

Crockett Samuel Rutherford

The Firebrand



Samuel Crockett

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CHAPTER I THE MAKING OF AN OUTLAW

Ramon Garcia, called El Sarria, lay crouched like a wild beast. And he was a wild beast. Yet he smiled as he blinked into the midnoon heat, under his shaggy brows, from his den beneath the great rock of limestone that shadowed him.

El Sarria was hunted, and there was on his hands the blood of a man – to be more particular, on his left hand. For El Sarria had smitten hard and eager, so soon as he had seen Rafael de Flores – Rafael, the pretty boy, the cousin of his young wife, between whom and her relative there was at least cousinly affection. So the neighbours said, all but Manuela, the priest's housekeeper.

So Ramon smote and wiped his Manchegan knife on his vest, in the place under the flap at the left side where he had often wiped it before. He used the same gesture as when he killed a sheep.

In his cave of limestone Ramon was going over the scene in his own mind. That is why he licked his lips slowly and smiled. A tiger does that when after a full meal he moves the loose skin over his neck twitchy-ways and yawns with over-fed content. And Ramon, even though hunted, did the same.

When he married little Dolóres, Ramon Garcia had not dreamed that so many things would happen. He was a rich man as men go; had his house, his garden, his vines, a quintaine of olive-trees, was accounted quite a match by old Manuela, the village go-between, the priest's housekeeper, in whose hands were the hearts of many maids.

These things he, Don Ramon Garcia, had possessed (he was called Don then) and now – he had his knife and the long, well-balanced gun which was placed across the rests in the driest part of the cavern.

He remembered the day well. He had been from home, down by Porta in the Cerdagne, to buy cattle, and returning home more swiftly than he had expected, his cattle following after in the herdsman's care, the thought of pretty Dolóres making his horse's feet go quicker, a song upon his lips, he had approached the village of Sarria de la Plana, and the home that was his own – and hers.

A swift-falling Spanish twilight it was, he remembered, the sky, broadly banded of orange and rose, was seen behind the highly piled houses. From the whiteness of the long frontage, dots and flecks flashed out. Black oblongs of glassless window-space splashed the white. Here and there a hint of vivid colour flung itself out almost defiantly – a woman's red petticoat drying on a cord, the green slats of a well-to-do window-blind. There came to the ears of Ramon Garcia the click of castanets from the semi-dark of wide-arched doors, and the soft tink-a-tank of lightly thrummed guitars. He saw a lover or two "eating iron," his hands clasping the bars behind which was the listening ear of his mistress.

And throughout this village were peace and well-accustomed pleasance. Ramon smiled. It was his home.

But not as he smiled up among the rocks of the Montblanch on the borderlands betwixt Aragon and Catalonia.

He smiled well-pleased and minded him upon the nights not so long gone by, when he too had "eaten iron," and clung a-tip-toe to the window-bars of little Dolóres, who lent him such a shy attention, scuttling off like a mouse at the least stirring within the house where all her kinsfolk slept.

There was none like her, his little Dolóres! God had given her to a rough old fellow like him, one who had endured the trampling of the threshing floor as the car oxen drave round.

Little Dolóres, how all the men had been wild to have her, but she had loved none but Ramon Garcia alone! So said Manuela Durio, the go-between, the priest's housekeeper, and if any did, she knew. Indeed, there was little told at confession that she did not know. Ramon smiled again, a wicked, knowing smile. For if Manuela owned the legitimate fifty years which qualified her for a place in the Presbytery of Sarria de la Plana, eyes and lips belied her official age. Anyway, she kept the priest's conscience – and – what was more important, she swore that little Dolóres loved Ramon Garcia and Ramon Garcia alone.

"Caballero! Don Ramon!"

He started. He had been thinking of the woman at that very moment, and there was her voice calling him. He turned about. The broad rose-glow had deepened to the smoky ruby of a Spanish gloaming, as it lingered along the western hill-tops. These last shone, in spite of the glowing darkness, with a limpid and translucent turquoise like that of the distant landscape in a Siennese picture.

"Don Ramon! wait – I would speak with you!"

It was indeed the priest's Manuela who called him, and though his heart hasted forward to Dolóres, and overleaped boundaries as a dog leaps a wall, still he could not refuse Manuela. Had she not brought them together at the first?

"Ah, Manuela, you are kind – there is good news up at the house, is there not? No ill has befallen the little one?"

"What has brought you home so soon?" cried the woman, a touch of impatient eagerness in her tones. "You will frighten Dolóres if you blunder it upon her all unshaven and travel-stained like that. Have you no more sense, when you know – ?"

"Know what? I know nothing!" Ramon slurred his speech in his eagerness. "What is there to know?"

Manuela laughed – a little strained sound, as if she had been recovering a shaken equanimity, and was not yet sure of her ground.

"You, so long married – five, six months, is it not so – and yet not to know! But a fool is always a fool, Don Ramon, even if he owns a vineyard and a charming young wife ten times too good for him!"

"Truth of God!" gasped Ramon, with his favourite oath, "but I did not know. I am the father of all donkeys. But what am I to do, tell me, Manuela? I will obey you!"

The woman's countenance suddenly cleared.

"No, Don Ramon, we will not call the promised one – the blessed one, a donkey. A father! Yes, Don Ramon, but no father of *borricos*. No, no! There will not be so brave a babe from Navarra to Catalonia as yours and Lola's. But we must go quietly, very quietly. He walks far who begins slowly. He who treads upon eggs does not dance the *bolero*. You will bide here and talk to the holy Father, and I myself will go to the house of Ramon of the Soft Heart and the Lumbering Hoofs, and warn the little one warily. For I know her – yes, Manuela knows her. I am a widow and have borne children – ay, borne them also to the grave, and who, if not I, should know the hearts of young wives that are not yet mothers!"

She patted his arm softly as she spoke, and the great rough-husked heart of Ramon of Sarria, the Aragonese peasant, glowed softly within him. He looked down into Manuela's black eyes that hid emotion as a stone is hidden at the bottom of a mountain tarn. Manuela smiled with thin flexible lips, her easy subtle smile. She saw her way now, and to do her justice she always did her best to earn her wages.

Lovers would be lovers, so she argued, God had made it so. Who was she, Manuela, the housekeeper of Padre Mateo of Sarria, to interfere for the prevention of the designs of Providence? And cousins too – the young cavalier so gallant, so handsome – and – so generous with his money. Had he not even kissed Manuela herself one night when he came coaxing her to contrive something? *Who* could resist him after that? And what was a hand thrust through the *rejas*? What a kiss if the bars of the grille happened to be broken. A glass that is drunk from, being washed, is clean as before.

And when Ramon Garcia, that great Aragonese oaf, kissed little Dolóres, what knew he of pretty Don Rafael de Flores, the *alcalde's* son? They had been lovers since childhood, and there was no harm. 'Twas pity surely, to part them before the time. Rafael was to marry the rich Donna Felesia, the daughter of the vine-grower of Montblanch, who farmed the revenues of the great abbey. He could not marry pretty little Dolóres! It was a pity – yes, but – she had a feeling heart, this Manuela, the priest's housekeeper, and the trade had been a paying one since the beginning of the world.

"Padre – Padre Mateo!" she cried, raising her voice to the pitch calculated by long experience to reach the father in his study. "Come down quickly. Here is Don Ramon to speak with your reverence!"

"Don Ramon – what Don Ramon?" growled a voice from the stair-head, a rich baritone organ, unguented with daily dole of oil and wine, not to speak of well-buttered trout in a lordly dish, and with rappee coloured red with the umber of Carthagera to give timbre and richness thereto. It was the voice of Don Mateo Balin, most pious and sacerdotal vicar of Christ in the township of Sarria.

"Don Ramon Garcia, most reverend father!" said Manuela, somewhat impatiently. "If you will tap your snuff-box a little less often, you will be all the sooner able to hear what he has to say to you!"

"*Don* Ramon, indeed! – here's advancement," grumbled the priest, good-humouredly descending the staircase one step at a time. To do this he held his body a little sideways and let himself down as if uncertain of the strength of the Presbytery stairs, which were of stone of Martorel, solid as the altar steps of St. Peter's.

"Good, good!" he thought to himself, "Manuela wants something of this chuckle-head that she goes Don-ing him, and, I wager, battenning him with compliments as greasy as an old wife's cookery the first day after Lent. 'Tis only eggs in the pan that are buttered, and I wonder why she has been buttering this oaf." Then he spoke aloud. "Ah, Ramon, back already! We thought you had been buying beeves in the Cerdagne. I suppose the little Dolóres dragged you back. Ho, ho, you young married men! Your hearts make fools of your feet. 'Tis only celibacy, that most sacred and wise institution of Holy Mother Church, that can preserve man his liberty – certainly, Manuela, I will put away my snuff-box, I was not aware that it was in my hand! And I will *not* drop any more on my new soutane, which indeed, as you say, I had no business to be wearing on an ordinary day."

While Don Mateo thus spoke, and, talking all the time, moved lightly for so gross a man to and fro on his verandah, Manuela with a quick hitch of her muffling mantilla about the lower part of her face, took her way swiftly up the village street.

"This way, Ramon – this way! A plague take those spider-legged chairs. They are all set crosswise in the way of an honest man's feet. Manuela keeps all so precise, nothing is ever left where it would be most convenient. Not that she is not the best of souls, our good Manuela and a pearl of price – a very Martha in the house, a woman altogether above rubies! Is she quite gone? Sit you down then, Ramon, here is the wine-skin, under the seat to the left, and tell me of your journey, speaking at ease as man to man. This is no confessional, which reminds me, sirrah, that you have not come to your duty since Easter. Ah, again the married man! 'He minds the things of his wife,' saith the holy apostle, in my opinion very justly."

Ramon had seated himself on a chair at one corner of the priest's verandah – a deep screen of leaves was over them. The mosquitoes and gnats danced and lit, hummed and bit, but neither the priest nor yet Ramon minded them in the least. They were men of Sarria, bred of the reed-fenced villages of the Aragonese border, blooded by the grey-backed, white-bellied mosquitoes which took such sore toll alike of the stranger within the wall, and through the skin of the Proselyte of the Gate.

But as the priest boomed forth his good-humoured gossip in a voice monotonous and soothing as the *coo-rooing* of a rock pigeon, suddenly there rose out of the tangle of roses and vine leaves behind him, an evil thing against which Don Ramon's birthright gave him no immunity. It stung and fled.

"Go home, fool!" hissed a voice in his ear, as he sat silent and spellbound in the dusk, "go home, shamed one. Your wife is with her lover, and Manuela has gone to warn them!"

The good priest hummed on, plaiting and replaiting his fingers and pursing his lips.

"As I was saying, 'tis no use marrying a woman without money. That is the *olla* without bacon. But for pleasure to himself, neither should a man marry without love. 'Tis a lying proverb which sayeth that all women are alike in the dark. A fair maid is surely worth a farthing candle to kiss her by. Not that I know aught about the matter, being a clerk and a man of years and bodily substance. But a wise man learns many things in spite of himself. What is the use of being a priest and not knowing? But believe me, if money be the bacon and beef, love is the seasoning of the dish, the *pimientos* and Ronda pippins of a wise man's *olla*!"

Through this sacerdotal meditation the hissing whisper lifted itself again. Ramon had not moved. His great hand lay along the stone balustrade. A mosquito was gorging himself at a vein upon the hairy wrist.

"There is a broken bar on the lower window, Ramon the fool! They are kissing each other thereat and calling sweet names – these two, the cousin whom she loves – Rafael, the pretty boy, and little Dolóres whom you have made your wife – "

"God's blood, for this I will have your life!" cried Ramon so suddenly that the worthy priest tumbled backward before he had even time to cross himself. And Ramon was over the parapet with his long knife bare in his hand. It had gone ill with the traitor if Ramon Garcia had caught him then.

But even as he had arisen, exhaled from the undergrowth like an evil breath, so he vanished into the night, blown away by Ramon's rush over the edge of the balcony like a fly escaping before a man's hand.

"I will follow the liar to the world's end!" said Ramon between his teeth, furiously, and he threshed through the tangle as an elephant charges through young jungle.

But even as he went the words of the viper fermented in his brain till he went mad.

"There *is* a broken bar – what more likely! The house is old – my father's father's. There was a tale of my grandfather's sister – avenged truly, but still a tale told in whispers in the twilight. God's truth, could it be even thus with Dolóres, little Dolóres, whom I have held next in honour and purity to Mary the mother of God?"

So he meditated, dashing this way and that to find his enemy.

"Ah, fool! Three times fool to trust a woman! How true the proverb, 'Who sees his wife crane her neck through the jealousies, had better twist it and be done!'"

He would go! Yes, he would know. If this thing were false (as he prayed God), he would kneel and kiss her little white feet. They were pink – yes, pink on the instep as the heart of a sea-shell. And he, Ramon, would set the arched instep on his neck and bid her crush him for a faithless unbelieving hound to suspect his own – his purest – his only!

But, that cousin, Rafael de Flores – ah, the rich youth. He remembered how once upon a time when he was a young man going to market driving his father's oxen, he had seen Rafael rushing about the orchard playing with Dolóres. They had been together thus for years, more like brother and sister than cousins.

Was it not likely? How could it be otherwise? He knew it all now. His eyes were opened. Even the devil can speak truth sometimes. He knew a way, a quicker road than Manuela dreamed of – up the edge of the ravine, across by the pine tree which had fallen in the spring rains. He would go and take them together in their infamy. That would be his home-coming.

"*You dog of dogs!*"

In the darkness of the night Ramon saw a window from whose grille, bent outward at the bottom like so many hoops, one had been slipped cunningly aside.

"Chica, dearest – my beloved!"

The face of the speaker was within, his body without.

Up rose behind him the great bulk of Ramon Garcia, henceforward to be El Sarria, the outlaw.

The Albacete dagger was driven deep between the shoulder-blades. The young lithe body drew itself together convulsively as a clasp knife opens and shuts again. There was a spurt of something

hot on Ramon's hand that ran slowly down his sleeve, growing colder as it went. A shriek came from within the *rejas* of bowed iron.

And after this fashion Ramon Garcia, the vine-dresser, the man of means, became El Sarria, the man without a home, without friends, an outlaw of the hills.

CHAPTER II

THE MAN WITHOUT A FRIEND

Yet on the side of Rafael and little Dolóres Garcia there was something to be said. Ramon, had he known all, need not have become "El Sarria," nor yet need young de Flores, the alcalde's son, have been carried home to the tall house with the courtyard and the one fig tree, a stab under his right shoulder-blade, driven through from side to side of his white girlish body.

It was true enough that he went to the house of Ramon to "eat iron," to "pluck the turkey," to "hold the wall." But 'twas not Dolóres, the wife of Ramon, who knew of it, but pretty Andalucian Concha, the handmaiden and companion Ramon had given his wife when they were first married. Concha was niece to the priest's Manuela, a slim sloe-eyed witty thing, light of heart and foot as a goose feather that blows over a common on a northerly breeze. She had had more sweethearts than she could count on the fingers of both hands, this pleasantly accommodative maiden, and there was little of the teaching of the happy guileful province in which Concha needed instruction, when for health and change of scene she came to the house of Ramon and Dolóres Garcia in the upland village of Sarria.

These were the two fairest women in all Sarria – nay, in all that border country where, watered by the pure mountain streams, fertile Catalonia meets stern and desolate Aragon, and the foot-hills of the Eastern Pyrenees spurn them both farther from the snows.

Well might her lovers say there was none like her – this Concha Cabezos, who had passed her youth in a basket at her mother's feet in the tobacco manufactories of Sevilla, and never known a father. Tall as the tower of Lebanon that looketh towards Damascus, well bosomed, with eyes that promised and threatened alternate, repelled and cajoled all in one measured heave of her white throat, Concha of the house of Ramon, called "little" by that Spanish fashion of speech which would have invented a diminutive for Minerva herself, brought fire and destruction into Sarria. As the wildfire flashes from the east to the west, so the fame of her beauty went abroad. Also the wit of her replies – how she had bidden Pedro Morales (who called himself, like Don Jaime, "El Conquistador") to bring her a passport signed at all his former houses of call; how she had "cast out the sticks" of half the youth of the village, till despised batons strewed the ground like potsherds. And so the fame of little Concha went ever farther afield.

Yet when Rafael, the alcalde's son, came to the window on moonless nights, Concha was there. Hers was the full blood, quick-running and generous of the south, that loves in mankind a daintiness and effeminacy which they would scorn in their own sex.

So, many were the rich golden twilights when the two lovers whispered together beneath the broad leaves of the fig-trees, each dark leaf rimmed with the red of the glowing sky. And Rafael, who was to marry the vine-dresser's daughter, and so must not "eat the iron" to please any maid, obeyed the word of Concha more than all Holy Writ, and let it be supposed that he went to the Ramon's house for the sake of his cousin Dolóres.

For this he paid Manuela to afford him certain opportunities, by which he profited through the cleverness of Concha and her aunt Manuela. For that innocent maid took her mistress into her confidence – that is, after her kind. It was wonderfully sad, she pleaded. She had a lover – good, generous, eager to wed her, but his family forbade, and if her kind mistress did not afford her the opportunity she would die. Yes, Concha would die. The maids of Andalucia oftentimes died for love. Then the tears ran down her cheeks and little Dolóres wept for company, and because she also was left alone.

Thus it chanced that this foolish Rafael, the alcalde's son, marched whistling softly to his fate. His broad sombrero was cocked to the left and looped on the side. His Cordovan gloves were loosely

held in his right hand along with his tasselled cane. He had an eye to the paved street, lest he should defile his lacquered shoes with the points carved like eagle's beaks. He whistled the jota of Aragon as he went, and – he quite forgot Ramon, the great good-humoured giant with whom he had jested and at whom he had laughed. He was innocent of all intent against little Lola, his playmate. He would as soon have thought of besieging his sister's balcony, or "plucking the turkey" under his own mother's window.

But he should not have forgotten that Ramon Garcia was not a man to wait upon explanations, when he chanced on what seemed to touch the honour of his house. So Rafael de Flores, because he was to marry Felesia Gramunt and her wine-vats, and Concha the Andaluse, because to be known as Rafael's sweetheart might interfere with her other loves, took the name of Ramon Garcia's wife in vain with light reckless hearts. This was indeed valorously foolish, though Concha with her much wisdom ought to have known better. But a woman's experience, that of such a woman as Concha at least, refers exclusively to what a man will do in relation to herself. She never considered what Ramon Garcia might do in the matter of his wife Dolóres.

Concha thought that giant cold, stupid, inaccessible. When she first came into the clear air of the foot-hills from Barcelona (where a promising adventure had ended in premature disaster) she had tried her best wiles upon Ramon.

She had met him as he came wearied home, with a basin of water in her two hands, and the deference of eye-lashes modestly abased. He passed her by, merely dipping his finger-tips in the water without so much as once looking at her. In the shade of the pomegranate trees in the corner, knowing herself alone, she had touched the guitar all unconscious, and danced the dance of her native Andalucia with a verve and abandon which she had never excelled. Then when Ramon discovered himself in an arbour near by and congratulated her upon her performance – in the very middle of her tearful protestations that if she had only known he was there, she would never, never have dared, never have ventured, and could he forgive her – he had tramped unconscious away. And instead of forgiving her in a fit and proper manner, he had said he would go and bring down his wife to see her dance the *bolero* in the Andalucian manner. It would afford Doña Dolóres much pleasure.

With such a man who could do anything? It was a blessing all men were not alike, said Concha with a pout. And indeed from Cadiz by the sea to the mountains of the north she had found men otherwise – always quite otherwise, this innocent much experienced little Concha.

