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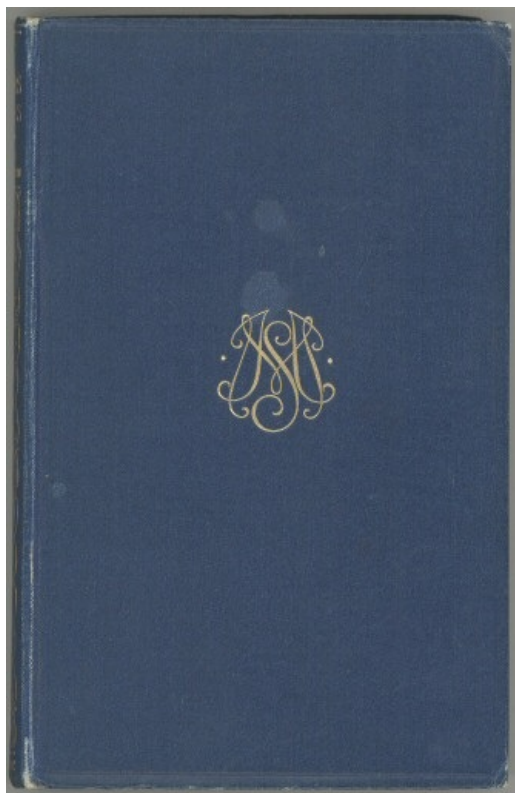
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IN KEDAR'S TENTS



BY
HENRY SETON MERRIMAN

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CHAPTER I ONE SOWETH

p. 1

'If it be a duty to respect other men's claims, so also is it a duty to maintain our own.'

It is in the staging of her comedies that fate shows herself superior to mere human invention. While we, with careful regard to scenery, place our conventional puppets on the stage and bid them play their old old parts in a manner as ancient, she rings up the curtain and starts a tragedy on a scene that has obviously been set by the carpenter for a farce. She deals out the parts with a fine inconsistency, and the jolly-faced little man is cast to play Romeo, while the poetic youth with lantern jaw and an impaired digestion finds no Juliet to match his love.

Fate, with that playfulness which some take too seriously or quite amiss, set her queer stage as long ago as 1838 for the comedy of certain lives, and rang up the curtain one dark evening on no fitter scene than the high road from Gateshead to Durham. It was raining hard, and a fresh breeze from the south-east swept a salt rime from the North Sea across a tract of land as bare and bleak as the waters of that grim ocean. A hard, cold land this, where the iron that has filled men's purses has also entered their souls.

There had been a great meeting at Chester-le-Street of those who were at this time beginning to be known as Chartists, and, the Act having been lately passed that torchlight meetings were illegal, this assembly had gathered by the light of a waning moon long since hidden by the clouds. Amid the storm of wind and rain, orators had expounded views as wild as the night itself, to which the hard-visaged sons of Northumbria had listened with grunts of approval or muttered words of discontent. A dangerous game to play—this stirring up of the people's heart, and one that may at any moment turn to the deepest earnest.

Few thought at this time that the movement awakening in the working centres of the North and Midlands was destined to spread with the strange rapidity of popular passion—to spread and live for a decade. Few of the Chartists expected to see the fulfilment of half of their desires. Yet, today, a moiety of the People's Charter has been granted. These voices crying in the night demanded an extended suffrage, vote by ballot, and freedom for rich and poor alike to sit in Parliament. Within the scope of one reign these demands have been granted.

The meeting at Chester-le-Street was no different from a hundred others held in England at the same time. It was illegal, and yet the authorities dared not to pronounce it so. It might prove dangerous to those taking part in it. Lawyers said that the leaders laid themselves open to the charge of high treason. In this assembly as in others there were wirepullers—men playing their own game, and from the safety of the rear pushing on those in front. With one of these we have to do. With his mistake Fate raised the curtain, and on the horizon of several lives arose a cloud no bigger than a man's hand.

Geoffrey Horner lived before his time, insomuch as he was a gentleman-Radical. He was clever, and the world heeded not. He was brilliant, well educated, capable of great achievements, and the world refused to be astonished. Here were the makings of a malcontent. A well-born Radical is one whom the world has refused to accept at his own valuation. A wise man is ready to strike a bargain with Fate. The wisest are those who ask much and then take half. It is the coward who asks too little, and the fool who imagines that he will receive without demanding.

Horner had thrown in his lot with the Chartists in that spirit of pique which makes a man marry the wrong woman because the right one will have none of him. At the Chester-le-Street meeting he had declared himself an upholder of moral persuasion, while in his heart he pandered to those who knew only of physical force and placed their reliance thereon. He had come from Durham with a contingent of malcontents, and was now returning thither on foot in company with the local leaders. These were intelligent mechanics seeking clumsily and blindly enough what they knew to be the good of their fellows. At their heels tramped the rank and file of the great movement. The assembly was a subtle foreshadowing of things to come—of Newport and the march of twenty thousand men, of violence and bloodshed, of strife between brethren, and of justice nonplussed and hesitating.

The toil-worn miners were mostly silent, their dimly enlightened intellects uneasily stirred by the words they had lately heard—their stubborn hearts full of a great hope with a minute misgiving at the back of it. With this dangerous material Geoffrey Horner proposed to play his game.

Suddenly a voice was raised.

'Mates,' it cried, at the cross-roads, 'let's go and smash Pleydell's windows!'

And a muttered acquiescence to the proposal swept through the moving mass like a sullen breeze through reeds.

The desire for action rustled among these men of few words and mighty arms.

Horner hurriedly consulted his colleagues. Was it wise to attempt to exert an authority which was merely nominal? The principles of Chartism were at this time to keep within the limits of the law, and yet to hint, when such a course was safe, that stronger measures lay behind mere words. Their fatal habit was to strike softly.

In peace and war, at home and abroad, there is but one humane and safe rule: Hesitate to strike—strike hard.

Sir John Pleydell was a member of that Parliament which had treated the Charter with contempt. He was one of those who had voted with the majority against the measures it embodied.

In addition to these damnatory facts, he was a local Tory of some renown—an ambitious man, the neighbours said, who wished to leave his son a peerage.

To the minds of the rabble this magnate represented the tyranny against which their protest was raised. Geoffrey Horner looked on him as a political opponent and a dangerous member of the winning party. The blow was easy to strike. Horner hesitated—at the cross roads of other lives than his own—and held his tongue.

The suggestion of the unknown humorist in the crowd commended itself to the more energetic of the party, who immediately turned towards the by-road leading to Dene Hall. The others—the minority—followed as minorities do, because they distrusted themselves. Some one struck up a song with words lately published in the 'Northern Liberator' and set to a well-known local air.

The shooting party assembled at Dene Hall was still at the dinner table when the malcontents entered the park, and the talk of coverts and guns ceased suddenly at the sound of their rough voices. Sir John Pleydell, an alert man still, despite his grey hair and drawn, careworn face, looked up sharply. He had been sitting silently fingering the stem of his wineglass—a habit of his when the ladies quitted the room—and, although he had shot as well as, perhaps better than, any present, had taken but little part in the conversation. He had, in fact, only half listened, and when a rare smile passed across his grey face it invariably owed its existence to some sally made by his son, Alfred Pleydell, gay, light-hearted, *débonnaire*, at the far end of the table. When Sir John's thoughtful eyes rested on his motherless son, a dull and suppressed light gleamed momentarily beneath his heavy lids. Superficial observers said that John Pleydell was an ambitious man; 'not for himself,' added the few who saw deeper.

When his quick mind now took in the import of the sound that broke the outer silence of the night, Sir John's glance sought his son's face. In moments of alarm the glance flies to where the heart is.

'What is that?' asked Alfred Pleydell, standing up.

'The Chartists,' said Sir John.

Alfred looked round. He was a soldier, though the ink had hardly dried upon the parchment that made him one—the only soldier in the room.

'We are eleven here,' he said, 'and two men downstairs—some of you fellows have your valets too—say fifteen in all. We cannot stand this, you know.'

As he spoke the first volley of stones crashed through the windows, and the broken glass rattled to the floor behind the shutters. The cries of the ladies in the drawing-room could be heard, and all the men sprang to their feet. With blazing eyes Alfred Pleydell ran to the door, but his father was there before him.

'Not you,' said the elder man, quiet but a little paler than usual; 'I will go and speak to them. They will not dare to touch me. They are probably running away by this time.'

'Then we'll run after 'em,' answered Alfred with a fine spirit, and something in his attitude, in the ring of his voice, awoke that demon of combativeness which lies dormant in men of the Anglo-Saxon race.

'Come on, you fellows!' cried the boy with a queer glad laugh, and without knowing that he did it Sir John stood aside, his heart warm with a sudden pride, his blood stirred by something that had not moved it these thirty years. The guests crowded out of the room—old men who should have known better—laughing as they threw aside their dinner napkins. What a strange thing is man, peaceful through long years, and at a moment's notice a mere fighting devil.

'Come on, we'll teach them to break windows!' repeated Alfred Pleydell, running to the stick rack. The rain rattled on the skylight of the square hall, and the wind roared down the open chimney. Among the men hastily arming themselves with heavy sticks and cramming caps upon their heads were some who had tasted of rheumatism, but they never thought of an overcoat.

'We'll know each other by our shirt fronts,' said a quiet man who was standing on a chair in order to reach an Indian club suspended on the wall.

Alfred was at the door leading through to the servants' quarters, and his summons brought several men from the pantry and kitchens.

'Come on!' he cried, 'take anything you can find—stick or poker—yes, and those old guns, use 'em like a club, hit very hard and very often. We'll charge the devils—there's nothing like a charge—come on!'

And he was already out of the door with a dozen at his heels.

The change from the lighted rooms to the outer darkness made them pause a moment, during which time the defenders had leisure to group themselves around Alfred Pleydell. A hoarse shout, which indeed drowned Geoffrey Horner's voice, showed where the assailants stood. Horner had found his tongue after the first volley of stones. It was the policy of the Chartist leaders and wirepullers to suggest rather than demonstrate physical force. Enough had been done to call attention to the Chester-le-Street meeting, and give it the desired prominence in the eyes of the nation.

'Get back, go to your homes!' he was shouting, with upraised arms, when the hoarse cry of his adherents and the flood of light from the opened door made him turn hastily. In a moment he saw the meaning of this development, but it was too late.

With a cheer, Alfred Pleydell, little more than a boy, led the charge, and seeing Horner in front, ran at him with upraised stick. Horner half warded the blow, which came whistling down his own stick and paralysed his thumb. He returned the stroke with a sudden fury, striking Pleydell full

on the head. Then, because he had a young wife and child at home, he pushed his way through the struggling crowd, and ran away in the darkness. As he ran he could hear his late adherents dispersing in all directions, like sheep before a dog. He heard a voice calling:

‘Alfred! Alfred!’

And Horner, who an hour—nay, ten minutes—earlier had had no thought of violence, ran his fastest along the road by which he had lately come. His heart was as water within his breast, and his staring eyes played their part mechanically. He did not fall, but he noted nothing, and had no knowledge whither he was running.

Alfred Pleydell lay quite still on the lawn in front of his father’s house.

CHAPTER II

ANOTHER REAPETH

p. 11

‘Attempt the end, and never stand to doubt.’

DURING the course of a harum-scarum youth in the city of Dublin certain persons had been known to predict that Mr. Frederick Conyngham had a future before him. Mostly pleasant-spoken Irish persons these, who had the racial habit of saying that which is likely to be welcome. Many of them added, ‘the young divil,’ under their breath, in a pious hope of thereby cleansing their souls from guilt.

‘I suppose I’m idle, and what is worse, I know I’m a fool,’ said Conyngham himself to his tutor when that gentleman, with a toleration which was undeserved, took him severely to task before sending him up for the Bar examination. The tutor said nothing, but he suspected that this, his wildest pupil, was no fool. Truth to tell, Frederick Conyngham had devoted little thought to the matter of which he spoke, namely, himself, and was perhaps none the worse for that. A young man who thinks too often usually falls into the error of also thinking too much, of himself.

The examination was, however, safely passed, and in due course Frederick was called to the Irish Bar, where a Queen’s Counsel, with an accent like rich wine, told him that he was now a gentleman, and entitled so to call himself.

All these events were left behind, and Conyngham, sitting alone in his rooms in Norfolk Street, Strand, three days after the breaking of Sir John Pleydell’s windows, was engaged in realising that the predicted future was still in every sense before him, and in nowise nearer than it had been in his mother’s lifetime.

This realisation of an unpleasant fact appeared in no way to disturb his equanimity, for, as he knocked his pipe against the bars of the fire, he murmured a popular air in a careless voice. The firelight showed his face to be pleasant enough in a way that left the land of his birth undoubted. Blue eyes, quick and kind; a square chin, closely curling hair, and square shoulders bespoke an Irishman. Something, however, in the cut of his lips—something close and firm—suggested an admixture of Anglo-Saxon blood. The man looked as if he might have had an English mother. It was perhaps this formation of the mouth that had led those pleasant-spoken persons to name to his relatives their conviction that Conyngham had a future before him. The best liars are those who base their fancy upon fact. They knew that the ordinary thoroughbred Irishman has usually a cheerful enough life before him, but not that which is vaguely called a future. Fred Conyngham looked like a man who could hold to his purpose, but at this moment he also had the unfortunate appearance of not possessing one to hold to.

He knocked the ashes from his pipe, and held the hot briar bowl against the ear of a sleeping fox terrier, which animal growled, without moving, in a manner that suggested its possession of a sense of humour and a full comprehension of the harmless practical joke.

A moment later the dog sat up and listened with an interest that gradually increased until the door opened and Geoffrey Horner came into the room.

‘Faith, it’s Horner!’ said Conyngham. ‘Where are you from?’

‘The North.’

‘Ah—sit down. What have you been doing up there—tub-thumping?’

Horner came forward and sat down in the chair indicated. He looked five years older than when he had last been there. Conyngham glanced at his friend, who was staring into the fire.

‘Edith all right?’ he asked carelessly.

‘Yes.’

‘And—the little chap?’

‘Yes.’

Conyngham glanced at his companion again. Horner's eyes had the hard look that comes from hopelessness; his lips were dry and white. He wore the air of one whose stake in the game of life was heavy, who played that game nervously. For this was an ambitious man with wife and child whom he loved. Conyngham's attitude towards Fate was in strong contrast. He held his head up and faced the world without encumbrance, without a settled ambition, without any sense of responsibility at all. The sharp-eyed dog on the hearthrug looked from one to the other. A moment before, the atmosphere of the room had been one of ease and comfortable assurance—an atmosphere that some men, without any warrant or the justification of personal success or distinction, seem to carry with them through life. Since Horner had crossed the threshold the ceaseless hum of the streets seemed to be nearer, the sound of it louder in the room; the restlessness of that great strife stirred the air. The fox terrier laid himself on the hearthrug again, but instead of sleeping watched his two human companions.

Conyngham filled his pipe. He turned to the table where the matchbox stood at his elbow, took it up, rattled it, and laid it down. He pressed the tobacco hard with his thumb, and, turning to Horner, said sharply:

'What is it?'

'I don't know yet; ruin, I think.'

'Nonsense, man!' said Conyngham cheerily. 'There is no such thing in this world. At least, the jolliest fellows I know are bankrupts, or no better. Look at me: never a brief; literary contributions returned with thanks; balance at the bank, seventeen pounds ten shillings; balance in hand, none; debts, the Lord only knows! Look at me! I'm happy enough.'

'Yes, you're a lonely devil.'

Conyngham looked at his friend with inquiry in his gay eyes.

'Ah! perhaps so. I live alone, if that is what you mean. But as for being lonely—no, hang it! I have plenty of friends, especially at dividend time.'

'You have nobody depending on you,' said Horner with the irritability of sorrow.

'Because nobody is such a fool. On the other hand, I have nobody to care a twopenny curse what becomes of me. Same thing, you see, in the end. Come, man, cheer up. Tell me what is wrong. Seventeen pounds ten shillings is not exactly wealth, but if you want it you know it is there, eh?'

'I do not want it, thanks,' replied the other. 'Seventeen hundred would be no good to me.'

He paused, biting his under lip and staring with hard eyes into the fire.

'Read that,' he said at length, and handed Conyngham a cutting from a daily newspaper.

The younger man read, without apparent interest, an account of the Chester-le-Street meeting, and the subsequent attack on Sir John Pleydell's house.

'Yes,' he commented, 'the usual thing. Brave words followed by a cowardly deed. What in the name of fortune you were doing in that *galère* you yourself know best. If these are politics, Horner, I say drop them. Politics are a stick, clean enough at the top, but you've got hold of the wrong end. Young Pleydell was hurt, I see—"seriously, it is feared."

'Yes,' said Horner significantly; and his companion, after a quick look of surprise, read the slip of paper carefully a second time. Then he looked up and met Horner's eyes.

'Gad!' he exclaimed in a whisper.

Horner said nothing. The dog moved restlessly, and for a moment the whole world—that sleepless world of the streets—seemed to hold its breath.

'And if he dies,' said Conyngham at length.

'Exactly so,' answered the other with a laugh—of scaffold mirth.

Conyngham turned in his chair and sat with his elbows on his knees, his face resting on his closed fists, staring at the worn old hearthrug. Thus they remained for some minutes.

'What are you thinking about?' asked Horner at length.

'Nothing—got nothing to think with. You know that, Geoffrey. Wish I had—never wanted it as I do at this moment. I'm no good, you know that. You must go to some one with brains—some clever devil.'

As he spoke he turned and took up the paper again, reading the paragraph slowly and carefully. Horner looked at him with a breathless hunger in his eyes. At some moments it is a crime to think, for we never know but that thought may be transmitted without so much as a whisper.

"The miners were accompanied by a gentleman from London," Conyngham read aloud, "a barrister, it is supposed, whose speech was a feature of the Chester le-Street meeting. This gentleman's name is quite unknown, nor has his whereabouts yet been discovered. His sudden disappearance lends likelihood to the report that this unknown agitator actually struck the blow which injured Mr. Alfred Pleydell. Every exertion is being put forth by the authorities to trace

the man who is possibly a felon and certainly a coward.”’

Conyngham laid aside the paper and again looked at Horner, who did not meet his glance nor ask now of what he was thinking. Horner, indeed, had his own thoughts, perhaps of the fireside—modest enough, but happy as love and health could make it—upon which his own ambition had brought down the ruins of a hundred castles in the air—thoughts he scarce could face, no doubt, and yet had no power to drive away, of the young wife whose world was that same fireside; of the child, perhaps, whose coming had opened for a time the door of Paradise.

Conyngham broke in upon these meditations with a laugh.

‘I have it!’ he cried. ‘It’s as simple as the alphabet. This paper says it was a barrister—a man from London—a malcontent, a felon, a coward. Dammy, Geoff—that’s me!’

He leapt to his feet. ‘Get out of the way, Tim!’ he cried to the dog, pushing the animal aside and standing on the hearthrug.

‘Listen to this,’ he went on. ‘This thing, like the others, will blow over. It will be forgotten in a week. Another meeting will be held—say in South Wales, more windows will be broken, another young man’s head cracked, and Chester-le-Street (God-forsaken place, never heard of it!) will be forgotten.’

Horner sat looking with hollow eyes at the young Irishman, his lips twitching, his fingers interlocked—there is nothing makes so complete a coward of a man as a woman’s love. Conyngham laughed as the notion unfolded itself in his mind. He might, as he himself had said, be of no great brain power, but he was at all events a man and a brave one. He stood a full six foot, and looked down at his companion, who sat whitefaced and shrinking.

‘It is quite easy,’ he said, ‘for me to disappear in such a manner as to arouse suspicion. I have nothing to keep me here; my briefs—well, the Solicitor-General can have ‘em! I have no ties—nothing to keep me in any part of the world. When young Pleydell is on his feet again, and a few more windows have been broken, and nine days have elapsed, the wonder will give place to another, and I can return to my—practice.’

‘I couldn’t let you do it.’

‘Oh yes, you could,’ said Conyngham with the quickness of his race to spy out his neighbour’s vulnerable point. ‘For the sake of Edith and the little devil.’

Horner sat silent, and after a moment Conyngham went on.

‘All we want to do is to divert suspicion from you now—to put them on a false scent, for they must have one of some sort. When they find that they cannot catch me they will forget all about it.’

Horner shuffled in his seat. This was nothing but detection of the thoughts that had passed through his own mind.

‘It is easily enough done,’ went on the Irishman. ‘A paragraph here and there in some of the newspapers; a few incriminating papers left in these rooms, which are certain to be searched. I have a bad name—an Irish dog goes about the world with a rope round his neck. If I am caught it will not be for some time, and then I can get out of it somehow—an alibi or something. I’ll get a brief at all events. By that time the scent will be lost, and it will be all right. Come, Geoff, cheer up! A man of your sort ought not to be thrown by a mischance like this.’

He stood with his legs apart, his hands thrust deep into his pockets, a gay laugh on his lips, and much discernment in his eyes.

‘Oh, d—n Edith!’ he added after a pause, seeing that his efforts met with no response. ‘D—n that child! You used to have some pluck, Horner.’ Horner shook his head and made no answer, but his very silence was a point gained. He no longer protested nor raised any objection to his companion’s hare-brained scheme. The thing was feasible, and he knew it.

Conyngham went on to set forth his plans, which with characteristic rapidity of thought he evolved as he spoke.

‘Above all,’ he said, ‘we must be prompt. I must disappear to-night, the paragraphs must be in to-morrow’s papers. I think I’ll go to Spain. The Carlists seem to be making things lively there. You know, Horner, I was never meant for a wig and gown—there’s no doubt about that. I shall have a splendid time of it out there—’

He stopped, meeting a queer look in Horner’s eyes, who sat leaning forward and searching his face with jealous glance.

‘I was wondering,’ said the other, with a pale smile, ‘if you were ever in love with Edith.’

‘No, my good soul, I was not,’ answered Conyngham, with perfect carelessness, ‘though I knew her long before you did.’

He paused, and a quick thought flashed through his mind that some men are seen at their worst in adversity. He was ready enough to find excuses for Horner, for men are strange in the gift of their friendship, often bestowing it where they know it is but ill deserved.

He rattled on with unbroken gaiety, unfolding plans which in their perfection of detail suggested

a previous experience in outrunning the constable.

While they were still talking a mutual friend came in—a quick-spoken man already beginning to be known as a journalist of ability. They talked on indifferent topics for some time. Then the new-comer said jerkily:

‘Heard the news?’

‘No,’ answered Conyngham.

‘Alfred Pleydell—young fellow who resisted the Chartist rioters at Durham—died yesterday morning.’ Frederick Conyngham had placed himself in front of Horner, who was still seated in the low chair by the fire. He found Horner’s toe with his heel.

‘Is that so?’ he said gravely. ‘Then I’m off.’

