seen her, I'll explain."

"See?" grumbled the artillery officer. "How do you expect us to see her when I can't see my hand before my face?"

"When the time comes, there will be plenty of light, too," their host promised, but Marteau had already begun to feel creepy. Quite the opposite of the major in appearance, small and dark, for he claimed no Scotch ancestors, fiery and hot-tempered, he displayed his lack of orderliness in the bagginess of his trousers and the careless way his coat was buttoned. But he was no fool. He had begun to suspect that something was wrong in the ruined, gloomy church. He remembered the report of some Spanish rebels who had poisoned a roomful of French invaders, invited to a banquet, and had burned the dwelling. Could it be that d'Aubigny had gone crazy or had sold out to the rebels?

The popping of champagne corks

brought him out of his reverie. Even the feeble light let him admire the deft way their host thumbed out the stoppers and let the sparkling liquor cascade into their glasses. After one taste, Marteau felt that he would be willing to toast with such nectar the ugliest of Spanish matrons and at d'Aubigny's behest hail her as queen of love and beauty. Then he noticed that Constans was not emptying his goblet as frequently as the others did.

"Drink! Drink, *mon ami*," he urged.

"I am waiting for *la doña* Dorotea," the lieutenant barely whispered, his blue eyes seeming to look into the future.

"All in time," the major promised. "Moonlight is the light for love. In the moonlight you shall see her, and after that, my revenge." He looked up at one of the curtained windows. "Time for one more glass," he calculated. "To the loveliest lady in the world."

"More beautiful because she is the wife of an enemy," Poiret cackled.

"Shut up!" Constans almost spit at him.

With meaningless laughter Marteau and the artillery officer arose unsteadily to drink the toast. Then Major d'Aubigny caught up one of the candles.

"And now, *messieurs*, to My Lady's sleeping-chambers."

The others, only slightly more sure of their footing, serpentine after him toward the little chapel. At the stone railing he stopped them with a gesture and went on alone. Stopping before the window, he reached up and with a single tug tore away the curtain stretched across the colored glass.

He had calculated well. Like a theatrical spotlight, the moonlight streamed in to pick out a lady kneeling on a tomb. From the other side of the railing came a burst of ribald laughter.

"A damned monument!" shouted Marteau.

"In love with a statue!" scoffed Poiret, showing his crooked teeth, but Lieutenant Constans caught his breath.

"Lovely!" he whispered. "Under the moonlight, she might be flesh and blood."

"So she's the woman who married the conqueror of your ancestor?" cackled Marteau. "What a pity she isn't alive! Plenty of ways you could have had a very enjoyable revenge.

"And under her husband's eyes at that," added the artillery officer.

"He looks as though he guarded her even in death," Constans mused. And indeed, as their eyes became accustomed to the light, they could see the armored figure on the tomb next to hers, his gauntleted hands resting on his sword and a strained, watchful look upon his face turned in her direction.

They chattered with liquor-loosened tongues.

"What do you think of my last night's companion?" the major finally demanded.

"He whose chisel created her was a genius," Constans declared. "I can understand why Pygmalion hoped to bring his statue to life with a kiss."

"A kiss," laughed d'Aubigny, and then more violently: "That's it, a kiss. A kiss with her husband, the grandee, looking on. Watch, you dullards. Learn how a beautiful Spanish *señora* should be loved."

HE TOTTERED toward her, but Constans, vaulting over the railing, was at his side, clutching his shoulder.

"Don't be a fool," he cried. "Don't insult the dead!"

"Insult? I wish I could. But my kisses are no insult to a lovely woman."

"Her husband was a Spanish grandee," the lieutenant insisted, "and you know how Spaniards worship family honor."

"Don't we French regard our family honor?" the major snarled. "Here. Look at this. You read Spanish, don't you?"

With a finger trembling with rage, he followed along the inscription on the tomb, picked out by the moonlight.

AQUÍ YACE DON PEDRO DONOSO
GUERRERO CABALLERO

"And see what else it says: 'Whose victory at the Garigliano in 1503 brought dominion to his king and honor to himself.' *Caballero*, is he, when he stole another man's sweetheart? And great warrior when he learned by treachery all his enemy's plans? When I saw his monument last night, I knew I was fated to avenge my ancestor. I made up my mind to despoil this boasting monument before I left, but you have shown me a better way. I hope that from wherever Spanish warriors go, he is looking down to see how I take my revenge."

"You're drunk, Stuart," Constans told him, "or you'd never so debase yourself. The man's dead. You're not insulting him. It's a crime against lovely womanhood to pollute that statue with your beastly caresses."

"*Vive la France!*" Marteau called out in a cracked voice. "Down with the dons!"

The major flung off Constans' restraining hand.

"Look down, don Pedro Donoso. The

d'Aubigny are revenged." He took a step nearer that miracle in marble. "Come, *señora!* Forget your decrepit old Spanish husband. Show me how warm-blooded Spanish maidens love."

One more step he took, between the tombs, then half turned his head to mock the kneeling caballero behind him.

"Watch, cuckold!" he jeered. "My revenge is complete. Now boast your honor of a grandee, if you can."

He bent to kiss the kneeling woman.

Only Constans saw what happened next. The artillery officer had his glasses off and was polishing them. Marteau had turned for a goblet of wine to toast the occasion and the next he knew Major d'Aubigny lay dead on the floor of the chapel, his skull bashed in behind.

To the billeted cavalymen who rushed up alarmed by the shouting, Constans explained that their leader had lost his footing and slipped. He realized the impossibility of making those uncouth soldiers believe what his eyes had seen, but even his reason refused to accept. Yet he knew no mere fall could so have crushed the major's head.

A queer, creepy feeling ran up and down his spine as he remembered that scowl darkening don Pedro's brow, and saw that gauntleted hand crash down upon the insulter of his honor. And wasn't there a changed expression in the features of that stone caballero? They had lost that strained, watchful look, and instead there appeared the proud, haughty gaze befitting an honorable grandee.