Meanwhile the hunters closed in on Ramon the brigand on the hills above Montblanch. One cannot kill (or as good as kill) an alcalde's son without suffering for it, and it chanced that the government, having been reproached on all sides for lack of vigour, and being quite unable to capture Don Carlos or Zumalacarregui, had resolved to make an example of Ramon, called "El Sarria."

So to begin with, it had confiscated all that Ramon possessed – house and farm, vineyard and oliveyard, wine-presses and tiers of well-carpentered vats with the wine of half a score of vintages maturing therein. These were duly expropriated in the name of the government of the most Christian regent Doña Maria Cristina. But how much of the produce stuck to the fingers of General Rodriguez, the military governor, and of Señor Amado Gomez, administrator of so much of the province as was at that time in the hands of the Cristinos, who shall say? It is to be feared that after these gentlemen had been satisfied, there remained not a great deal for the regencial treasure-chest at Madrid.

Meantime Ramon lay on his rock-ledge and wondered – where little Dolóres was, chiefly, and to this he often returned. If he had had time that night would he have killed her? Sometimes he thought so, and then again – well, she was so small, so dainty, so full of all gentle ways and winsomenesses and – hell and furies, it was all deceit! She had been deceiving him from the first! Those upward glances, those shy, sweet confidences, sudden, irresistible revealings of her heart, he had thought they were all for him. Fool! Three times fool! He knew better now. They were practised on her husband that she might act them better before her lover. God's truth, he would go down and kill her even now, as he

had killed that other. Why had he not waited? He could easily have slain the soldiers who had rushed upon him, whom that hell-cat Manuela had brought – ah, he was glad he had marked her for life.

"*Ping! Ping!*" Two rifle bullets sang close past the brigand's head as he lay in his rocky fastness. He heard them splash against the damp stone behind him, and the limestone fell away in flakes. A loose stone rumbled away down and finally leaped clear over the cliff into the mist.

El Sarria's cavern lay high up on the slopes of the Montblanch, the holy white mountain, or rather on an outlying spur of it called the Peak of Basella. Beneath him, as he looked out upon the plain, three thousand feet below, the mists were heaped into glistening white Sierras, on which the sun shone as upon the winter snows of the far away Pyrenees.

As the sun grew stronger Ramon knew well that his mountain fastness would be stormed and enveloped, by these delusive cloud-continents. They would rise and dissipate themselves into the faint bluish haze of noonday heat.

Already there appeared far down the cleft called the Devil's Gulf, which yawned below the Peak of Basella, certain white jets of spray tossed upwards as from a fountain, which were the forerunners of that coming invasion of mist that would presently shut him out from the world.

But not a moment did Ramon waste. As quick as the grasshopper leaps from the flicked forefinger, so swift had been El Sarria's spring for his rifle. His cartouches lay ready to his hand in his belt of untanned leather. His eyes, deep sunken and wild, glanced everywhere with the instant apprehension of the hunted.

Ping! Ping!

Again the bullets came hissing past him. But Ramon was further back within his cave this time, and they whistled over his head. The chips of brittle limestone fell with a metallic clink on the hard stone floor.

El Sarria saw from whence one at least of his enemies had fired. A little drift of white reek was rising from the mouth of a cavern on the opposite escarpment of the Montblanch. He knew it well, but till now he had thought that but one other person did so, his friend Luis Fernandez of Sarria. But at the same moment he caught a glimpse of a blue jacket, edged with red, round the corner of a grey boulder up which the young ivy was climbing, green as April grass. The contrast of colour helped his sight, as presently it would assist his aim.

"The Lads of the Squadron!" he murmured grimly. And then he knew that it had come to the narrow and bitter pass with him.

For these men were no mere soldiers drafted from cities, or taken from the plough-tail with the furrow-clay heavy upon their feet. These were men like himself; young, trained to the life of the brigand and the contrabandista. Now they were "Migueletes" – "Mozos de la Escuadra" – "Lads of the Squadron," apt in all the craft of the smuggler, as good shots as himself, and probably knowing the country quite as well.

For all that El Sarria smiled with a certain knowledge that he had a friend fighting for him, that would render vain all their vaunted tracker's craft. Miguelete or red-breeched soldier, guerilla or contrabandista, none could follow him through that rising mist which boiled like a cauldron beneath. Ramon blew the first breath of its sour spume out through his nostrils like cigarette smoke, with a certain relish and appreciation.

"They have found me out, indeed, how, I know not. But they have yet to take Ramon Garcia!" he muttered, as he examined the lock of his gun.

He knew of a cleft, deep and secret, the track of an ancient watercourse, which led from his cave on the Puig, past the cliff at the foot of which was perched the great and famous Abbey of Montblanch, to another and a yet safer hold among the crags and precipices of Puymorens.

This none knew but his friend and brother, dearer to his soul than any other, save little Dolóres alone – Luis Fernandez, whose vineyard had neighbored his in the good days when – when he had a vineyard. He was the groomsman, who, even in those old days, had cared for Dolóres with more

than a brother's care. The secret of the hidden passage was safe with him. Ramon held this thought to his soul amid the general wreck. This one friend at least was true. Meantime yonder was a Miguelete behind a stone – a clumsy one withal. He, El Sarria, would teach him the elements of his trade. He drew a bead on the exposed limb. The piece cracked, and with a yell the owner rolled back behind his protecting boulder. For the next hour not a cap-stem was seen, not a twig of juniper waved.

El Sarria laughed grimly. His eye was still true and his rifle good as ever. That was another friend on whose fidelity he could rely. He patted the brown polished stock almost as he used to do little Lola's cheek in the evenings when they sat at their door to watch José, the goatherd, bringing his tinkling flock of brown skins and full udders up from the scanty summer pasturage of the dried watercourses.

Ah, there at last! The mist rose quite quickly with a heave of huge shoulders, strong and yet unconscious, like a giant turning in his sleep. From every direction at once the mist seemed to swirl upwards till the cave mouth was whelmed in a chaos of grey tormented spume, like the gloom of a thundercloud. Then again it appeared to thin out till the forms of mountains very far away were seen as in a dream. But Ramon knew how fallacious this mirage was, and that the most distant of these seeming mountain summits could be reached in a dozen strides – that is, if you did not break your neck on the way, much the most probable supposition of all.

Ramon waited till the mist was at its thickest, rising in hissing spume-clouds out of the deeps. Then with a long indrawing of breath into his lungs, like a swimmer before the plunge, he struck out straight for the cave on the face of the Montblanch from which the bullets had come.

But long ere he reached it, the ground, which had been fairly level so far, though strewn with myriads of rocky fragments chipped off by winter frosts and loosened by spring rains, broke suddenly into a succession of precipices. There was only one way down, and El Sarria, making as if he would descend by it, sent instead a great boulder bounding and roaring down the pass.

He heard a shouting of men, a crash and scattering thunder of falling fragments far below. A gun went off. A chorus of angry voices apostrophised the owner, who had, according to them, just as much chance of shooting one of his comrades as El Sarria.

Ramon laughed when he heard this, and loosening a second huge stone ("to amuse the gentlemen in the blue and red," he said), he sent it after the first.

Then without waiting to ascertain the effect, Ramon plunged suddenly over an overhanging rock, apparently throwing himself bodily into space. He found his feet again on an unseen ledge, tip-toed along it, with his fingers hooked in a crack, and lo! the rock-face split duly in twain and there was his cleft, as smooth and true as if the mountain had been cut in half, like a bridescake, and moved a little apart.

There was the same glad defiance in the heart of El Sarria, which he had felt long ago, when as a boy he lay hidden in the rambling cellars of the old wine-barn, while his companions exhausted themselves in loud and unavailing research behind every cask and vat.

And indeed the game was in all points identically the same. For in no long space of time, Ramon could hear the shouting of his pursuers above him. It was dark down there in the cleft, but once he caught a glimpse of blue sky high above him, and again the fragrance of a sprig of thyme was borne to his nostrils. The smell took him at an advantage, and something thickened painfully in his throat. Dolóres had loved that scent as she had loved all sweet things.

"It is the bee's flower," she had argued one night, as he had stood with his arm under her mantilla, looking out at the wine-red hills under a fiery Spanish gloaming, "the bees make honey, and I eat it!"

Whereat he had called her a "greedy little pig," with a lover's fond abuse of the thing he most loves, and they had gone in together quickly ere the mosquitoes had time to follow them behind the nets which Ramon had held aside a moment for her to enter.

Thinking of this kept Ramon from considering the significance of the other fact he had ascertained. Above he saw the blue sky, deep blue as the Mediterranean when you see it lie land-bound between two promontories.

Then it struck him suddenly that the mist must have passed. If he went now he would emerge in the clear sunshine of even. Well, it mattered not, he would wait in the cleft for sunset and make his escape then. He knew that the "Lads of the Squadron" would be very hot and eager on the chase, after one of them had tasted El Sarria's bullet in his thigh. He would have a short shrift and no trial at all if he fell into their hands. For in those days neither Carlist nor Cristino either asked or gave quarter. And, indeed, it was more than doubtful if even the Carlists themselves would spare El Sarria, whose hand was against every man, be he King's man or Queen's man.

The evening darkened apace. Ramon made his way slowly to the bottom of the cleft. There was the wide *arroyo* beneath him, brick-red and hot, a valley of dry bones crossed here and there by rambling goat tracks, and strewn with boulders of all sizes, from that of a chick-pea to that of a cathedral.

It was very still there. An imperial eagle, serenely adrift across the heavens, let his shadow sail slowly across the wide marled trough of the glen. There could be no fear now.

"Well," thought Ramon, with philosophy, "we must wait – none knows of this place. Here I am secure as God in his Heaven. Let us roll a cigarette!"

So, patiently, as only among Europeans a Spaniard can, El Sarria waited, stretching his fingers out to the sun and drawing them in, as a tiger does with his claws, and meanwhile the afternoon wore to evening.

At last it was time.

Very cautiously, for now it was life or death, yet with perfect assurance that none knew of his path of safety, Ramon stole onward. He was in the jaws now. He was out. He rushed swiftly for the first huge boulder, his head drawn in between his shoulders, his gun held in his left hand, his knife in his right.

But from the very mouth of the pass six men sprang after him, and as many more fronted him and turned him as he ran.

"Take him alive! A hundred duros to the man who takes El Sarria alive!"

He heard the voice of the officer of Migueletes. He saw the short, businesslike sword bayonets dance about him like flames. The uniforms mixed themselves with the rocks. It was all strange and weird as in a dream.

But only one face he saw crystal clear. One man alone inevitably barred his way. He dropped his gun. He could run better without it. They were too many for that, and it was not needed. He tore his way through a brace of fellows who had closed in upon him eager for the reward.

But through all the pother he still dashed full at the man whose face he knew. This time his knife made no mistake. For assuredly no enemy, but a friend, had done this – even Luis Fernandez, the brother of his heart.

And leaving the wounded strewn among the grey boulders and all the turmoil of shouting men, Ramon the hunted, broke away unscathed, and the desolate wilderness of Montblanch swallowed him up. Yet no wilderness was like this man's heart as he fled down and down with his knife still wet in his hand. He had no time to wipe it, and it dripped as he ran.

For this man had now neither wife nor friend.

CHAPTER III

COCK O' THE NORTH

"*Carai! Caramba! Car –!* This bantam will outface us on our own dung-hill! Close in there, Pedro! Take down the iron spit to him, José! Heaven's curses on his long arm! A foreigner to challenge us to fight with the knife, or with the sword, or with the pistol!"

From the kitchen of the venta at San Vicencio, just where the track up the Montblanch takes its first spring into the air, came these and other similar cries. It was a long and narrowish apartment – the upper portion merely of a ground-floor chamber, which occupied the whole length of the building.

Part of the space was intended for horses and mules, and indeed was somewhat overcrowded by them that night. These being alarmed by the tumult and shoutings, were rearing so far as their short unsinkered head-stalls permitted them, and in especial making play with their feet at the various *machos* or he-mules scattered among them. These gladly retaliated, that being their form of relaxation, and through the resulting chaos of whinnying, stamping, neighing, and striking of sparks from pavement stones, skirmished a score of brown imps, more than half naked, each armed with a baton or stout wand with which he struck and pushed the animals entrusted to their care out of the reach of harm, or with equal good-will gave a sly poke with the sharp spur of the goad to a neighbour's beast, by way of redressing any superiorities of heels or teeth.

But all the men had run together to the kitchen end of the apartment. Where the stable ended there was a step up, for all distinction between the abode of beasts and of men. Over this step most of those who had thus hastened to the fray incontinently stumbled. And in the majority of instances their stumble had been converted into a fall by a blow on the scone, or across the shoulders, from the flat of a long sword wielded by the arm of a youth so tall as almost to reach the low-beamed ceiling along which the spiders were scuttling, in terror doubtless of the sweeping bright thing on which the firelight played as it waved this way and that.

First in the fray were a round dozen of Migueletes, come in from an unsuccessful chase, and eager to avenge on a stranger the failure and disgrace they had suffered from one of their own race. Next came a young butcher or two from the killing-yards, each already a *toreador* in his own estimation. The rest were chiefly *arrieros* or carriers, with a stray gipsy from the south, dark as a Moor; but every man as familiar with the use of his long curved sheath-knife as a cathedral priest with his breviary.

Meanwhile the tall young man with the long sword was not silent. His Spanish was fluent if inelegant, and as it had been acquired among the *majos* of Sevilla and the mule-clippers of Aragon rather than in more reputable quarters, his speech to the critical ear was flavoured with a certain rich allusiveness of personality and virility of adjective which made ample amends (in the company in which he found himself) for any want of grammatical correctness.

With the Spanish anathemas that formed the main portion of his address, he mingled certain other words in a foreign tongue, which, being strong-sounding and guttural, served him almost as well in the Venta of San Vicencio as his *Carais* and *Carambas*.

"*Dogs of dog-mothers without honour!* Come on, and I will stap twal inches o' guid steel warranted by Robin Fleming o' the Grassmarket doon your throats! A set o' gabbling geese – tak' that! With your virgins and saints! Ah, would you? There, that will spoil your sitting down for a day or two, my lad! Aye, scart, gin it does ye ony guid?"

A knife in his left hand, and in his right the long waving sword, bitter and sometimes unknown and mysterious words in his mouth, this youth kept his enemies very successfully at bay, meeting their blades six at a time, and treading and turning so lightly that as he lunged this way and that, there

was a constant disorganisation among the opposing ranks, as one and the other sprang back to elude his far-reaching point.

"He is of the devil – a devil of devils!" they cried. "We shall all perish," wailed an old woman, shrinking back further into the chimney-corner, and wringing her hands.

Meanwhile the youth apostrophised his blade.

"My bonny Robin Fleemin' – as guid as ony Toledan steel that ever was forged! What do you think o' that for Leith Links? And they wad hae made me either a minister or a cooper's apprentice!"

As he spoke he disarmed one of his chief opponents, who in furious anger snatched a pistol and fired point-blank. The shot would indubitably have brought down the young hero of the unequal combat, had not a stout ruddy-faced youth, who had hitherto been leaning idly against the wall, knocked up the owner's arm at the moment the pistol went off.

"Ha' done!" cried the new-comer in English; "twenty to one is bad enough, specially when that one is a fool. But pistols in a house-place are a disgrace! Stand back there, will ye?"

And with no better weapon than a long-pronged labourer's fork snatched from the chimney-corner, he set himself shoulder to shoulder with the young Scot and laid lustily about him.

That son of an unkindly soil, instead of being grateful for this interference on his behalf, seemed at first inclined to resent it.

"What call had ye to put your neck in danger for an unkenned man's sake?" he cried, crabbedly. "Couldna ye hae letten me fill thae carles' skins as fu' o' holes as a riddle?"

"I am not the man to stand and see a countryman in danger!" said the other, while the broad sweeps of his companion's sword and the energetic lunges of his own trident kept the enemy at a respectful distance.

Suddenly a thought struck the Englishman. Without dropping the fork, he rushed to the hearth, where the *ollas* and *pucheros* of the entire company bubbled and steamed, he caught the largest of the pots in one hand and threatened to overturn the entire contents among the ashes and *débris* on the floor.

"I speak their lingo but ill," he cried to his companion; "but tell them from John Mortimer, that if they do not cease their racket, I will warrant that they shall not have an onion or a sprig of garlic to stink their breaths with this night. And if that does not fear them, nothing will – not Purgatory itself!"

The young man communicated this in his own way, and though every man among his assailants was to the full as brave as himself, the threat of the Englishman did not fail in its effect. The *arrieros* and Aragonese horse-clippers drew off and consulted, while the Scot who had caused all the disturbance, dropped his point to the floor, and contented himself with wrapping his cloak more tightly about his defensive arm. He had evidently been some time in the country, for he wore the dark *capa* and red *boina* of Navarra, and answered the deputation which now came forward with readiness and composure. Whoever gave in, it would certainly not be he. That, at least, was the impression given by his attitude.

"Certainly, most certainly," he said. "I will be glad to meet any one of you anywhere. I will stand to my words spoken in any language, or any field of honour, from the carpet of a prime minister to one of your infernal dusty *campos*, with any weapon, from pistol and sword to a tooth-pick – with any Spaniard, or Frenchman, or mongrel tyke that ever lifted wine pot."

"Is this a way to speak to gentlemen – I put it to you, caballeros?" cried one of the deputation, a huge rawboned Galician, angrily.

The Scot instantly detected the accent of the speaker and, dismissing him with the gesture one uses to a menial, called out, "Caballeros, indeed! What needs this son of the burden-bearing animal to speak of Caballeros? Is there any old Castilian here, of the right ancient stock? If so, let him arbitrate between us. I, for one, will abide by his decision. The sons of gentlemen and soldiers will not do wrong to a soldier and a stranger!"

Then from the darkest and most distant corner, where he had sat wrapped in his great striped mantle with the cape drawn close about his head, rose a man of a little past the middle years of life, his black beard showing only a few threads of grey, where the tell-tale wisdom tuft springs from the under lip.

"Young sir," he said courteously, "I am an Old Castilian from Valladolid. I will hear your cause of quarrel, and, if you so desire, advise my compatriots, if they in their turn will consent to put their case into my hands."

There was some demur at this among the rougher gipsies and muleteers, but every one was anxious for the evening meal, and the fragrant earthen pipkins and great iron central pot gave forth a good smell. Also a red-waistcoated man-servant ran hither and thither among them, whispering in the ear of each belligerent; and his communication, having presumably to do with the stranger's quality and condition, had a remarkable effect in casting oil upon the waters. Indeed, the Migueletes had withdrawn as soon as the Castilian came forward, and presently he of Galicia, having consulted with his fellows, answered that for his part he was quite prepared to submit the causes of strife to the noble cavalier from Valladolid, provided the stranger also would abide by the decision.

"I have said so," put in the Scot fiercely, "and *my* custom is not to make a promise at night for the purpose of breaking it in the morning!"

CHAPTER IV

A LITTLE COMB-CUTTING

By his accent of defiance, the Scot evidently considered that he had made a personal point here, but the Old Castilian gravely passed the insult over.

"Will the Señor state his case?" he said, bowing to the young man.

"I came to this venta, the proprietor of which, and all his relations, may God confound for liars and thieves! When I entered I paid for one week's good straw and barley in coined silver of Mexico. The unshorn villain stole the feed from under my horse's nose so soon as my back was turned, and then to-night, upon my complaining, set his rascal scullions on to vilify my country, or at least a country which, if not mine, is yet no concern of his or theirs. Whereupon I tendered to all the cleaner of them my cartel, offering to fight them with any weapon they might name, and in any place, for the honour of Scotland and the Presbyterian religion!"