‘What do you mean?’ asked the journalist with a quick look—the man had the manner of a ferret.

‘Nothing, only I’m off, that’s all, old man. And I cannot ask you to stay this evening, you understand, because I have to pack.’

He turned slowly on Horner, who had recovered himself, but still had his hand over his face.

‘Got any money, Geoff?’ he asked.

‘Yes, I have twenty pounds if you want it,’ answered the other in a hoarse voice.

‘I do want it—badly.’

The journalist had taken up his hat and stick. He moved slowly towards the door, and, there pausing, saw Horner pass the bank-notes to Conyngham.

‘You had better go too,’ said the Irishman. ‘You two are going in the same direction, I know.’

Horner rose, and, half laughing, Conyngham pushed him towards the door.

‘See him home, Blake,’ he said. ‘Horner has the blues to-night.’

CHAPTER III

LIKE SHIPS UPON THE SEA

p. 23

‘No one can be more wise than destiny.’

‘WHAT are we waiting for? why, two more passengers—grand ladies as they tell me—and the captain has gone ashore to fetch them,’ the first mate of the ‘Granville’ barque, of London, made answer to Frederick Conyngham, and he breathed on his fingers as he spoke, for the north-west wind was blowing across the plains of the Medoc, and the sun had just set behind the smoke of Bordeaux.

The ‘Granville’ was lying at anchor in the middle of the Garonne river, having safely discharged her deck cargo of empty claret casks and landed a certain number of passengers. There are few colder spots on the Continent than the sunny town of Bordeaux when the west wind blows from Atlantic wastes in winter time. A fine powder of snow scudded across the flat land, which presented a bleak brown face, patched here and there with white. There were two more passengers on board the ‘Granville,’ crouching in the cabin—two French gentlemen who had taken passage from London to Algeciras in Spain, on their way to Algiers.

Conyngham, with characteristic good-nature, had made himself so entirely at home on board the Mediterranean trader that his presence was equally welcomed in the forecastle and the captain’s cabin. Even the first mate, his present interlocutor, a grim man given to muttered abuse of his calling and a pious pessimism in respect to human nature, gradually thawed under the influence of so cheerful an acceptance of heavy weather and a clumsy deck cargo.

‘The ladies will be less trouble than the empty casks, at all events,’ said Conyngham, ‘because they will keep below.’

The sailor shook his head forebodingly and took an heroic pinch of snuff.

‘One’s as capable of carrying mischief as the other,’ he muttered in the bigoted voice of a married teetotaller.

The ship was ready for sea, and this mariner’s spirit was ever uneasy and restless till the anchor was on deck and the hawser stowed.

‘There’s a boat leaving the quay now,’ he added. ‘Seems she’s lumbered up forr’ard wi’ women’s hamper.’

And indeed the black form of a skiff so laden could be seen approaching through the driving snow and gloom. The mate called to the steward to come on deck, and this bearded servitor of dames

emerged from the galley with uprolled sleeves and a fine contempt for cold winds. A boy went forward with a coil of rope on his arm, for the tide was running hard and the Garonne is no ladies' pleasure stream. It is not an easy matter to board a ship in mid-current when tide and wind are at variance, and the fingers so cold that a rope slips through them like a log-line. The 'Granville,' having still on board her cargo of coals for Algeciras, lay low in the water with both her anchors out and the tide singing round her old-fashioned hempen hawsers.

'Now see ye throw a clear rope,' shouted the mate to the boy who had gone forward. The proximity of the land and the approach of women—a *bête noire* no less dreaded—seemed to flurry the brined spirit of the Granville's mate.

Perhaps the knowledge that the end of a rope, not judged clear, would inevitably be applied to his own person, shook the nerve of the boy on the forecastle—perhaps his hands were cold and his faculties benumbed. He cast a line which seemed to promise well at first. Two coils of it unfolded themselves gracefully against the grey sky, and then Confusion took the others for herself. A British oath from the deck of the ship went out to meet a fine French explosion of profanity from the boat, both forestalling the splash of the tangled rope into the water under the bows of the ship, and a full ten yards out of the reach of the man who stood, boathook in hand, ready to catch it. There were two ladies in the stern of the boat, muffled up to the eyes, and betokening by their attitude the hopeless despair and misery which seize the southern fair the moment they embark in so much as a ferry boat. The fore part of the heavy craft was piled up with trunks and other impedimenta of a feminine incongruity. A single boatman had rowed the boat from the shore, guiding it into mid-stream, and there describing a circle calculated to insure a gentle approach on the lee side. This man, having laid aside his oars, now stood, boathook in hand, awaiting the inevitable crash. The offending boy in the bows was making frantic efforts to haul in his misguided rope, but the possibility of making a second cast was unworthy of consideration. The mate muttered such a string of foreboding expletives as augured ill for the delinquent. The boatman was preparing to hold on and fend off at the same moment—a sudden gust of wind gave the boat a sharp buffet just as the man grappled the mizzen-chains—he overbalanced himself, fell, and recovered himself, but only to be jerked backwards into the water by the boathook, which struck him in the chest.

'*À moi!*' cried the man, and disappeared in the muddy water. He rose to the surface under the ship's quarter, and the mate, quick as lightning, dumped the whole coil of the slack of the main sheet on to the top of him. In a moment he was at the level of the rail, the mate and the steward hauling steadily on the rope, to which he clung with the tenacity and somewhat the attitude of a monkey. At the same instant a splash made the rescuers turn in time to see Conyngham, whose coat lay thrown on the deck behind them, rise to the surface ten yards astern of the 'Granville' and strike out towards the boat, now almost disappearing in the gloom of night.

The water, which had flowed through the sunniest of the sunny plains of France, was surprisingly warm, and Conyngham, soon recovering from the shock of his dive, settled into a quick side-stroke. The boat was close in front of him, and in the semi-darkness he could see one of the women rise from her seat and make her way forward, while her companion crouched lower and gave voice to her dismay in a series of wails and groans. The more intrepid lady was engaged in lifting one of the heavy oars, when Conyngham called out in French:

'Courage, mesdames! I will be with you in a moment.'

Both turned, and the pallor of their faces shone whitely through the gloom. Neither spoke, and in a few strokes Conyngham came alongside. He clutched the gunwale with his right hand, and drew himself breast high.

'If these ladies,' he said, 'will kindly go to the opposite side of the boat, I shall be able to climb in without danger of upsetting.'

'If mama inclines that way I think it will be sufficient,' answered the muffled form which had made its way forward. The voice was clear and low, remarkably self-possessed, and not without a suggestion that its possessor bore a grudge against some person present.

'Perhaps mademoiselle is right,' said Conyngham with becoming gravity, and the lady in the stern obeyed her daughter's suggestion, with the result anticipated. Indeed, the boat heeled over with so much goodwill that Conyngham was lifted right out of the water. He clambered on board and immediately began shivering, for the wind cut like a knife.

The younger lady made her way cautiously back to the seat which she had recently quitted, and began at once to speak very severely to her mother. This stout and emotional person was swaying backwards and forwards, and, in the intervals of wailing and groaning, called in Spanish upon several selected saints to assist her. At times, and apparently by way of a change, she appealed to yet higher powers to receive her soul.

'My mother,' said the young lady to Conyngham, who had already got the oars out, 'has the heart of a rabbit, but—yes—of a very young rabbit.'

'Madame may rest assured that there is no danger,' said Conyngham.

'Monsieur is an Englishman—'

'Yes, and a very cold one at the moment. If madame could restrain her religious enthusiasm so much as to sit still, we should make better progress.'

He spoke rather curtly, as if refusing to admit the advisability of manning the boat with a crew of black-letter saints. The manner in which the craft leapt forward under each stroke of the oars testified to the strength of his arms, and madame presently subsided into whispers of thankfulness, having reason, it would seem, to be content with mere earthly aid in lieu of that heavenly intervention which ladies of her species summon at every turn of life.

'I wish I could help you,' said the younger woman presently, in a voice and manner suggestive of an energy unusual to her countrywomen. She spoke in French, but with an accent somewhat round and full, like an English accent, and Conyngham divined that she was Spanish. He thought also that under their outer wraps the ladies wore the mantilla, and had that graceful carriage of the head which is only seen in the Peninsula.

'Thank you, mademoiselle, but I am making good progress now. Can you see the ship?'

She rose and stood peering into the darkness ahead—a graceful, swaying figure. A faint scent as of some flower was wafted on the keen wind to Conyngham, who had already decided with characteristic haste that this young person was as beautiful as she was intrepid.

'Yes,' she answered, 'it is quite close. They are also showing lights to guide us.'

She stood looking apparently over his head towards the 'Granville,' but when she spoke it would seem that her thoughts had not been fixed on that vessel.

'Is monsieur a sailor?'

'No, but I fortunately have a little knowledge of such matters—fortunate, since I have been able to turn it to the use of these ladies.'

'But you are travelling in the "Granville."'

'Yes; I am travelling in the "Granville."'

Over his oars Conyngham looked hard at his interlocutrice, but could discern nothing of her features. Her voice interested him, however, and he wondered whether there were ever calms on the coast of Spain at this time of the year.

'Our sailors,' said the young lady, 'in Spain are brave, but they are very cautious. I think none of them would have done such a thing as you have just done for us. We were in danger. I knew it. Was it not so?'

'The boat might have drifted against some ship at anchor and been upset. You might also have been driven out to sea. They had no boat on board the "Granville" ready to put out and follow you.'

'Yes; and you saved us. But you English are of a great courage. And my mother, instead of thanking you, is offering her gratitude to James and John the sons of Zebedee, as if they had done it.'

'I am no relation to Zebedee,' said Conyngham with a gay laugh. 'Madame may rest assured of that.'

'Julia,' said the elder lady severely, and in a voice that seemed to emanate from a chest as deep and hollow as an octave cask, 'I shall tell Father Concha, who will assuredly reprove you. The saints upon whom I called were fishermen, and therefore the more capable of understanding our great danger. As for monsieur, he knows that he shall always be in my prayers.'

'Thank you, madame,' said Conyngham gravely.

'And at a fitter time I hope to be able to tender him my thanks.'

At this moment a voice from the 'Granville' hailed the boat, asking whether all was well and Mr. Conyngham on board. Being reassured on this point, the mate apparently attended to another matter requiring his attention, the mingled cries and expostulations of the cabin boy sufficiently indicating its nature.

The boat, under Conyngham's strong and steady strokes, now came slowly and without mishap alongside the great black hull of the vessel, and it soon became manifest that, although all danger was past, there yet remained difficulty ahead; for when the boat was made fast and the ladder lowered, the elder of the two ladies firmly and emphatically denied her ability to make the ascent. The French boatman, shivering in a borrowed great coat, and with a vociferation which flavoured the air with cognac, added his entreaties to those of the mate and steward. In the small boat Conyngham, in French, and the lady's daughter, in Spanish, represented that at least half of the heavenly host, having intervened to save her from so great a peril as that safely passed through, could surely accomplish this smaller feat with ease. But the lady still hesitated, and the mate, having clambered down into the boat, grabbed Conyngham's arm with a large and not unkindly hand, and pushed him forcibly towards the ladder.

'You hadn't got no business, Mr. Conyngham,' he said gruffly, 'to leave the ship like that, and like as not you've got your death of cold. Just you get aboard and leave these women to me. You get to your bunk, mister, and stooard'll bring you something hot.'

There was nought but obedience in the matter, and Conyngham was soon between the blankets,

alternately shivering and burning in the first stages of a severe chill.

The captain having come on board, the 'Granville' presently weighed anchor, and on the bosom of an ebbing tide turned her blunt prow towards the winter sea. The waves out there beat high, and before the lights of Pauillac, then a mere cluster of fishers' huts, had passed away astern, the good ship was lifting her bow with a sense of anticipation, while her great wooden beams and knees began to strain and creak.

During the following days, while the sense of spring and warmth slowly gave life to those who could breathe the air on deck, Conyngham lay in his little cabin and heeded nothing; for when the fever left him he was only conscious of a great lassitude, and scarce could raise himself to take such nourishment as the steward, with a rough but kindly skill, prepared for him.

'Why the deuce I ever came—why the deuce I ever went overboard after a couple of señoras—I don't know,' he repeated to himself during the hours of that long watch below.

Why, indeed? except that youth must needs go forth into the world and play the only stake it owns there. Nor is Frederick Conyngham the first who, having no knowledge of the game of life, throws all upon the board to wait upon the hazard of a die.

CHAPTER IV

LE PREMIER PAS

p. 34

'Be as one that knoweth and yet holdeth his tongue.'

THE little town of Algeciras lies, as many know, within sight of Gibraltar, and separated from that stronghold by a broad bay. It is on the mainland of Spain, and in direct communication by road with the great port of Cadiz. Another road, little better than a bridle-path, runs northward to Ximena and through the corkwood forests of that plain towards the mountain ranges that rise between Ronda and the sea.

By this bridle-path, it is whispered, a vast smuggled commerce has ever found passage to the mainland, and scarce a boatman or passenger lands at Algeciras from Gibraltar but carries somewhere on his person as much tobacco as he may hope to conceal with safety. Algeciras, with its fair white houses, its prim church, and sleepy quay, where the blue waters lap and sparkle in innocent sunlight, is, it is to be feared, a town of small virtue and the habitation of scoundrels. For this is the stronghold of those contrabandistas whom song and legend have praised as the boldest, the merriest, and most romantic of law-breakers. Indeed, in this country the man who can boast of a smuggling ancestry holds high his head and looks down on honest folk.

The 'Granville' having dropped anchor to the north of the rough stone pier, was soon disburdened of her passengers—the ladies going ashore with undisguised delight, and leaving behind them many gracious messages of thanks to the gentleman whose gallantry had resulted so disastrously; for Conyngham was still in bed, though now nearly recovered. Truth to tell, he did not hurry to make his appearance in the general cabin, and came on deck a few hours after the departure of the ladies, whose gratitude he desired to avoid.

Two days of the peerless sunshine of these southern waters completely restored him to health, and he prepared to go ashore. It was afternoon when his boat touched the beach, and the idlers, without whom no Mediterranean seaboard is complete, having passed the heat of the day in a philosophic apathy amounting in many cases to a siesta, now roused themselves sufficiently to take a dignified and indifferent interest in the new arrival. A number of boys, an old soldier, several artillerymen from the pretty and absolutely useless fort, a priest and a female vendor of oranges put themselves out so much as to congregate in a little knot at the spot where Conyngham landed.

'Body of Bacchus!' said the priest, with a pinch of snuff poised before his long nose, 'an Englishman—see his gold watch chain.'

This remark called forth several monosyllabic sounds, and the onlookers watched the safe discharge of Conyngham's personal effects with a characteristic placidity of demeanour which was at once tolerant and gently surprised. That any one should have the energy to come ashore when he was comfortable on board, or leave the shore when amply provided there with sunshine, elbowroom, and other necessaries of life, presented itself to them as a fact worthy of note but not of emulation. The happiest man is he who has reduced the necessities of life to a minimum.

No one offered to assist Conyngham. In Spain the onlooker keeps his hands in his pockets.

'The English, see you, travel for pleasure,' said the old soldier, nodding his head in the direction of Gibraltar, pink and shimmering across the bay.

The priest brushed some stray grains of snuff from the front of his faded cassock—once black, but now of a greeny brown. He was a singularly tall man, gaunt and grey, with deep lines drawn downwards from eye to chin. His mouth was large and tender, with a humorous corner ever

awaiting a jest. His eyes were sombre and deeply shaded by grey brows, but one of them had a twinkle lurking and waiting, as in the corner of his mouth.

'Everyone stretches his legs according to the length of his coverlet,' he said, and, turning, he courteously raised his hat to Conyngham, who passed at that moment on his way to the hotel. The little knot of onlookers broke up, and the boys wandered towards the fort, before the gate of which a game at bowls was in progress.

'The Padre has a hungry look,' reflected Conyngham. 'Think I'll invite him to dinner.'

For Geoffrey Horner had succeeded in conveying more money to the man who had taken his sins upon himself, and while Conyngham possessed money he usually had the desire to spend it.

Conyngham went to the Fonda de la Marina, which stands to-day—a house of small comfort and no great outward cleanliness; but, as in most Spanish inns, the performance was better than the promise, and the bedroom offered to the traveller was nothing worse than bare and ill furnished. With what Spanish he at this time possessed the Englishman made known his wants, and inquired of the means of prosecuting his journey to Ronda.

'You know the Captain-General Vincente of Ronda?' he asked.

'But . . . yes—by reputation. Who does not in Andalusia?' replied the host, a stout man, who had once cooked for a military mess at Gibraltar, and professed himself acquainted with the requirements of English gentlemen.

'I have a letter to General Vincente, and must go to Ronda as soon as possible. These are stirring times in Spain.'

The man's bland face suddenly assumed an air of cunning, and he glanced over his shoulder to see that none overheard.

'Your Excellency is right,' he answered. 'But for such as myself one side is as good as another—is it not so? Carlist or Christino—the money is the same.'

'But here in the South there are no Carlists.'

'Who knows?' said the innkeeper with outspread hands. 'Anything that his Excellency requires shall be forthcoming,' he added grandiosely. 'This is the dining-room, and here at the side a little saloon where the ladies sit. But at present we have only gentlemen in the hotel—it being the winter time.'

'Then you have other guests?' inquired Conyngham.

'But . . . yes—always. In Algeciras there are always travellers. Noblemen—like his Excellency—for pleasure. Others—for commerce, the Government—the politics.'

'No flies enter a shut mouth, my friend,' said a voice at the door, and both turned to see standing in the doorway the priest who had witnessed Conyngham's arrival.

'Pardon, señor,' said the old man, coming forward with his shabby hat in his hand. 'Pardon my interruption. I came at an opportune moment, for I heard the word politics.'

He turned and shook a lean finger at the innkeeper, who was backing towards the door with many bows.

'Ah, bad Miguel,' he said, 'will you make it impossible for gentlemen to put up at your execrable inn? The man's cooking is superior to his discretion, señor. I, too, am a traveller, and for the moment a guest here. I have the honour. My name is Concha—the Padre Concha—a priest, as you see.'

Conyngham nodded, and laughed frankly.

'Glad to meet you,' he said. 'I saw you as I came along. My name is Conyngham, and I am an Englishman, as you hear. I know very little Spanish.'

'That will come—that will come,' said the priest, moving towards the window. 'Perhaps too soon, if you are going to stay any length of time in this country. Let me advise you—do not learn our language too quickly.'

He shook his head and moved towards the open window.

'See to your girths before you mount, eh? Here is the verandah, where it is pleasant in the afternoon. Shall we be seated? That chair has but three legs—allow me! this one is better.'

He spoke with the grave courtesy of his countrymen. For every Spaniard, even the lowest muleteer, esteems himself a gentleman, and knows how to act as such. The Padre Concha had a pleasant voice, and a habit of gesticulating slowly with one large and not too clean hand, that suggested the pulpit. He had led the way to a spacious verandah, where there were small tables and chairs, and at the outer corners orange trees in square green boxes.

'We will have a bottle of wine—is it not so?—yes,' he said, and gravely clapped his hands together to summon the waiter—an Oriental custom still in use in the Peninsula.

The wine was brought and duly uncorked, during which ceremony the priest waited and watched

with the preoccupied air of a host careful for the entertainment of his guest. He tasted the wine critically.

'It might be worse,' he said. 'I beg you to excuse it not being better.'

There was something simple in the old man's manner that won Conyngham's regard.

'The wine is excellent,' he said. 'It is my welcome to Spain.'

'Ah! Then this is your first visit to this country,' the priest said indifferently, his eyes wandering to the open sea, where a few feluccas lay becalmed.

'Yes.'

Conyngham turned and looked towards the sea also. It was late in the afternoon, and a certain drowsiness of the atmosphere made conversation, even between comparative strangers, a slower, easier matter than with us in the brisk North. After a moment the Englishman turned with, perhaps, the intention of studying his companion's face, only to find the deep grey eyes fixed on his own.

'Spain,' said the Padre, 'is a wonderful country, rich, beautiful, with a climate like none in Europe; but God and the devil come to closer quarters here than elsewhere. Still for a traveller, for pleasure, I think this country is second to none.'

'I am not exactly a traveller for pleasure, my father.'

'Ah!' and Concha drummed idly on the table with his fingers.

'I left England in haste,' added Conyngham lightly.

'Ah!'

'And it will be inexpedient for me to return for some months to come. I thought of taking service in the army, and have a letter to General Vincente, who lives at Ronda, as I understand, sixty miles from here across the mountains.'

'Yes,' said the priest thoughtfully, 'Ronda is sixty miles from here—across the mountains.'

He was watching a boat which approached the shore from the direction of Gibraltar. The wind having dropped, the boatmen had lowered the sail and were now rowing, giving voice to a song which floated across the smooth sea sleepily. It was an ordinary Algeciras wherry built to carry a little cargo, and perhaps a dozen passengers, a fishing boat that smelt strongly of tobacco. The shore was soon reached, and the passengers, numbering half a dozen, stepped over the gunwale on to a small landing stage. One of them was better dressed than his companions, a smart man with a bright flower in the buttonhole of his jacket, carrying the flowing cloak brightly lined with coloured velvet without which no Spaniard goes abroad at sunset. He looked towards the hotel, and was evidently speaking of it with a boatman whose attitude was full of promise and assurance.

The priest rose and emptied his glass.

'I must ask you to excuse me. Vespers wait for no man, and I hear the bell,' he said with a grave bow, and went indoors.

Left to himself, Conyngham lapsed into the easy reflections of a man whose habit it is to live for the present, leaving the future and the past to take care of themselves. Perhaps he thought, as some do, that the past dies—which is a mistake. The past only sleeps, and we carry it with us through life, slumbering. Those are wise who bear it gently so that it may never be aroused.

The sun had set, and Gibraltar, a huge couchant lion across the bay, was fading into the twilight of the East when a footstep in the dining-room made Conyngham turn his head, half expecting the return of Father Concha. But in the doorway, and with the evident intention of coming towards himself, Conyngham perceived a handsome dark-faced man of medium height, with a smart moustache brushed upward, clever eyes, and the carriage of a soldier. This stranger unfolded his cloak, for in Spain it is considered ill-mannered to address a stranger and remain cloaked.

'Señor,' he said, with a gesture of the hat, courteous and yet manly enough to savour more of the camp than the court, 'señor, I understand you are journeying to Ronda.'

'Yes.'

'I, too, intended to go across the mountains, and hoped to arrive here in time to accompany friends who I learn have already started on their journey. But I have received letters which necessitate my return to Malaga. You have already divined that I come to ask a favour.'