Though he had never heard of either of these last, the grey-bearded umpire gravely wagged his head at the statement of the Scot, nodded in acknowledgment, and turned with equal gravity and distinction to the Gallegan as the representative of the opposite faction. He motioned him to proceed.

"This man," said the Galician, speaking in the harsh stuttering whisper affected by these Iberian hewers of wood and drawers of water, "this man for these ten days past hath given all in the *Venta* bad money and worse talk. To-day he would have cheated *Dueño*, and we, like true men, took up the cudgels for the good patron."

"Hear the bog-trotting cowards lie!" cried the Scot, fiercely. "Save for the barley, I paid no money, good or bad. All I had remains here in my belt. If I gave bad money, let him produce it. And, save in the matter of his beast's provend, who gives money at the entering in of a hotel?"

"Least of all a Scot," put in the Englishman, who had been following with some difficulty the wordy warfare.

"Then because he would not exchange good money for the bad, and because of his words, which carried stings, we challenged him to fight, and he fought. That, worthy Señor, is the beginning of the matter, and the end."

"Sir," said the Scot to the Old Castilian, "there was no question of money. None brought my reckoning to me –"

"No," sighed the landlord, from beyond the bottle-encumbered counter where he had taken refuge, "because he threatened to let daylight into the vitals of the man who carried it to him."

"But as to the insults to his country?" asked the old Castilian, "you ought to have borne in mind that for that cause will a man fight quicker than for his sweetheart."

"So it is, Señor, we deny it not," answered the Gallegan; "yet this fellow, after abusing the English and their land till there were no more ill words in the language, turned upon us because we chanced to agree with him, outs with his pocket-book and deals round what he calls 'cartels of defiance' as if he dealt a hand at ombre. Then, after some give and take of ill words, as your honour knows the custom is, he pulls his blade upon us, and makes play as you saw. We are poor fellows, and know no more than how to defend ourselves. And if we fight, our custom is to do it with a couple of Albacete knives before half the town, and be done with it. But this stranger was all for duels, and seconds, and codes of honour, after the mode of Paris."

"And a very excellent thing too, sir," said the Old Castilian, smiling at the Scot, "but in their due place, and their place is hardly in the kitchen of the venta of San Vicencio. Listen to me. My finding is this. You will all shake hands, after an apology given and received in the matter of the stranger's country, and since he has paid no reckoning these ten days according to his own statement, the which I believe, he shall defray his count so soon as it shall be presented to him by the host. Are you agreed?"

"Agreed!" said the Gallegan, holding out his hand to the Scot, "and I regret, on behalf of myself and my companions, that we ever said aught to the discredit of England, the very distinguished country of which the Señor stranger is a native."

The Scot shrugged his shoulders in the French manner, but nevertheless held out his hand with some show of heartiness.

"I am no citizen of England, thank God," he said, "I own no such pock-pudding land, but it will be a heavy day when Rollo Blair of Castle Blair, in the good shire of Fife, sits still with his hands in his pockets and hears a garlic-eating Frenchman abuse the English, with whom his forbears fought so many good fights."

"I thank you on behalf of my country for your championship, such as it is," said the stout Englishman, smiling; "things that cut and thrust or go off with a bang, are not in my way. But if my knuckles are any good against the bridge of a man's nose, they shall henceforth be at your country's service. For the rest, bills of lading and exchanges at thirty days are more in my line."

"Ah," said the young Scot, twirling an almost invisible moustache, "commerce I know little of. I was bred to the profession of arms. My good father taught me the sword and the pistol, according to the practice of the best modern schools. Sergeant McPherson, his orderly, gave me instruction in the sabre and bayonet. I was intended for a commission in the 77th, my father's old regiment, when a pecuniary loss, the result of an unfortunate speculation, broke my poor father's heart and sent me out to seek my fortune with no more than Robin Fleeming's sword and my right arm."

"Poor capital to start on," said the Englishman, in his bluff manner, as he examined the article in question; "now you do not happen to write a good round hand, do you?"

The Scot started and laid his hand on his sword hilt.

"Sir," he cried, "your avocations do not permit you to understand how great an insult you offer to a gentleman!"

"Oh," said the other, "I don't know at all that you would have suited. Our manager down at Barcelona is a very particular man; but then I would have said a good word for you, and being the owner's son –"

"Say no more of the matter, I beg of you," said the Scot, haughtily. "I have not yet been reduced to the necessity of choosing a mercantile career."

"And that is a most fortunate thing for you," quoth the Englishman, with the utmost gravity.

"Eh?" said the Scot, somewhat surprised, and, being occupied with his own thoughts and with keeping an eye on the door, not exactly taking the Englishman's meaning, "Oh, you were speaking of a mercantile career. Yes, I am indeed fortunate in that my lines have been cast in pleasanter places than before a ream of foolscap on a desk."

"It pays well, though," said the other placidly.

"For me, I care nothing for money," said Rollo Blair. "Eh! what is this?"

He wheeled round quickly in response to a tap upon his arm, and the Englishman, looking at him keenly (though apparently intently regarding the opposite wall), saw him turn visibly paler.

The landlord was at Master Rollo Blair's elbow with the reckoning written out upon a long sheet of paper. A couple of serving men, who were probably privy to the extravagant total, stood sniggering and whispering in a neighbouring archway. The Gallegan and his companions sat crossing their legs and gossiping watchfully, darting inquisitive glances under their brows at their late adversary, to see how he would bear himself. Only that noble gentleman, the Old Castilian, sipped his chocolate unmoved, and, with the perfection of good manners, stared at the fire.

From red to white, and from white back again to a kind of greenish paleness, went and came the hues of the young man's complexion. The son of the house of Blair of Blair was manifestly unhappy. He put his hand in one pocket. He clapped another. His purse was not in either.

"Perchance 'tis in your honour's equipage," suggested the landlord wickedly; "shall I call your body-servant to bring it?"

It was a face of bitter chagrin that Rollo Blair of Blair lifted to the Englishman who had meantime never ceased from his study of a fly upon the wall. He beckoned him a little apart with a look of inimitable chagrin.

"Sir," he said, "will you buy from me a silver-hilted sword. It was my grandfather's, and he fought well with it at Killiecrankie. It is the sole article of value I possess – "

Here a kind of a sob came into his voice. "God knows, I would rather sell my right hand!" he said brusquely.

"How came you to run up such a bill, having no effects?" said the Englishman, looking at him coolly, and taking no notice of the young man's offer of his weapon, which he continued to hold by the scabbard.

"I can hardly tell," said the Scot, hanging his head, "but only two nights ago there was a young French lord here who out-faced me first at the cards and then at the drinking of wine. So I was compelled to order in more and better to be upsides with him!"

"There is no meaner ambition, especially on an empty purse," said the Englishman, not moving from the angle of wall upon which he leaned.

"Curse me that ever I troubled myself to appeal to a cold-livered Englishman!" cried the young man, "I will go to the Castilian over yonder. He looks as if he might have the bowels of a man. At least he will not palm off a gentleman in distress with moral precepts culled from last week's sermon!"

The Englishman leaped forward and clapped the hot-headed Scot on the shoulder. With the other hand he drew a well-filled wallet, with a mercantile calendar slipped into the band, from his pocket.

"There," he said, heartily, "let me be your banker. 'Tis worth a score of reckonings to hear a Scotsman speak disrespectfully of sermons. My name is John Mortimer – "

"Of the Mortimers of Plas Gwynedd in Caernarvonshire? Why, my grandmother was of that – " Rollo Blair was beginning a genealogical disquisition with great eagerness when the Englishman stopped him.

"No," he said, "at least not that I know of. My father made mouse-traps before he took to cotton-spinning, and I never so much as heard whether I had any grandfather. I am plain John Mortimer of Chorley at your service. I think you are an honest lad, sorely led astray by whimsies in the brain, but you are honest, and in a far land. You are welcome to my purse and, credit to any reasonable amount which will put you in the way of repaying your obligation, as I am sure you desire to do."

"I shall not sleep sound at night till I do," returned the youth, firmly. "But first I desire to inform you that I have had an ill opinion of your nation – an opinion to which, in spite of your great personal kindness and the obligation under which you place me, I am bound to adhere."

The Englishman nodded carelessly.

"There speaks an honest man, but also a foolish one!" said Mortimer, shaking his head; "you should try the foreign wine trade for a year or two. It is wonderfully curbing to a man's vocabulary!"

The Scot stood a moment at gaze, manifestly debating with himself.

"And you will not accept of my sword?" he said. "I assure you it is worth enough to discharge my small liabilities twice over."

"Swords are not legal tender in the wine business," said the other, smiling, "nor yet when I go home with a knowledge of languages to help sell my father's grey cloth! You are as welcome as my brother to the loan," he added, "and I promise you I will accept repayment as gladly from you as from him."

"You make the matter easier indeed," said Rollo Blair, recovering his spirits with a bound. "Here, landlord, can you change this gold ounce, or is the matter too great a one for your petty venta?"

The young men had been standing a little back, in the shadow of one of the arches, in which were empty mangers and the rings of head-stalls, so that the patron could not observe the passing of the Englishman's purse from hand to hand.

"Your servant, Señor!" said the innkeeper, no Spaniard, but a French Jew of Roussillon, "what can I have the honour of ordering for your excellencies' supper?"

"Order yourself out of my sight!" cried the Scot imperiously. "We are going up to the monastery to dine with my uncle the Abbot!"

The patron of the venta fell back a couple of steps, and the two serving men ceased to grin and instead bowed most obsequiously.

"He is a nephew of the Abbot, perhaps (who knows) his son! There will be fine doings out of this night's work, if he tells Don Baltasar all, as he doubtless will."

This was the whispered comment of one servitor in the ear of his master. Said the other —

"Speak him fair, patron, for the love of God! For if the monks are adverse, we are sped. Our pipe is as good as out. And perchance a yet worse thing may happen!"

And he leaned over till his lips almost touched mine host's ear.

"My God!" gasped the latter, "what a country! Would that I were safe back again in mine own house with green blinds in Roussillon!"

The Englishman and the Scot were now walking amicably arm in arm to and fro in front of the inn. The Scot had quite recovered his military demeanour, and again twirled his moustache with an air. The silver-hilted sword shone no brighter on the morn of Killiecrankie. The unused spurs tinkled melodiously.

The landlord stood with his hands deferentially folded. The young men took not the faintest notice of him, but continued to pace slowly to and fro.

Mine host of the venta of Montblanch cleared his throat. The Scot cast a single scornful glance at him, which he caught as a dog catches a bone.

"My most noble lords," he said, "I trust that the unfortunate occurrence of this evening will not prevent this house from having your honours' custom in the future, and that you too will say no word of all this to the most reverend Abbot Don Baltasar!"

"Make yourself easy on that score," said the Scot; "as soon as we are round the corner we will forget that such a refuge for fleabitten knaves anywhere exists out of Pandemonium!"

Lower still bowed the obsequious patron, for this was his idea of the way a gentleman should speak to an innkeeper. Abuse showed his quality.

"Shall I order a carriage to convey your honours up to the Abbey?" said the landlord, preparing to take his leave. "I know a patron, who has a coach-and-six!"

"We will walk on our feet," replied the Scot, no whit abashed, "ah — in pursuance of a vow made at Salamanca!"

The landlord withdrew, making an obeisance that was almost an oriental salaam.

"But is the Abbot really your uncle?" inquired the Englishman, as they set out.

"As much as you are," said the Scot, "but all the same we shall dine with him, or my name is not Rollo Blair of Blair Castle in the shire of Fife!"

"The Lord send it," said the Englishman devoutly; "perhaps in that case he will part with his Priorato wine a farthing the gallon cheaper!"

CHAPTER V

THE ABBEY OF MONTBLANCH

The great monastery of Montblanch was of regal, nay almost of imperial dignity. Though no emperor (as at Yuste) had here laid aside the world and assumed the cowl, yet mighty Kings of Aragon and Navarra lay buried within its walls, and its long line of mitred abbots included many in whose veins ran the royal blood of all the Spains.

Almost completely encircled by wild sierras, it was yet situated upon a plain, as it were let into the very heart of the mountains. A clear trout stream, which furnished many a Friday's breakfast to the monks, ran through a rich vale. Of no place within fifty leagues, could it be so truly said, that all about it and above it there was heard a sound of many waters.

Of the various potencies and pre-eminences of Montblanch, civil and ecclesiastical, there was no end. A hundred villages owned its lordship. The men were serfs, the women handmaids. Soul and body they were bound to their masters of the monastery of Montblanch. Without permission they dared neither to wed nor to bury, neither to increase nor to multiply, to lay the bride on the bride-bed nor the corpse upon the bier.

Nor, to thrill the listener's blood, were darker tales awaiting, whispered with a quiver of the flesh, as men crouched closer about the glowing charcoal pan, and women glanced fearfully out between the green lattice strips at the twinkling lights of the Abbey, set high above them under the silent stars.

It was said, not openly indeed, but rather with an awestruck lowering of the voice and fearful glances to right and left, that when the inquisition was done away with in the Spain of the cities and provinces, the chiefs of the Holy Office had found a last place of refuge beneath the grey rocks of Montblanch, and that whoso offended against the monks of the mountain, or refused to them flock or herd, son or daughter, sooner or later entered the doors of the monastery never to be visible again in the light of day.

So at least ran the tale, and as the two young men made their way upward from San Vicencio, by the mountain path beside which the stream brattled and sulked alternate, Rollo Blair told these things to the Englishman as one who half believed them.

"It is not possible," answered the latter scornfully; "this is no century in which such things can be done. Has civilisation not reached as far as Aragon? Who talks of the rack and the inquisition at this time of day?"

The young Scot halted a sturdy peasant who came whistling down the path, a bundle of tough reed stems over his shoulder.

"Did you ever hear of the black room of the monastery of Montblanch?" he said, pinching the man's blue overall between finger and thumb.

The sunburnt Aragonese crossed himself and was silent.

"Speak, have you heard?"

The other nodded, and made with his digits that "fig of Spain" which averts the evil eye; but under his loose blouse half furtively as if ashamed of his precaution.

"I have heard!" he said, and was silent.

"Do you wish to enter it?" said Rollo.

"God forbid!" quoth the man with conviction.

"And why?" pursued the Scot, wishful to make his point.

"Because of those who go in thither, no one ever comes out."

The man, having thus spoken, hastened to betake himself out of sight, his feet, shod with sandals of esparto grass, pad-padding from side to side of the narrow mountain path.

"You see," said Rollo Blair, "mine uncle, reverend man, is no favourite in his own district."

It was now drawing towards evening, and the rich orange glow characteristic of northern Iberia deepened behind the hills, while the bushes of the wayside grew indistinct and took on mysterious shapes on either side.

"My object in coming to Spain is simple," said the Englishman, of whom his companion had asked a question. "Before my father retires and confides to me his spinning mills at Chorley, he stipulates that I shall make by my own exertions a clear profit of a thousand pounds. I, on my part, have agreed neither to marry nor to return till I can do so with a thousand pounds thus acquired in my hand. I thought I could make it as easily in the wine business as in any other of which I had no knowledge. And so, here I am!" concluded the young man.

"Lord," cried Blair, "if my father had insisted on any such conditions with me, he would have made me a wandering Jew for life, and a perpetual bachelor to boot! A thousand pounds! Great Saint Andrew, I would as soon think of getting to heaven by my own merits!"

"Spoken like an excellent Calvinist!" cried the Englishman. "But how came you into this country, and can you in any way assist me in the buying of good vintages, out of which I may chance to make profit? Besides the firm's credit, I have a private capital of one hundred pounds, of which at present eight or nine are in a friend's hands!"

"Good Lord!" cried the Scot, "then I by my folly have put you by so much farther from your happiness. But of course you have a sweetheart waiting for you on your return?"

"I have yet to see the woman I would give a brass farthing to marry, or for whose mess of connubial pottage I would sell my good bachelor's birthright."

"Fegs," said Rollo Blair, gazing with admiration upon his shorter companion, and, as was his wont when excited, relapsing into dialect, "the shoe has aye pinched the ither foot wi' me, my lad. No to speak o' Peggy Ramsay, I think I hae been disappointed by as mony as a round dozen o' lasses since I shook off the dust o' the Lang Toon o' Kirkcaldy."

"Disappointed?" queried his companion, "how so, man? Did you not please the maids?"

"Oh, aye, it wasna that," returned the squire of Fife, taking his companion's arm confidentially; "the lasses, to do justice to their good taste, were maistly willing eneuch. There's something about a lang man like me that tak's them, the craiteurs, and I hae a way o' my ain wi' them, though I never gat mair schooling than my father could thrash into me wi' a dog whip. But the fact is that aye afore the thing gaed far eneuch, I cam to words wi' some brither or faither o' the lass, and maybe put a knife into him, or as it were an ounce o' lead, I wadna wonder – to improve his logic."

"In other words you are quarrelsome?" said Mortimer shortly.

The Scot removed his hand from the Englishman's arm and drew himself to his full height.

"There" he said, "I beg to take issue with you, sir! Argumentative I may be, and it is my nature, but to the man who flings it in my teeth that I am of a quarrelsome disposition, I have but one answer. Sir, receive my card!"

And with great gravity he pulled from his pocket an ancient card-case of damaged silver, bulged and dented out of all shape, opened it, and burst into a loud laugh.

"I declare I have not one left! I spent them all on those Aragonese dogs down there, who thought, I daresay, that they were soup tickets on the *frailuchos'* kitchen up above. And anyway it is heaven's own truth, I *am* a quarrelsome, ungrateful dog! But forgive me, Mr. Mortimer, it is my nature, and at any rate it does not last long. I am not yet of those 'that age and sullens have,' as my father used to say. A desperate wise man my father, and well read! I would have learned more from him if I had not preferred Sergeant McPherson and the stables, to the study and my father's Malacca cane about my shoulders each time I made a false quantity."

"But you have not answered my question," said the Englishman. "I am here to buy wines. I am above all anxious to take over to England some thousand hectolitres of the famous Priorato of Montblanch, and any other vintages that will suit the English market."

"But how on a hundred pounds can you expect to do so much?" asked the Scot, with an unlooked-for exhibition of native caution.

"Oh, I have enough credit for anything that I may buy on account of the firm. The hundred is my own private venture, and it struck me that with your command of the language and my knowledge of business, we might be able to ship some Spanish wines to the Thames on very favourable terms. I should of course be glad to pay you the usual commission."

"Vintages and commissions and shipments are so much Greek to me," said Rollo Blair; "but if I can do anything to lessen the weight of obligation under which you have placed me, you can count on my services. I am scarce such a fool as my tongue and temper make me out sometimes! You are the only man alive I have tried to pick a quarrel with and failed."

"I think we shall do very well together yet," said Mortimer; "the usual commission is five per cent, on all transactions up to a hundred pounds – above that, seven and a half."

"Damn you and your commissions, sir," cried Blair, hotly. "Did I not tell you I would do my best, on the honour of a Scottish gentleman!"

"Very likely," returned the other, dryly; "but I have always found the benefit of a clear and early understanding between partners."

They had been gradually ascending the narrow path which wound through clumps of rosemary, broom, thyme, and bay-tree laurel to a sheltered little plain, much of it occupied by enclosed gardens and the vast white buildings of the monastery itself.

The moon, almost full but with a shaving off its right-hand side which kept it a full hour late, shone behind the two adventurers as they stood still a moment to take in the scene.

Pallid limestone pinnacles rose high into serene depths of indigo, in which the stars twinkled according to their size and pre-eminence, nearer and farther, gradually retiring into infinite space. In the clefts high up were black tufts of trees, that seemed from below like so many gooseberry bushes. A kind of three days' stubble of beard covered the plain itself right up to the monastery wall, while here and there was heard the continuous tinkle of many goat bells as the leaders alternately strayed and cropped the herbage between the boulders.

Stretching from side to side was the white abbey, not so much imposing for architectural beauty, but because of its vast size, its Titanic retaining walls and multitude of windows, now mere splashed oblongs of darkness irregularly scattered along the white walls. Only at one end the chapel was lit up, and from its windows of palest gold, and Madonna blue, and ruby red, came the sweet voices of children beginning to sing the evening hymn as it stands in the Breviary for the use of the faithful in the arch-diocese of Tarragona —

"Rosasque miscens liliis.
Aram vetustam contegit."

CHAPTER VI

BROTHER HILARIO

At the great entrance gate they paused, uncertain which way to turn, for from the windows of the chapel a bright light shone forth upon the grey waste without, whitening alike the dark green creepers of the juniper and the pale yellow spears of the restless broom. But a chance encounter decided the matter for them.

"Well, ah, my good sometime enemy," cried a shrill eager voice, "have you forgotten Etienne de Saint Pierre, and how we are to fight below the windmill at Montmartre the first time you come to Paris?"

"Lord, it is the hare-brained Frenchman!" cried Rollo, yet with some glow of pleasure in his face. The very talk of fighting stirred him.

"Then there are a pair of you!" said John Mortimer, quietly, like a man dropping his fly into a pool on a clear evening.

"Eh, what's that?" angrily cried the Scot, but was diverted from further inquiry by the sight of a figure that darted forward out of the darkness of the wall.

A smallish slender man, dressed in a costume which would have recalled the Barber of Seville, had it not been for the ecclesiastical robe that surmounted and as it were extinguished its silken gorgeousness. A great cross of gold set with jewels swung at the young man's breast and was upheld by links as large as those which sustain a lord mayor's badge of office.

"Ah, I have renounced the world, my dear adversary," cried the new-comer enthusiastically, "as you will also. I am no longer Etienne de Saint Pierre, but Brother Hilario, an unworthy novice of the Convent of the Virgin of Montblanch!"

"But, sir," cried Rollo Blair, "you cannot take up the religious life without some small settlement with me. You are trusted to meet me with the smallsword at the Buttes of Montmartre – you to fight for the honour of Señorita Concha of Sarria and I to make a hole in your skin for the sweet sake of little Peggy Ramsay, who broke my heart or ever I left the bonny woods o' Alyth to wander on this foreign shore!"

"Your claim I allow, my dear Sir Blair," cried the Frenchman, "but the eternal concerns of the soul come first, and I have been wicked – wicked – so very wicked – or at least as wicked as my health (which is indifferent) would allow. But the holy Prior – the abbot – mine uncle, hath shown me the error of my ways!"

John Mortimer turned directly round till he faced the speaker.

"Odds bobs," he cried, "then after all there is a pair of them. *He is this fellow's uncle too!*"

The Frenchman gazed at him amazed for a moment. Then he clapped his hand fiercely on the place where his sword-hilt should have been, crying, "I would have you know, Monsieur, that the word of a Saint Pierre is sacred. I carry in my veins the blood of kings!"

And he grappled fiercely for the missing sword-hilt, but his fingers encountering only the great jewelled cross of gold filigree work, he raised it to his lips with a sudden revulsion of feeling.

"Torrentes iniquitatis conturbaverunt me.
Dolóres inferni circumdederunt me."

He spoke these words solemnly, shaking his head as he did so.

"What! still harping on little Dolóres?" cried Blair; "I thought little Concha was your last – before Holy Church, I mean."

The little Frenchman was beneath the lamps and he looked up at the long lean Scot with a peculiarly sweet smile.

"Ah, you scoff," he said, "but you will learn – yes, you will learn. My uncle, the Prior, will teach you. He will show you the Way, as he has done for me!"

"It may be so," retorted the Scot, darkly; "I only wish I could have a chance at him. I think I could prove him all in the wrong about transubstantiation – that is, if I could keep my temper sufficiently long.

"But," he added, "if it be a fair question to put to a novice and a holy man, how about the divine right of kings that you talked so much of only a week ago, and especially what of Don Carlos, for whom you came to fight?"

"Ah, my good cousin Carlos, my dear cousin," cried Etienne Saint Pierre, waving his hands in the air vehemently, "his cause is as dear and sacred to this heart as ever. But now I will use in his behalf the sword of the Spirit instead of the carnal weapon I had meant to draw, in the cause of the Lord's anointed. I will *pray* for the success of his arms night and morning."

At this moment the colloquy at the abbey gate was broken up by a somewhat stout man, also in the garb of a novice, a long friar's robe being girt uncomfortably tight about his waist. In his hand he held a lantern.

"Monsieur – Brother Hilario, I mean – a thousand devils run away with me that ever I should speak such a shake-stick name to my master – the Holy Prior wishes to speak with you, and desires to know whether you would prefer a capon of Zaragoza or two Bordeaux pigeons in your *olla* to-night?"

"Come, that is more promising," cried the Scot; "we will gladly accept of your invitation to dine with you and your uncle, and give him all the chance he wants to convert me to the religious life. We accept with pleasure – pleased, I am sure, to meet either the Saragossan capon or the two Bordeaux pigeons!"

"Invitation!" cried the astonished Brother Hilario. "Did I invite you? If so, I fear I took a liberty. I do not remember the circumstance."

"Do you doubt my word!" cried the Scot, with instant frowning truculence. "I say the invitation was implied if not expressed, and by the eyes of Peggy Ramsay, if you do not get us a couple of covers at your uncle's table to-night, I will go straight to the Holy Prior and tell him all that I know of little Concha of Sarria, and your plot to carry her off – a deal more, I opine, than you included in your last confession, most high-minded friar!"

"That was before my renunciation of the flesh," cried Saint Pierre, manifestly agitated.

The Scot felt his elbow touched.

"I was under her balcony with a letter last Friday, no further gone, sir," whispered the novice in the cord-begirt robe; "blessed angels help me to get this nonsense out of his head, or it will be the death of us, and we will never night-hawk it on the Palais Royal again!"

"And on what pious principles do you explain the love-letter you sent last Friday!" said Rollo, aloud. "What if I were to put it into the hands of your good uncle the Prior? If that were to happen, I warrant you would never ride on one of the white abbey mules in the garb of the brothers of Montblanch!"

The stout novice rubbed his hands behind his master's back, and grinned from ear to ear. But the effect upon Saint Pierre was not quite what Rollo intended.

Instead of being astonished and quailing at his acuteness, the young Frenchman suddenly fired up in the most carnal and unmonkish fashion.

"You have been making love to my little Concha yourself, you dirty Scots rogue! I will have your life, monsieur! Guard yourself!"

"'Your Concha' – do you say, Master Friar?" cried Blair; "and pray who gave you a right to have Conchas on your hands with the possessive adjective before them? Is that permit included in

your monkish articles of association? Is adoration of pretty little Conchas set down in black and red in your breviaries? Answer me that, sir!"

"No matter, monsieur," retorted the Frenchman; "I was a man before I was a monk. Indeed, in the latter capacity I am not full-fledged yet. And I hold you answerable if in anything you have offended against the lady you have named, or used arts to wile her heart from me!"

"I give you my word I never set eyes on the wench – but from what I hear – "

"Stop there," cried the second novice; "be good enough to settle that question later. For me, I must go back promptly with the answer about the capon of Zaragoza and the two Bordeaux pigeons!"

The Scot looked at the Frenchman. The Frenchman looked at the Scot.

"As a compliment to the fair lady the Señorita Concha, say to my uncle the capon, François!" said the lover.

"And as a compliment to yourself, my dear Brother Hilario, say to his lordship *also* the two Bordeaux pigeons!"

"*And* the pigeons, François!" quoth the latest addition to the brotherhood of Montblanch, with perfect seriousness.

CHAPTER VII

THE ABBOT'S DINNER

Rollo Blair kept his gasconading promise. He dined with "his uncle," the abbot, that most wise, learned, and Christian prelate, Don Baltasar Varela.

The abbot of Montblanch was glad to see Milord of Castle Blair in the land of the Scots. It was not a Christian country, he had been informed.

"Then your venerability has been misinformed," cried Rollo, who thirsted for argument with the high ecclesiastic upon transubstantiation, consubstantiation, and all the other "ations" of his creed. But the Abbot parried him neatly at the very first assault, by an inquiry as to what he thought of *transverberacion*.

At this Rollo gasped, and found immediate occasion to change the subject to the famous wine of the Abbey, *el Priorato*, while the little Frenchman beamed appreciation of his uncle's ecclesiastical learning, and that wise prelate twirled his thumbs about each other and discoursed at large, his shrewd unfathomable grey eyes now fixed on one and now on another of the company, as though he were fathoming them severally with some infallible mental gauge, by which he could calculate their measure of capacity to a hair.

Costly wines were on the table. Silver and cut glass of Venice sparkled on spotless cloth. Silent-sandalled lay brethren of the Order waited on the Prior and his guests. Course after course was brought in, discussed, and removed. The Abbot, Don Baltasar Varela, himself ate little. He watched his guests' appetites, however, with manifest interest, and directed the servitors with almost imperceptible movements of his hand. He appeared to favour each one of the three equally.

Yet an observer as detached as Don Baltasar himself would have detected that the chief part of his attention was given to the young man, Rollo Blair, and that the Prior, with a gently subtle smile, kept murmuring to himself at each quick retort and flash of repartee.

"Fiery as a Scot' indeed! A true proverb! This fellow is the man we want, if so we can pay his price. The others – "

And Don Baltasar shrugged his shoulders slightly and contemptuously, as he glanced from the broad stolid features of John Mortimer of Chorley to the bright volatile countenance of his nephew Etienne, Count of Saint Pierre – though, as we know, in so doing he did much injustice to two men very brave after their kind, albeit their kind was not that for which the Prior of Montblanch happened to be presently on the outlook.

Rollo never emptied his glass (and he did so frequently) but one of Abbot Baltasar's eyelids quivered, and the glass was immediately filled again.

Thus supplied with inspiration the stream of the youth's conversation flowed steadily. His tones rose till they dominated the table. His vocabulary expanded, and as he had learned his Castilian in strange places, his occasional freedom of expression bore somewhat heavily upon the lay brothers, who, fearful of the watchful grey eye of their superior, dared not so much as to smile behind their hands.

As Rollo's tongue loosened and his heart enlarged, the Prior with a twitch of his thumb indicated that the doors were to be closed, and turned again to give yet graver and more courteous attention to the conversation of his guest.

Master Blair's muse was the historical – and, alas! the autobiographical.

"Through his sword-arm I sent Killiecrankie, which is a better blade than any ever forged at Toledo – as I, Rollo Blair, stand ready to affirm and make good upon any man every day of the week!"

"I agree," said John Mortimer, "'tis better than my only razor, which is an infernally bad piece of metal, and not fit to scrape a hog with!"

"And *I* agree," sighed Etienne, "because the remainder of my life I have resolved to devote to contemplation upon holy things. *Vade retro me, Satana!*"

The Scot turned upon him like a flash.

"*You* have renounced the world" – he queried – "did I hear you say?"

The Frenchman nodded. "And its vanities!" he agreed with a twirl of his chain.

"Since Friday night, I presume?" Again began the fateful questioning, at which Mortimer kicked Rollo severely under the table. The poor novice and martyr to monarchial principles flushed visibly. He was afraid of what the mad Scot might say next. But at that very moment of danger Rollo curbed his tongue. He would not let the name of little Concha pass his lips. Still the novice in his uncle's presence was game too excellent to let slip easily.

"Contemplation!" he laughed aloud, "you will, you say, pass your days in contemplation. The relics of the saints will serve you from this day forth, most gentle penitent. Why, man, you should go straight to Cologne. They have the bones of eleven thousand virgins there, I am told. These might chance to serve you some while!"

"Speaking of relics," said the abbot, rising, to prevent further awkwardness of discourse, "there is a midnight celebration which it is my duty to attend, but do not let that disturb you from finishing your wine. Son Hilario, I absolve you from attendance, that you may keep these friends of yours in company. When you are weary, touch this bell, and Father Anselmo, my confessor, will show you the treasures and reliquaries of the Abbey – the former, alas! now scanty, since the visit of your compatriots, Messire Etienne, who came in the year eight, with their unhallowed melting-pots. But there are as many relics as ever, praise be to the saints – mostly stones. There is never any lack of stones at Montblanch, though sometimes we poor anchorites of the Virgin may chance to lack bread."

As he spoke he looked about at the well-laden table, the bursting figs, the bunches of purple grapes, the shining silver and snowy linen.

"*Benedicite*, good gentlemen!" he said, and went out with bowed head and a rustle of flowing robe.

"But the wine – the wine! You have forgotten the wine!" cried John Mortimer, suddenly remembering his purpose in coming to Montblanch.

"*Ma foi!*" exclaimed Brother Hilario, "has the Englishman not yet had enough! I have heard of how these islanders drink, but this passes credit."

"Ay, it coves Kirkcaldy!" cried Rollo. "He is indeed a maisterfu' drinker, this Englishman!"

"What?" queried the Frenchman, still mystified, and moving towards the decanters. "Does he want more wine? How much would satisfy him, think you?"

"I could take somewhere about sixty thousand gallons at present, and as much more in a week or two!" said Mortimer, pulling out his pocket-book.

The Frenchman looked at Rollo for enlightenment. Our insular measures of capacity were naturally strange to him.

"About twenty thousand *arrobas* at present might satisfy him, he says, but he would like more in a week or two!"

Monsieur Etienne de Saint Pierre fell back, lax with astonishment.

"*Mon Dieu!*" he cried, "I never believed it before, but I see now it is true. An Englishman bathes himself, and drinks the contents of his bath when he is finished. It is that he may be ready for the twenty thousand *arrobas* of Priorato! But you are pleased to jest, gentlemen, is it not so?"

The matter was explained.

"I can arrange that with my uncle," said Etienne, as soon as he fully understood John Mortimer's purpose; "I understand something about wines, for I grow some square leagues of vines on my lands in France. Moreover, I will see to it that your friend does not pay too high a price for the Priorato! And now for the relics! We have already wasted too much time."

He rang the bell and called in the abbot's confessor.

Father Anselmo was a gaunt, severe man, of more than the average height, with black hair streaked with grey, and fixed and stony eyes. With him there appeared a younger and more jovial monk, with small eyes that perpetually twinkled, and a smile that seemed to catch itself up as with a click each time that the stern gaze of Father Anselmo turned his way. This monk was evidently only a novice, or a lay brother on his probation, for he wore the lesser habit and carried in his hand a great bunch of keys, which he tinkled freely, as if in that silent place he took a certain pleasure in the sound.

Father Anselmo gazed with severe disapproval upon the rich appointments of the abbot's table, and austere refused for himself and his companion any refreshment beyond a glass of cold water.

But on the other hand the eyes of the keybearer perused with evident longing every salver and decanter. Whereupon the wild Scot, being restrained by no scruples, religious or otherwise, passed him first of all a glass of wine behind his superior's back, which he drank at a gulp without a sound, his eyes all the while on the lean rounded shoulders of the father confessor.

A full bottle of wine followed and was instantly concealed beneath the novice's long robe. A plate of grapes, half a dozen pears, a loaf of wheaten bread, all were passed to him one by one, and as swiftly and silently disappeared, none being bold enough to guess whither.

"By the Lord, I'll try him with a whole melon," muttered Rollo; "I believe that, swollen as he is, he could stow away a keg of butter quite comfortably."

But before he could put this jovial son of Peter the keybearer to the test, Father Anselmo had gathered his robes ascetically about him, and signed to the abbot's guests to follow him to the reliquary chamber.

CHAPTER VIII

SANCTUARY

The severe confessor solemnly preceded them, a candle in his hand. Rollo thought that Father Anselmo had the air of perpetually assisting at an excommunication, a burning of heretics, or other extreme disciplinary ceremony of Holy Church. His inferior, the bearer of the Petrine keys, dimpled behind him, rattling the wards vigorously to hide any tendency of the bottle of wine to make music of its own in his ample skirts.

The treasury of Montblanch had indeed been most grievously despoiled by the French, according to the immemorial custom of that most Christian nation upon its campaigns, and only the most used dishes were now of silver or silver gilt. All the rest were of homely pewter silvered over – which, as the confessor said, resembled most men's characters, in that they looked well enough from a distance, and on the whole served just as well. He surveyed the company of young men so meaningly as he said this, that the Scot was only restrained from challenging him on the spot, by the pressure of John Mortimer's arm upon one side, and an almost tearful expression of entreaty on Brother Hilario's face upon the other.

The Confessor selected two keys from the bunch and inserted them into a couple of locks in a small iron door at the foot of certain gloomy steps.

The Scot who was imaginative, thought that he could discern some faint stirrings of life about his feet. Accordingly he stamped once or twice, having an instinctive hatred of little creeping vermin, which (with wasps) were the only things he feared in heaven or earth.

But the faint stirring ceasing, he grew interested in watching Father Anselmo and the novice bearing simultaneously on the keys, which turned together quite suddenly. Then the Confessor touched a spring concealed behind some drapery and the door opened.

A former visitor, Marshal Souchy, had obtained the same privilege by tying the late Abbot up by the thumbs till he gave the order for the treasury to be opened. In the despatches which he forwarded to his imperial master this fact appeared in the following form: "After half an hour's persuasion the Abbot of Montblanch decided to give up his treasures to your officers, and to celebrate a solemn service in thanksgiving for the arrival in Aragon of the delivering armies of his Majesty the Emperor."

The paucity of treasures of silver and gold in the treasury of Montblanch was, however, more than made up for by the extraordinary number of relics of saints which the monastery possessed. It was at this point that the novice, who appeared to act as a kind of showman in ordinary to the vaults, took up his tale.

"Brother Atanasio, do your duty!" the Confessor had said with a solemn voice, precisely as if he had been ordering the first turn of the great wheel of the garotte.

And in words that fairly tumbled over each other with haste the custodian began his enumeration.

"Here we have a bud from the rod of Aaron – also the body of Aaron himself; the clasp of the robe of Elijah, the prophet, which Elisha did not observe when he picked up the mantle – also the aforesaid Elijah and Elisha; the stone on which the angel sat in the holy sepulchre; the stone on which holy St. Peter stumbled when he let John outrun him; the words he said on that occasion, which are not included in Holy Writ, but were embroidered on a handkerchief by his mother-in-law, probably out of spite; the stone on which the Sainted Virgin was sitting when the angel saluted her, the stone on which she sat down to watch the crucifixion; the stone from Mount Sinai upon which St. Joseph prayed going down to Egypt; a stone from the house of St. Nicholas, and another from his sepulchre – "

Athanasius the rosy had only proceeded so far with his enumeration when a groan came as it were from the ground, and the Scot leaped violently aside.

"Good God!" he cried, "there is some one suffering down here – through that door, I think! Open it, you black-a-vised sweep of darkness! I am a true-blue Presbyterian, I tell you, and I will have no Torquemada business where Rollo Blair is."

But the dark monk only shook his head, and for the first time smiled.

"The exclamatory stranger is misled by a curious echo, which has given this place its name. It is called 'The Gate of the Groans,' and our wise predecessors chose the place for the entrance of their treasure-chamber, as giving ignorant men the idea that the properties of the Abbey were protected by demons! I had not, however, hoped that the ingenious little arrangement would deceive one so wise and experienced as the *caballero* with the long sword. Our novice, Brother Hilario, will inform his friend that what I have said is well known in the monastery to be the case!"