He brought forward a chair and sat down, drawing from his pocket a silver cigarette case, which he offered to the Englishman. There was a certain picturesqueness in the man's attitude and manner. His face and movements possessed a suggestion of energy which seemed out of place here in the sleepy South, and stamped him as a native not of dreamy Andalusia, but of La Mancha perhaps, where the wit of Spain is concentrated, or of fiery Catalonia, where discontent and unrest are in the very atmosphere of the brown hills. This was a Spanish gentleman in the best sense of the word, as scrupulous in personal cleanliness as any Englishman, polished,

accomplished, bright and fascinating, and yet carrying with him a subtle air of melancholy and romance which lingers still among the men and women of aristocratic Spain.

‘Tis but to carry a letter,’ he explained, ‘and to deliver it into the hand of the person to whom it is addressed. Ah, I would give five years of life to touch that hand with my lips.’

He sighed, gave a little laugh which was full of meaning, and yet quite free from self-consciousness, and lighted a fresh cigarette. Then, after a little pause, he produced the letter from an inner pocket and laid it on the table in front of Conyngham. It was addressed, ‘To the Señorita J. B.,’ and had a subtle scent of mignonette. The envelope was of a delicate pink.

‘A love letter,’ said Conyngham bluntly.

The Spaniard looked at him and shrugged his shoulders.

‘Ah! you do not understand,’ he said, ‘in that cold country of the North. If you stay in Spain, perhaps some dark-eyed one will teach you. But,’ and his manner changed with theatrical rapidity, as he laid his slim hand on the letter, ‘if, when you see her you love her, I will kill you.’

Conyngham laughed and held out his hand for the letter.

‘It is insufficiently addressed,’ he said practically. ‘How shall I find the lady?’

‘Her name is Barenna, the Señorita Barenna; that is sufficient in Ronda.’

Conyngham took up the letter and examined it. ‘It is of importance?’ he said.

‘Of the utmost.’

‘And of value?’

‘Of the greatest value in the world to me.’

The Spaniard rose and took up his cloak, which he had thrown over the back of the nearest chair, not forgetting to display a picturesque corner of its bright lining.

‘You swear you will deliver it, only with your own hand, only to the hand of the Señorita Barenna? And—you will observe the strictest secrecy?’

‘Oh, yes,’ answered Conyngham carelessly, ‘if you like.’

The Spaniard turned, and, leaning one hand on the table, looked almost fiercely into his companion’s face. ‘You are an Englishman,’ he said, ‘and an Englishman’s word—is it not known all the world over? In the North, in my country, where Wellington fought, the peasants still say “word of an Englishman” instead of an oath.’

He threw his cloak over his shoulder, and stood looking down at his companion with a little smile as if he were proud of him.

‘There!’ he said. ‘Adios. My name is Larralde, but that is of no consequence. Adios!’

With a courteous bow he took his leave, and Conyngham presently saw him walking down to the landing stage. It seemed that this strange visitor was about to depart as abruptly as he had come. Conyngham rose and walked to the edge of the verandah, where he stood watching the departure of the boat in which his new friend had taken passage.

While he was standing there, the old priest came quietly out of the open window of the dining room. He saw the letter lying on the table where Conyngham had left it. He approached, his shabby old shoes making no sound on the wooden flooring, and read the address written on the pink and scented envelope. When the Englishman at length turned, he was alone on the verandah, with the wine bottle, the empty glasses, and the letter.

CHAPTER V

CONTRABAND

p. 48

‘What rights are his that dares not strike for them?’

AN hour before sunrise two horses stood shuffling their feet and chewing their bits before the hotel of the Marina at Algeciras, while their owner, a short and thick-set man of an exaggeratedly villanous appearance, attended to such straps and buckles as he suspected of latent flaws. The horses were lean and loose of ear, with a melancholy thoughtfulness of demeanour that seemed to suggest the deepest misgivings as to the future. Their saddles and other accoutrements were frankly theatrical, and would have been at once the delight of an artist and the despair of a saddler. Fringes and tassels of bright-coloured worsted depended from points where fringes and tassels were distinctly out of place. Where the various straps should have been strong they looked weak, and scarce a buckle could boast an innocence of knotted string. The saddles were of wood, and calculated to inflict serious internal injuries to the rider in case of a fall. They stood at least a foot above the horse’s backbone, raised on a thick cushion upon the ribs of the animal,

and leaving a space in the middle for the secretion of tobacco and other contraband merchandise.

'I'll take the smallest cut-throat of the crew,' Conyngham had said on the occasion of an informal parade of guides the previous evening. And the host of the Fonda, in whose kitchen the function had taken place, explained to Concepción Vara that the English Excellency had selected him on his—the host's—assurance that Algeciras contained no other so honest.

'Tell him,' answered Concepción with a cigarette between his lips and a pardonable pride in his eyes, 'that my grandfather was a smuggler and my father was shot by the Guardia Civil near Algatocin.'

Concepción, having repaired one girth and shaken his head dubiously over another, lighted a fresh cigarette and gave a little shiver, for the morning air was keen. He discreetly coughed. He had seen Conyngham breakfasting by the light of a dim oil lamp of a shape and make unaltered since the days of Nebuchadnezzar, and, without appearing impatient, wished to convey to one gentleman the fact that another awaited him.

Before long Conyngham appeared, having paid an iniquitous bill with the recklessness that is only thoroughly understood by the poor. He appeared as usual to be at peace with all men, and returned his guide's grave salutation with an easy nod.

'These the horses?' he inquired.

Concepción Vara spread out his hands. 'They have no equal in Andalusia,' he said.

'Then I am sorry for Andalusia,' answered Conyngham with a pleasant laugh.

They mounted and rode away in the dim cool light of the morning. The sea was of a deep blue, and rippled all over as in a picture. Gibraltar, five miles away, loomed up like a grey cloud against the pink of sunrise. The whole world wore a cleanly look as if the night had been passed over its face like a sponge, wiping away all that was unsightly or evil. The air was light and exhilarating, and scented by the breath of aromatic weeds growing at the roadside.

Concepción sang a song as he rode—a song almost as old as his trade—declaring that he was a smuggler bold. And he looked it, every inch. The road to Ronda lies through the cork woods of Ximena, leaving St. Roque on the right hand—such at least was the path selected by Conyngham's guide; for there are many ways over the mountains, and none of them to be recommended. Beguiling the journey with cigarette and song, calling at every venta on the road, exchanging chaff with every woman and a quick word with all men, Concepción faithfully fulfilled his contract, and, as the moon rose over the distant snow-clad peaks of the Sierra Nevada, pointed forward to the lights of Gaucin, a mountain village with an evil reputation.

The dawn of the next day saw the travellers in the saddle again, and the road was worse than ever. A sharp ascent led them up from Gaucin to regions where foliage grew scarcer at every step, and cultivation was unknown. At one spot they turned to look back, and saw Gibraltar like a tooth protruding from the sea. The straits had the appearance of a river, and the high land behind Ceuta formed the farther bank of it.

'There is Africa,' said Concepción gravely, and after a moment turned his horse's head uphill again. The people of these mountain regions were as wild in appearance as their country. Once or twice the travellers passed a shepherd herding sheep or goats on the mountain side, himself clad in goatskin, with a great brown cloak floating from his shoulders—a living picture of Ishmael or those sons of his who dwelt in the tents of Kedar. A few muleteers drew aside to let the horses pass, and exchanged some words in an undertone with Conyngham's guide. Fine-looking brigands were these, with an armoury of knives peeping from their bright-coloured waistbands. The Andalusian peasant is for six days in the week calculated to inspire awe by his clothing and general appearance. Of a dark skin and hair, he usually submits his chin to the barber's office but once a week, and the timid traveller would do well to take the road on Sundays only. Towards the end of the week, and notably on a Saturday, every passer-by is an unshorn brigand capable of the darkest deeds of villany, while twenty-four hours later the land will be found to be peopled by as clean and honest and smart, and withal as handsome, a race of men as any on earth.

Before long all habitations were left behind, and the horses climbed from rock to rock like cats. There was no suggestion of pathway or landmark, and Concepción paused once or twice to take his bearings. It was about two in the afternoon when, after descending the bed of a stream long since dried up, Concepción called a halt, and proposed to rest the horses while he dined. As on the previous day, the guide's manner was that of a gentleman, conferring a high honour with becoming modesty when he sat down beside Conyngham and untied his small sack of provisions. These consisted of dried figs and bread, which he offered to his companion before beginning to eat. Conyngham shared his own stock of food with his guide, and subsequently smoked a cigarette which that gentleman offered him. They were thus pleasantly engaged when a man appeared on the rocks above them in a manner and with a haste that spoke but ill of his honesty. The guide looked up knife in hand, and made answer to a gesture of the arm with his own hand upraised.

'Who is this?' said Conyngham. 'Some friend of yours? Tell him to keep his distance, for I don't care for his appearance.'

'He is no friend of mine, Excellency. But the man is, I dare say, honest enough. In these

mountains it is only of the Guardia Civil that one must beware. They have ever the finger on the trigger and shoot without warning.'

'Nevertheless,' said the Englishman, now thoroughly on the alert, 'let him state his business at a respectable distance. Ah! he has a comrade and two mules.'

And indeed a second man of equally unprepossessing exterior now appeared from behind a great rock leading a couple of heavily laden mules.

Concepción and the first traveller, who was now within a dozen yards, were already exchanging words in a patois not unlike the Limousin dialect, of which Conyngham understood nothing.

'Stop where you are,' shouted the Englishman in Spanish, 'or else I shoot you! If there is anything wrong, Señor Vara,' he added to the guide, 'I shoot you first, understand that.'

'He says,' answered Concepción with dignity, 'that they are honest traders on the road to Ronda, and would be glad of our company. His Excellency is at liberty to shoot if he is so disposed.'

Conyngham laughed.

'No,' he answered, 'I am not anxious to kill any man, but each must take care of himself in these times.'

'Not against an honest smuggler.'

'Are these smugglers?'

'They speak as such. I know them no more than does his Excellency.'

The second new-comer was now within hail, and began at once to speak in Spanish. The tale he told was similar in every way to that translated by Concepción from the Limousin dialect.

'Why should we not travel together to Ronda?' he said, coming forward with an easy air of confidence, which was of better effect than any protestation of honesty. He had a quiet eye, and the demeanour of one educated to loftier things than smuggling tobacco across the Sierra, though indeed, he was no better clad than his companion. The two guides instinctively took the road together, Concepción leading his horse, for the way was such that none could ride over it. Conyngham did the same, and his companion led the mule by a rope, as is the custom in Andalusia.

The full glare of the day shone down on them, the bare rock giving back a puff of heat that dried the throat. Conyngham was tired and not too trustful of his companion, who, indeed, seemed to be fully occupied with his own thoughts. They had thus progressed a full half-hour when a shout from the rocks above caused them to halt suddenly. The white linen head coverings of the Guardia Civil and the glint of the sun on their accoutrements showed at a glance that this was not a summons to be disregarded.

In an instant Concepción's companion was leaping from rock to rock with an agility only to be acquired in the hot fear of death. A report rang out and echoed among the hills. A bullet went 'splat' against a rock near at hand, making a frayed blue mark upon the grey stone. The man dodged from side to side in the panic-stricken irresponsibility of a rabbit seeking covert where none exists. There was not so much as to hide his head. Conyngham looked up towards the foe in time to see a puff of white smoke thrown up against the steely sky. A second report, and the fugitive seemed to trip over a stone. He recovered himself, stood upright for a moment, gave a queer spluttering cough, and sat slowly down against a boulder.

'He is killed!' said Concepción, throwing down his cigarette. 'Mother of God! these Guardias Civiles!'

The two guards came clambering down the face of the rock. Concepción glanced at his late companion writhing in the sharpness of death.

'Here or at Ronda, to-day, or to-morrow, what matters it?' muttered the quiet-eyed man at Conyngham's side. The Englishman turned and looked at him.

'They will shoot me too, but not now.'

Concepción sullenly awaited the arrival of the guards. These men ever hunt in couples of a widely different age, for the law has found that an old head and a young arm form the strongest combination. The elder of the two had the face of an old grey wolf. He muttered some order to his companion, and went towards the mule. He cut away the outer covering of the burden suspended from the saddle, and nodded his head wisely. These were boxes of cartridges to carry one thousand each. The grey old man turned and looked at him who lay on the ground.

'A la longa,' he said with a grim smile. 'In the long run, Antonio.'

The man gave a sickly grin and opened his mouth to speak, but his jaw dropped instead, and he passed across that frontier which is watched by no earthly sentinel.

'This gentleman,' said the quiet-eyed man, whose guide had thus paid for his little mistake in refusing to halt at the word of command, 'is a stranger to me—an Englishman, I think.'

'Yes,' answered Conyngham.

The old soldier looked from one to the other.

'That may be,' he said, 'but he sleeps in Ronda prison to-night. To-morrow the Captain-General will see to it.'

'I have a letter to the Captain-General,' said Conyngham, who drew from his pocket a packet of papers. Among these was the pink scented envelope given to him by the man called Larralde at Algeciras. He had forgotten its existence, and put it back in his pocket with a smile. Having found that for which he sought, he gave it to the soldier, who read the address in silence and returned the letter.

'You I know,' he said, turning to the man at Conyngham's side, who merely shrugged his shoulders. 'And Concepción Vara, we all know him.'

Concepción had lighted a cigarette, and was murmuring a popular air with the indifferent patience and the wandering eye of perfect innocence. The old soldier turned and spoke in an undertone to his comrade, who went towards the dead man and quietly covered his face with the folds of his own faja or waistcloth. This he weighted at the corners with stones, carrying out this simple office to the dead with a suggestive indifference. To this day the Guardias Civiles have plenary power to shoot whomsoever they think fit—flight and resistance being equally fatal.

No more heeding the dead body of the man whom he had shot than he would have heeded the carcase of a rat, the elder of the two soldiers now gave the order to march, commanding Concepción to lead the way.

'It will not be worth your while to risk a bullet by running away,' he said. 'This time it is probably a matter of a few pounds of tobacco only.'

The evening had fallen ere the silent party caught sight of the town of Ronda, perched, as the Moorish strongholds usually are, on a height. Ronda, as history tells, was the last possession of the brave and gifted Moslems in Spain. The people are half Moorish still, and from the barred windows look out deep almond eyes and patient faces that have no European feature. The narrow streets were empty as the travellers entered the town, and the clatter of the mules slipping and stumbling on the cobble stones brought but few to the doors of the low-built houses. To enter Ronda from the south the traveller must traverse the Moorish town, which is divided from the Spanish quarter by a cleft in the great rock that renders the town impregnable to all attack. Having crossed the bridge spanning the great gorge into which the sun never penetrates even at midday, the party emerged into the broader streets of the more modern town, and, turning to the right through a high gateway, found themselves in a barrack yard of the Guardias Civiles.

CHAPTER VI AT RONDA

p. 59

'Le plus grand art d'un habile homme est celui de savoir cacher son habileté.'

WHEN Conyngham awoke after a night conscientiously spent in that profound slumber which waits on an excellent digestion and a careless heart, he found the prison attendant at his bedside. A less easy-going mind would perhaps have leapt to some nervous conclusion at the sight of this fierce-visaged janitor, who, however, carried nothing more deadly in his hand than a card.

'It is the Captain-General,' said he, 'who calls at this early hour. His Excellency's letter has been delivered, and the Captain-General scarce waited to swallow his morning chocolate.'

'Very much to the Captain-General's credit,' returned Conyngham rising. 'Cold water,' he went on, 'soap, a towel, and my luggage—and then the Captain-General.'

The attendant, with an odd smile, procured the necessary articles, and when the Englishman was ready led the way downstairs. He was a solemn man from Galicia, this, where they do not smile.

In the patio of the great house, once a monastery, now converted into a barrack for the Guardias Civiles, a small man of fifty years or more stood smoking a cigarette. On perceiving Conyngham he came forward with outstretched hand and a smile which can only be described as angelic. It was a smile at once sympathetic and humorous, veiling his dark eyes between lashes almost closed, parting moustached lips to disclose a row of pearly teeth.

'My dear sir,' said General Vincente in very tolerable English, 'I am at your feet. That such a mistake should have been made in respect to the bearer of a letter of introduction from my old friend General Watterson—we fought together in Wellington's day—that such a mistake should have occurred overwhelms me with shame.'

He pressed Conyngham's hand in both of his, which were small and white—looked up into his face, stepped back and broke into a soft laugh. Indeed his voice was admirably suited to a lady's drawing-room, and suggested nought of the camp or battle field. From the handkerchief which

he drew from his sleeve and passed across his white moustache a faint scent floated on the morning air.

'Are you General Vincente?' asked Conyngham.

'Yes—why not?' And in truth the tone of the Englishman's voice had betrayed a scepticism which warranted the question.

'It is very kind of you to come so early. I have been quite comfortable, and they gave me a good supper last night,' said Conyngham. 'Moreover, the Guardias Civiles are in no way to blame for my arrest. I was in bad company, it seems.'

'Yes; your companions were engaged in conveying ammunition to the Carlists; we have wanted to lay our hands upon them for some weeks. They have carried former journeys to a successful termination.'

He laughed and shrugged his shoulders.

'The guide, Antonio something-or-other, died, as I understand.'

'Well, yes; if you choose to put it that way,' admitted Conyngham.

The General raised his eyebrows in a gentle grimace expressive of deprecation, with, as it were, a small solution of sympathy, indicated by a moisture of the eye, for the family of Antonio something-or-other in their bereavement.

'And the other man? Seemed a nice enough fellow . . . ' inquired Conyngham.

The General raised one gloved hand as if to fend off some approaching calamity.

'He died this morning—at six o'clock.'

Conyngham looked down at this gentle soldier with a dawning light of comprehension. This might after all be the General Vincente whom he had been led to look upon as the fiercest of the Spanish Queen's adherents.

'Of the same complaint?'

'Of the same complaint,' answered the General softly. He slipped his hand within Conyngham's arm, and thus affectionately led him across the patio towards the doorway where sentinels stood at attention. He acknowledged the attitude of his subordinates by a friendly nod; indeed, this rosy-faced warrior seemed to brim over with the milk of human kindness.

'The English,' he said, pressing his companion's arm, 'have been too useful to us for me to allow one of them to remain a moment longer in confinement. You say you were comfortable. I hope they gave you a clean towel and all that.'

'Yes, thanks,' answered Conyngham, suppressing a desire to laugh.

'That is well. Ronda is a pleasant place, as you will find. Most interesting—Moorish remains, you understand. I will send my servant for your baggage, and of course my poor house is at your disposal. You will stay with me until we can find some work for you to do. You wish to take service with us, of course?'

'Yes,' answered Conyngham. 'Rather thought of it—if you will have me.'

The General glanced up at his stalwart companion with a measuring eye.

'My house,' he said, in a conversational way, as if only desirous of making matters as pleasant as possible in a life which nature had intended to be peaceful and sunny, and perhaps trifling, but which the wickedness of men had rendered otherwise, 'my house is, as you would divine, only an official residence, but pleasant enough—pleasant enough. The garden is distinctly tolerable; there are orange trees now in bloom—so sweet of scent.'

The street into which they had now emerged was no less martial in appearance than the barrack yard, and while he spoke the General never ceased to dispense his kindly little nod on one side or the other in response to military salutations.

'We have quite a number of soldiers in Ronda at present,' he said, with an affectionate little pressure of Conyngham's arm, as if to indicate his appreciation of such protection amid these rough men. 'There is a great talk of some rising in the South—in Andalusia—to support Señor Cabrera, who continually threatens Madrid. A great soldier, they tell me, this Cabrera, but not—well, not perhaps quite, eh?—a caballero, a gentleman. A pity, is it not?'

'A great pity,' answered Conyngham, taking the opportunity at last afforded him of getting a word in.

'One must be prepared,' went on the General with a good-natured little sigh, 'for such measures. There are so many mistaken enthusiasts—is it not so? Such men as your countryman, Señor Flinter. There are so many who are stronger Carlists than Don Carlos himself, eh?'

The secret of conversational success is to defer to one's listener. A clever man imparts information by asking questions, and obtains it without doing so.

'This is my poor house,' continued the soldier, and as he spoke he beamed on the sentries at the door. 'I am a widower, but God has given me a daughter who is now of an age to rule my household. Estella will endeavour to make you comfortable, and an Englishman—a soldier—will surely overlook some small defects.'

He finished with a good-natured laugh. There was no resisting the sunny good-humour of this little officer, or the gladness of his face. His attitude towards the world was one of constant endeavour to make things pleasant, and acquit himself to his best in circumstances far beyond his merits or capabilities. He was one who had had good fortune all his days. Those who have greatness thrust upon them are never much impressed by their burden. And General Vincente had the air of constantly assuring his subordinates that they need not mind him.

The house to which he conducted Conyngham stood on the broad main street, immediately opposite a cluster of shops where leather bottles were manufactured and sold. It was a large gloomy house with a patio devoid of fountain and even of the usual orange trees in green boxes.

'Through there is the garden—most pleasant and shady,' said the General, indicating a doorway with the riding-whip he carried.

A troop of servants awaited them at the foot of the broad Moorish staircase open on one side to the patio and heavily carved in balustrade and cornice. These gentlemen bowed gravely—indeed, they were so numerous that the majority of them must have had nothing to do but cultivate this dignified salutation.

'The señorita?' inquired the General.

'The señorita is in the garden, Excellency,' answered one with the air of a courtier.

'Then let us go there at once,' said General Vincente, turning to Conyngham, and gripping his arm affectionately.

They passed through a doorway whither two men had hurried to open the heavy doors, and the scent of violets and mignonette, of orange in bloom, and of a hundred opening buds swept across their faces. The brilliant sunlight almost dazzled eyes that had grown accustomed to the cool shade of the patio, for Ronda is one of the sunniest spots on earth, and here the warmth is rarely oppressive. The garden was Moorish, and running water in aqueducts of marble, yellow with stupendous age, murmured in the shade of tropical plants. A fountain plashed and chattered softly, like the whispering of children. The pathways were paved with a fine white gravel of broken marble. There was no weed amid the flowers. It seemed a paradise to Conyngham, fresh from the grey and mournful northern winter, and no part of this weary, busy world. For here were rest and silence, and that sense of eternity which is only conveyed by the continuous voice of running or falling water. It was hard to believe that this was real and earthly. Conyngham rubbed his eyes and instinctively turned to look at his companion, who was as unreal as his surroundings—a round-faced, chubby little man, with a tender mouth and moist dark eyes looking kindly out upon the world, who called himself General Vincente; and the name was synonymous in all Spain with bloodthirstiness and cruelty, with daring and an unsparing generalship.

'Come,' said he, 'let us look for Estella.'

He led the way along a path winding among almond and peach trees in full bloom, in the shadow of the weird eucalyptus and the feathery pepper tree. Then with a little word of pleasure he hurried forward. Conyngham caught sight of a black dress and a black mantilla, of fair golden hair, and a fan upraised against the rays of the sun.