"I have heard it so stated," said Etienne, with some reluctance, and speaking not at all as his monastic name would import.

The groans came again and again, apparently from the earth, and Rollo, not yet fully convinced, stamped here and there with his foot and battered the walls with the basket of his sword, till he added a dint or two to the tasselled hilt of "Killiecrankie." All in vain, however, for the walls were solid, and the floor beneath his feet rang dull and true.

"Firm as the Rock of Peter," said the Confessor grimly, "on which Holy Church is built. *Tu es Petrus, et super hanc petram – !*"

"I know that verse," cried the Scot, getting quickly in front of him; "but I can show you in a quarter of an hour that the Romanist argument from these words proceeds upon a misconception – if you will do me the honour to follow me – !"

"Follow *me!*" said the sepulchral monk curtly, and pointing upwards as the sound of a bell was wafted down to them faintly. "That is the hour of midnight. Let us attend the call!"

So for that time Rollo's argument against the Romanist doctrine of the Rock of Peter was shut within him. It was not long, however, before he had other matters to think of.

They followed their guide through a maze of dark passages, till, with a sudden "Attention!" he halted them before a door, from the other side of which came a sound of voices.

The door opened and all the world seemed suddenly filled with clear singing and glorious light.

Without the least preparation or preface Father Anselmo ushered the three young men into the great chapel of the order of the Virgin of Montblanch.

To Rollo it seemed almost an indecency to be thus transported from stuffy cases of doubtful relics and the chill darkness of earth-smelling passages, to this place where unseen suppliant voices assailed the Deity with a perpetual song.

The three youths blinked at the sudden light as they stepped within, and each of them glanced at their dress, apprehending with the instinct common to those who find themselves unexpectedly in crowded places, that it must be disordered. They followed their guide mechanically to the Holy Water laver. Etienne made the necessary signs and a low reverence towards the altar. Rollo's devotion to the Presbyterian form of worship did not prevent his imitating his companion with the easy adaptability of youth to place and circumstance, but quite unexpectedly they ran upon a rock in the matter of John Mortimer.

"Do as I do, you obstinate ass!" hissed Rollo in his ear. "Take some of the water on one finger and make the sign of the cross – that is, if you want to sleep in an unpricked skin this night!"

"Be hanged if I do," muttered John Mortimer, between his teeth. "I am not much given to religion myself, but my father is a Primitive Methodist, and built them a church in Chorley. And I never could look the old man in the face again if I dotted myself all over with their heathen holy water!"

"It's little of the Abbot's Priorato you'll ever ship then, my good friend," muttered Rollo; "but please yourself!"

The Englishman had rooted his heels to the pavement and squared his hands by his sides as one who would in nowise be dislodged from his resolve.

"I do not care if I never put a drop of wine into cask," he said, doggedly. "I won't go back to Chorley after having denied my father's brand of religion, even if my own vintage is of the poorest."

"There's more ways of killing a cat than choking her with cream!" growled Rollo; "take this, then, you stiff-necked English deevil!"

And bowing towards the altar, and again towards the Father Confessor, who had been regarding them with a sinister curiosity, with the utmost gravity Rollo made certain gestures with his hands, and dipping his fingers again in the laver, he made the sign of the cross on his friend's forehead and breast, before the Englishman had time to protest.

"In fulfilment of a vow!" he exclaimed in a whisper to Father Anselmo. "My companion has promised to St. Vicente Ferrer of Valencia that he will not make the sign of the cross upon his person till he can do it at the Basilica of holy St. Peter at Rome. He hath a mortal sin still upon his conscience."

"Then let him come to me," said the Confessor. "I will deal with him in a more summary fashion!"

It was the season of pilgrimage, and many were the penitents who availed themselves of the monks' three days statutory hospitality. These were seated about the dark church on chairs and stools supplied them by the sacristans, and on two of the latter John Mortimer and Rollo presently found themselves, while Brother Hilario went off to the gallery reserved for novices of his standing. Now and then a woman would steal forward and add a tall candle to the many thousands which burned upon the altar, or a man kneel at the screen of golden bars beyond which were the officiating priests and their silently-moving acolytes.

The church lay behind in deep shadow, only the higher lights shining here on a man's head, and there on a woman's golden ornament. The Abbot sat to the right in his episcopal robes, with his mitre on a cushion beside him. A priest stood by this chair with the crozier in his hand.

The brethren of the Order could be seen in their robes occupying the stalls allotted to them. There was another organ and choir far down the church, high to the right of the pillar by which the young men sat. The presence of this second choir was betrayed by a dim illumination proceeding from behind the fretted balustrade of the loft.

With the quick sympathy of his nature, Rollo, forgetting his sometime devotion to his native Presbytery, which indeed was chiefly of the controversial sort, permitted himself to be carried away by the magnificent swing of the music, the resonance of the twin organs, now pouring their thunder forth so as to shake at once the hearers' diaphragms and the fretted roof of blue and gold above them, now sweet and lonesome as a bird warbling down in Elie meadows in the noon silences. Anon Rollo shut his eyes and the Chapel of the Virgin of Montblanch incontinently vanished. He was among the great Congregation of all the Faithful, he alone without a wedding garment. The place where he stood seemed filled with surges of aureate light, but the night lay banked up without, eager and waiting to envelop him, doomed to be for ever a faithless wandering son of the great Father. Snatches of his early devotions came ramblingly back to him, prayers his mother had taught him, Psalms his old nurse had insisted on his learning, or mayhap crooned about his cradle. Such were the first words which came to him —

"That man hath perfect blessedness,
Who walketh not astray,
In counsel of ungodly men,
Nor stands in sinners' way."

The impressions, hitherto vivid, blurred themselves at this point. Rollo Blair was kneeling at his mother's knee. He thought of his first sweetheart who had nearly made him a minister, and,

perchance, a better man. The night that was waiting imminent outside, silently overleapt the barriers of golden light. Rollo Blair's head fell forward against a pillar – and, while the music thundered and wailed alternate, and the great service swept on its gorgeous way, the wild unhaltered Scot, soothed by a lullaby of sound, slept the sleep of the young, the tired, and the heart-free.

How long he slumbered he could not tell, but he was awakened by a violent thrust in the ribs from the elbow of John Mortimer.

"Great jimminy! what's that? Look, man, look!"

Rollo opened his eyes, bleared with insufficient sleep, and for a long moment all things danced weirdly before them, as gnats dance in the light of the moon. He saw dimly without understanding the swinging altar lamps in a blur of purple haze, the richly-robed priests, the myriad candles, the dark forms of the worshippers. But now, instead of all eyes being turned towards the brilliance of the golden altar, it was towards the door at the dark end of the chapel that they looked.

He could distinguish a tumult of hoarse voices without, multitudinous angry cries of men, the clatter of feet, the sharp clash of arms. A shot or two went off quite near at hand.

"Seize him – take the murderer! Hold him!"

The shoutings came clear now to Rollo's brain, and rising to his feet he half drew his sword, as though he himself had been the hunted man. But with a smile he let the blade slide back, which it did as easily as a stone slips into water. For though Killiecrankie's hilt might be battered, without ribbon or bow-knot, Rollo saw to it that Robin Fleeming's blade played him no tricks. His life had depended too often upon it for that, and might again.

Within the chapel of the monastery the service went on almost unheeded, save by a few of the elders, faithful women whom piety and deafness kept to their reverence. The men crowded unanimously towards the door outside which the turmoil waxed wilder and wilder.

Then, shedding to either side a surge of men, as the bow of a swift ship casts a twin wave to right and left, a man with only scraps of rags clinging to him rushed up the aisle of the nave. His hair was red-wet and matted about his brow. There was a gash on one shoulder. His right arm hung useless by his side. He was barefooted, but still in his left hand he held a long knife, of which the steel was dimmed with blood.

"El Sarria! El Sarria!" cried the voices behind him. "There are a hundred duros on his head! Take him! Take him!"

And in a moment more the whole church was filled with the clangour of armed men. Bright uniforms filled the doorways. Sword bayonets glinted from behind pillars, as eager pursuers rushed this way and that after their prey, overturning the chairs and frightening the kneeling women.

Straight along the aisle, turning neither to right nor left, rushed the hunted man. On the steps which lead up to the gilded railing he threw down his knife, which with a clang rebounded on the marble floor of the church.

A priest came forward as if to bar the little wicket door. But with a bound El Sarria was within, and in another he had cast himself down on the uppermost steps of the high altar itself and laid his hands upon the cloth which bore *Su Majestad*, the high mystery of the Incarnation of God.

At this uprose the Abbot, and stepping from his throne with a calm dignity he reached the little golden gate through which the hunted man had come one moment before the pursuers. These were the regular Government troops, commanded by a Cristino officer, who with a naked sword in his hand pointed them on.

Blind with anger and the loss of many comrades, they would have rushed after the fugitive and slain him even on the holy place where he lay.

But the Abbot of the Order of the Virgin of Montblanch stood in the breach. They must first pass over his body. He held aloft a cross of gold with a gesture of stern defiance. The crozier-bearer had moved automatically to his place behind him.

"Thus far, and no farther!" cried the Abbot; "bring not the strife of man into the presence of the Prince of Peace. This man hath laid his hands upon the horns of the altar, and by Our Lady and the Host of God, he shall be safe!"

CHAPTER IX

THE SHADOW OF THE DESTROYER

The Abbot of Montblanch, Don Baltasar Varela, was supposed to be occupied in prayer and meditation. But in common with many of his abbatial brethren, he employed his leisure with quite other matters. Many have been the jests levelled at the higher clergy of the Church of Rome, rich, cloistered, and celibate, in their relations to the other sex.

But all such jests, good against even certain holy popes of Rome and their nephews, fell harmless against the triple brass of the reputation of Don Baltasar, present head of the great Monastery of Montblanch.

Things might be whispered against the practice of divers of the brethren of the Order. But out of the sphere of his immediate jurisdiction, Don Baltasar concerned himself not with other men's matters.

"To his own God he standeth or falleth," quoth Don Baltasar, and washed his hands of the responsibility.

But there were one or two offences which Don Baltasar did not treat in this manner, and of these anon.

Meantime the Abbot talked with his confessor, and in the security of his chamber was another man to the genial host, the liberal and well-read churchman, the courteous man of the world who had listened so approvingly to the wild talk of Rollo the Scot, and so condescendingly clinked glasses with Brother Hilario, the rich young recruit who had come from his native province to support the cause of *el Rey Absoluto*, Don Carlos V. of Spain.

The chamber itself was different. It contained one chair, plain and rude as that of any anchorite, in which the Abbot sat, a stool for the father confessor, a pallet bed, a rough shelf with half a dozen worn volumes above it, two great books with locked clasps of metal – these composed the entire furniture of the chamber of one of the most powerful princes of Holy Church in the world.

"It is no use, Anselmo," said the Abbot, gravely toying with the clasp of one of the open books, in which a few lines of writing were still wet, "after all, we are but playing with the matter here. The curé lies elsewhere. We may indeed keep our petty bounds intact, sheltering within a dozen of leagues not one known unfaithful to the true King, and the principles of the Catholic religion; but we do not hold even Aragon with any certainty. The cities whelm us in spite of ourselves. Zaragoza itself is riddled with sedition, rottenly Jacobin to the core!"

"An accursed den of thieves!" said the gloomy monk. "God will judge it in His time!"

"Doubtless – doubtless. I most fully agree!" said the Abbot, softly, "but meantime it is His will that we use such means as we have in our hands to work out the divine ends. It is well known to you that there is one man who is driving this estate of Spain to the verge of a devil's precipice."

With a look of dark shrewdness the priest dropped his head closer to his superior's ear.

"Mendizábal," he said, "Mendizábal, the Jew of Madrid, the lover of heretic England, the overgrown cat's-paw of the money-brokers, the gabbler of the monkeys' chatter called 'liberal principles,' the evil councillor of a foolish queen."

"Even so," sighed the Abbot. "To such God for a time grants power to scourge His very elect. Great is their power – for a time. They flourish like a green bay tree – for a time. But doth not the Wise Man say in the Scripture, 'Better is wisdom than many battalions, and a prudent man than a man of war'? You and I, father, must be the prudent men."

"But will not our brave Don Carlos soon rid us of these dead dogs of Madrid?" said the Confessor. "What of his great generals Cabrera and El Serrador? They have gained great victories. God has surely been with their arms!"

The Prior shrugged his shoulders with a slight but inconceivably contemptuous movement, which indicated that he was weary of the father's line of argument.

"Another than yourself, Anselmo, might mistake me for a scoffer when I say that in this matter we must be our own Don Carlos, our own generals – nay, our own Providence. To be plain, Carlos V. – that blessed and truly legitimate sovereign, is a donkey; Cabrera, a brave but cruel *guerrillero* who will get a shot through him one fine day, as all these gluttons for fighting do! – The rest of the generals are even as Don Carlos, and as for Providence – well, believe me, reverend father, in these later days, even Providence has left poor Spain to fend for herself?"

"God will defend His Church," said the Confessor solemnly.

"But how?" purred the Abbot. "Will Providence send down three legions of angels to sweep the Nationals from sea-board to sea-board, from Alicante even to Pontevedra?"

"I, for one, place neither bounds nor limits upon the Divine power!" said the dark monk, sententiously.

"Well, then, I do," answered the Prior; "those of common sense, and of requiring us who are on earth to use the means, the commoner and the more earthly the better."

The monk bowed, but did not again contradict his superior. The latter went on —

"Now I have received from a sure hand in Madrid, one of us and devoted to our interests, an intimation that so soon as the present Cortes is dissolved, Mendizábal means to abolish all the convents in Spain, to seize their treasures and revenues, turn their occupants adrift, and with the proceeds to pay enough foreign mercenaries to drive Don Carlos beyond the Pyrenees and end the war!"

During this speech, which the Prior delivered calmly, tapping the lid of his golden snuff-box and glancing occasionally at the Father Confessor out of his unfathomable grey eyes, that gloomy son of the Church had gradually risen to his full height. At each slow-dropping phrase the expression of horror deepened on his countenance, and as the Abbot ended, he lifted his right arm and pronounced a curse upon Mendizábal, such as only the lips of an ex-inquisitor could have compassed, which might have excited the envy of Torquemada the austere, and even caused a smile of satisfaction to sit upon the grim lips of San Vicente Ferrer, scourge of the Jews.

The Prior heard him to the end of the anathema.

"*And then?*" he said, quietly.

The dark monk stared down at his chief, as he set placidly fingering his episcopal ring and smiling. Was it possible that in such an awful crisis he remained unmoved?

"The day of anathemas is over," he said; "the power of words to loose or to bind, so far as the world is concerned, is departed. But steel can still strike and lead kill. We must use means, Father Anselmo, we must use means."

"*I will be the means — I, Anselmo, unworthy son of Holy Church — with this dagger I will strike the destroyer down! Body and soul I will send him quick to the pit! I alone will go! Hereby I devote myself! Afterwards let them rend and torture me as they will. I fear not; I shall not blench. I, Anselmo, who have seen so many — shall know how to comport myself!*"

"Hush!" said the Abbot, for the first time seriously disturbed, and looking over his shoulder at the curtained door, "moderate your voice and command yourself, father. These things are not to be spoken of even in secret. The Jew of Madrid shall die, because he hath risen up against the Lord's anointed; but your hand shall not drive the steel!"

"And why, Baltasar Varela?" said the dark priest, "pray tell me why you claim the right to keep me from performing my vow?"

"Let that tell you why!" said the Prior with severity. And without rising, so circumscribed was his chamber, he reached down the small wall-mirror, which he used when he shaved, and handed it to the Father Confessor. "Think you, would a countenance like that have any chance of being allowed into the ante-rooms of the Prime Minister?"

"I would disguise myself," said the priest.

The Prior smiled. "Yes," he said, "and like a *sereno* in plain clothes, look three times the monk you are with your frock upon you! No, no, Anselmo; Holy Church has need of you, but she does not require that you should throw your life away uselessly."

He motioned the Confessor to a seat, and passed him his snuff-box open, from which the dark monk took a pinch mechanically, his lips still working, like the sea after a storm, in a low continuous mutter of Latin curses.

"I have found my instruments," said the Prior. "They are within the walls of the Abbey of Montblanch at this moment. And we have just two months in which to do our business."

The Father Confessor, obeying the beckoning eyebrow of his superior, inclined his ear closer, and the Prior whispered into it for some minutes. As he proceeded, doubt, hope, expectation, certainty, joy, flitted across the monk's face. He clasped his hands as the Abbot finished.

"God in His Heaven defend His poor children and punish the transgressor!"

"Amen," said the Abbot, a little dryly; "and we must do what we can to assist Him upon the earth."

CHAPTER X

A MAN AND HIS PRICE

These were memorable days for all the three youths, who so unexpectedly found themselves within the Convent of Montblanch. The Cristino soldiery, having fraternised with the Abbey cooks, and having been treated well from the Abbey cellars, departed about their business, leaving guards behind them to watch the exits and entrances of the hill-set monastery.

Then a peace majestic, and apparently eternal as the circle of the mountains, settled down upon Montblanch. Of all the men who dwelt there, monk and novice, lay-brother and serving-man, only two, the Abbot Baltasar and the gloomy Confessor, knew that the Abbey of the Virgin, after existing six hundred years, and increasing in riches and dignity all the while, had but eight weeks more in which to live its sweet and cloistered life.

For the rest the Abbot was the most unconcerned of all, and as to the Confessor, even a sentence of immediate execution could not have added to the consistent funereal gloom of his countenance.

But to the three young men, altogether relieved from any cares of mind, body, or estate, these days of peace revealed new worlds. The sweet-tongued bells which called dreamily to morning prayer awoke them in their cells. The soft yet fresh mountain air that came in through their open windows, the Psalms chanted in a strange tongue, the walks to the caves of the hermits, and the sanctuaries of the saints scattered up and down the mountain steeps, had gone far to convince John Mortimer that there had been religion in the world before the coming of his father's Primitive Methodism. Even hare-brained Rollo grew less argumentative, and it was remarked that on several occasions he left his long sword Killiecrankie behind him when he pilgrimed to the conventual chapel.

As for Brother Hilario, he became so saintly that his man-servant, François (who regretted bitterly the Palais Royal and its joys), haunted him with offers to convey mission or missives to *la petite* Concha of Sarria with the utmost discretion, only to be repulsed with scorn.

To chant in the choir, to live laborious days, to count the linen of the brotherhood, to ride a white mule, and to sleep in a whitewashed cell, these were in future to be the simple daily pleasures of Brother Hilario, late Count of Saint Pierre. Never more would he sing a lusty serenade beneath a lady's window, never more throw his cloak about his mouth and follow a promising adventure at a carnival masquerade.

These grey monastery walls were to contain his life for ever. Its simple range of duties and frugal pleasures were to satisfy him till the day when, the inhabitant of one of its rocky cells, he should be found dead upon a stiff frosty morning, and the bones of this new Saint Hilario (and eke the stone on which he had sat), would be added to the others in the reliquary chamber of the Abbey.

There were, however, at least two objections to this. Firstly, Brother Hilario was not yet twenty-five years of age and a Frenchman, with the blood of youth running very hotly in his veins; and, secondly, unless the unexpected happened, the monastery in two months more would cease to exist upon the face of the earth.

The Abbot cultivated the society of all the three youths. But as the Englishman spoke little French and no Spanish, as the manner of his nation is, their intercourse was, of course, restricted. Nevertheless, the affair of the Priorato wine went forward apace, and the bargain was struck with the almoner of the convent at a rate which satisfied all parties. John Mortimer paid £90 down in hard cash as earnest of the price, being the balance of the private venture with which he meant to purchase the right to return to Chorley and its paternal spindles.

But the preference of the Abbot for the headstrong Scot of Fife was too manifest to be ignored, and many were the speculations among the brethren as to what might be the purpose of Don Baltasar in thus spending so much of his time with a stripling heretic.

That he had such purpose none doubted, nor that the results would in due time be seen to the honour of the Holy House of Montblanch. For though the brethren used the dearest privilege of all brotherhoods – that of grumbling freely at the Superior – none questioned either Don Baltasar's capacity or his single-mindedness where the Order was concerned.

The Abbot sounded the depths of the young man. He met his Scottish caution with a frank confession of his purpose.

"I am putting my life and the lives of all these good and holy men in your hands, Don Rollo," he said. "Any day there may be a Nationalist army here. Their outposts are watching us even now. A fugitive was pursued to the very altar of sanctuary the other night! What! You saw him? Ah, of course, it was the night when our pleasant acquaintanceship began. Frankly, then, we are all Carlists here, Don Rollo. We stand for the King, who alone will stand for us."

"Your secret, or any secret, is safe with me," said Rollo grandly, turning his quick frank eyes upon the Prior. "Not death – no, nor torture – could drag a word from me against my will."

The Abbot perused him with his eyes thoughtfully for a moment.

"No, I do not think they would," he said slowly, and without his usual smile.

"Further, I would desire to enlist you as a recruit," he went on, after a pause. "There are many English fighting in our ranks, but few of your brave northern nation. Don Rollo, we need such men as you are. We can give them a career. Indeed, I have at present a mission in hand such as might make the fortune of any brave man. It is worth a general's commission if rightly carried through. Not many young men have such a chance at twenty-two. Ah, rogue, rogue – I heard of your doings the other night down at the inn of San Vicente, and of how with your sole sword you held at bay a score of Migueletes and Aragonese gipsies – smart fellows with their knives all of them!"

"It was nothing," said Rollo modestly; "the cowards did not mean fighting. It was never in their eyes."

"Pardon me," said the Prior, "I know these fellows a great deal better than you, and it was a very great deal indeed. Your life hung upon the turning of a hair!"

"Well, for that time the hair turned my way, at any rate," said Rollo, who honestly thought nothing of the affair, and did not wish the Abbot, if he had indeed serious business on hand, to measure him by a little public-house *fracas*.

"Ah," said he gently, "you follow your star! It is good policy for those who would go far. Also I think that your star will lead you shortly into some very good society."

The Abbot paused a little ere he made the plunge. Perhaps even his steadfast pulse felt the gravity of the occasion.

Then he began to speak – lightly, rapidly, almost nervously, with the sharp staccato utterance with which Don Baltasar concealed his intensest emotion.

"The commission is a great one," said the Abbot. "This great Order, and all the servants of God in Spain, depend for their lives on you. If you succeed, Don Carlos will assuredly sit on the throne of his fathers; if you fail, there is an end. But it is necessary that you should carry with you your two friends. I, on my part, will give you a guide who knows every pass and bridle-path, every cave and shelter-stone, betwixt here and Madrid."

"Then I am to go to Madrid?"

"Not, as I hope, to Madrid, but to La Granja, where your work will await you. It is, as you may know, a palace on the slopes of the Guadarrama mountains, much frequented by the court of the Queen-Regent at Madrid."

"There is to be no bloodshed among the prisoners?" said Rollo. "Fighting is very well, but I am not going to be heart or part in any shootings of unarmed men!"

"My friend," said the Abbot, with affectionate confidentiality, laying his arm on the young man's sleeve, "I give you my word of honour. All you have to do is to bring two amiable and Catholic ladies here – the Lady Cristina and her little maid. They are eager to be reconciled to mother Church,

but are prevented by evil councillors. They will come gladly enough, I doubt not, so soon as they are informed of their destination."

"Well," said Rollo, "on these conditions I will undertake the task; but as to those who are there in the palace with her? How are they to fare?"

"Your instructions," said the Abbot, "are these. You will go first to the camp of General Cabrera, to whom I will give you a letter. He will furnish you with such escort as may be thought desirable. You will also receive from him detailed orders as to what you must do when you arrive at La Granja. And I will see to it that you go from this place with a colonel's commission in the service of Carlos V. of Spain. Does that satisfy you?"

It did, but for all that the Abbot gave Rollo no hint as to what was to be the fate of those who might be taken at La Granja in the company of the little queen and her mother, the Regent Maria Cristina.

There was no difficulty at all about Etienne Saint Pierre, but John Mortimer was all for devoting his energies to the task of getting his casks of Priorato down to Barcelona for shipment. It was only after he had seen the Nationalist guards stave in cask after cask of his beloved wine, on which he was depending to lay the foundation of his fortune, drinking as much as they could, and letting the rest run to waste on the hillside, that the sullen English anger arose, and burned hotly in the bosom of John Mortimer.

"Then I will help to clear them out of the country, if they will not let me ship the property I have bought and paid good earnest money upon! I can shoot a pistol as well as any one – if the man is only near enough!"

So presently, these three, and another behind them, were riding out of the gates of Montblanch, a colonel's commission in the army of Don Carlos in Rollo's breast-pocket, a monopoly promise of all the Priorato wine for six years in that of John Mortimer, and in Brother Hilario's a dispensation absolving him for the length of his military service from all conventual and other vows.

It is difficult to say which of the three was the happiest.

"That bit of paper is worth more than a thousand pounds any day at Barcelona!" said John Mortimer triumphantly, slapping the pocket which contained the Abbot's undertaking about the Priorato. "It is as good as done if only I can get those sixty hogsheads down to the sea, as an earnest of what is to come!"

Ah, if only, indeed!

Rollo smiled quietly as he put his hand into his pocket, and touched the colonel's commission that nestled there.

"I must keep a tight rein on my command," he said. "I hear these Carlist fellows are the devil and all!"

But as for Brother Hilario, it is grievous to state that he stood up in his stirrups and halloed with pure joy when he lost sight of the monastery towers, that he threw his pocket breviary into a ditch, and concealed carefully the jewelled crucifix in the breast of his blue velvet coat – with the intent, as he openly averred, of pawning it so soon as they got to Madrid.

He turned round upon the huge attendant – a simple Gallegan peasant by his dress – who followed them by order of the Abbot.

"By the way, sirrah," he cried, "we pass through the village of Sarria, do we not?"

The Gallegan lifted a pair of eyes that burned slumberously, like red coals in a smith's furnace, and with a strange smile replied, "Yes, *caballero*, we do pass through Sarria."

As for the Prior, he stood at the gate where he had given the lads his benediction, and watched them out of sight. Father Anselmo was at his elbow, but half a pace behind.

"There they go," said the Prior. "God help them if the Nationalists overhaul them. They carry enough to hang them all a dozen times over. But praise to St. Vincent and all the saints, nothing to compromise us, nor yet the Abbey of Our Lady of Montblanch!"

CHAPTER XI

CARTEL OF DEFIANCE

It was indeed Ramon Garcia, who on a stout shaggy pony, a portmanteau slung before and behind him, followed his masters with the half-sullen, wholly downcast look of the true Gallegan servitor. He was well attired in the Galician manner, appearing indeed like one of those Highlanders returning from successful service in the Castillas or in Catalonia, all in rusty brown double-cloth, the *pañño pardo* of his class, his wide-brimmed hat plumed, and his *alpargatas* of esparto grass exchanged for holiday shoes of brown Cordovan leather.

But in his eyes, whenever he raised them, there burned, morose and unquenchable, the anger of the outcast El Sarria against the world. He lifted them indeed but seldom, and no one of the cavaliers who rode so gallantly before him recognised in the decently clad, demure, well-shaven man-servant supplied to them by the Abbot, the wild El Sarria, whom with torn mantle and bleeding shoulder, they had seen fling himself upon the altar of the Abbey of Montblanch.

So when little Etienne de Saint Pierre, that Parisian exquisite and true Legitimist, finding himself emancipated alike from vows conventual and monkish attire, and having his head, for the time being, full of the small deceiver Concha, the companion of Dolóres Garcia, inquired for the village of Sarria and whether they would chance to pass that way, he never for a moment thought that their honest dullish Jaime from far away Lugo, took any more interest in the matter than might serve him to speculate upon what sort of *anisete* they might chance to find at the village venta.

By favour of the Abbot the three voyagers into the unknown had most gallant steeds under them, and were in all things well appointed, with English and French passports in their own several names and styles as gentlemen travelling for pleasure, to see strange lands, and especially this ancient, restless, war-distracted country of Spain.

Their servant, Jaime de Lugo, was appropriately horsed on a little round-barrelled Asturian pony, able to carry any weight, which padded on its way with a quiet persistence that never left its master far behind the most gallant galloper of the cavalcade.

So these three rode on towards the camp of the most redoubted and redoubtable General Cabrera.

This chief of all the armies of Don Carlos was then at the height of his fame. His fear was on all the land. He was brave, cruel, perfectly unscrupulous, this "Killer of Aragon," this "Butcher of Tortosa." In a few months he had achieved a fame greater almost than that of Zumalacarregui, the prince of *guerrilleros*, himself.

At this time Cabrera was holding half a dozen of the Cristino generals at bay, including Minos himself, the chief of all. His tactics consisted in those immemorial rapid movements and unexpected appearances which have characterised Spanish guerilla warfare ever since the Carthaginians invaded the land, and the aboriginal Celtiberians took to the mountains of Morella and the wild passes of Aragon, just as Cabrera and El Serrador were doing at this date.

Meanwhile southward out of the pleasant hills of Montblanch, our three lads were riding, each with his own hopes and fears in his heart. Rollo of course was the keenest of the party; for not only was the work to his liking, but he was the natural as well as the actual leader. He alone knew the Abbot's purposes, or at least as much of them as Don Baltasar had thought it wise to reveal to his emissary – which after all was not a great deal.

But John Mortimer had failed to rouse himself to any enthusiasm even under the spur of Rollo's defiant optimism.

They would return to Montblanch in a week or two, the latter averred. By that time the passes would be cleared. John's wine would be safe. The Abbot's seven-year undertaking in his pocket was

good for the face of it at any wine-shipper's in Barcelona. In a month he (Rollo) would be a colonel – perhaps a general, and he (John Mortimer) rich beyond the dreams of avarice.

"Or both of us may be dead, more likely!" suggested the latter, with gloomy succinctness.

"Dead – nonsense!" cried Rollo. "See here, man, you believe in God, or at any rate your father does. So, hang it, you must have at least a kind of second-hand interest Above. Now, is there not a time appointed for you to die? Here, look at this clock" (he took an ancient and very bulbous-faced watch out of his pocket). "This minute hand has to push that hour hand so many times round before the moment comes for your ghost to mount and ride. Till that time comes, let your heart sit care-free. You cannot hasten, or retard that event by one solitary tick – can you? No? Well then, keep the ball rolling meantime, and if it rolls to the camp of Cabrera, why, you will be just as safe there as in your bed at Chorley with the curtains drawn and your prayers said!"

"I have a notion I could hasten the event in my own case by some few ticks, with the assistance of this unaccustomed little plaything!" said John Mortimer, who had been listening to this harangue of Rollo's with manifest impatience. And as if to prove his words, he made a sweeping motion with his pistol in the air. Instantly Rollo showed great interest.

"Good heavens, man, do you know that weapon is fresh-primed, and the trigger at full cock? If you are anxious to get a ball through your head, I am not!"

John Mortimer laughed long and loud.

"What about the appointed ticks on the watch-dial now, Master Blair? Have you forgotten you can neither hasten nor retard the day of your death? When the minute hand approaches the inevitable moment, Fate's full stop – did you not call it, you must mount and ride to Hades! Till then, you know, you are perfectly safe."

Rollo looked disgusted.

"That is the worst of trying to argue with an Englishman," he said; "his head is like a cannon ball, impervious to all logic. He does not attend to your premisses, and he never has any of his own! Of course, *if* it were ordained by the powers Above that at this moment you should suddenly go mad and shoot us all, *that* would be our appointed time, and you would no more hasten it by your tomfoolery than if a star fell out of the firmament and knocked this round world to everlasting potsherds!"

"Umm!" said John Mortimer, still unconvinced, "very likely – but – if I saw my wine-barrels on the ship '*Good Intent*' of Liverpool, and my thousand pounds upon deposit receipt in honest William Deacon's Bank in Chorley, it would be a hanged sight more comfort to me than all the appointed ticks on all the appointed watches in the world!"

And so saying, the Englishman rode on his way very sullenly, muttering and shaking his head at intervals, as if the journey and adventure they had entered upon, were not at all to his liking.

During this fatalistic controversy between Rollo and his friend, Etienne de Saint Pierre had dropped somewhat behind. He had been interested in the remark of the glum servitor who followed them that they must of necessity pass through the village of Sarria.

"Do you know that place well?" he said, speaking in Castilian, which, being of Spanish descent on his mother's side, he knew as accurately as his native language.

"What place?" queried the Gallegan without raising his eyes. Etienne was not disturbed by the apparent ill-humour of the fellow. It was, as he knew, natural to these corner-men of Spain. But he wondered at the rascal's quite remarkable size and strength. The arm which showed below the velvet-banded cuff of the rusty brown coat was knotted and corded, like the roots of an oak where the water wears away the bank in the spring rains. His chest, where his embroidered shirt was open for a hand's-breadth down, showed a perfect network of scars, ridged white cuts, triangular purple stabs, as it were punched out and only half filled in, as well as cicatrices where wounds reluctant to heal had been treated by the hot iron of half the unskilful surgeons in Spain.

But after all these things are no novelty in Iberia, where the knife is still among the lower orders the only court of appeal, and Etienne made no remark upon them. He had indeed other affairs on his mind of a more engrossing nature.

"Mon Dieu," he communed with himself, "'tis a full calendar month since I kissed a pretty girl. I wonder what on earth it feels like?"

The path to Sarria was steep and long, but their guide, now permanently in the van, threaded his way betwixt stone and stone, now down the narrow gorge of an *arroyo* littered with *débris* and then up the next talus of slate chips like a man familiar from infancy with the way.

From a commanding hill-top he pointed away to the southward and showed them where the bayonet of a Cristino outpost glinted every half minute as the sentinel stalked to and fro upon his beat.

The Gallegan chuckled a little when the Englishman remarked upon their danger, and tapped his long rifle significantly.

"The danger of the Cristino soldier, you mean," he said, "why, masters mine, I could lead you to a place from which you might shoot yonder lad so secretly that his comrades would never know from what quarter arrived his death."

It was evening ere they drew near the village of Sarria, which lay, a drift of rusty red roofs and whitewashed walls beneath the tumbled Aragonese foot-hills. The river ran nearly dry in its channel and the mill had stopped. There was not enough water to drive the clacking undershot wheel of Luis Fernandez the comfortable, propertied miller of Sarria, who had been so cruelly wounded by the outlaw Ramon on the night when he claimed shelter from the Carlist monks of Montblanch. Ah, well, all that would soon be at an end, so at least they whispered in Sarria! If all tales were true, monks, monastery tithes, and rights of sanctuary, they would all go together. The wise politicians at Madrid, eager for their country's good (and certain advantages upon the stock exchange), were about to pass the besom of destruction over the religious houses, sweeping away in a common ruin grey friar and white friar and black friar. Nay, the salaried parish priests would find themselves sadly docked, and even stout Father Mateo himself was beginning to quake in his shoes and draw his girdle tighter by a hole at a time to prepare for the event.

So at least the bruit went forth, and though none save the Prior of Montblanch and his confidant knew anything for certain, the air was full of rumours; while between the Carlist war and the report of the great coming changes, the minds of men were growing grievously unsettled. Honest folk and peaceful citizens now went about armed. The men sat longer at the *cafés*. They returned later home. They spoke more sharply to their wives when they asked of them why these things were so.

By the little village gate where Gaspar Perico, the chief representative of the town dues of Sarria, sat commonly at the receipt of custom, a group of men occupied a long bench, with their pints of wine and the sweet syrup of pomegranates before them, as is the custom of Aragon on summer evenings.

The venta of Sarria was kept by a nephew of Gaspar's, the octroi man, one recently come to the district. His name was Esteban, and like his uncle he had already got him the name of a "valiant," or of a man ready with his tongue and equally ready with his knife.

With the younger Perico's coming, the venta *El Corral* had promptly become the Café de Madrid, while the prices of all liquors rose to mark the change, even as in a like proportion their quality speedily diminished. Customers would doubtless have left at this juncture but for the fact that Esteban was his uncle's nephew, and that Perico the Elder sat at the receipt of custom.

So at this newly named Café de Madrid our travellers alighted, and the silent Gallegan, gathering the reins in his hands, disappeared into the stables, whose roofs rose over the low front of the venta like a cathedral behind its cloisters.

"Good evening to you, young cavaliers!" cried the gallant Gaspar, who commonly did the honours even in the presence of his nephew, the nominal host of the venta. The younger man had

followed the Gallegan to the stables with a declared intent of seeing that the horses were properly provided for.

"You have come far to-day?" inquired Gaspar courteously.

"From the Abbey of –" (here Rollo kicked Etienne suddenly) "I mean we passed the Abbey of Montblanch, leaving behind us gladly such a nest of Carlist thieves! From the true nationalist city of Zaragoza we come," said the Count de Saint Pierre in a breath.

"You are all good men and true here, I observe," said Rollo, who had seen Cristino colours on the official coat of Gaspar Perico.

"Good men and good nationals!" cried Gaspar. "Indeed, I believe you! I should like to see any other show his face in Sarria. There never was one since Ramon Garcia became an outlaw, and he fled the village rather than face me, the champion of the province. Ah, he knew better than to encounter this noble and well-tried weapon!"

And as he spoke he tapped the brown stock of his blunderbuss, and took a wholly superfluous squint down the stock to be certain that the sights were properly adjusted, or perhaps to show the excellent terms he was on with his weapon.

At this very moment, Esteban the bully, Esteban the unconquered valiant, came running from the stables of the venta, holding his hands to his face, and behind him, towering up suddenly and filling the entire doorway, appeared the huge figure of the Gallegan. What had occurred between them no man could say. But the Gallegan with great coolness proceeded to cast out upon the rubbish heap before the door, armful after armful of chopped and partly rotten straw which exhaled a thin steam into the cool air of evening. He followed this up by emptying a huge leather-covered sieve full of bad barley several times upon the same vaporous mound. Then with the greatest composure and with a complete understanding of the premises, the Gallegan walked across to a smaller stable, where the landlord's own cattle were kept. He kicked the door open with two applications of his foot, and presently was lost to sight within.

"Shoot him – shoot him, uncle!" cried the half-tearful bully; "he hath smitten me upon the nose to the outpouring of my blood! Shall a Perico abide this? Shoot – for the honour of our name!"

But the valiant man of the receipt of customs was also a cautious one.

"Not so, dear Esteban," he said; "this man is the servant of three noble cavaliers of a foreign nation. If he has done wrong, their purses will make reparation. They are all rich, these foreigners! For all the spilt fodder they will also doubtless pay. Is it not so, *caballeros*?"

But Rollo, the readily furious, gripped his sword and said, "Not one groat or stiver, not a single maravedi, will I pay till I have spoken with our man-servant and know the cause of this disorder from himself."