'Estella, here is a guest: Mr. Conyngham, one of the brave Englishmen who remember Spain in her time of trouble.'

Conyngham bowed with a greater ceremony than we observe to-day, and stood upright to look upon that which was for him from that moment the fairest face in the world. As, to some men, success or failure seems to come early and in one bound, so, for some, Love lies long in ambush, to shoot at length a single and certain shaft. Conyngham looked at Estella Vincente, his gay blue eyes meeting her dark glance with a frankness which was characteristic, and knew from that instant that his world held no other woman. It came to him as a flash of lightning that left his former life grey and neutral, and yet he was conscious of no surprise, but rather of a feeling of having found something which he had long sought.

The girl acknowledged his salutation with a little inclination of the head and a smile which was only of the lips, for her eyes remained grave and deep. She had all the dignity of carriage famous in Castilian women, though her figure was youthful still, and slight. Her face was a clean-cut oval, with lips that were still and proud, and a delicately aquiline nose.

'My daughter speaks English better than I do,' went on the General in the garrulous voice of an exceedingly domesticated man. 'She has been at school in England—at the suggestion of my dear friend Watterson—with his daughters, in fact.'

'And must have found it dull and grey enough compared with Spain,' said Conyngham.

'Ah! Then you like Spain?' said the General eagerly. 'It is so with all the English. We have something in common, despite the Armada, eh? Something in manner and in appearance, too; is it not so?'

He left Conyngham, and walked slowly on with one hand at his daughter's waist.

'I was very happy in England,' said Estella to Conyngham, who walked at her other side; 'but happier still to get home to Spain.'

Her voice was rather low, and Conyngham had an odd sensation of having heard it before.

'Why did you leave your home?' she continued in a leisurely conversational way which seemed natural to the environments.

The question rather startled the Englishman, for the only answer seemed to be that he had quitted England in order to come to Ronda and to her, following the path in life that fate had assigned to him.

'We have troubles in England also—political troubles,' he said, after a pause.

'The Chartists,' said the General cheerfully. 'We know all about them, for we have the English newspapers. I procure them in order to have reliable news of Spain.'

He broke off with a little laugh, and looked towards his daughter.

'In the evening Estella reads them to me. And it was on account of the Chartists that you left England?'

'Yes.'

'Ah, you are a Chartist, Mr. Conyngham.'

'Yes,' admitted the Englishman after a pause, and he glanced at Estella.

CHAPTER VII IN A MOORISH GARDEN

p. 70

'When love is not a blasphemy, it is a religion.'

THERE IS perhaps a subtle significance in the fact that the greatest, the cruellest, the most barbarous civil war of modern days, if not of all time, owed its outbreak and its long continuance to the influence of a woman. When Ferdinand VII. of Spain died, in 1833, after a reign broken and disturbed by the passage of that human cyclone, Napoleon the Great, he bequeathed his kingdom, in defiance of the Salic law, to his daughter Isabella. Ferdinand's brother Charles, however, claimed the throne under the very just contention that the Salic law, by which women were excluded from the heritage of the crown, had never been legally abrogated.

This was the spark that kindled in many minds ambition, cruelty, bloodthirstiness, self-seeking and jealousy—producing the *morale*, in a word, of the Spain of sixty years ago. Some sided with the Queen Regent Christina, and rallied round the child-queen because they saw that that way lay glory and promotion. Others flocked to the standard of Don Carlos because they were poor and of no influence at Court. The Church as a whole raised its whispering voice for the Pretender. For the rest, patriotism was nowhere, and ambition on every side. 'For five years we have fought the Carlists, hunger, privation, and the politicians at Madrid! And the holy saints only know which has been the worst enemy,' said General Vincente to Conyngham when explaining the above related details.

And indeed the story of this war reads like a romance, for there came from neutral countries foreign legions as in the olden days. From England an army of ten thousand mercenaries landed in Spain, prepared to fight for the cause of Queen Christina, and very modestly estimating the worth of their services at the sum of thirtepenne per diem. After all, the value of a man's life is but the price of his daily hire.

'We did not pay them much,' said General Vincente with a deprecating little smile, 'but they did not fight much. Their pay was generally in arrear, and they were usually in the rear as well. What will you, my dear Conyngham? You are a commercial people—you keep good soldiers in the shop window, and when a buyer comes you serve him with second-class goods from behind the counter.'

He beamed on Conyngham with a pleasant air of benign connivance in a very legitimate commercial transaction.

This is no time or place to go into the history of the English Legion in Spain, which, indeed, had quitted that country before Conyngham landed there, horrified by the barbarities of a cruel war where prisoners received no quarter and the soldiers on either side were left without pay or rations. In a half-hearted manner England went to the assistance of the Queen Regent of Spain, and one error in statesmanship led to many. It is always a mistake to strike gently.

'This country,' said General Vincente in his suavest manner, 'owes much to yours, my dear Conyngham; but it would have been better for us both had we owed you a little more.'

During the five years prior to Conyngham's arrival at Ronda the war had raged with unabated fury, swaying from the west to the east coast as fortune smiled or frowned on the Carlist cause. At one time it almost appeared certain that the Christino forces were unable to stem the rising tide which bade fair to spread over all Spain—so unfortunate were their generals, so futile the best endeavours of the bravest and most patient soldiers. General Vincente was not alone in his conviction that had the gallant Carlist leader Zumalacarreguy lived he might have carried all before him. But this great leader at the height of his fame—beloved of all his soldiers, worshipped by his subordinate officers—died suddenly, by poison, as it was whispered, the victim of jealousy and ambition. Almost at once there arose in the East of Spain one, obscure in birth and unknown to fame, who flashed suddenly to the zenith of military glory—the ruthless, the wonderful Cabrera. The name is to this day a household word in Catalonia, while the eyes of a few old men still living, who fought with or against him, flash in the light of other days at the mere mention of it.

Among the many leaders who had attempted in vain to overcome by skill and patriotism the thousand difficulties placed in their way by successive unstable, insincere Ministers of War, General Vincente occupied an honoured place. This mild-mannered tactician enjoyed the enviable reputation of being alike unconquerable and incorruptible. His smiling presence on the battlefield was in itself worth half a dozen battalions, while at Madrid the dishonest politicians, who through those years of Spain's great trial systematically bartered their honour for immediate gain, dreaded and respected him.

During the days that followed his arrival at Ronda and release from the prison there, Frederick Conyngham learnt much from his host and little of the man himself, for General Vincente had that in him with which no great leader in any walk of life can well dispense—an unsoundable depth.

Conyngham learnt also that the human heart is capable of rising at one bound above differences of race or custom, creed and spoken language. He walked with Estella in that quiet garden between high walls on the trim Moorish paths, and often the murmur of the running water which ever graced the Moslem palaces was the only sound that broke the silence. For this thing had come into the Englishman's life suddenly, leaving him dazed and uncertain. Estella, on the other hand, had a quiet *savoir-faire* that sat strangely on her young face. She was only nineteen, and yet had a certain air of authority, handed down to her from two great races of noble men and women.

'Do all your countrymen take life thus gaily?' she asked Conyngham one day; 'surely it is a more serious affair than you think it.'

'I have never found it very serious, señorita,' he answered. 'There is usually a smile in human affairs if one takes the trouble to look for it.'

'Have you always found it so?'

He did not answer at once, pausing to lift the branch of a mimosa tree that hung in yellow profusion across the pathway.

'Yes, señorita, I think so,' he answered at length, slowly. There was a sense of eternal restfulness in this old Moorish garden which acted as a brake on the thoughts, and made conversation halt and drag in an Oriental way that Europeans rarely understand.

'And yet you say you remember your father's death?'

'He made a joke to the doctor, señorita, and was not afraid.'

Estella smiled in a queer way, and then looked grave again.

'And you have always been poor, you say, sometimes almost starving?'

'Yes—always poor, deadly poor, señorita,' answered Conyngham with a gay laugh; 'and since I have been on my own resources frequently—well, very hungry. The appetite has been large and the resources have been small. But when I get into the Spanish army they will no doubt make me a general, and all will be well.'

He laughed again, and slipped his hand into his jacket pocket.

'See here,' he said, 'your father's recommendation to General Espartero in a confidential letter.'

But the envelope he produced was that pink one which the man called Larralde had given him at Algeciras.

'No—it is not that,' he said, searching in another pocket. 'Ah! here it is—addressed to General Espartero, Duke of Vittoria.'

He showed her the superscription, which she read with a little inclination of the head, as if in salutation of the great name written there. The greatest names are those that men have made for themselves. Conyngham replaced the two letters in his pocket and almost immediately asked:

'Do you know anyone called Barena in Ronda, señorita?' thereby proving that General Espartero would do ill to give him an appointment requiring even the earliest rudiments of diplomacy.

'Julia Barena is my cousin. Her mother was my mother's sister. Do you know them, Señor

Conyngham?’

‘Oh no,’ answered Conyngham, truthfully enough. ‘I met a man who knows them. Do they live in Ronda?’

‘No; their house is on the Cordova road, about half a league from the Customs station.’

Estella was not by nature curious, and asked no questions. Some who knew the Barennas would have been glad to claim acquaintance with General Vincente and his daughter, but could not do so. For the Captain-General moved in a circle not far removed from the Queen Regent herself, and mixed but little in the society of Ronda, where, for the time being, he held a command.

Conyngham required no further information, and in a few moments dismissed the letter from his mind. Events seemed for him to have moved rapidly within the last few days, and the world of roadside inns and casual acquaintance into which he had stepped on his arrival in Spain was quite another from that in which Estella moved at Ronda.

‘I must set out for Madrid in a few days at the latest,’ he said a few moments afterwards; ‘but I shall go against my will, because you tell me that you and your father will not be coming North until the spring.’

Estella shook her head with a little laugh. This man was different from the punctilious aides-de-camp and others who had hitherto begged most respectfully to notify their admiration.

‘And three days ago you did not know of our existence,’ she said.

‘In three days a man may be dead of an illness of which he ignored the existence, señorita. In three days a man’s life may be made miserable or happy—perhaps in three minutes.’

And she looked straight in front of her in order to avoid his eyes.

‘Yours will always be happy, I think,’ she said, ‘because you never seem to go below the surface, and on the surface life is happy enough.’

He made some light answer, and they walked on beneath the orange trees, talking of these and other matters—indulging in those dangerous generalities which sound so safe, and in reality narrow down to a little world of two.

They were thus engaged when the servant came to announce that the horse which the General had placed at Conyngham’s disposal was at the door in accordance with the Englishman’s own order. He went away sorrowfully enough, only half consoled by the information that Estella was about to attend a service at the Church of Santa Maria, and could not have stayed longer in the garden.

The hour of the siesta was scarce over, and as Conyngham rode through the cleanly streets of the ancient town more than one idler roused himself from the shadow of a doorway to see him pass. There are few older towns in Andalusia than Ronda, and scarce anywhere the habits of the Moors are so closely followed. The streets are clean, the houses whitewashed within and without. The trappings of the mules and much of the costume of the people are Oriental in texture and brilliancy.

Conyngham asked a passer-by to indicate the way to the Cordova road, and the polite Spaniard turned and walked by his stirrup until a mistake was no longer possible.

‘It is not the most beautiful approach to Ronda,’ said this garrulous person, ‘but well enough in the summer, when the flowers are in bloom and the vineyards green. The road is straight and dusty until one arrives at the possession of the Señora Barenna—a narrow road to the right leading up into the mountain. One can perceive the house—oh, yes—upon the hillside, once beautiful, but now old and decayed. Mistake is now impossible. It is a straight way. I wish you a good journey.’

Conyngham rode on, vaguely turning over in his mind a half-matured plan of effecting a seemingly accidental entry to the house of Señora Barenna, in the hope of meeting that lady’s daughter in the garden or grounds. Once outside the walls of the town he found the country open and bare, consisting of brown hills, of which the lower slopes were dotted with evergreen oaks. The road soon traversed a village which seemed to be half deserted, for men and women alike were working in the fields. On the balcony of the best house a branch of palm bound against the ironwork balustrade indicated the dwelling of the priest, and the form of that village despot was dimly discernible in the darkened room behind. Beyond the village Conyngham turned his horse’s head towards the mountain, his mind preoccupied with a Macchiavellian scheme of losing his way in this neighbourhood. Through the evergreen oak and olive groves he could perceive the roof of an old grey house which had once been a mere hacienda or semi-fortified farm.

Conyngham did not propose to go direct to Señora Barenna’s house, but described a semicircle, mounting from terrace to terrace on his sure-footed horse.

When at length he came in sight of the high gateway where the ten-foot oaken gates still swung, he perceived someone approaching the exit. On closer inspection he saw that this was a priest, and on nearing him recognised the Padre Concha, whose acquaintance he had made at the Hotel of the Marina at Algeciras.

The recognition was mutual, for the priest raised his shabby old hat with a tender care for the insecurity of its brim.

'A lucky meeting, Señor Englishman,' he said; 'who would have expected to see you here?'

'I have lost my way.'

'Ah!' And the grim face relaxed into a smile. 'Lost your way?'

'Yes.'

'Then it is lucky that I have met you. It is so easy to lose one's way—when one is young.'

He raised his hand to the horse's bridle.

'You are most certainly going in the wrong direction,' he said; 'I will lead you right.'

It was said and done so quietly that Conyngham had found no word to say before his horse was moving in the opposite direction.

'This is surely one of General Vincente's horses,' said the priest; 'we have few such barbs in Ronda. He always rides a good horse, that Miguel Vincente.'

'Yes, it is one of his horses. Then you know the General?'

'We were boys together,' answered the Padre; 'and there were some who said that he should have been the priest and I the soldier.'

The old man gave a little laugh.

'He has prospered, however, if I have not. A great man, my dear Miguel, and they say that his pay is duly handed to him. My own—my princely twenty pounds a year—is overdue. I am happy enough, however, and have a good house. You noticed it, perhaps, as you passed through the village, a branch of palm against the rail of the balcony—my sign, you understand. The innkeeper next door displays a branch of pine, which, I notice, is more attractive. Every man his day. One does not catch rabbits with a dead ferret. That is the church—will you see it? No? Well, some other day. I will guide you through the village. The walk will give me appetite, which I sometimes require, for my cook is one whose husband has left her.'

CHAPTER VIII

THE LOVE LETTER

p. 82

'I must mix myself with action lest I wither by despair.'

'No one,' Conyngham heard a voice exclaiming as he went into the garden on returning from his fruitless ride, 'no one knows what I have suffered.'

He paused in the dark doorway, not wishing to intrude upon Estella and her visitors; for he perceived the forms of three ladies seated within a miniature jungle of bamboo, which grew in feathery luxuriance around a fountain. It was not difficult to identify the voice as that of the eldest lady, who was stout, and spoke in deep, almost manly tones. So far as he was able to judge, the suffering mentioned had left but small record on its victim's outward appearance.

'Old lady seems to have stood it well,' commented the Englishman in his mind.

'Never again, my dear Estella, do I leave Ronda, except indeed for Toledo, where, of course, we shall go in the summer if this terrible Don Carlos is really driven from the country. Ah! but what suffering! My mind is never at ease. I expect to wake up at night and hear that Julia is being murdered in her bed. For me it does not matter; my life is not so gay that it will cost me much to part from it. No one would molest an old woman, you think? Well, that may be so; but I know all the anxiety, for I was once beautiful—ah! more beautiful than you or Julia; and my hands and feet—have you ever noticed my foot, Estella?—even now—'

And a sonorous sigh completed the sentence. Conyngham stepped out of the doorway, the clank of his spurred heel on the marble pavement causing the sigh to break off in a little scream. He had caught the name of Julia, and hastily concluded that these ladies must be no other than Madame Barenna and her daughter. In the little bamboo grove he found the elder lady lying back in her chair, which creaked ominously, and asking in a faint voice whether he were Don Carlos.

'No,' answered Estella, with a momentary twinkle in her grave, dark eyes; 'this is Mr. Conyngham—my aunt, Señora Barenna, and my cousin Julia.'

The ladies bowed.

'You must excuse me,' said Madame Barenna volubly, 'but your approach was so sudden. I am a great sufferer—my nerves, you know. But young people do not understand.'

And she sighed heavily, with a side glance at her daughter, who did not even appear to be trying to do so. Julia Barenna was darker than her cousin, quicker in manner, with an air of worldly capability which Estella lacked. Her eyes were quick and restless, her face less beautiful, but expressive of a great intelligence, which, if brought to bear upon men in the form of coquetry, was likely to be infinitely dangerous.

'It is always best to approach my mother with caution,' she said with a restless movement of her hands. This was not a woman at her ease in the world or at peace with it. She laughed as she spoke, but her eyes were grave, even while her lips smiled, and watched the Englishman's face with an air almost of anxiety. There are some faces that seem to be watching and waiting. Julia Barenna's had such a look.

'Conyngham,' said Madame Barenna reflectively. 'Surely I have heard that name before. You are not the Englishman with whom Father Concha is so angry—who sells forbidden books—the Bible, it is said?'

'No, señora,' answered Conyngham with perfect gravity; 'I have nothing to sell.'

He laughed suddenly, and looked at the elder lady with that air of good humour which won for him more friends than he ever wanted; for this Irishman had a ray of sunshine in his heart which shone upon his path through life, and made that uneven way easier for his feet. He glanced at Julia, and saw in her eyes the look of expectancy which was, in reality, always there. The thought flashed through his mind that by some means, or perhaps feminine intuition beyond his comprehension, she knew that he possessed the letter addressed to her, and was eagerly awaiting it. This letter seemed to have been gaining in importance the longer he carried it, and this opportunity of giving it to her came at the right moment. He remembered Larralde's words concerning the person to whom the missive was addressed, and the high-flown sentiments of that somewhat theatrical gentleman became in some degree justified. Julia Barenna was a woman who might well awaken a passionate love. Conyngham realised this, as from a distance, while Julia's mother spoke of some trivial matter of the moment to unheeding ears. That distance seemed now to exist between him and all women. It had come suddenly, and one glance of Estella's eyes had called it into existence.

'Yes,' Señora Barenna was saying, 'Father Concha is very angry with the English. What a terrible man! You do not know him, Señor Conyngham?'

'I think I have met him, señora.'

'Ah, but you have never seen him angry. You have never confessed to him! A little, little sin—no larger than the eye of a fly—a little bite of a calf's sweetbread on Friday in mere forgetfulness, and Sancta Maria! what a penance is required! What suffering! It is a purgatory to have such a confessor.'

'Surely madame can have no sins,' said Conyngham pleasantly.

'Not now,' said Señora Barenna with a deep sigh. 'When I was young it was different.'

And the memory of her sinful days almost moved her to tears. She glanced at Conyngham with a tragic air of mutual understanding, as if drawing a veil over that blissful past in the presence of Julia and Estella. 'Ask me another time,' that glance seemed to say.

'Yes,' the lady continued, 'Father Concha is very angry with the English. Firstly, because of these bibles. Blessed Heaven! what does it matter? No one can read them except the priests, and they do not want to do so. Secondly, because the English have helped to overthrow Don Carlos—'

'You will have a penance,' interrupted Miss Julia Barenna quietly, 'from Father Concha for talking politics.'

'But how will he know?' asked Señora Barenna sharply; and the two young ladies laughed.

Señora Barenna looked from one to the other, and shrugged her shoulders. Like many women she was a strange mixture of foolishness and worldly wisdom. She adjusted her mantilla and mutely appealed to Heaven with a glance of her upturned eyes. Conyngham, who was no diplomatist, nor possessed any skill in concealing his thoughts, looked with some interest at Julia Barenna, and Estella watched him. 'Julia is right,' Señora Barenna was saying, though nobody heeded her; 'one must not talk nor even think politics in this country. You are no politician, I trust, Señor Conyngham—Señor Conyngham, I ask you, you are no politician?'

'No, señora,' replied Conyngham hastily; 'no; and if I were, I should never understand Spanish politics.'

'Father Concha says that Spanish politics are the same as those of any other country—each man for himself,' said Julia with a bitter laugh.

'And he is, no doubt, right.'

'Do you really think so?' asked Julia Barenna, with more earnestness than the question would seem to require; 'are there not true patriots who sacrifice all—not only their friends, but themselves—to the cause of their country?'

'Without the hope of reward?'

'Yes.'

'There may be, señorita—a few,' answered Conyngham with a laugh, 'but not in my country. They must all be in Spain.'

She smiled and shook her head in doubt. But it was a worn smile.

The Englishman turned away and looked through the trees. He was wondering how he could get speech with Julia alone for a moment.

'You are admiring the garden,' said that young lady; and this time he knew that there had in reality been that meaning in her eyes which he had imagined to be there.

'Yes, señorita, I think it must be the most beautiful garden in the world.'

He turned as he spoke, and looked at Estella, who met his glance quietly. Her repose of manner struck him afresh. Here was a woman having that air of decision which exacts respect alike from men and women. Seen thus, with the more vivacious Julia at her side, Estella gained suddenly in moral strength and depth—suggesting a steady fire in contrast with a flickering will-o'-the-wisp blown hither and thither on every zephyr. Yet Julia Barenna would pass anywhere as a woman of will and purpose.

Julia had risen, and was moving towards the exit of the little grove in which they found themselves. Conyngham had never been seated.

'Are the violets in bloom, Estella? I must see them,' said the visitor. 'We have none at home, where all is dry and parched.'

'So bad for the nerves—what suffering!—such a dry soil that one cannot sleep at night,' murmured Madame Barenna, preparing to rise from her seat.

Julia and Conyngham naturally led the way. The paths winding in and out among the palms and pepper trees were of a width that allowed two to walk abreast.

'Señorita, I have a letter for you.'

'Not yet—wait!'

Señora Barenna was chattering in her deep husky tones immediately behind them. Julia turned and looked up at the windows of the house, which commanded a full view of the garden. The dwelling rooms were as usual upon the first floor, and the windows were lightly barred with curiously wrought iron. Each window was curtained within with lace and muslin.

The paths wound in and out among the trees, but none of these were large enough to afford a secure screen from the eye of any watcher within the house. There was neither olive nor ilex in the garden to afford shelter with their heavy leaves. Julia and Conyngham walked on, out-distancing the elder lady and Estella. From these many a turn in the path hid them from time to time, but Julia was distrustful of the windows and hesitated, in an agony of nervousness. Conyngham saw that her face was quite colourless, and her teeth closed convulsively over her lower lip. He continued to talk of indifferent topics, but the answers she made were incoherent and broken. The course of true love did not seem to run smooth here.

'Shall I give you the letter? No one can see us, señorita. Besides, I was informed that it was of no importance except to yourself. You have doubtless had many such before, unless the Spanish gentlemen are blind.'

He laughed and felt in his pocket.

'Yes!' she whispered. 'Quickly—now.'