And he laid his hand so determinedly on the hilt of Killiecrankie, whose basket had been endued with a new silk lining of red and tassels of the same colour, that the valiant men of Sarria thought better of any designs of attack they might have entertained, and preferred to await the event.

The Gallegan by this time had emerged from the smaller private stable with a good bushel measure of straw and barley, which he carried on his head towards the larger premises where his masters' three steeds and his own round-barrelled Aragonese pony had been settled for the night.

He waved his hand to the three at the venta door.

"There is now no fault! It is of good quality this time!" he cried.

And no one said a word more concerning the matter. Nor did Señor Esteban Perico again advert to the stout buffet his nose had received at the beginning of the affair. On the contrary, he was laboriously polite to the Gallegan, and put an extra piece of fresh-cut garlic in his soup when it came to supper-time. For after this fashion was the younger Perico made.

And while the three waited, they talked to all and sundry. For Etienne had questions to ask which bore no small relation to the present preoccupation of his mind.

Concha – oh yes, little Concha Cabezos from Andalucia, certainly they knew her. All the village knew her.

"A pretty girl and dances remarkably well," said Esteban Perico complacently, "but holds her head too high for one in her position."

"I do not call that a fault," said Etienne, moving along the wooden settle in front of the venta door to make room for the huge Gallegan, who at that moment strolled up. He did this quite naturally, for in Spain no distinctions of master or servant hold either upon church pavements or on venta benches.

"No, it is certainly no fault of Concha's that she keeps herself aloof," said a young fellow in a rustic galliard's dress – light stockings, knee breeches of black cloth, a short shell jacket, and a broad sash of red about his waist. He twirled his moustachios with the air of one who could tell sad tales of little Concha if only he had the mind.

"And why, sir?" cried Etienne, bristling in a moment like a turkeycock; "pray, has the young lady vouchsafed you any token of her regard?"

"Nay, not to me," said the local Don Juan, cautiously; "but if you are anxious upon the question, I advise you to apply to Don Rafael de Flores, our alcalde's son."

"What," cried the Frenchman, "is he her lover?"

"Her lover of many months," answered Don Juan, "truly you say right. And the strange thing is that he got himself stabbed for it too, by that great oaf Ramon Garcia, whom they now call 'El Sarria.' Ha! ha! and he was as innocent as yourself all the time."

"I will presently interview the Don Rafael de Flores," muttered Etienne. "This is some slander. 'Tis not possible Concha has been deceiving me – and she so young, so innocent. Oh, it would be bitter indeed if it were so!"

He meditated a moment, flicking his polished boot with a riding-whip.

"And all the more bitter, that up to this moment I thought it was I who was deceiving her."

But the young Don Juan of the Sarrian *café* liked to hold the floor, and with three distinguished cavaliers for listeners, it was something to find a subject of common interest. Besides, who knew whether he might not hear a tale or two to the disadvantage of little Concha Cabezos, who had flouted him so sadly at last carnival and made a score of girls laugh at him upon the open Rambla.

"It happened thus," he said, "you have heard of El Sarria the outlaw, on whose head both parties have set a price?"

"He was of our village," cried half a dozen at once. It was their one title to respect, indisputable in any company. They began all conversations when they went from home with Ramon Garcia's name, and the statement of the fact that they had known his father.

"And a fine old man he was; very gracious and formal and of much dignity."

"It happened thus," the youthful dandy went on. "El Sarria came home late one night, and when he arrived at his own gable-end, lo, there by the *reja*, where the inside stairway mounts, was a youth 'plucking the turkey' with his sweetheart through a broken bar, and that apparently with great success. And the fool Ramon, his head being filled with his Dolóres, never bethought himself for a moment that there might be another pretty girl in the house besides his wife, and so without waiting either 'Buenos!' or 'Hola!' —*click* went Ramon's knife into the lover's back! Such a pair of fools as they were!"

"And did this – this Rafael de Flores die?" asked Etienne, divided between a hope that he had, and a fear that if so he might be balked of his revenge.

"Die? No – he was about again before many weeks. But this foolish Ramon took straightway to the hills, because he thought that his wife was false and that he had killed her cousin and lover."

And even as Don Juan was speaking these words a young man of a slender form and particularly lithe carriage, dressed in the height of Madrid fashion, walked into the *café* with a smiling flourish of his hat to the company.

"A glass of vermouth, Esteban," he said, "and if any of these gentlemen will join me I shall feel honoured. Be good enough to tell them who I am, Gaspar, my friend."

"Señor cavalier," said the valiant man of Sarria, planting the butt of his blunderbuss firmly on the ground that he might lean upon it, and as it were more officially make the important introduction, "this is no other than the only son of our rich and distinguished alcalde, Señor Don Rafael de Flores, concerning whom you have already heard some speech."

And Gaspar, who knew his place, stood back for the impressive civilities which followed. The jaws of the villagers dropped as they saw the three foreigners with one accord raise their hats from their heads and make each a reverence after his kind. Rollo, the tragical Scot, swept back his sombrero-brim in a grand curve as if it bore a drooping plume. John Mortimer jerked his beaver vertically off and clapped it down again as if he had a spite at the crown, while M. Etienne turned out his toes and in his elbows, as he bowed sharply at the waist with a severe and haughty expression, without, however, taking his hat from his head.

"I must do the honours, I see," said Rollo, laughing, "since we have no local trumpeter to do them for us. (Where in the world is that sullen dog, our most faithful Galician?) This to the left is Monsieur de Saint Pierre, count of that name. Then next Mr. John Mortimer of Chorley in England, and as for me I am Rollo Blair of Blair Castle in the county of Fife, at your service."

At this point the aforesaid M. de Saint Pierre stepped forward. He had drawn out his card-case and selected a pasteboard with the care and deliberation with which a connoisseur may choose a cigar.

"I have the honour to present Señor Don Rafael with my cartel of defiance," he said simply.

The young man thus addressed stood a long moment dumb and fixed in the middle of the floor, gazing at the engraved lines on the card, which he had mechanically accepted, without comprehending their meaning.

"A cartel!" he stammered at last; "impossible. I can have no cause of quarrel with this gentleman from France. I do not even know him!"

But Etienne had all the science of the affair of honour at his finger-ends.

"I have nothing to say, sir," he replied, frigidly; "I refer you to my second!"

And he turned to his nearest companion, who happened to be John Mortimer. The Englishman, however, had but imperfectly understood.

"Well," he said in his best Spanish, "I am prepared to treat for any quantity, provided the quality be to my satisfaction. But mind, the terms are, 'delivered on the quay at Barcelona.' *No more Priorato pigs in pokes for John Mortimer of Chorley.*"

He relapsed into English with the last clause, and sticking his thumbs into the pockets of his waistcoat, he waited Don Rafael's reply to his ultimatum.

"Holy Virgin, are they all mad?" that young gentleman was crying in a passion of despair when Rollo stepped forward and bowed courteously.

"The matter is briefly this, as I understand it," he said. "My friend, M. Etienne de Saint Pierre, has been in terms of considerable amity with a certain young lady – whose name I need not repeat in a public place. He has been given to understand that you claim a similar high position in her favour. If this be so, Señor, my principal wishes to end the difficulty by a duel to the death, so that the young lady may not be put to the painful necessity of making a choice between two such gallant men. I make it *quite* clear, do I not? Two of you love one lady. The lady cannot accept both. You fight. There remains but one. The lady is in no difficulty! Do you both agree?"

"I agree most heartily," said Etienne, rubbing his hands cheerfully, and practising feints in the air with his forefinger.

"But not I – not I!" cried Don Rafael, with sudden frenzy; "I do not agree – far from it, indeed. I would have you know that I am a married man. My wife is waiting for me at home at this moment. I must go. I must, indeed. Besides, I am under age, and it is murder in the first degree to shoot an unarmed man. I am not in love with any person. I make claims to no lady's affection. I am a

married man, I tell you, gentlemen – I was never in love with anybody else. I told my wife so only this morning!"

"Not with Doña Concha Cabezos of this village?" said Etienne, sternly. "I am advised that you have been in the habit of making that claim."

"Never, never," cried the gallant, wringing his hands. "Saints, angels, and martyrs – if this should come to my wife's ears! I swear to you I do not know any Concha – I never heard of her. I will have nothing to do with her! Gentlemen, you must excuse me. I have an engagement!"

And with this hurried adieu the little man in the Madrid suit fairly bolted out of the *café*, and ran down the street at full speed.

And in the dusk of the gable arches the Gallegan sat with his head sunk low in his hands.

"What a fool, Ramon Garcia! What a mortal fool you were – to have thought for a moment that your little Dolóres could have loved a thing like that!"

CHAPTER XII

THE CRYING OF A YOUNG CHILD

"And now, gentlemen," said Monsieur Etienne grandly, "where is the young gentleman who traduced in my hearing the fair fame of Doña Concha Cabezos? *Ma foi*, I will transfer my cartel to him!"

Then, with great dignity, uprose the ancient valiant man of the octroi of Sarria, for he felt that some one must vindicate the municipality.

"Cavalier," he said, with a sweeping bow which did honour at once to himself and to the place in which they were assembled, "there may be those amongst us who have spoken too freely, and on their behalf and my own I convey to you an apology if we have unwittingly offended. In a *venta* – I beg my nephew's pardon – in a *café*, like the *Café de Madrid*, men's tongues wag fast without harm being intended to any man, much less to any honourable lady. So it was in this case, and in the name of the loyal town of Sarria, I express my regret. If these words be sufficient, here is my hand. The *Café de Madrid*, sir, begs your acceptance of a bottle of the best within its cellars. But if your lordship be still offended, there are twenty men here who are ready to meet you on the field of honour. For I would have you know, gentlemen, that we are also *Caballeros*. But it must be with the weapons in the use of which we have some skill – the cloak wrapped about the left arm, the *Manchegan* knife in the right hand. Or, if our Aragonese custom please not your honours, I make myself personally responsible for any words that may have been spoken; aye, and will be proud to stand out upon the hillside and exchange shots with you till you are fully satisfied – standing up, man to man, at one hundred yards. This I do because the offence was given in my nephew's *café*, and because for forty years I have been called the Valiant Man of Sarria!"

The ancient Gaspar stood before them, alternately patting the stock of his blunderbuss and pulling the ragged ends of his long white moustachios, till Rollo, who could recognise true courage when he saw it, stepped up to him, and making a low bow held out a hand, which the other immediately grasped amid plaudits from the assembled company.

"You are a brave man, a valiant man, indeed, Señor – " he was beginning.

"Gaspar Perico, at your service – of the wars of the Independence!" interrupted the old man, proudly.

"You have not forgotten the use of your weapons, *Señor Valiente!*" said the young Scot. "Take off your hat, Etienne," he added in French, "and accept the old fellow's apology as graciously as you can. I am your second, and have arranged the matter for you already!"

With a little grumbling Etienne complied, and was graciously pleased to allow himself to be appeased. Rollo felt for him, for he himself knew well what it is to itch to fight somebody and yet have to put up one's sword with the point untried. But a new feeling had come into his soul. A steady-rein was thrown over his shoulder – the best that can be set to diminish the ardours of a firebrand like this hot-headed Scot. This was responsibility. He was upon a mission of vast importance, and though he cared about the rights and wrongs of the affair not at all, and would just as soon have taken service with the red and yellow of the nationals as with the white *boinas* of Don Carlos, once committed to the adventure he resolved that no follies that he could prevent should damage a successful issue.

So, having settled the quarrel, and partaken of the excellent smuggled vermuth de Torino, in which, by his uncle's order, Esteban the host and his guests washed away all traces of ill-feeling, the three sat down to enjoy the *puchero*, which all this while had been quietly simmering in the kitchen of the inn. At their request the repast was shared by Gaspar Perico, while the nephew, in obedience to a sign from his uncle, waited at table. It was not difficult to perceive that Señor Gaspar was the true patron of the *Café de Madrid* in the village of Sarria.

So soon as he knew that the cause for which he had stabbed his wife's cousin had been one that in no wise concerned little Dolóres the disguised Ramon Garcia went out to seek his wife, a great pity and a great remorse tearing like hungry Murcian vultures at his heart. He was not worthy even to speak to that pure creature. His hasty jealousy had ruined their lives. He it was who had squandered his chances, lost his patrimony, broken up their little home behind the whispering reeds of the Cerde. Yes, he had done all that, but —*he loved her*. So he went forth to seek her, and the night closed about him, grey and solemn with a touch of chill in the air. It was not hot and stifling like that other when he had come home to meet his doom and crept up through a kind of blood-red haze to strike that one blow by the latticed *reja* of his house.

Ramon did not hide and skulk now. He walked down the street with his long locks shorn, his beard clean shaven, his Gallegan dress and plumed hat, secure that none of his fellow townsmen would recognise him. And, at least in the semi-darkness, he was entirely safe.

There he could see the little white shed on the roof where Dolóres used to feed her pigeons, and he smiled as he remembered how before he married he had been wont to keep various breeds, such as Valencia tumblers, pouters, and fast-flying carriers upon which he used to wager a few reals with his friends.

But that was in his bachelor days. He smiled again as he thought that when Dolóres came it was a different story. Never was such a little house-wife. She was all for the pot. She would have him part with his fine sorts, save and except one or two tumblers that she used to feed from her balcony. She loved to see them from her window circling, wheeling, and as it were, play-acting in the air. For the rest, the commonest kinds that laid the most eggs, brought up the largest broods, and took on the plumpest breasts when fed with ground maize and Indian corn, green from the patch which he grew on purpose for her behind the willows – these were his wife's especial delight.

Ramon opened the little wicket to which she had so often run to meet him, under the three great fig trees. The gate creaked on unaccustomed hinges. The white square of a placard on the post caught his eye. It was too dark to see clearly, or else El Sarria would have seen that it was a bill of sale of the house and effects of a certain Ramon Garcia, outlaw. As he stepped within his foot slipped among the rotten figs which lay almost ankle-deep on the path he had once kept so clean. A buzz of angry wasps arose. They were drunken, however, with the fermenting fruit, and blundered this way and that like men tipsy with new wine.

The path before him was tangled across and across with bindweed and runners of untended vine. The neglected artichokes had shot, and their glary seed-balls rose as high as his chin like gigantic thistles.

The house that had been so full of light and loving welcome lay all dark before him, blank and unlovely as a funeral vault.

Yet for all these signs of desolation Ramon only reproached himself the more.

"The little Dolóres," he thought, "she has felt herself forsaken. Like a wounded doe she shrinks from sight. Doubtless she comes and goes by the back of the house. The sweet little Dolóres – " And he smiled. It did not occur to him that she would ever be turned out of the house that was his and hers. She would go on living there and waiting for him. And now how surprised she would be. But he would tell her all, and she would forgive him. And it is typical of the man and of his nation that he never for a moment dreamed that his being "El Sarria," a penniless outlaw with a price on his head, would make one whit of difference to Dolóres.

After all what was it to be outlawed? If he did this service for the Abbot and Don Carlos – a hard one, surely – he would be received into the army of Navarra, and he might at once become an officer. Or he might escape across the seas and make a home for Dolóres in a new country. Meantime he would see her once more, for that night at least hold her safe in his arms.

But by this time he had gone round the gable by the little narrow path over which the reeds continually rustled. He passed the window with the broken *reja*, and he smiled when he thought of

the ignominious flight of Don Rafael down the village street. With a quickened step and his heart thudding in his ears he went about the little reed-built hut in which he had kept Concha's firewood, and stood at the back-door.

It was closed and impervious. No ray of light penetrated. "Perhaps Concha has gone out, and the little one, being afraid, is sitting alone in the dark, or has drawn the clothes over her head in bed."

He had always loved the delightful terrors with which Dolóres was wont to cling to him, or flee to throw herself on his bosom from some imaginary peril – a centipede that scuttled out of the shutter-crack or a he-goat that had stamped his foot at her down on the rocks by the river. And like a healing balm the thought came to him. For all that talk in the venta – of Concha this and Concha that, of lovers and aspirants, no single word had been uttered of his Dolóres.

"What a fool, Ramon! What an inconceivable fool!" he murmured to himself. "*You* doubted her, but the common village voice, so insolently free-spoken, never did so for a moment!"

He knocked and called, his old love name for her, "Lola – dear Lola – open! It is I – Ramon!"

He called softly, for after all he was the outlaw, and the Migueletes might be waiting for him in case he should return to his first home.

But, call he loud or call he soft, there was no answer from the little house where he had been so happy with Dolóres. He struck a light with his tinder-box and lit the dark lantern he carried.

There was another bill on the back-door, and now with the lantern in his hand he read it from top to bottom. It was dated some months previously and was under the authority of the *alcalde* of Sarria and by order of General Nogueras, the Cristino officer commanding the district.

"This house, belonging to the well-known rebel, outlaw and murderer, Ramon Garcia, called El Sarria, is to be sold for the benefit of the government of the Queen-Regent with all its contents – " And here followed a list, among which his heart stood still to recognise the great chair he had bought at Lerida for Dolóres to rest in when she was delicate, the bed they twain had slept in, the very work-table at which she had sewn the household linen, and sat gossiping with Concha over their embroidery.

But there was no doubt about the matter. Dolóres was gone, and the eye of El Sarria fell upon a notice rudely printed with a pen and inserted in a corner of the little square trap-door by which it was possible to survey a visitor without opening the door.

"Any who have letters, packages, or other communications for persons lately residing in this house, are honourably requested to give themselves the trouble of carrying them to the Mill of Sarria, where they will receive the sincere thanks and gratitude of the undersigned

"Luis Fernandez."

Ramon saw it all. He knew now why his friend had arranged for his death at the mouth of the secret hiding-place. He understood why there was no talk about Dolóres at the inn. She was under the protection of the most powerful man in the village, save the *alcalde* alone. Not that Ramon doubted little Dolóres. He would not make that mistake a second time.

But they would work upon her, he knew well how, tell her that he was dead, that Luis Fernandez has been his only friend. He recollected, with a hot feeling of shame and anger, certain speeches of his own in which he had spoken to her of the traitor as his "twin brother," the "friend of his heart," and how even on one occasion he had commended Dolóres to the good offices of Luis when he was to be for some weeks absent from Sarria upon business.

He turned the lamp once more on the little announcement so rudely traced upon the blue paper. A spider had spun its web across it. Many flies had left their wings there. So, though undated, Ramon judged that it was by no means recent.

"Ah, yes, Don Luis," he thought grimly, "here is one who has a message to leave at the mill-house of Sarria."

But before setting out Ramon Garcia went into the little fagot-house, and sitting down upon a pile of kindling-wood which he himself had cut, he drew the charges of his pistols and reloaded them with quite extraordinary care.

Then he blew out his lantern and stepped forth into the night.

At the venta the three adventurers supped by themselves. Their Gallegan retainer did not put in an appearance, to the sorrow of Mons. Etienne who wished to employ him in finding out the abiding-place of the faithless but indubitably charming Doña Concha.

However, the Gallegan did not return all night. He had, in fact, gone to deliver a message at the house of his sometime friend Don Luis Fernandez.

When he arrived at the bottom of the valley through which the waters of the Cerde had almost ceased to flow, being so drained for irrigation and bled for village fountains that there remained hardly enough of them to be blued by the washerwomen at their clothes, or for the drink of the brown goats pattering down to the stray pools, their hard little hoofs clicking like castanets on the hot and slippery stones of the river-bed. Meanwhile El Sarria thought several things.

First, that Luis Fernandez had recovered from his wound and was so sure of his own security that he could afford to take over his friend's wife and all her responsibilities. Ramon gritted his teeth, as he stole like a shadow down the dry river-bed. He had learned many a lesson during these months, and the kite's shadow flitted not more silently over the un-peopled moor than did El Sarria the outlaw down to the old mill-house. He knew the place, too, stone by stone, pool by pool, for in old days Luis and he had often played there from dawn to dark.