He gave her the letter in its romantic pink, scented envelope with a half-suppressed smile at her eagerness. Would anybody—would Estella—ever be thus agitated at the receipt of a letter from himself? They were at the lower end of the inclosure, which was divided almost in two by a broader pathway leading from the house to the centre of the garden, where a fountain of Moorish marble formed a sort of carrefour, from which the narrower pathways diverged in all directions.

Descending the steps into the garden from the house were two men, one talking violently, the other seeking to calm him.

'My uncle and the Alcalde—they have seen us from the windows,' said Julia quickly. All her nervousness of manner seemed to have vanished, leaving her concentrated and alert. Some men are thus in warfare—nervous until the rifle opens fire, and then cool and ready.

'Quick!' whispered Julia. 'Let us turn back.'

She wheeled round, and Conyngham did the same.

'Julia!' they heard General Vincente call in his gentle voice.

Julia, who was tearing the pink envelope, took no heed. Within the first covering a second envelope appeared, bearing a longer address. 'Give that to the man whose address it bears, and save me from ruin,' said the girl, thrusting the letter into Conyngham's hand. She kept the pink envelope.

When, a minute later, they came face to face with General Vincente and his companion, a white-faced, fluttering man of sixty years, Julia Barenna received them with a smile. There are some men who, conscious of their own quickness of resource, are careless of danger, and run into it from mere heedlessness, trusting to good fortune to aid them should peril arise. Frederick Conyngham was one of these. He now suspected that this was no love letter which the man called Larralde had given him in Algeciras.

'Julia,' said the General, 'the Alcalde desires to speak with you.'

Julia bowed with that touch of hauteur which in Spain the nobles ever observe in their manner towards the municipal authorities.

'Mr. Conyngham,' continued the General, 'this is our brave Mayor, in whose hands rests the well-being of the people of Ronda.'

'Honoured to meet you,' said Conyngham, holding out his hand with that frankness of manner which he accorded to great and small alike. The Alcalde, a man of immense importance in his own estimation, hesitated before accepting it.

'General,' he said, turning and bowing very low to Señora Barenna and Estella, who now joined them, 'General, I leave you to explain to your niece the painful duties of my office.'

The General smiled and raised a deprecating shoulder.

'Well, my dear,' he said kindly to Julia, 'it appears that our good Alcalde has news of a letter which is at present passing from hand to hand in Andalusia. It is a letter of some importance. Our good Mayor, who was at the window a minute ago, saw Mr. Conyngham hand you a letter. Between persons who only met in this garden five minutes ago such a transaction had a strange air. Our good friend, who is all zeal for Spain and the people of Ronda, merely asks you if his eyes deceived him. It is a matter at which we shall all laugh presently over a lemonade—is it not so? A trifle, eh?' He passed his handkerchief across his moustache, and looked affectionately at his niece.

'A letter!' exclaimed Julia. 'Surely the Alcalde presumes. He takes too much upon himself.' The official stepped forward.

'Señorita,' he said, 'I must be allowed to take that risk. Did this gentleman give you a letter three minutes ago?'

Julia laughed and shrugged her shoulders.

'Yes.'

'May I ask the nature of the letter?'

'It was a love letter.'

Conyngham bit his lip and looked at Estella.

The Alcalde looked doubtful, with the cunning lips of a cheap country lawyer.

'A love letter from a gentleman you have never seen before?' he said with a forced laugh.

'Pardon me, Señor Alcalde, this gentleman travelled in the same ship with my mother and myself from Bordeaux to Algeciras, and he saved my life.'

She cast a momentary glance at Conyngham; which would have sealed his fate had the fiery Mr. Larralde been there to see it. The Prefect paused, somewhat taken aback. There was a momentary silence, and every moment gave Julia and Conyngham time to think. Then the Alcalde turned to Conyngham.

'It will give me the greatest pleasure,' he said, 'to learn that I have been mistaken. I have only to ask this gentleman's confirmation of what the señorita has said. It is true, señor, that you surreptitiously handed to the Señorita Barenna a letter expressing your love?'

'Since the señorita has done me the honour of confessing it, I must ask you to believe it,' answered Conyngham steadily and coldly.

CHAPTER IX

A WAR OF WIT

p. 94

'La discrétion est l'art du mensonge.'

THE Alcalde blew out his cheeks and looked at General Vincente. Señora Barenna would with small encouragement have thrown herself into Conyngham's arms; but she received none whatever, and instead frowned at Julia. Estella was looking haughtily at her father, and would not meet Conyngham's glance.

'I feel sure,' said General Vincente in his most conciliating manner, 'that my dear Julia will see the necessity of satisfying the good Alcalde by showing him the letter—with, of course, the consent of my friend Conyngham.'

He laughed, and slipped his hand within Conyngham's arm.

'You see, my dear friend,' he said in English, 'these local magnates are a trifle inflated; local magnitude is a little inclined to inflate, eh? Ha! ha! And it is so easy to conciliate them. I always try to do so myself. Peace at any price—that is my motto.'

And he turned aside to arrange his sword, which dragged on the ground.

'Tell her, my dear Conyngham, to let the old gentleman read the letter.'

'But it is nothing to do with me, General.'

'I know that, my friend, as well as you do,' said Vincente with a sudden change of manner, which gave the Englishman an uncomfortable desire to know what he meant. But General Vincente, in pursuit of that peace which had earned him such a terrible reputation in war, turned to Señora Barena with his most reassuring smile.

'It is nothing, my dear Iñez,' he said. 'In these times of trouble the officials are so suspicious, and our dear Alcalde knows too much. He remembers dear Julia's little affair with Esteban Larralde, now long since lived down and forgotten. Larralde is, it appears, a malcontent, and on the wrong side of the wall. You need have no uneasiness. Ah! your nerves—yes, I know! A great sufferer—yes, I remember. Patience, dear Iñez, patience!'

And he patted her stout white hand affectionately.

The Alcalde was taking snuff with a stubborn air of disbelief, glancing the while suspiciously at Conyngham, who had eyes for none but Estella.

'Alcalde,' said General Vincente, 'the incident is past, as we say in the diplomatic service; a lemonade now?'

'No, General, the incident is not past, and I will not have a lemonade.'

'Oh!' exclaimed General Vincente in gentle horror.

'Yes, this young lady must give me the letter, or I call in my men.'

'But your men could not touch a lady, my dear Alcalde.'

'You may be the Alcalde of Ronda,' said Conyngham cheerfully, in continuation of the General's argument; 'but if you offer such an insult to Señorita Barena, I throw you into the fountain, in the deepest part, where it is wettest, just there by the marble dolphin.'

And Conyngham indicated the exact spot with his riding-whip.

'Who is this gentleman?' asked the Alcalde. The question was in the first place addressed to space and the gods—after a moment the speaker turned to General Vincente.

'A prospective aide-de-camp of General Espartero.'

At the mention of the great name the Mayor of Ronda became beautifully less and half bowed to Conyngham.

'I must do my duty,' he said with the stubbornness of a small mind.

'And what do you conceive that to be, my dear Alcalde?' inquired the General.

'To place the Señorita Barena under arrest unless she will hand to me the letter she has in her possession.' Julia looked at him with a smile. She was a brave woman, playing a dangerous game with consummate courage, and never glanced at Conyngham, who with an effort kept his hand away from the pocket where the letter lay concealed. The manner in which she trusted him unreservedly and entirely was in itself cunning enough, for it appealed to that sense of chivalry which is not yet dead in men.

'Place me under arrest, Señor Alcalde,' she said indifferently, 'and when you have satisfied me that you have a right to inspect a lady's private correspondence I will submit to be searched—but not before.'

She made a little signal to Conyngham not to interfere.

Señora Barena took this opportunity of asserting herself and her nerves. She sat heavily down on a stone seat and wept. She could hardly have done better, for she was a countess in her own right, and the sight of high-born tears distinctly unnerved the Alcalde.

'Well,' he said, 'the señorita has made her own choice. In these times' (he glanced nervously at the weeping lady) 'one must do one's duty.'

'My dear Julia,' protested the General, 'you who are so sensible—'

Julia shrugged her shoulders and laughed. She not only trusted Conyngham but relied upon his intelligence. It is as a rule safer to confide in the honesty of one's neighbour than in his wit;

better still, trust in neither. Conyngham, who was quick enough when the moment required it, knew that she was fostering the belief that the letter at that moment in his pocket was in her possession. He suspected also that he and Julia Barenna were playing with life and death. Further, he recognised her and her voice. This was the woman who had showed discrimination and calmness in face of a great danger on the Garonne. Had this Englishman, owning as he did to a strain of Irish blood, turned his back on her and danger at such a moment he would assuredly have proved himself untrue to the annals of that race which has made a mark upon the world that will never be wiped out. He looked at the Alcalde and smiled, whereupon that official turned and made a signal with his hand to a man who, dressed in a quiet uniform, had appeared in the doorway of the house.

‘What the deuce we are all trying to do I don’t know,’ reflected Conyngham, who indeed was sufficiently at sea to awake the most dormant suspicions.

The Alcalde, now thoroughly aroused, protested his inability to neglect a particle of his duty at this troubled period of Spain’s history, and announced his intention of placing Julia Barenna under surveillance until she handed him the letter she had received from Conyngham.

‘I am quite prepared,’ he added, ‘to give this caballero the benefit of the doubt, and assume that he has been in this matter the tool of unscrupulous persons. Seeing that he is a friend of General Vincente’s, and has an introduction to his Excellency the Duke of Vittoria, he is without the pale of my jurisdiction.’

The Alcalde made Conyngham a profound bow and proceeded to conduct Julia and her indignant mother to their carriage.

‘There goes,’ said General Vincente with his most optimistic little chuckle, ‘a young woman whose head will always be endangered by her heart.’ And he nodded towards Julia’s retreating form.

Estella turned and walked away by herself.

‘Come,’ said the General to Conyngham, ‘let us sit down. I have news for you. But what a susceptible heart—my dear young friend—what a susceptible heart! Julia is, I admit, a very pretty girl—*la beauté du diable*, eh! But on so short an acquaintance—rather rapid, rather rapid!’

As he spoke he was searching among some letters which he had produced from his pocket, and at length found an official envelope that had already been opened.

‘I have here,’ he said, ‘a letter from Madrid. You have only to proceed to the capital, and there I hope a post awaits you. Your duties will at present be of a semi-military character, but later I hope we can show you some fighting. This pestilential Cabrera is not yet quelled, and Morella still holds out. Yes, there will be fighting.’

He closed the letter and looked at Conyngham. ‘If that is what you want,’ he added.

‘Yes, that is what I want.’

The General nodded and rose, pausing to brush a few grains of dust from his dapper riding-breeches.

‘Come,’ he said, ‘I have seen a horse which will suit you at the cavalry quarters in the Calle de Bobadilla. Shall we go and look at him?’

Conyngham expressed his readiness to do as the General proposed.

‘When shall I start for Madrid?’ he asked.

‘Oh, to-morrow morning will be time enough,’ was the reply, uttered in an easy-going, indolent tone, ‘if you are early astir. You see, it is now nearly five o’clock, and you could scarcely be in saddle before sunset.’

‘No,’ laughed Conyngham, ‘scarcely, considering that I have not yet bought the saddle or the horse.’

The General led the way into the house, and Conyngham thought of the letter in his pocket. He had not yet read the address. Julia relied upon him to deliver it, and her conduct towards the Alcalde had the evident object of gaining time for him to do so. She had unhesitatingly thrust herself into a position of danger to screen him and further her own indomitable purpose. He thought of her—still as from a distance at which Estella had placed him—and knew that she not only had a disquieting beauty, but cleverness and courage, which are qualities that outlast beauty and make a woman powerful for ever.

When he and his companion emerged from the great doorway of the house into the sunlight of the Calle Mayor, a man came forward from the shade of a neighbouring porch. It was Concepción Vara, leisurely and dignified, twirling a cigarette between his brown fingers. He saluted the General with one finger to the brim of his shabby felt hat as one great man might salute another. He nodded to Conyngham.

‘When does his Excellency take the road again?’ he said. ‘I am ready. The Guardia Civil was mistaken this time—the judge said there was no stain on my name.’

He shrugged his shoulders and waved away the slight with the magnanimity of one who can forgive and forget.

'I take the road to-morrow; but our contract ceased at Ronda. I had no intention of taking you on.'

'You are not satisfied with me?' inquired Concepción, offering his interlocutor the cigarette he had just made.

'Oh, yes.'

'Buen! We take the road together.'

'Then there is nothing more to be said?' inquired Conyngham with a good-natured laugh.

'Nothing, except the hour at which your Excellency starts.'

'Six o'clock,' put in General Vincente quietly. 'Let me see, your name is Concepción Vara.'

'Yes, Excellency—of Algeciras.'

'It is well. Then serve this gentleman well, or else—' The General paused, and laughed in his most deprecating manner.

Concepción seemed to understand, for he took off his hat and turned gravely away. The General and Conyngham walked rapidly through the streets of Ronda, than which there are none cleaner in the whole world, and duly bought a great black horse at a price which seemed moderate enough to the Englishman, though the vendor explained that the long war had made horseflesh rise in value. Conyngham, at no time a keen bargainer, hurried the matter to an end, and scarce examined the saddle. He was anxious to get back to the garden of the great house in the Calle Mayor before the cool of evening came to drive Estella indoors.

'You will doubtless wish to pack your portmanteau,' said the General rather breathlessly, as he hurried along with small steps beside Conyngham.

'Yes,' answered the Englishman ingenuously, 'yes, of course.'

'Then I will not detain you,' said General Vincente. 'I have affairs at headquarters. We meet at dinner, of course.'

He waved a little salutation with his whip and took a side turning.

The sun had not set when Conyngham with a beating heart made his way through the house into the garden. He had never been so serious about anything in his life. Indeed, his life seemed only to have begun in that garden. Estella was there. He saw her black dress and mantilla through the trees, and the gleam of her golden hair made his eyes almost fierce for the moment.

'I am going to-morrow morning,' he said bluntly when he reached her where she sat in the shade of a mimosa.

She raised her eyes for a moment—deep velvet eyes with something in them that made his heart leap within his breast.

'And I love you, Estella,' he added. 'You may be offended—you may despise me—you may distrust me. But nothing can alter me. I love you—now and ever.'

She drew a deep breath and sat motionless.

'How many women does an Englishman love at once?' she asked coldly at length.

'Only one, señorita.'

He stood looking at her for a moment. Then she rose and walked past him into the house.

CHAPTER X

THE CITY OF DISCONTENT

p. 105

'En paroles ou en actions, être discret, c'est s'abstenir.'

'THERE IS,' observed Frederick Conyngham to himself as he climbed into the saddle in the grey dawn of the following morning, 'there is a certain picturesqueness about these proceedings which pleases me.'

Concepción Vara indeed supplied a portion of this romantic atmosphere, for he was dressed in the height of contrabandista fashion, with a bright-coloured handkerchief folded round his head underneath his black hat, a scarlet waistcloth, a spotless shirt, and a flower in the ribbon of his hat.

He was dignified and leisurely, but so far forgot himself as to sing as he threw his leg across his

horse. A dark-eyed maiden had come to the corner of the Calle Vieja, and stood there watching him with mournful eyes. He waved her a salutation as he passed.

'It is the waiting-maid at the venta where I stay in Ronda—what will you?' he explained to Conyngham with a modest air as he cocked his hat farther on one side.

The sun rose as they emerged from the narrow streets into the open country that borders the road to Bobadilla. A pastoral country this, where the land needs little care to make it give more than man requires for his daily food. The evergreen oak studded over the whole plain supplies food for countless pigs and shade where the herdsmen may dream away the sunny days. The rich soil would yield two or even three crops in the year, were the necessary seed and labour forthcoming. Underground, the mineral wealth outvies the richness of the surface, but national indolence leaves it unexplored.

'Before General Vincente one could not explain oneself,' said Concepción, urging his horse to keep pace with the trot of Conyngham's huge mount.

'Ah!'

'No,' pursued Concepción. 'And yet it is simple. In Algeciras I have a wife. It is well that a man should travel at times. So,' he paused and bowed towards his companion with a gesture of infinite condescension, 'so—we take the road together.'

'As long as you are pleased, Señor Vara,' said Conyngham, 'I am sure I can but feel honoured. You know I have no money.'

The Spaniard shrugged his shoulders.

'What matter?' he said. 'What matter? We can keep an account—a mere piece of paper—so: "Concepción Vara, of Algeciras, in account current with F. Conyngham; Englishman. One month's wages at one hundred pesetas." It is simple.'

'Very,' acquiesced Conyngham. 'It is only when pay-day comes that things will get complicated.'

Concepción laughed.

'You are a caballero after my own heart,' he said. 'We shall enjoy ourselves in Madrid. I see that.'

Conyngham did not answer. He had remembered the letter and Julia Barenna's danger. He rose in his stirrups and looked behind him. Ronda was already hidden by intervening hills, and the bare line of the roadway was unbroken by the form of any other traveller.

'We are not going to Madrid yet,' said Conyngham. 'We are going to Xeres, where I have business. Do you know the road to Xeres?'

'As well that as any other, Excellency.'

'What do you mean?'

'I know no roads north of Ronda. I am of Andalusia, I,' replied Concepción easily, and he looked round about him with an air of interest which was more to the credit of his intelligence as a traveller than his reliability as a guide.

'But you engaged to guide me to Madrid.'

'Yes, Excellency—by asking the way,' replied Concepción with a light laugh, and he struck a sulphur match on the neck of his horse to light a fresh cigarette.

Thus with an easy heart Frederick Conyngham set out on his journey, having for companion one as irresponsible as himself. He had determined to go to Xeres, though that town of ill repute lay far to the westward of his road towards the capital. It would have been simple enough to destroy the letter entrusted to him by Julia Barenna, a stranger whom he was likely never to see again—simple enough and infinitely safer as he suspected, for the billet-doux of Mr. Larralde smelt of grimmer things than love. But Julia Barenna wittingly, or in all innocence, appealed to that sense of chivalry which is essentially the quality of lonely men who have never had sisters, and Conyngham was ready to help Julia where he would have refused his assistance to a man, however hard pressed.

'Cannot leave the girl in a hole,' he said to himself, and proceeded to act upon this resolution with a steadiness of purpose for which some may blame him.

It was evening when the two travellers reached Xeres after some weary hours of monotonous progress through the vine-clad plains of this country.

'It is no wonder,' said Concepción, 'that the men of Xeres are malcontents, when they live in a country as flat as the palm of my hand.'

It happened to be a fête day, which in Spain, as in other countries farther North, is synonymous with mischief. The men of Xeres had taken advantage of this holiday to demonstrate their desire for more. They had marched through the streets with banner and song, arrayed in their best clothes, fostering their worst thoughts. They had consumed marvellous quantities of that small Amontillado which is as it were a thin fire to the blood, heating and degenerating at once. They

had talked much nonsense and listened to more. Carlist or Christino—it was all the same to them, so long as they had a change of some sort. In the meantime they had a desire to break something, if only to assert their liberty.

A few minutes before Conyngham and his guide rode into the market-place, which in Xeres is as long as a street, some of the free sons of Spain had thought fit to shout insulting remarks to a passer-by. With a fire too bright for his years this old gentleman, with fierce white moustache and imperial, had turned on them, calling them good-for-nothings and sons of pigs.

Conyngham rode up just in time to see the ruffians rise as one man and rush at the victim of their humour. The old man with his back to the wall repelled his assailants with a sort of fierce joy in his attitude which betokened the soldier.

‘Come on, Concepción!’ cried Conyngham, with a dig of the spurs that made his tired horse leap into the air. He charged down upon the gathering crowd, which scattered right and left before the wild onslaught. But he saw the flash of steel, and knew that it was too late. The old man, with an oath and a gasp of pain, sank against the wall with the blood trickling through the fingers clasped against his breast. Conyngham would have reined in, but Concepción on his heels gave the charger a cut with his heavy whip that made him bound forward and would have unseated a short-stirruped rider.

‘Go on,’ cried the Spaniard; ‘it is no business of ours. The police are behind.’

And Conyngham, remembering the letter in his pocket, rode on without looking back. In the day of which the present narrative treats, the streets of Xeres were but ill paved, and the dust lay on them to the depth of many inches, serving to deaden the sound of footsteps and facilitate the commission of such deeds of violence as were at this time of daily occurrence in Spain. Riding on at random, Conyngham and his companion soon lost their way in the narrow streets, and were able to satisfy themselves that none had followed them. Here in a quiet alley Conyngham read again the address of the letter of which he earnestly desired to rid himself without more ado.

It was addressed to Colonel Monreal at No. 84 Plaza de Cadiz.

‘Let his Excellency stay here and drink a glass of wine at this venta,’ said Concepción. ‘Alone, I shall be able to get information without attracting attention. And then, in the name of the saints, let us shake the dust of Xeres off our feet. The first thing we see is steel, and I do not like it. I have a wife in Algeciras to whom I am much attached, and I am afraid—yes, afraid. A gentleman need never hesitate to say so.’

He shook his head forebodingly as he loosened his girths and called for water for the horses.

‘I could eat a cocida,’ he went on, sniffing the odours of a neighbouring kitchen, ‘with plenty of onions and the mutton as becomes the springtime—young and tender. Dios! this quick travelling and an empty stomach, it kills one.’

‘When I have delivered my letter,’ replied Conyngham, ‘we shall eat with a lighter heart.’

Concepción went away in a pessimistic humour. He was one of those men who are brave enough on good wine and victuals, but lack the stamina to fight when hungry. He returned presently with the required information. The Plaza de Cadiz was, it appeared, quite close. Indeed, the town of Xeres is not large, though the intricacies of its narrow streets may well puzzle a newcomer. No. 84 was the house of the barber, and on his first floor lived Colonel Monreal, a retired veteran who had fought with the English against Napoleon’s armies.

During his servant’s absence, Conyngham had written a short note in French, conveying, in terms which she would understand, the news that Julia Barena doubtless awaited with impatience; namely, that her letter had been delivered to him whose address it bore.

‘I have ordered your cocida and some good wine,’ he said to Concepción. ‘Your horse is feeding. Make good use of your time, for when I return I shall want you to take the road again at once. You must make ten miles before you sleep to-night, and then an early start in the morning.’

‘For where, señor?’

‘For Ronda.’

Concepción shrugged his shoulders. His life had been spent upon the road, his wardrobe since childhood had been contained in a saddle-bag, and Spaniards, above all people, have the curse of Ishmael. They are a homeless race, and lay them down to sleep, when fatigue overtakes them, under a tree or in the shade of a stone wall. It often happens that a worker in the fields will content himself with the lee side of a haystack for his resting-place when his home is only a few hundred yards up the mountain side.

‘And his Excellency?’ inquired Concepción.

‘I shall sleep here to-night and proceed to Madrid to-morrow, by way of Cordova, where I will wait for you. I have a letter here which you must deliver to the Señorita Barena at Ronda without the knowledge of anyone. It will be well that neither General Vincente nor any other who knows you should catch sight of you in the streets of Ronda.’

Concepción nodded his head with much philosophy.

'Ah! these women,' he said, turning to the steaming dish of mutton and vegetables which is almost universal in the South, 'these women, what shoe leather they cost us!'

Leaving his servant thus profitably employed, Conyngham set out to find the barber's shop in the Plaza de Cadiz. This he did without difficulty, but on presenting himself at the door of Colonel Monreal's apartment learnt that that gentleman was out.

'But,' added the servant, 'the Colonel is a man of regular habits. He will return within the next fifteen minutes, for he dines at five.'

Conyngham paused. He had no desire to make Colonel Monreal's acquaintance, indeed preferred to remain without it, for he rightly judged that Señor Larralde was engaged in affairs best left alone.

'I have a letter for the Colonel,' he said to the servant, a man of stupid countenance. 'I will place it here upon his table, and can no doubt trust you to see that he gets it.'

'That you can, Excellency,' replied the man, with a palm already half extended to receive a gratuity.

'If the Colonel fails to receive the letter I shall certainly know of it,' said Conyngham, stumbling down the dark staircase, and well pleased to have accomplished his mission.

He returned with all speed to the inn in the quiet alley where he had elected to pass the night, and found Concepción still at table.

'In half an hour I take the road,' said the Spaniard. 'The time for a cup of coffee, and I am ready to ride all night.'

Having eaten, Concepción was in a better frame of mind, and now cheerfully undertook to carry out his master's instructions. In little more than half an hour he was in the saddle again, and waved an airy adieu to Conyngham as he passed under the swinging oil lamp that hung at the corner of the street.

It was yet early in the evening, and Conyngham, having dined, set out to explore the streets of Xeres, which were quiet enough now, as the cafes were gayer and safer than the gloomy thoroughfares where a foe might lurk in every doorway. In the market-place, between rows of booths and tents, a dense crowd walked backwards and forwards with that steady sense of promenading which the Spaniard understands above all other men. The dealers in coloured handkerchiefs from Barcelona or mantillas from Seville were driving a great trade, and the majority of them had long since shouted themselves hoarse. A few quack dentists were operating upon their victims under the friendly covert of a big drum and a bassoon. Dealers in wonderful drugs and herbs were haranguing the crowd, easily gaining the attention of the simple peasants by handling a live snake or a crocodile which they allowed to crawl upon their shoulders.

Conyngham lingered in the crowd, which was orderly enough, and amused himself by noting the credulity of the country folk, until his attention was attracted by a solemn procession passing up the market-place behind the tents. He inquired of a bystander what this might be.

'It is the police carrying to his apartment the body of Colonel Monreal, who was murdered this afternoon in the Plaza Mayor,' was the answer.

Conyngham made his way between two tents to the deserted side of the market-place, and, running past the procession, reached the barber's shop before it. In answer to his summons a girl came to the door of the Colonel's apartment. She was weeping and moaning in great mental distress.

Without explanation Conyngham pushed past her into the room where he had deposited the letter. The room was in disorder, and no letter lay upon the table.

'It is,' sobbed the girl, 'my husband, who, having heard that the good Colonel had been murdered, stole all his valuables and papers and has run away from me.'

CHAPTER XI

A TANGLED WEB

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'Wherein I am false, I am honest—not true to be true.'

'AND—would you believe it?—there are soldiers in the house, at the very door of Julia's apartments.' Señora Barenna, who made this remark, heaved a sigh and sat back in her canework chair with that jerkiness of action which in elderly ladies usually betokens impatience with the ways of young people.

'Policemen—policemen, not soldiers,' corrected Father Concha patiently, as if it did not matter much. They were sitting in the broad vine-clad verandah of the Casa Barenna, that grim old house on the Bobadilla road, two miles from Ronda. The priest had walked thither, as the dust on his square-toed shoes and black stockings would testify. He had laid aside his mournful old hat,

long since brown and discoloured, and was wiping his forehead with a cheap pocket-handkerchief of colour and pattern rather loud for his station in life.

'Well, they have swords,' persisted the lady.

'Policemen,' said Father Concha, in a stern and final voice, which caused Señora Barenna to cast her eyes upwards with an air of resigned martyrdom.

'Ah, that Alcalde!' she whispered between her teeth.

'A little dog, when it is afraid, growls,' said Concha philosophically. 'The Alcalde is a very small dog, and he is at his wit's end. Such a thing has not occurred in Ronda before, and the Alcalde's world is Ronda. He does not know whether his office permits him to inspect young ladies' love letters or not.'

'Love letters!' ejaculated Señora Barenna. She evidently had a keen sense of the romantic, and hoped for something more tragic than a mere flirtation begotten of idleness at sea.

'Yes,' said Concha, crossing his legs and looking at his companion with a queer cynicism. 'Young people mostly pass that way.'

He had had a tragedy, this old man. One of those grim tragedies of the cassock which English people rarely understand. And his tragedy sat beside him on the cane chair, stout and eminently worldly, while he had journeyed on the road of life with all his illusions, all his half-fledged aspirations, untouched by the cold finger of reality. He despised the woman now, the contempt lurked in his cynical smile, but he clung with a half-mocking, open-eyed sarcasm to his memories.

'But,' he said reassuringly, 'Julia is a match for the Alcalde, you may rest assured of that.'

Señora Barenna turned with a gesture of her plump hand indicative of bewilderment.

'I do not understand her. She laughs at the soldiers—the policemen, I mean. She laughs at me. She laughs at everything.'

'Yes, it is the hollow hearts that make most noise in the world,' said Concha, folding his handkerchief upon his knee. He was deadly poor, and had a theory that a folded handkerchief remains longer clean. His whole existence was an effort to do without those things that make life worth living.

'Why did you send for me?' he asked.

'But to advise me—to help me. I have been, all my life, cast upon the world alone. No one to help me—no one to understand. No one knows what I have suffered—my husband—'

'Was one of the best and most patient of mortals, and is assuredly in heaven, where I hope there are a few mansions reserved for men only.'

Señora Barenna fetched one of her deepest sighs. She had a few lurking in the depth of her capacious being, reserved for such occasions as this. It was, it seemed, no more than her life had led her to expect.

'You have had,' went on her spiritual adviser, 'a life of ease and luxury, a husband who denied you nothing. You have never lost a child by death, which I understand is—one of the greatest sorrows that God sends to women. You are an ungrateful female.'

Señora Barenna, whose face would have graced one of the very earliest of the martyrs, sat with folded hands waiting until the storm should pass.

'Do you wish me to see Julia?' asked Concha abruptly.

'Yes—yes! And persuade her to conciliate the Alcalde—to tell him some story or another. It does not surely matter if it be not the strict truth. Anything to get these men out of the house. My maid Maria is so flighty. Ah—these young people! What a trial—my dear Padre, what a trial!'

'Of course,' said Father Concha. 'But what a dull world it would be if our neighbour knew how to manage his own affairs! Shall we go to Julia?'

The perturbed lady preferred that the priest should see her daughter alone. A military-looking individual in white trousers and a dark green tunic stood guard over the door of Julia's apartment, seeking by his attitude and the curl of his moustache to magnify his office in the eyes of a maid who happened to have an unusual amount of cleaning to do in that particular corridor.

'Ah!' said Father Concha, by no means abashed by the sentinel's sword. 'Ah, it is you, Manuel. Your wife tells me you have objections to the christening of that last boy of yours, number five, I think. Bring number five on Sunday, after vespers—eh? You understand—and a little something for the poor. It is pay day on Saturday. And no more nonsense about religion, Manuel, eh?'

He shook his lean finger in the official's face and walked on unchallenged.

'May I come in?' he said, tapping at the door; and Julia's voice bade him enter.

He closed the door behind him and laid aside his hat. Then he stood upright, and slowly rubbing his hands together looked at Julia with the humorous twinkle lurking in his eye and its companion dimple twitching in his lean cheek. Then he began to feel his pockets, passing his hands down

his worn cassock.

'Let me see, I had a love letter—was it from Don Carlos? At all events, I have lost it!'

He laughed, made a perfunctory sign of the cross and gave her his blessing. Then, his face having become suddenly grave as if by machinery at the sound of the solemn Latin benediction, he sat down.

Julia looked worn and eager. Her eyes seemed to search his face for news.

'Yes, my dear child,' he said. 'Politics are all very well as a career. But without a distinct profit they are worth the attention of few men, and never worth the thought of a woman.'

He looked at her keenly, and she turned to the window, which was open to admit the breath of violets and other flowers of the spring. She shrugged her shoulders and gave a sharp sigh.

'See here, my child,' said Padre Concha abruptly. 'For reasons which concern no one, I take a great interest in your happiness. You resemble some one whose welfare was once more important to me than my own. That was long ago, and I now consider myself first, as all wise men should. I am your friend, Julia, and much too old to be over-scrupulous. I peep and pry into my neighbours' affairs, and I am uneasy about you, my child.'

He shook his head and drummed upon the table with his dirty fingers.

'Thank you,' answered the girl with her defiant little laugh, 'but I can manage my own affairs.'

The priest nodded reflectively.

'Yes,' he said. 'It is natural that you should say that. One of the chief blessings of youth is self confidence. Heaven forbid that I should shake yours. But, you see, there are several people who happen to be anxious that this little affair should blow over and be forgotten. The Alcalde is a mule, we know that, and anything that serves to magnify himself and his office is likely to be prolonged. Do not play into his hand. As I tell you, there are some who wish to forget this incident, and one of them is coming to see you this afternoon.'

'Ah!' said the girl indifferently.

'General Vincente.'

Julia changed colour and her eyelids flickered for a moment as she looked out of the open window.

'A good friend,' continued Concha, 'but—'

He finished the phrase with an eloquent little gesture of the hand. At this moment they both heard the sound of an approaching carriage.

'He is coming now,' said Concha. 'He is driving, so Estella is with him.'

'Estella is of course jealous.'

The priest looked at her with a slow wise smile and said nothing.

'She—' began Julia, and then closed her lips—true to that *esprit de sexe* which has ruled through all the ages. Then Julia Barenna gave a sharp sigh as her mind reverted from Estella's affairs to her own.

Sitting thus in silence, the two occupants of the quiet room heard the approach of steps and the clink of spurs in the corridor.

'It is the reverendo who visits the señorita,' they heard the voice of the sentinel explain deprecatingly.

The priest rose and went to the door, which he opened.

'Only as a friend,' he said. 'Come in, General.'

General Vincente entered the room followed by Estella. He nodded to Concha and kissed his niece affectionately.

'Still obdurate?' he said, with a semi-playful tap on her shoulder. 'Still obdurate? My dear Julia, in peace and war the greatest quality in the strong is mercy. You have proved yourself strong—you have worsted that unfortunate Alcalde—be merciful to him now, and let this incident finish.'

He drew forward a chair, the others being seated, and laid aside his gloves. The sword which he held upright between his knees, with his two hands resting on the hilt, looked incongruously large and reached the level of his eyes. He gave a little chuckling laugh.

'I saw him last night at the Café Real—the poor man had the air of a funeral, and took his wine as if it were sour. Ah! these civilians, they amuse one—they take life so seriously.'

He laughed and looked round at those assembled as if inviting them to join him in a gayer and easier view of existence. The Padre's furrowed face answered the summons in a sudden smile, but it was with grave eyes that he looked searchingly at the most powerful man in Andalusia; for General Vincente's word was law south of the Tagus.

The two men sat side by side in strong contrast. Fate indeed seems to shake men together in a bag, and cast them out upon the world heedless where they may fall; for here was a soldier in the priest's habit, and one carrying a sword who had the keen heart and sure sympathy for joy or sorrow that should ever be found within a black coat if the Master's work is to be well done.

General Vincente smiled at Estella with *sang-froid* and an unruffled good nature, while the Padre Concha, whose place it surely was to take the lead in such woman's work as this, slowly rubbed his bony hands together, at a loss and incompetent to meet the urgency of the moment.

'Our guest left us yesterday morning,' said the General, 'and of course the Alcalde placed no hindrance on his departure.'

He did not look at Julia, who drew a deep breath and glanced at Estella.

'I do not know if Señor Conyngham left any message for you with Estella—to me he said nothing,' continued Estella's father; and that young lady shook her head.

'No,' she put in composedly.

'Then it remains for us to close this foolish incident, my dear Julia; and for me to remind you, seeing that you are fatherless, that there are in Spain many adventurers who come here seeking the sport of love or war, who will ride away when they have had their fill of either.'

He ceased speaking with a tolerant laugh, as one who, being a soldier himself, would beg indulgence for the failings of his comrades, examined the hilt of his sword, and then looked blandly round on three faces which resolutely refused to class the absent Englishman in this category.

'It remains, my dear niece, to satisfy the Alcalde—a mere glance at the letter—sufficient to satisfy him as to the nature of its contents.'

'I have no letter,' said Julia quietly, with her level red lips set hard.

'Not in your possession, but perhaps concealed in some place near at hand—unless it is destroyed.'

'I have destroyed no letter, I have concealed no letter, and I have no letter,' said the girl quietly. Estella moved uneasily in the chair. Her face was colourless and her eyes shone. She watched her cousin's face intently, and beneath his shaggy brows the old priest's eyes went from one fair countenance to the other.

'Then,' cried the General, rising to his feet with an air of relief, 'you have but to assure the Alcalde of this, and the whole incident is terminated. Blown over, my dear Concha—blown over!'

He tapped the priest on the shoulder with great good nature. Indeed, the world seemed sunny enough and free from cares when General Vincente had to deal with it.

'Yes—yes,' said the Padre, snuff-box in hand. 'Blown over—of course.'

'Then I may send the Alcalde to you, Julia—and you will tell him what you have told us? He cannot but take the word of a lady.'

'Yes—if you like,' answered Julia.

The General's joy knew no bounds.

'That is well,' he cried, 'I knew we could safely rely upon your good sense. Kiss me, Julia—that is well! Come, Estella—we must not keep the horses waiting.'

With a laugh and a nod he went towards the door. 'Blown over, my dear Concha,' he said over his shoulder.

A few minutes later the priest walked down the avenue of walnut trees alone. The bell was ringing for vespers, but the Padre was an autocratic shepherd and did not hurry towards his flock. The sun had set, and in the hollows of the distant mountains the shades of night already lay like a blue veil.

The priest walked on and presently reached the high road. A single figure was upon it—the figure of a man sitting in the shadow of an ilex tree half a mile up the road towards Bobadilla. The man crouched low against a heap of stones and had the air of a wanderer. His face was concealed in the folds of his cloak.

'Blown over,' muttered the Padre as he turned his back upon Bobadilla and went on towards his church. 'Blown over, of course; but what is Concepción Vara doing in the neighbourhood of Ronda to-night?'

CHAPTER XII

ON THE TOLEDO ROAD

'Une bonne intention est une échelle trop courte.'

CONYNGHAM made his way without difficulty or incident from Xeres to Cordova, riding for the most part in front of the clumsy diligencia wherein he had bestowed his luggage. The road was wearisome enough, and the last stages, through the fertile plains bordering the Guadalquivir, dusty and monotonous.

At Cordova the traveller found comfortable quarters in an old inn overlooking the river. The ancient city was then, as it is now, a great military centre, and the headquarters of the picturesque corps of horse-tamers, the 'Remonta,' who are responsible for the mounting of the cavalry and the artillery of Spain. Conyngham had, at the suggestion of General Vincente, made such small changes in his costume as would serve to allay curiosity and prevent that gossip of the stable and kitchen which may follow a traveller to his hurt from one side of a continent to the other.

'Wherever you may go learn your way in and out of every town, and you will thus store up knowledge most useful to a soldier,' the General had said in his easy way.

'See you,' Concepción had observed, wagging his head over a cigarette; 'to go about the world with the eyes open is to conquer the world.'

From his guide, moreover, whose methods were those that Nature teaches to men who live their daily lives in her company, Conyngham learnt much of that road craft which had raised Concepción Vara to such a proud eminence among the rascals of Andalusia. Cordova was a good object upon which to practise, for Roman and Goth, Moor and Christian, have combined to make its tortuous streets well-nigh incomprehensible to the traveller's mind.

Here Conyngham wandered, or else he sat somnolently on a seat in the Paseo del Gran Capitan in the shade of the orange trees, awaiting the arrival of Concepción Vara. He made a few acquaintances, as every traveller who is not a bear must needs do in a country where politeness and hospitality and a grave good fellowship are the natural habit of high and low alike. A bullfighter or two, who beguiled the long winter months, when the rings are closed, by a little innocent horse dealing, joined him quietly in the streets and offered him a horse—as between gentlemen of undoubted honour—at a price much below the current value. Or it was perhaps a beggar who came to him on the old yellow marble seat under the orange trees, and chatted affably about his business as being bad in these times of war. Once, indeed, it was a white-haired gentleman, who spoke in English, and asked some very natural questions as to the affairs that brought an Englishman to the town of Cordova. This sweet-spoken old man explained that strangers would do well to avoid all questions of politics and religion, which he classed together in one dangerous whole. Nevertheless, Conyngham thought that he perceived his ancient friend the same evening hurrying up the steps of the Jesuit College of La Campania.

Two days elapsed and Concepción Vara made neither appearance nor sign. On the second evening Conyngham decided to go on alone, prosecuting his journey through the sparsely populated valley of the Alcadia to Ciudad Real, Toledo, and Madrid.

'You will ride,' the innkeeper told him, 'from the Guadalquivir to the Guadiana, and if there is rain you may be a month upon the road.'

Conyngham set out in the early morning, and as he threw his leg across the saddle the sun rose over the far misty hills of Ronda, and Concepción Vara awoke from his night's rest under the wall of an olive terrace above the Bobadilla road, to begin another day of patient waiting and watching to get speech with the maid or the mistress; for he had already inaugurated what he lightly called 'an affair' with Julia's flighty attendant. The sun rose also over the plains of Xeres, and lighted up the picturesque form of Esteban Larralde, in the saddle this hour and more, having learnt that Colonel Monreal's death took place an hour before Conyngham's arrival in the town of Xeres de la Frontera. The letter, therefore, had not been delivered to Colonel Monreal, and was still in Conyngham's possession.

Larralde bestrode a shocking steed, and had but an indifferent seat in the saddle. Nevertheless, the dust rose beneath his horse's feet, and his spurs flashed in the sunlight as this man of many parts hurried on towards Utrera and Cordova.

In the old Moorish palace in Ronda, General Vincente, summoned to a great council of war at Madrid, was making curt military preparations for his journey and the conveyance of his household to the capital. Señora Barena was for the moment forgetful of her nerves in the excitement of despatching servants in advance to Toledo, where she owned a summer residence. Julia was nervously anxious to be on the road again, and showed by every word and action that restlessness of spirit which is the inheritance of hungry hearts. Estella, quiet and self-contained, attended to the details of moving a vast and formal household with a certain eagerness which in no way resembled Julia's feverish haste. Estella seemed to be one of those happy people who know what they want.

Thus Frederick Conyngham, riding northward alone, seemed to be a pilot to all these persons into whose lives he had suddenly stepped as from a side issue, for they were one and all making ready to follow him to the colder plains of Castile, where existence was full of strife and ambition, of war and those inner wheels that ever jar and grind where politicians contend together for the mastery of a moment.

As he rode on, Conyngham left a message from time to time for his self-appointed servant. At the offices of the diligencias in various towns on the great road from Cordova to Madrid he left word for Concepción Vara to follow, should the spirit of travel be still upon him, knowing that at these places where travellers were ever passing, the tittle-tattle of the road was on the tongue of every ostler and stable help. And truly enough there followed one who made careful inquiries as to the movements of the Englishman, and heard his messages with a grim smile. But this was not Concepción Vara.

It was late one evening when Conyngham, who had quitted Toledo in the morning, began to hunger for the sight of the towers and steeples of Madrid. He had ridden all day through the bare country of Cervantes, where to this day Spain rears her wittiest men and plainest women. The sun had just set behind the distant hills of Old Castile, and from the east, over Aranjuez, where the great river cuts Spain in two parts from its centre to the sea, a grey cloud—a very shade of night—was slowly rising. The aspect of the brown plains was dismal enough, and on the horizon the rolling unbroken land seemed to melt away into eternity and infinite space.

Conyngham reined in and looked around him. So far as eye could reach, no house arose to testify to the presence of man. No labourer toiled home to his lonely hut. For, in this country of many wars and interminable strife, it has, since the days of Nebuchadnezzar, been the custom of the people to congregate in villages and small townships, where a common danger secured some protection against a lawless foe. The road rose and fell in a straight line across the table-land without tree or hedge, and Madrid seemed to belong to another world, for the horizon, which was distant enough, bore no sign of cathedral spire or castle height.

Conyngham turned in his saddle to look back, and there, not a mile away, the form of a hurrying horseman broke the bare line of the dusty road. There was something weird and disturbing in this figure, a suggestion of pursuit in every line. For this was not Concepción Vara. Conyngham would have known him at once. This was one wearing a better coat; indeed Concepción preferred to face life and the chances of the world in shirt sleeves.

Conyngham sat in his saddle awaiting the new-comer. To meet on such a road in Spain without pausing to exchange a salutation would be a gratuitous insult, to ride in solitude within hail of another traveller were to excite or betray the deepest distrust. It was characteristic of Conyngham that he already waved his hand in salutation, and was prepared to hail the new-comer as the jolliest companion in the world.

Esteban Larralde, seeing the salutation, gave a short laugh, and jerked the reins of his tired horse. He himself wore a weary look, as if the fight he had in hand were an uphill one. He had long recognised Conyngham; indeed the chase had been one of little excitement, but rather an exercise of patience and dogged perseverance. He raised his hat to indicate that the Englishman's gay salutations were perceived, and pulled the wide brim well forward again.

'He will change his attitude when it becomes apparent who I am,' he muttered.

But Conyngham's first word would appear to suggest that Esteban Larralde was a much less impressive person than he considered himself.

'Why, it's the devout lover!' he cried. 'Señor Larralde, you remember me, Algeciras, and your pink love letter—deuced fishy love letter, that; nearly got me into a devil of a row, I can tell you. How are you, eh?'

And the Englishman rode forward with a jolly laugh and his hand held out. Larralde took it without enthusiasm. It was rather difficult to pick a picturesque quarrel with such a person as this. Moreover, the true conspirator never believes in another man's honesty.

'Who would have expected to meet you here?' went on Conyngham jovially.

'It is not so surprising as you think.'

'Oh!'

There was no mistaking Larralde's manner, and the Englishman's gay blue eyes hardened suddenly and rather surprisingly.

'No, I have followed you. I want that letter.'