The mill-house of Sarria was in particularly sharp contrast to the abode he had left. Luis had always been a rich man, especially since his uncle died; he, Ramon, never more than well-to-do. But here were magazines and granaries, barns and drying-lofts. Besides, in the pleasant angle where the windows looked down on the river, there was a dwelling-house with green window-shutters and white curtains, the like of which for whiteness and greenness were not to be seen even within the magnificent courtyard of Señor de Flores, the rich alcalde of Sarria.

This was illuminated as Ramon came near, and, from the darkness of the river gully, he looked up at its lighted windows from behind one of the great boulders, which are the teeth of the Cerde when the floods come down from the mountains. How they rolled and growled and groaned and crunched upon each other! Ramon, in all the turmoil of his thoughts, remembered one night when to see Dolóres and to stand all dripping beneath her window, he had dared even that peril of great waters.

But all was now clear and bright and still. The stars shone above and in nearly every window of the mill-house there burned a larger, a mellower star. It might have been a *fiesta* night, save that the windows were curtained and the lights shone through a white drapery of lace, subdued and tender.

He crept nearer to the house. He heard a noise of voices within. An equipage drove up rapidly to the front. What could bring a carriage to the house of Luis Fernandez?

A wild idea sprang into Ramon's brain. He had been so long in solitude that he drew conclusions rapidly. So he followed the train of thought upon which he had fallen, even as the flame runs along a train of gunpowder laid on the floor.

They had been long persuading her – all these months he had been on the mountain, and now they had married her to his false friend, to Luis Fernandez. It was the eve of the wedding-feast, and the guests were arriving. His knife had deceived him a second time. He had not struck true. Where was his old skill? There – surely his eyesight did not deceive him – was Luis Fernandez walking to and fro within his own house, arm in arm with a friend. They had lied to Dolóres and told her he was dead, even as the Migueletes would certainly do to claim the reward. There upon the balcony was a stranger dressed in black; he and Luis came to an open window, leaned out, and talked confidentially together. The stranger was peeling an orange, and he flung the peel almost upon the head of El Sarria.

Ramon, fingering his pistol butt, wondered if he should shoot now or wait. The two men went in again, and solved the difficulty for that time. Moreover, the outlaw did not yet know for certain that his wife was within the mill-house.

He would reconnoitre and find out. So he hid his gun carefully in a dry place under a stone, and stole up to the house through the garden, finding his way by instinct, for all the lighted windows were now on the other side.

Yet El Sarria never halted, never stumbled, was never at a loss. Now he stepped over the little stream which ran in an artificial channel to reinforce the undershot wheel from above, when the Cerde was low. Another pace forward and he turned sharply to the left, parted a tangle of oleanders, and looked out upon the broad space in front of the house.

It was a doctor's carriage all the way from La Bisbal that stood there. It was not a wedding then; some one was ill, very ill, or the *Sangrador* would not have come from so far, nor at such an expense to Don Luis, who in all things was a careful man. Moreover, to Ramon's simple Spanish mind the *Sangrador* and the undertaker arrived in one coach. Could he have struck some one else instead of Don Luis that night at the chasm? Surely no!

And then a great keen pain ran through his soul. He heard Dolóres call his name! High, keen, clear – as it were out of an eternity of pain, it came to him. "*Ramon, Ramon – help me, Ramon!*"

He stood a moment clutching at his breast. The cry was not repeated. But all the same, there could be no mistake. It was her voice or that of an angel from heaven. She had summoned him, and alive or dead he would find her. He drew his knife and with a spring was in the road. Along the wall he sped towards the door of the dwelling-place: it stood open and the wide hall stretched before him empty, vague, and dark.

Ramon listened, his upper lip lifted and his white teeth showing a little. He held his knife, yet clean and razor-sharp in his hand. There was a babel of confused sounds above; he could distinguish the tones of Luis Fernandez. But the voice of his Dolóres he did not hear again. No matter, he had heard it once and he would go – yes, into the midst of his foes. Escape or capture, Carlist or Cristino did not matter now. She was innocent; she loved him; she had called his name. Neither God nor devil should stop him now. He was already on the staircase. He went noiselessly, for he was bare of foot, having stripped in the river-bed, and left his brown cordovans beside his gun. But before his bare sole touched the hollow of the second step, the one sound in the universe which could have stopped him reached his ear – and that foot was never set down.

El Sarria heard the first cry of a new-born child.

CHAPTER XIII

DON TOMAS DIGS A GRAVE

No Cristino bullet that ever was moulded could have stopped the man more completely. He stood again on the floor of the paven hall, pale, shaking like an aspen leaf, his whole live soul upturned and aghast within him.

And above the youngling blared like a trumpet.

El Sarria was outside now. His knife was hidden in his breast. There was no need of it, at least for the present. He looked out of the gate upon the white and dusty highway. Like the hall, it was vague and empty, ankle-deep too in yet warm dust, that felt grateful to his feet after the sharp stones of the *arroyo* out of which he had climbed.

Under the barn a woman crouched by a fire near a little tent pitched in a corner, evidently taking care of the *tan* in the absence of her companions. Gipsies they were, as he could see, and strangers to the place. Perhaps she could tell him something. She called aloud to him, and he went and sat down beside her, nothing loth.

"You are a Gallegan, I see!" said the woman, while she continued to stir something savoury in a pot without appearing to pay Ramon much attention.

"A Gallician from Lugo – yes – but I have been long in these parts," answered El Sarria, mindful of his accent.

"And we of Granada – as you may both see and hear!" said the old gipsy, tossing her head with the scorn of the Romany for the outlander.

"What is going on up there?" he said, indicating the mill-house with his thumb. And as he spoke, for the first time the woman ceased stirring the pot and turned her eyes upon him.

"What is that to thee?" she inquired with a sudden fiery thrill in her speech.

As fierce and strong beat the passion in the heart of El Sarria, but nevertheless he commanded himself and answered, "Naught!"

"Thou liest!" she said; "think not to hide a heart secret from a hax, a witch woman. Either thou lovest to the death or thou hatest to the death. In either case, *pay!* Pay, and I will tell thee all thy desire, according to the crossing of my hand!"

El Sarria drew a gold double *duro* from his pouch and gave it into her withered clutch.

"Good," she said, "'tis a good crossing! I will tell you truth that you may take oath upon, whether kissing or slaying be in your thought. A woman is sick to the death or near by. A babe little desired is born. The Tia Elvira is with her. Whether the woman live or die, the Tia will decide according to the crossing of *her* hand. And the babe – well, when the mother is soon to be a bride, its life is not like to be long! A rough crossing for so short a sojourn, I wot. Good morning, brave man's son! And to you, sir, a safe journey till the knife strikes or the lips meet!"

The cryptic utterance of the witch woman sitting crooning over her pot affected El Sarria greatly. He did not doubt for a moment that Dolóres lay within the house of Luis Fernandez, and that he had heard the crying of his own first-born son. He arose uncertainly, as if the solid earth were swaying beneath him.

Leaving her pot simmering on the wood-ashes, the gipsy woman came after Ramon to the corner of the garden. The broad-leaved fig-trees made a dense green gloom there. The pale grey undersides of the olive whipped like feathers in the light chill breeze of night.

"There – go in there!"

She pointed with her hand to a little pillared summer-house in the garden. It was overgrown with creepers, and Luis had placed a fountain in it, which, however, only played when the waters were high in the Cerde.

"Whether you hate the old or love the young, bide there," she whispered; "there is no need that Tia Elvira should have all the gold. Cross my hand again, and I am your servant for ever."

Ramon gave her a gold *duro*.

"I am not a rich man," he said, "but for your good-will you are welcome!"

"You run eager-hearted in the dust with bare and bleeding feet," she said. "You carry a knife naked in your bosom. Therefore you are rich enough for me. And I will spite Tia Elvira if I can. She would not give me so much as an *ochavo* of all her gettings. Why should I consider her?"

And she gripped Ramon by the arm with claws like eagles' talons and stood leaning against him, breathing into his ear.

"Ah, Gallego, you are strong to lean against. I love a man so," she said. "Once you had not stood so slack and careless if La Giralda had leaned her breast against your shoulder – ah me, all withered now is it and hard as the rim of a sieve. But you love this young widow, you also. She is El Sarria's widow, they tell me, he whom the Migueletes slew at the entering in of the Devil's Cañon. A fine man that, *Caramba!* And so you too wish to marry her now he is dead. If I were a widow and young I would choose you, for you are of stature and thickness, yes – a proper man through and through. Scarce can I meet my old arms about your chest. Yet woman never knows woman, and she may chance to prefer Don Luis. But the babe is in their way – the babe that cried to-night. Luis does not wish it well. He longs for children of his own by this woman, and El Sarria's brat would spoil his inheritance. The Tia let the secret out in her cups!"

She stopped and unclasped her arms.

"Ah," she said, "you love not Don Luis. I felt it when I spoke of his having issue by that woman. I wot well the thing will never happen. Your knife or your pistol (of these you have two) will have conference with him before that. But, if you wish this child to live – though I see not why you should, save that its father was like you a proper man and the slayer of many – stand yonder in the shadow of the summer-house, and if any come out with the babe, smite! If it be a man, smite hard, but if it be Aunt Elvira, the *hax*, smite ten times harder. For she is the devil in petticoats and hath sworn away many a life, as she would do mine if she could. I, who have never wished her any harm all the days of my life! There, put your arm about me yet a moment – so. Now here is your gold back. I wish it not. The other is better. Tighter! Hold me yet closer a moment. Ay-ah, dearie, it is sweet to feel once more the grip of a strong man's arms about one – yes – though he love another – and she a little puling woman who cannot even deliver herself of her first-born son without a *Sangrador*. Go – go, they are coming to the door. I see the lights disappear from the chamber above. Remember to strike the Tia low – in the groin is best. She wears amulets and charms above, and you might miss your mark!"

So, much astonished, and with his gold pieces in his hand, Ramon found him in the little roughly finished lath-and-plaster temple. He sat on the dry basin of the fountain and parted the vine leaves with his hands. He was scarce a dozen yards from a door in the wall – a door recently broken, which by two stone steps gave direct access to the garden.

Behind him were the wall and the fig-tree where he had spoken with the gipsy. As he looked he fancied a figure still there, dark against the sky, doubtless the woman La Giralda waiting to see if his knife struck the Tia in the proper place.

Ramon listened, and through the darkness he could discern the keen, insistent, yet to his ear sweet crying of the babe, presently broken by a series of pats on the back into a staccato bleat, and finally stilling itself little by little into an uncertain silence.

Then the door into the garden was cautiously opened, and a man clumsily descended. He shut the door softly behind him and stood a while gazing up at the lighted room. Then shaking his fist at the illuminated panes, he moved towards the summer-house. El Sarria thought himself discovered, and with a filling of his lungs which swept his breast up in a grand curve, he drew his knife and stood erect in the darkest corner.

Stumbling and grumbling the man came to the aperture. He did not descend the step which led to the interior, but instead groped through one of the open windows for something behind the door.

"May holy San Isidro strike my brother with his lightnings!" he muttered. "He gives me all the ill jobs, and when I have done them but scant thanks for my pains!"

His hand went groping blindly this way and that, unwitting of what lurked in the further gloom.

"From Ramon Garcia's knife at the Devil's Gorge to this young one's undoing, all comes to poor Tomas. And now, when he might have left me the mill-house he must needs marry this widow Garcia and set to work forthwith to chouse me out of my inheritance! A foul pest on him and on his seed!"

This mutter of discontent he interspersed with yet more potent anathemas, as he groped here and there in the darkness for what he sought. By-and-by he extracted a spade, a mattock, and a skin-covered corn measure holding about the quarter of an *arroba*.

With these he went grumbling off towards the deep shade of the fig-tree where Ramon had talked with the gipsy woman. With great impartiality he cursed his brother Luis, El Sarria and his knife, the widow Dolóres and her child.

Ramon heard him laugh as he stumbled among the vine roots.

"It is a blessing that such puling brats need no iron collar when sentenced to the garotte. It will not be pleasant, I suppose – a nasty thing enough to do. But after all, this little trench under the fig-tree will be an excellent hold over my good brother Luis. Many a stout 'ounce' of gold shall he bleed because of the small squalling bundle that shall be hushed to sleep under this garden mould!"

Nothing was heard for the next ten minutes but the measured stroke of the mattock, and the deep breathing of the night workman. But a broad shadow had drifted silently out from the corner of the little temple summer-house, and stood only a yard or two from the hole Don Tomas was making in the ground under the fig-tree.

El Sarria knew his man by this time, though he had not seen him for many years. The grave-digger was Don Tomas, Luis Fernandez's ne'er-do-well brother, who had been compelled to flee the country the year of Angoulême's French invasion, for giving information to the enemy. He it was whom he had seen at his old tricks by the Devil's Cañon. Not but what Luis must all the same have set him on, for he alone knew of the secret way of retreat.

Presently with many puffs and pants Tomas finished the work to his satisfaction. Then he shook a handful of grass and leaves into the bottom of the excavation.

"There," he muttered with a cackle of laughter, "there is your cradle-bed cosily made, young Don Ramon! Would that your father were lying cheek by jowl with you! Would not I cover you both up snugly. Holy Coat of Treves, but I am in a lather! This it is to labour for others' good! I wonder how soon that hell-hog Tia Elvira will be ready to do her part. The *Sangrador* must have gone home hours ago. She is to bring the youngling out and then go back to tell her story to the mother how sweetly it passed away – ah, ah – how heavenly was its smile. So it will be – so it will! Tomas Fernandez knows the trick. He has quieted many a leveret the same way!"

The garden door opened again, this time very slightly, a mere slit of light lying across the tangled green and yellowish grey of the garden. It just missed El Sarria and kindled to dusky purple a blossom of oleander that touched his cheek as he stooped. The whites of his eyes gleamed a moment, but the digger saw him not. His gaze was fixed on his brother in the doorway.

"The signal," he muttered, "I am to go and wait outside for the Tia. Of course, as usual, my good and respectable brother will not put a finger to the job himself. Well, *toma!* he shall pay the more sweetly when all is done – oh yes, Luis shall pay for all!"

He was standing leaning upon his mattock at the head of the little grave which he had destined for the child of Dolóres Garcia. He had been whistling a gay Andalusian lilt of tune he had learned on his long travels. A devil of a fellow this Tomas in his day, and whistled marvellously between his teeth – so low that (they said) he could make love to a Señorita in church by means of it, and yet her own mother at her elbow never hear.

"Well, better get it over!" he said, dropping his mattock and starting out towards the door. "Here comes the Tia!"

But at that moment the heavens fell. Upon the head of the midnight workman descended the flat of his own spade. El Sarria had intended the edge, but Tomas's good angel turned the weapon at the last moment or else he had been cloven to the shoulder-blade. For it was a father's arm that wielded the weapon. Down fell the digger of infant graves, right athwart the excavation he himself had made. His mouth was filled with the dirt he had thrown out, and the arm that threw it swung like a pendulum to and fro in the hole.

CHAPTER XIV

THE HOLY INNOCENTS

With small compunction El Sarria turned Don Tomas over with his foot and coolly appropriated the cloak he had discarded, as also his headgear, which was banded with gay colours, and of the shape affected by the dandies of Seville.

Then swinging the cloak about him, and setting the hat upon his head jauntily, he strode to the garden door.

Above he could hear the angry voice of a woman, with intervals of silence as if for a low-toned inaudible reply. Then came a wail of despair and grief – that nearly sent him up the stairs at a tiger's rush, which would have scattered his enemies before him like chaff. For it was the voice of his Dolóres he heard for the second time. But of late El Sarria had learned some of the wisdom of caution. He knew not the force Luis might have within the house, and he might only lose his own life without benefiting either Dolóres or his son.

Then there was a slow foot on the stairs, coming down. The light went out above, and he heard a heavy breathing behind the closed door by which he stood.

"Tomas – Tomas!" said a voice, "here is the brat. It is asleep; do it quietly, so that the mother may not be alarmed. I cannot stir without her hearing me and asking the reason."

And in the arms of Ramon Garcia was placed the breathing body of his first-born son. The door was shut before he could move, so astonished he was by the curious softness of that light burden, and Tia Elvira's unamuled groin escaped safe for that time – which, indeed, afterwards turned out to be just as well.

So at the door of his enemy El Sarria stood dumb and stricken, the babe in his arms. For the fact that this child was the son of his little Dolóres, annihilated for the moment even revenge in his soul.

But a hand was laid on his shoulder.

"Haste thee, haste," hissed the witch-wife, La Giralda, Elvira's friend and rival, "hast thou smitten strongly? She lies behind the door. I cannot hear her breath, so all must be well. I saw thee stoop to the blow. Well done, well done! And the brain-pan of the ill-disposed and factious Señor Tomas is comfortably cracked, too. He had but sevenpence in his pockets, together with a bad peseta with a hole in it. Such fellows have no true moral worth. But come away, come away! Presently Don Luis will miss the Tia and give the alarm. Give me the babe!"

But this Ramon would not do, holding jealously to his own.

"What can you, a man, do with a babe?" she persisted. "Can you stop its mouth from crying? Is there milk in your breasts to feed its little blind mouth? Give it to me, I say!"

"Nay," said El Sarria, shaking her off, "not to you. Did not this murderous woman come from your waggons? Is not her place under your canvas?"

"It shall be so no more, if your stroke prove true," said the gipsy. "I shall be the queen and bring up this youngling to be the boldest horse-thief betwixt this filthy Aragon and the Gipsy-barrio of Granada, where La Giralda's cave dives deepest into the rock."

"No, I will not!" said the man, grasping the babe so tightly that it whimpered, and stretched its little body tense as a bowstring over his arm. "I will take him to the hills and suckle him with goat's milk! He shall be no horse-thief, but a fighter of men!"

"Ah, then you are an outlaw – a lad of the hills? I thought so," chuckled the woman. "Come away quickly, then, brave manslayer; I know a better way than either. The sisters, the good women of the convent, will take him at a word from me. I know the night watch – a countrywoman of mine, little Concha. She will receive him through the wicket and guard him well – being well paid, that is, as doubtless your honour can pay!"

"What, little Concha Cabezos?" said Ramon with instant suspicion. "Was she not a traitress to her mistress? Was it not through her treachery that her mistress came hither?"

"Little Concha – a traitress," laughed the old woman. "Nay – nay! you know her not, evidently. She may, indeed, be almost everything else that a woman can be, as her enemies say. No cloistered Santa Teresa is our little Concha, but, for all that, she is of a stock true to her salt, and only proves fickle to her wooers. Come quickly and speak with her. She is clever, the little Concha, and her advice is good."

They passed rapidly along the road, deep in white dust, but slaked now with the dew, and cool underfoot. The babe lifted up his voice and wept.

"Here, give him me. I cannot run away with him if I would," said the gipsy. "You may keep your hand on my arm, if only you will but give him me!"

And the gipsy woman lifted the little puckered features to her cheek, and crooned and clucked till the child gradually soothed itself to sleep face-down on her shoulder.

"How came Concha at the house of the nuns?" said Ramon.

"That you must ask herself," answered the woman; "some quarrel it was. Luis Fernandez never loved her. He wished her out of the house from the first. But here we are!"

First came a great whitewashed forehead of blind wall, then in the midst a small circular tower where at one side was a door, heavily guarded with great iron plates and bolts, and on the other a deep square aperture in which was an iron turnstile – the House of the Blessed Innocents at last.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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