'Well, as it happens, Señor Larralde, I have not got your letter, and if I had I am not quite sure that I would give it to you. Your conduct in the matter has not been over-nice, and, to tell you the truth, I don't think much of a man who gets strangers and women to do his dirty work for him.'

Larralde stroked his moustache with a half-furtive air of contempt.

'I should have given the confounded letter to the Alcalde of Ronda if it had not been that a lady would have suffered for it, and let you take your chance, Señor Larralde.'

Larralde shrugged his shoulders.

'You would not have given it to the Alcalde of Ronda,' he said in a sneering voice, 'because you want it yourself. You require it in order to make your peace with Estella Vincente.'

'We are not going to talk of Señorita Vincente,' said Conyngham quietly. 'You say you followed me because you wanted that letter. It is not in my possession. I left it in the house of Colonel

Monreal at Xeres. If you are going on to Madrid, I think I will sit down here and have a cigarette. If, on the other hand, you propose resting here, I shall proceed, as it is getting late.'

Conyngham looked at his companion with a nod and a smile which was not in the least friendly and at the same time quite cheerful. He seemed to recognise the necessity of quarrelling, but proposed to do so as light-heartedly as possible. They were both on horseback in the middle of the road, Larralde a few paces in the direction of Madrid.

Conyngham indicated the road with an inviting wave of the hand.

'Will you go on?' he asked.

Larralde sat looking at him with glittering eyes, and said nothing.

'Then I will continue my journey,' said the Englishman, touching his horse lightly with the spur. The horse moved on and passed within a yard of the other. At this moment Larralde rose in his stirrups and flung himself on one side.

Conyngham gave a sharp cry of pain and threw back his head. Larralde had stabbed him in the back. The Englishman swayed in the saddle as if trying to balance himself, his legs bent back from the knee in the sharpness of a biting pain. The heavy stirrups swung free. Then, slowly, Conyngham toppled forward and rolled out of the saddle, falling to the road with a thud.

Larralde watched him with a white face and staring eyes. Then he looked quickly round over the darkening landscape. There was no one in sight. This was one of the waste places of the world. Larralde seemed to remember the Eye that seeth even there, and crossed himself as he slipped from the saddle to the ground. He was shaking all over. His face was ashen, for it is a terrible thing to kill a man and be left alone with him.

Conyngham's eyes were closed. There was blood on his lips. With hands that shook like leaves Esteban Larralde searched the Englishman, found nothing, and cursed his ill fortune. Then he stood upright, and in the dim light his face shone as if he had dipped it in water. He crept into the saddle and rode on towards Madrid.

It was quite dark when Conyngham recovered consciousness. In turning him over to search his pockets Larralde had perhaps, unwittingly, saved his life by placing him in a position that checked the internal hæmorrhage. What served to bring back the Englishman's wandering senses was the rumbling of heavy wheels and the crack of a great whip as a cart laden with hay and drawn by six mules approached him from the direction of Toledo.

The driver of the team was an old soldier, as indeed were most of the Castilians at this time, and knew how to handle wounded men. With great care and a multitude of oaths he lifted Conyngham on to his cart and proceeded with him to Madrid.

CHAPTER XIII

A WISE IGNORAMUS

p. 140

'God help me! I know nothing—can but pray.'

It was Father Concha's custom to attend, at his church between the hours of nine and ten in the morning, to such wants spiritual or temporal as individual members of his flock chose to bring to him.

Thus it usually happened that the faithful found the old priest at nine o'clock sunning himself at the front door of the sacred edifice, smoking a reflective cigarette and exchanging the time of day with passers-by or such as had leisure to pause a moment.

'Whether it is body or soul that is in trouble—come to me,' he would say. 'For the body I can do a little—a very little. I have twenty pounds a year, and it is not always paid to me, but I sometimes have a trifle for charity. For the soul I can do a little more.' After a storm of wind and rain, such as come in the winter-time, it was no uncommon sight to see the priest sweeping the leaves and dust from the church steps and using the strongest language at the bootmaker over the way whose business this was supposed to be.

'See!' he would cry to some passer-by. 'See!—it is thus that our sacristan does his work. It is for this that the Holy Church pays him fifteen—or is it twenty?—pesetas each year.'

And the bootmaker would growl and shake his head over his last; for, like most who have to do with leather, he was a man of small humour.

Here, too, mothers would bring their children—little girls cowering under their bright handkerchiefs, the mantilla of the poor, and speak with the Padre of the Confirmation and first Communion which had lately begun to hang like a cloud over the child's life. Father Concha would take the child upon his knee as he sat on the low wall at the side of the steps, and when the mother had left them, would talk quietly with the lines of his face wonderfully softened, so that before long the little girl would run home quite happy in mind and no longer afraid of the

great unknown. Here, in the spring time, came the young men with thoughts appropriate to the season, and sheepish exceedingly; for they knew that Father Concha knew all about them, and would take an unfair advantage of his opportunities, refusing probably to perform the ceremony until he was satisfied as to the ways and means and prudence of the contracting parties—which of course he had no right to do. Here came the halt, the lame, the blind, the poor, and also the rich. Here came the unhappy. They came naturally and often. Here, so the bootmaker tells, came one morning a ruined man, who after speaking a few words to the Padre, produced a revolver and tried to shoot himself. And the Padre fell on him like a wild beast. And they fought, and fell, and rolled down the steps together into the road, where they still fought till they were white like millers with dust. Then at last the Padre got the strong man under him and took the revolver away and threw it into the ditch. Then he fell to belabouring the would-be suicide with his fists, until the big man cried for mercy and received it not.

'You saved his life,' the people said.

'It was his soul that I was caring for,' replied the Padre with his grim smile.

Concha was not a clever man, but he was wise. Of learning he had but little. It is easy, however, to be wise without being learned. It is easier still to be learned without being wise. The world is full of such persons to-day when education is too cheap. Concha steered his flock as best he could through the stormy paths of insurrection and civil war. He ruled with a rod of iron whom he could, and such as were beyond his reach he influenced by ridicule and a patient tolerance. True to his cloth, he was the enemy of all progress and distrusted every innovation.

'The Padre,' said the barber, who was a talker and a radical, 'would have the world stand still.'

'The Padre,' replied Concha, tenderly drying his chin with a towel, 'would have all barbers attend to their razors. Many are so busy shouting "Advance!" that they have no breath to ask whither they are going.'

On the whole, perhaps, his autocratic rule was a beneficent one, and contributed to the happiness of the little northern suburb of Ronda over which it extended. At all events, he was a watchful guardian of his flock, and knew every face in his parish.

It thus happened one morning that a strange woman, who had come quietly into church to pray, attracted his attention as he passed out after matins. She was a mere peasant and ill clad. The child seated on a chair by her side and staring with wondering eyes at the simple altar and stained-glass window had a hungry look.

Concha sat down on the low wall without the doors and awaited the exit of this devotee who was not of his flock. For though, as he often said, the good God had intended him for a soldier, his own strong will and simple faith had in time produced a very passable priest who, with a grim face, went about doing good.

The woman presently lifted the heavy leathern curtain and let out into the sunlight a breath of cool, incense-laden air.

She curtsied and paused as if expecting recognition. Concha threw away his cigarette and raised his hand to his hat. He had not lifted it except to ladies of the highest quality for some years, out of regard to symptoms of senile decay which had manifested themselves at the junction of the brim and the crown.

'Have I not seen your face before, my child?' he said.

'Yes, reverendo. I am of Ronda but have been living in Xeres.'

'Ah! then your husband is no doubt a malcontent?'

The woman burst into tears, burying her face in her hands and leaning against the wall in an attitude that was still girlish. She had probably been married at fifteen.

'No, reverendo! He is a thief.'

Concha merely nodded his head. He never had been a man to betray much pious horror when he heard of ill-doing.

'The two are almost identical,' he said quietly. 'One does what the other fears to do. And is your husband in prison? Is that why you have come back? Ah! you women—in foolishness you almost equal the men!'

'No, reverendo. I am come back because he has left me. Sebastian has run away, and has stolen all his master's property. It was the Colonel Monreal of Xeres—a good man, reverendo, but a politician.'

'Ah!'

'Yes, and he was murdered, as your reverence has no doubt seen in the newspapers. A week ago it was—the day that the Englishman came with a letter.'

'What Englishman was that?' inquired Father Concha, brushing some grains of snuff from his sleeve. 'What Englishman was that, my child?'

'Oh, I do not know! His name is unknown to me, but I could tell he was English from his manner

of speaking. The Colonel had an English friend who spoke so—one engaged in the sherry in Xeres.'

'Ah yes! And this Englishman, what was he like?'

'He was very tall and straight, like a soldier, and had a moustache quite light in colour, like straw.'

'Ah yes. The English are so. And he left a letter?'

'Yes, reverendo.'

'A rose-coloured letter—?'

'Yes,' said the woman, looking at him with surprise.

'And tell me what happened afterwards. I may perhaps be able to help you, my child, if you tell me all you know.'

'And then, reverendo, the police brought back the Colonel who had been murdered in the streets—and I who had his Excellency's dinner on the table waiting for him!'

'And—'

'And Sebastian ate the dinner, reverendo.'

'Your husband appears to be a man of action,' said Concha with a queer smile. 'And then—'

'Sebastian sent me on a message to the town, and when I came back he was gone and all his Excellency's possessions were gone—his papers and valuables.'

'Including the letter which the Englishman had left for the Colonel?'

'Yes, reverendo. Sebastian knew that in these times the papers of a politician may perhaps be sold for money.'

Concha nodded his head reflectively and took a pinch of snuff with infinite deliberation and enjoyment.

'Yes—assuredly, Sebastian is one of those men who get on in the world—up to a certain point—and at that point they get hanged. There is in the universe a particular spot for each man—where we all think we should like to go if we had the money. For me it is Rome. Doubtless Sebastian had some such spot, of which he spoke when he was intoxicated. Where is Sebastian's earthly paradise, think you, my child?'

'He always spoke of Madrid, reverendo.'

'Yes—yes, I can imagine he would.'

'And I have no money to follow him,' sobbed the woman, breaking into tears again. 'So I came to Ronda, where I am known, to seek it.'

'Ah, foolish woman!' exclaimed the priest severely, and shaking his finger at her. 'Foolish woman to think of following such a person. More foolish still is it to weep for a worthless husband, especially in public, thus, on the church steps, where all may see. All the other women will be so pleased. It is their greatest happiness to think that their neighbour's husband is worse than their own. Failure is the royal road to popularity. Dry your tears, foolish one, before you make too many friends.'

The woman obeyed him mechanically with a sort of dumb hopelessness.

At this moment a horseman clattered past, coming from Ronda and hastening in the direction of Bobadilla or perhaps to the Casa Barena. He wore his flat-brimmed hat well forward over the eyes, and kept his gaze fixed upon the road in front. There was a faint suggestion of assumed absorption in his attitude, as if he knew that the priest was usually at the church door at this hour, and had no desire to meet his eye. It was Larralde.

A few minutes later Julia Barena, who was sitting at her window watching and waiting—her attitude in life—suddenly rose with eyes that gleamed and trembling hands. She stood and gazed down into the valley below, her attention fixed on the form of a horseman slowly making his way through the olive groves. Then breathlessly she turned to her mirror.

'At last!' she whispered, her fingers busy with her hair and mantilla, a thousand thoughts flying through her brain, her heart throbbing in her breast. In a moment the aspect of the whole world had changed—in a moment Julia herself was another woman. Ten years seemed to have rolled away from her heart, leaving her young and girlish and hopeful again. She gave one last look at herself and hurried to the door.

It was yet early in the day, and the air beneath the gnarled and ancient olive trees was cool and fresh as Julia passed under them to meet her lover. He threw himself out of the saddle when he saw her, and, leaving his horse loose, ran to meet her. He took her hands and raised her fingers to his lips with a certain fervour which was sincere enough. For Larralde loved Julia according to his lights, though he had another mistress, Ambition, who was with him always and filled his thoughts, sleeping or waking. Julia, her face all flushed, her eyes aglow, received his gallant

greeting with a sort of breathless eagerness. She knew she had not Larralde's whole heart, and, woman-like, was not content with half.

'I have not seen you for nearly a fortnight,' she said.

'Ah!' answered Larralde, who had apparently not kept so strict an account of the days. 'Ah! yes—I know. But, dearest, I have been burning the high-roads. I have been almost to Madrid. Ah! Julia, why did you make such a mistake?'

'What mistake?' she asked with a sudden light of coquetry in her eyes. She thought he was about to ask her why she loved him. In former days he had had a pretty turn for such questions.

'In giving the letter to that scoundrel Conyngham—he has betrayed us, and Spain is no longer safe for me.'

'Are you sure of this?' asked Julia, alert. Had she possessed Larralde's whole heart she would have been happy enough to take part in his pursuits.

Larralde gave a short laugh and shrugged his shoulders.

'Heaven only knows where the letter is now,' he answered. Julia unfolded a note and handed it to him. She had received it three weeks earlier from Concepción Vara, and it was from Conyngham, saying that he had left her note at the house of the Colonel.

'The Colonel was dead before Conyngham arrived at Xeres,' said Larralde shortly. 'And I do not believe he ever left the letter. I suspected that he had kept it as a little recommendation to the Christinos under whom he takes service. It would have been the most natural thing to do. But I have satisfied myself that the letter is not in his possession.'

'How?' asked Julia with a sudden fear that blanched her face.

Larralde smiled in rather a sickly way and made no answer. He turned and looked down the avenue.

'I see Father Concha approaching,' he said; 'let us go towards the house.'

CHAPTER XIV

A WEIGHT OF EVIDENCE

p. 151

'The woman who loves you is at once your detective and accomplice.'

THE old priest was walking leisurely up the avenue towards the Casa Barena when the branches of a dwarf ilex were pushed aside, and there came to him from their leafy concealment, not indeed a wood-nymph, but Señora Barena, with her finger at her lips.

'Hush!' she said; 'he is here.'

And from the anxious and excited expression of her face it became apparent that madame's nerves were astir.

'Who is here?'

'Why, Esteban Larralde, of course.'

'Ah!' said Concha patiently. 'But need we for that hide behind the bushes and walk on the flower borders? Life would be much simpler, señora, if people would only keep to the footpath. Less picturesque, I allow you, but simpler. Shall I climb up a tree?'

The lady cast her eyes up to heaven and heaved an exaggerated sigh.

'Ah—what a tragedy life is!' she whispered, apparently to the angels, but loud enough for her companion to hear.

'Or a farce,' said Concha, 'according to our reading of the part. Where is Señor Larralde?'

'Oh, he has gone to the fruit garden with Julia—there is a high wall all round, and one cannot see. She may be murdered by this time. I knew he was coming from the manner in which she ran downstairs. She walks at other times.'

Concha smiled rather grimly.

'She is not the first to do that,' he said, 'and many have stumbled on the stairs in their haste.'

'Ah! You are a hard man—a terrible man with no heart. And I have no one to sympathise with me. No one knows what I suffer. I never sleep at night—not a wink—but lie and think of my troubles. Julia will not obey me. I have warned her not to rouse me to anger—and she laughs at me. She persists in seeing this terrible Esteban Larralde—a Carlist, if you please.'

'We are all as God made us,' said Concha—'with embellishments added by the Evil One,' he

added, in a lower tone.

'And now I am going to see General Vincente. I shall tell him to send soldiers. This man's presence is intolerable—I am not obeyed in my own house,' cried the lady. 'I have ordered the carriage to meet me at the lower gate. I dare not drive away from my own door. Ah! what a tragedy!'

'I will go with you, since you are determined to go,' said Concha.

'What! And leave Julia here with that terrible man?'

'Yes,' answered the priest. 'Happiness is a dangerous thing to meddle with. There is so little of it in the world, and it lasts so short a time.'

Señora Barena indicated by a sigh and her attitude that she had had no experience in the matter. As a simple fact, she had been enabled all through her life to satisfy her own desires—the subtlest form of misfortune.

'Then you would have Julia marry this terrible man,' said the lady, shielding her face from the sun with the black fan which she always carried.

'I am too old and too stupid to take any active part in my neighbours' affairs. It is only the young and inexperienced who are competent to do that,' answered the priest.

'But you say you are fond of Julia.'

'Yes,' said the priest quietly.

'I wonder why.'

'So do I,' he said in a tone that Señora Barena never understood.

'You are always kinder to her than you are to me,' went on the lady in her most martyred manner. 'Her penances are always lighter than mine. You are patient with her and not with me. And I am sure I have never done you any injury—'

The old Padre smiled. Perhaps he was thinking of those illusions which she had during the years pulled down one by one—for the greater peace of his soul.

'There is the carriage,' he said. 'Let us hasten to General Vincente—if you wish to see him.'

In a few minutes they were rattling along the road, while Esteban Larralde and Julia sat side by side in the shade of the great wall that surrounded the fruit garden. And one at least of them was gathering that quick harvest of love which is like the grass of the field, inasmuch as to-day it is, and to-morrow is not.

General Vincente was at home. He was one of those men who are happy in finding themselves where they are wanted. So many have, on the contrary, the misfortune to be always absent when they are required, and the world soon learns to progress without them.

'That man—that Larralde is in Ronda,' said Señora Barena, bursting in on the General's solitude. Vincente smiled, and nevertheless exchanged a quick glance with Concha, who confirmed the news by a movement of his shaggy eyebrows.

'Ah, these young people!' exclaimed the General with a gay little sigh. 'What it is to be young and in love! But be seated, Iñez—be seated. Padre—a chair.'

'What do you propose to do?' asked Señora Barena breathlessly, for she was stout and agitated and had hurried up the steps.

'When, my dear Iñez—when?'

'But now—with this man in Ronda. You know quite well he is dangerous. He is a Carlist. It was only the other day that you received an anonymous letter saying that your life was in danger. Of course it was from the Carlists, and Larralde has something to do with it; or that Englishman—that Señor Conyngham with the blue eyes. A man with blue eyes—bah! Of course he is not to be trusted.'

The receiver of the anonymous warning seemed to be amused.

'A little sweeping, your statements, my dear Iñez. Is it not so? Now, a lemonade! the afternoon is warm.'

He rose and rang the bell.

'My nerves,' whispered the Señora to Concha. 'My nerves—they are so easily upset.'

'The liqueurs,' said the General to the servant with perfect gravity.

'You must take steps at once,' urged Señora Barena when they were alone again. She was endowed with a magnificent imagination without much wisdom to hold it in check, and at times persuaded herself that she was in the midst, and perhaps the leader, of a dangerous whirl of political events.

'I will, my dear Iñez; I will. And we will take a little maraschino, to collect ourselves, eh?'

And his manner quite indicated that it was he and not Madame Barenna who was upset. The lady consented, and proceeded to what she took to be a consultation, which in reality was a monologue. During this she imparted a vast deal of information, and received none in return, which is the habit of voluble people, and renders them exceedingly dangerous to themselves and useful to others.

Presently the two men conducted her to her carriage, with many reassurances.

'Never fear, Iñez; never fear. He will be gone before you return,' said the General, with a wave of the hand. He had consented to invite Julia to accompany Estella and himself to Madrid, where she would be out of harm's way.

The two men then returned to the General's study, and sat down in that silence which only grows to perfection on the deep soil of a long-standing friendship. Vincente was the first to speak.

'I have had a letter from Madrid,' he said, looking gravely at his companion. 'My correspondent tells me that Conyngham has not yet presented his letter of introduction, and, so far as is ascertainable, has not arrived in the capital. He should have been there six weeks ago.'

The Padre took a pinch of snuff, and held the box out towards his companion, who waved it aside. The General was too dainty a man to indulge in such a habit.

'He possessed no money, so he cannot have fallen a victim to thieves,' said Concha.

'He was accompanied by a good guide, and an honest enough scoundrel, so he cannot have lost his way,' observed the General, with a queer expression of optimistic distress on his face.

'His movements were not always above suspicion—' the priest closed his snuff-box and laboriously replaced it in the pocket of his cassock.

'That letter—it was a queer business!' and the General laughed.

'Most suspicious.'

There was a silence, during which Concha sneezed twice with enjoyment and more noise than is usually considered necessary.

'And your letter,' he said, carefully folding his handkerchief into squares; 'that anonymous letter of warning that your life is threatened—is that true? It is the talk of Ronda.'

'Ah, that!' laughed Vincente. 'Yes, it is true enough. It is not the first time—a mere incident, that is all.'

'That which the Señora Barenna said just now,' observed the priest slowly, 'about our English friend—may be true. Sometimes thoughtless people arrive at a conclusion which eludes more careful minds.'

'Yes—my dear Padre—yes.'

The two grey-headed men looked at each other for a moment in silence.

'And yet you trust him,' said Concha.

'Despite myself, despite my better judgment, my dear friend.'

The priest rose and went to the window which overlooked the garden.

'Estella is in the garden?' he asked, and received no answer.

'I know what you are thinking,' said the General. 'You are thinking that we should do well to tell Estella of these distressing suspicions.'

'For you it does not matter,' replied the priest. 'It is a mere incident, as you say. Your life has been attempted before, and you killed both the men with your own hand, if I recollect aright.'

Vincente shrugged his shoulders and looked rather embarrassed.

'But a woman,' went on Concha, 'cannot afford to trust a man against her better judgment.'

By way of reply the General rose and rang the bell, requesting the servant when he answered the summons to ask the señorita to spare a few moments of her time.

They exchanged no further words until Estella came hurrying into the room with a sudden flush on her cheeks and something in her dark eyes that made her father say at once—

'It is not bad news that we have, my child.'

Estella glanced at Concha and said nothing. His wise old eyes rested for a moment on her face with a little frown of anxiety.

'We have had a visit from the Señora Barenna,' went on the General, 'and she is anxious that we should invite Julia to go to Madrid with us. It appears that Esteban Larralde is still attempting to force his attentions on Julia, and is at present in Ronda. You will not object to her coming with us?'

'Oh no,' said Estella without much interest.

'We have also heard rather disquieting news about our pleasant friend, Mr. Conyngham,' said the General, examining the tassel of his sword. 'And I think it is only right to tell you that I fear we have been deceived in him.'

There was silence for a few moments, and then Vincente spoke again.

'In these times, one is almost compelled to suspect one's nearest friends. Much harm may be done by being over-trustful, and appearances are so consistently against Mr. Conyngham that it would be folly to ignore them.'

The General waited for Estella to make some comment, and after a pause continued:

'He arrived in Ronda under singularly unfortunate circumstances, and I was compelled to have his travelling companion shot. Then occurred that affair of the letter, which he gave to Julia—an affair which has never been explained. Conyngham would have to show me that letter before I should be quite satisfied. I obtained for him an introduction to General Espartero in Madrid. That was six or seven weeks ago. The introduction has not been presented, nor has Conyngham been seen in Madrid. In England, on his own confession, he was rather a scamp; why not the same in Spain?'

The General spread out his hands in his favourite gesture of deprecation. He had not made the world, and while deeply deploring that such things could be, he tacitly admitted that the human race had not been, creatively speaking, a complete success.

Father Concha was brushing invisible grains of snuff from his cassock sleeve and watching Estella with anxious eyes.

'I only tell you, my dear,' continued the General, 'so that we may know how to treat Mr. Conyngham should we meet him in Madrid. I liked him. I like a roving man—and many Englishmen are thus wanderers—but appearances are very much against him.'

'Yes,' admitted Estella quietly. 'Yes.'

She moved towards the door, and there turning looked at Concha.

'Does the Padre stay to dinner?' she asked.

'No, my child, thank you. No; I have affairs at home.'

Estella went out of the room, leaving a queer silence behind her.

Presently Concha rose.

'I, too, am going to Madrid,' he said. 'It is an opportunity to press my claim for the payment of my princely stipend, now two years overdue.'

He walked home on the shady side of the street, exchanging many salutations, pausing now and then to speak to a friend. Indeed, nearly every passer-by counted himself as such. In his bare room, where the merest necessities of life scarce had place, he sat down thoughtfully. The furniture, the few books, his own apparel, bespoke the direst poverty. This was one who in his simplicity read his Master's words quite literally, and went about his work with neither purse nor scrip. The priest presently rose and took from a shelf an old wooden box quaintly carved and studded with iron nails. A search in the drawer of the table resulted in the finding of a key and the final discovery of a small parcel at the bottom of the box which contained letters and other papers.

'The rainy day—it comes at last,' said the Padre Concha, counting out his little stock of silver with the care that only comes from the knowledge that each coin represents a self-denial.

CHAPTER XV

AN ULTIMATUM

p. 163

'I do believe yourself against yourself.'

NEITHER Estella nor her father had a great liking for the city of Madrid, which indeed is at no time desirable. In the winter it is cold, in the summer exceedingly hot, and during the changes of the seasons of a treacherous weather difficult to surpass. The social atmosphere was no more genial at the period with which we deal. For it blew hot and cold, and treachery marked every change.

Although the Queen Regent seemed to be nearing at last a successful issue to her long and eventful struggle against Don Carlos, she had enemies nearer home whose movements were equally dangerous to the throne of the child queen.

'I cannot afford to have an honest soldier so far removed from the capital,' said Christina, who never laid aside the woman while playing the Queen, as Vincente kissed her hand on presenting himself at Court. The General smiled and shrugged his shoulders.

'What did she say? What did she say?' the intriguers whispered eagerly as the great soldier

made his way towards the door, with the haste of one who was no courtier. But they received no answer.

The General had taken a suite of rooms in one of the hotels on the Puerta del Sol, and hurried thither, well pleased to have escaped so easily from a palace where self-seeking—the grim spirit that haunts the abodes of royalty—had long reigned supreme. There was, the servants told him, a visitor in the salon—one who had asked for the General, and on learning of his absence had insisted on being received by the señorita.

‘That sounds like Conyngham,’ muttered the General, unbuckling his sword—for he had but one weapon, and wore it in the presence of the Queen and her enemies alike.

It was indeed Conyngham, whose gay laugh Vicente heard before he crossed the threshold of Estella’s drawing-room. The Englishman was in uniform, and stood with his back turned towards the door by which the General entered.

‘It is Señor Conyngham,’ said Estella at once, in a quiet voice, ‘who has been wounded and six weeks in the hospital.’

‘Yes,’ said Conyngham. ‘But I am well again now! And I got my appointment while I was still in the Sisters’ care.’

He laughed, though his face was pale and thin, and approached the General with extended hand. The General had come to Madrid with the intention of refusing to take that hand, and those who knew him said that this soldier never swerved from his purpose. He looked for a moment into Conyngham’s eyes, and then shook hands with him. He did not disguise the hesitation, which was apparent to both Estella and the Englishman.

‘How were you wounded?’ he asked.

‘I was stabbed in the back on the Toledo road, ten miles from here.’

‘Not by a robber—not for your money?’

‘No one ever hated me or cared for me on that account,’ laughed Conyngham.

‘Then who did it?’ asked General Vicente, unbuttoning his gloves.

Conyngham hesitated.

‘A man with whom I quarrelled on the road,’ he made reply; but it was no answer at all, as hearers and speaker alike recognised in a flash of thought.

‘He left me for dead on the road, but a carter picked me up and brought me to Madrid, to the hospital of the Hermanas, where I have been ever since.’

There were flowers on the table, and the General stooped over them with a delicate appreciation of their scent. He was a great lover of flowers, and indeed had a sense of the beautiful quite out of keeping with the colour of his coat.

‘You must beware,’ he said, ‘now that you wear the Queen’s uniform. There is treachery abroad, I fear. Even I have had an anonymous letter of warning.’

‘I should like to know who wrote it,’ exclaimed Conyngham, with a sudden flash of anger in his eyes. The General laughed pleasantly.

‘So should I,’ he said. ‘Merely as a matter of curiosity.’

And he turned towards the door, which was opened at this moment by a servant.

‘A gentleman wishing to see me—an Englishman, as it would appear,’ he continued, looking at the card.

‘By the way,’ said Conyngham, as the General moved away, ‘I am instructed to inform you that I am attached to your staff as extra aide-de-camp during your stay in Madrid.’

The General nodded and left Estella and Conyngham alone in the drawing-room. Conyngham turned on Estella.

‘So that I have a right to be near you,’ he said, ‘which is all that I want.’

He spoke lightly enough, as was his habit; but Estella, who was wise in those matters that women know, preferred not to meet his eyes, which were grave and deep.

‘Such things are quickly said,’ Estella retorted.

‘Yes—and it takes a long time to prove them.’

The General had left his gloves on the table. Estella took them up and appeared to be interested in them. ‘Perhaps a lifetime,’ she suggested.

‘I ask no less, señorita.’

‘Then you ask much.’

‘And I give all—though that is little enough.’

They spoke slowly—not bandying words but exchanging thoughts. Estella was grave. Conyngham's attitude was that which he ever displayed to the world—namely, one of cheerful optimism, as behoved a strong man who had not yet known fear.

'Is it too little, señorita?' he asked.

She was sitting at the table and would not look up—neither would she answer his question. He was standing quite close to her—upright in his bright uniform, his hand on his sword—and all her attention was fixed on the flowers which had called forth the General's unspoken admiration. She touched them with fingers hardly lighter than his.

'Now that I think of it,' said Conyngham after a pause, 'what I give is nothing.'

Estella's face wore a queer little smile, as of a deeper knowledge.

'Nothing at all,' continued the Englishman. 'For I have nothing to give, and you know nothing of me.'

'Three months ago,' answered Estella, 'we had never heard of you—and you had never seen me,' she added, with a little laugh.

'I have seen nothing else since,' Conyngham replied deliberately; 'for I have gone about the world a blind man.'

'In three months one cannot decide matters that affect a whole lifetime,' said the girl.

'This matter decided itself in three minutes, so far as I am concerned, señorita, in the old palace at Ronda. It is a matter that time is powerless to affect one way or the other.'

'With some people; but you are hasty and impetuous. My father said it of you—and he is never mistaken.'

'Then you do not trust me, señorita?'

Estella had turned away her face so that he could only see her mantilla and the folds of her golden hair gleaming through the black lace. She shrugged her shoulders.

'It is not due to yourself, nor to all who know you in Spain, if I do,' she said.

'All who know me?'

'Yes,' she continued; 'Father Concha, Señora Barenna, my father, and others at Ronda.'

'Ah! And what leads them to mistrust me?'

'Your own actions,' replied Estella.

And Conyngham was too simple-minded, too inexperienced in such matters, to understand the ring of anxiety in her voice.

'I do not much mind what the rest of the world thinks of me,' he said; 'I have never owed anything to the world nor asked anything from it. They are welcome to think what they like. But with you it is different. Is it possible, señorita, to make you trust me?'

Estella did not answer at once. After a pause she gave an indifferent jerk of the head.

'Perhaps,' she said.

'If it is possible, I will do it.'

'It is quite easy,' she answered, raising her head and looking out of the window with an air that seemed to indicate that her interests lay without and not in this room at all.

'How can I do it?'

She gave a short, hard laugh, which to experienced ears would have betrayed her instantly.

'By showing me the letter you wrote to Julia Barenna,' she said.

'I cannot do that.'

'No,' she said significantly. A woman fighting for her own happiness is no sparing adversary.

'Will nothing else than the sight of that letter satisfy you, señorita?'

Her profile was turned towards him—delicate and proud, with the perfect chiselling of outline that only comes with a long descent, and bespeaks the blood of gentle ancestors. For Estella Vincente had in her veins blood that was counted noble in Spain—the land of a bygone glory.

'Nothing,' she answered. 'Though the question of my being satisfied is hardly of importance. You asked me to trust you, and you make it difficult by your actions. In return I ask a proof, that is all.'

'Do you want to trust me?'

He had come a little closer to her, and was grave enough now.

'Why do you ask that?' she inquired in a low voice.

'Do you want to trust me?' he asked, and it is to be supposed that he was able to detect an infinitesimal acquiescent movement of her head.

'Then, if that letter is in existence, you shall have it,' he said. 'You say that my actions have borne evidence against me. I shall trust to action and not to words to refute that evidence. But you must give me time—will you do that?'

'You always ask something.'

'Yes, señorita, from you; but from no one else in the world.'

He gave a sudden laugh and walked to the window, where he stood looking at her.

'I suppose,' he said, 'I shall be asking all my life from you. Perhaps that is why we were created, señorita—I to ask, you to give. Perhaps that is happiness, Estella.'

She raised her eyes but did not meet his, looking past him through the open window. The hotel was situated at the lower end of the Puerta del Sol—the quiet end, and farthest removed from the hum of the market and the busy sounds of traffic. These only came in the form of a distant hum, like the continuous roar of surf upon an unseen shore. Below the windows a passing waterseller plied his trade, and his monotonous cry of 'Agua-a-a! Agua-a-a!' rose like a wail—like the voice of one crying in that human wilderness where solitude reigns as surely as in the desert.

For a moment Estella glanced at Conyngham gravely, and his eyes were no less serious. They were not the first, but only two out of many millions, to wonder what happiness is and where it hides in this busy world.

They had not spoken or moved when the door was again opened by a servant, who bowed towards Conyngham and then stood aside to allow ingress to one who followed on his heels. This was a tall man, white-haired, and white of face. Indeed, his cheeks had the dead pallor of paper, and seemed to be drawn over the cheekbones at such tension as gave to the skin a polish like that of fine marble. One sees many such faces in London streets, and they usually indicate suffering, either mental or physical.

The stranger came forward with a perfect lack of embarrassment, which proved him to be a man of the world. His bow to Estella clearly indicated that his business lay with Conyngham. He was the incarnation of the Continental ideal of the polished cold Englishman, and had the air of a diplomate such as this country sends to foreign Courts to praise or blame, to declare friendship or war with the same calm suavity and imperturbable politeness.

'I come from General Vincente,' he said to Conyngham, 'who will follow in a moment, when he has despatched some business which detains him. I have a letter to the General, and am, in fact, in need of his assistance.'

He broke off, turning to Estella, who was moving towards the door.

'I was especially instructed,' he said quickly to her, 'to ask you not to leave us. You were, I believe, at school with my nieces in England, and when my business, which is of the briefest, is concluded, I have messages to deliver to you from Mary and Amy Mainwaring.'

Estella smiled a little and resumed her seat. Then the stranger turned to Conyngham.

'The General told me,' he went on in his cold voice, without a gleam of geniality or even of life in his eyes, 'that if I followed the servant to the drawing-room I should find here an English aide-de-camp who is fully in his confidence, and upon whose good-nature and assistance I could rely.'

'I am for the time General Vincente's aide-de-camp, and I am an Englishman,' answered Conyngham.

The stranger bowed.

'I did not explain my business to General Vincente,' said he, 'who asked me to wait until he came, and then tell the story to you both at one time. In the meantime I was to introduce myself to you.'

Conyngham waited in silence.

'My name is Sir John Pleydell,' said the stranger quietly.

CHAPTER XVI

IN HONOUR

p. 174

'He makes no friend who never made a foe.'

CONYNGHAM remembered the name of Pleydell well enough, and glanced sharply at Estella, recollecting that the General received the 'Times' from London. Before he had time to make an

answer, and indeed he had none ready, the General came into the room.

'Ah!' said Vincente in his sociable manner, 'I see you know each other already—so an introduction is superfluous. And now we will have Sir John's story. Be seated, my dear sir. But first—a little refreshment. It is a dusty day—a lemonade?'

Sir John declined, his manner strikingly cold and reserved beside the genial *empresement* of General Vincente. In truth the two men seemed to belong to opposite poles—the one of cold and the other of heat. Sir John had the chill air of one who had mixed among his fellow men only to see their evil side; for the world is a cold place to those that look on it with a chilling glance. General Vincente, on the other hand, whose life had been passed in strife and warfare, seemed ready to welcome all comers as friends and to hold out the hand of good-fellowship to rich and poor alike.

Conyngham shrugged his shoulders with a queer smile. Here was a quandary requiring a quicker brain than his. He did not even attempt to seek a solution to his difficulties, and the only thought in his mind was a characteristic determination to face them courageously. He drew forward a chair for Sir John Pleydell, his heart stirred with that sense of exhilaration which comes to some in moments of peril.

'I will not detain you long,' began the new-comer, with an air slightly suggestive of the law court, 'but there are certain details which I am afraid I must inflict upon you, in order that you may fully understand my actions.'

The remark was addressed to General Vincente, although the speaker appeared to be demanding Conyngham's attention in the first instance. The learned gentlemen of the Bar thus often address the jury through the ears of the judge.

General Vincente had seated himself at the table and was drawing his scented pocket-handkerchief across his moustache reflectively. He was not, it was obvious, keenly interested, although desirous of showing every politeness to the stranger. In truth, such Englishmen as brought their affairs to Spain at this time were not as a rule highly desirable persons or a credit to their country. Estella was sitting near the window, rather behind her father, and Conyngham stood by the fireplace, facing them all.

'You perhaps know something of our English politics,' continued Sir John Pleydell, and the General making a little gesture indicative of a limited but sufficient knowledge, went on to say—'of the Chartists more particularly?'

The General bowed. Estella glanced at Conyngham, who was smiling.

'One cannot call them a party, as I have heard them designated in Spain,' said Sir John parenthetically. 'They are quite unworthy of so distinguished a name. These Chartists consist of the most ignorant people in the land—the rabble, in fact, headed by a few scheming malcontents: professional agitators who are not above picking the pockets of the poor. Many capitalists and landowners have suffered wrong and loss at the hands of these disturbers of the peace, none—' He paused and gave a sharp sigh which seemed to catch him unawares, and almost suggested that the man had, after all, or had at one time possessed, a heart. 'None more severely than myself,' he concluded.

The General's face instantly expressed the utmost concern.

'My dear sir,' he murmured.

'For many years,' continued Sir John hurriedly, as if resenting anything like sympathy, as all good Britons do, 'the authorities acted in an irresolute and foolish manner, not daring to put down the disturbances with a firm hand. At length, however, a riot of a more serious character at a town in Wales necessitated the interference of the military. The ringleaders were arrested, and for some time the authorities were in considerable doubt as to what to do to them. I interested myself strongly in the matter—having practised the law in my younger days—and was finally enabled to see my object carried out. These men were arraigned, not as mere brawlers and rioters, but under a charge of high treason—a much more serious affair for them.'

He broke off with a harsh laugh, which was only a matter of the voice, for his marble face remained unchanged, and probably had not at any time the power of expressing mirth.

'The ringleaders of the Newport riots were sentenced to long terms of imprisonment, which served my purpose excellently.'

Sir John Pleydell spoke with that cynical frankness which seems often to follow upon a few years devoted to practice at the Common Law Bar, where men in truth spend their days in dissecting the mental diseases of their fellow creatures, and learn to conclude that a pure and healthy mind is possessed by none. He moved slightly in his chair, and seemed to indicate that he had made his first point.

'I hope,' he said, addressing Conyngham directly, 'that I am not fatiguing you?'

'Not at all,' returned the younger Englishman coolly; 'I am much interested.'

The General was studying the texture of his pocket-handkerchief. Estella's face had grown cold and set. Her eyes from time to time turned towards Conyngham. Sir John Pleydell was not

creating a good impression.

'I will now come to the more personal part of my story,' went on that gifted speaker, 'and proceed to explain my reason for inflicting it upon you.'

He still spoke directly to Conyngham, who bowed his head in silence, with the queer smile still hovering on his lips. Estella saw it and drew a sharp breath. In the course of her short life, which had almost been spent in the midst of warfare, she had seen men in danger more than once, and perhaps recognised that smile.

'I particularly beg your attention,' explained Sir John to Conyngham, 'because I understand from General Vincente that you are in reality attached to the staff of General Espartero, and it is to him that I look for help.'

Sir John paused again. He had established another point. One almost expected to see him raise his hand to his shoulder to throw back the silken gown.

'Some months ago,' he went on, 'these Chartists attacked my house in the North of England, and killed my son.'

There was a short silence, and the General muttered a curt and polite Spanish oath under his breath. But somehow the speaker had failed to make that point, and he hurried on.

'It was not, technically speaking, a murder; my boy, who had a fine spirit, attacked the rioters, and a clever counsel might have got a verdict for the scoundrel who actually struck the blow. I knew this, and awaited events. I did not even take steps against the man who killed my son—an only son and child. It was not, from a legal point of view, worth while.'

He laughed his unpleasant laugh again and presently went on.

'Fortune, however, favoured me. The trouble grew worse, and the Newport riots at last aroused the Government. The sentence upon the ringleaders gave me my opportunity. It was worth while to hunt down the murderer of my son when I could ensure him sixteen or twenty years' penal servitude.'

'Quite,' said the General; 'quite.' And he smiled. He seemed to fail to realise that Sir John Pleydell was in deadly earnest, and really harboured the implacable spirit of revenge with which he cynically credited himself.

'I traced my man to Gibraltar, and thence he appears to have come north,' continued Sir John Pleydell. 'He has probably taken service under Espartero—many of our English outlaws wear the Spanish Queen's uniform. He is, of course, bearing an assumed name; but surely it would be possible to trace him?'

'Oh, yes,' answered Conyngham, 'I think you will be able to find him.'

Sir John's eyes had for a moment a gleam of life in them.

'Ah!' he said, 'I am glad to hear you say that. For that is my object in coming to this country; and although I have during the course of my life had many objects of ambition or desire, none of them has so entirely absorbed my attention as this one. Half a dozen men have gone to penal servitude in order that I might succeed in my purpose.'

There was a cold deliberation in this statement which was more cruel than cynicism, for it was sincere. Conyngham looked at Estella. Her face had lost all colour, her eyes were burning—not with the dull light of fear, for the blood that ran in her veins had no taint of that in it—but with anger. She knew who it was that Sir John Pleydell sought. She looked at Conyngham, and his smile of cool intrepidity made her heart leap within her breast. This lover of hers was at all events a brave man—and that which through all the ages reaches the human heart most surely is courage. The coward has no friends.

Sir John Pleydell had paused, and was seeking something in his pocket. General Vincente preserved his attitude of slightly bored attention.

'I have here,' went on the baronet, 'a list of the English officers serving in the army of General Espartero at the time of my quitting England. Perhaps you will, at your leisure, be kind enough to cast your eye over it, and make a note of such men as are personally unknown to you, and may therefore be bearing assumed names.'

Conyngham took the paper, and, holding it in his hand, spoke without moving from the mantelpiece against which he leant.

'You have not yet made quite clear your object in coming to Spain,' he said. 'There exists between Spain and England no extradition treaty; and even if such were to come in force I believe that persons guilty of political offences would be exempt from its action. You propose to arraign this man for high treason—a political offence according to the law of many countries.'

'You speak like a lawyer,' said Sir John, with a laugh.

'You have just informed us,' retorted Conyngham, 'that all the English in the Spanish service are miscreants. None know the law so intimately as those who have broken it.'

'Ah!' laughed Sir John again, with a face of stone. 'There are exceptions to all rules—and you,

young sir, are an exception to that which I laid down as regards our countrymen in Spain, unless my experience of faces and knowledge of men play me very false. But your contention is a just one. I am not in a position to seek the aid of the Spanish authorities in this matter. I am fully aware of the fact. You surely did not expect me to come to Spain with such a weak case as that?’

‘No,’ answered Conyngham slowly, ‘I did not.’

Sir John Pleydell raised his eyes and looked at his fellow countryman with a dawning interest. The General also looked up, from one face to the other. The atmosphere of the room seemed to have undergone a sudden change, and to be dominated by the personality of these two Englishmen. The one will, strong on the surface, accustomed to assert itself and dominate, seemed suddenly to have found itself faced by another as strong and yet hidden behind an easy smile and indolent manner.

‘You are quite right,’ he went on in his cold voice. ‘I have a better case than that, and one eminently suited to a country such as Spain, where a long war has reduced law and order to a somewhat low ebb. I at first thought of coming here to await my chance of shooting this man—his name, by the way, is Frederick Conyngham; but circumstances placed a better vengeance within my grasp—one that will last longer.’

He paused for a moment to reflect upon this long-drawn-out expiation.

‘I propose to get my man home to England, and let him there stand his trial. The idea is not my own; it has, in fact, been carried out successfully before now. Once in England I shall make it my business to see that he gets twenty years’ penal servitude.’

‘And how do you propose to get him to England?’ asked Conyngham.

‘Oh! that is simple enough. Only a matter of paying a couple of such scoundrels as I understand abound in Spain at this moment—a little bribing of officials, a heavy fee to some English ship-captain. I propose, in short, to kidnap Frederick Conyngham. But I do not ask you to help me in that. I only ask you to put me on his track—to help me to find him, in fact. Will you do it?’

‘Certainly,’ said Conyngham, coming forward with a card in his hand. ‘You could not have come to a better man.’

Sir John Pleydell read the card, and had himself in such control that his face hardly changed. His teeth closed over his lower lip for a second; then he rose. The perspiration stood out on his face—the grey of his eyes seemed to have faded to the colour of ashes. He looked hard at Conyngham, and then, taking up his hat, went to the door with curious, uneven steps. On the threshold he turned.

‘Your insolence,’ he said breathlessly, ‘is only exceeded by your—daring.’

As the door closed behind him there came, from that part of the room where General Vincente sat, a muffled click of steel, as if a sword half out of its scabbard had been sent softly home again.

CHAPTER XVII

IN MADRID

p. 185

‘Some keepeth silence knowing his time.’

‘WHO travels slowly may arrive too late,’ said the Padre Concha, with a pessimistic shake of the head, as the carrier’s cart in which he had come from Toledo drew up in the Plazuela de la Cebada at Madrid. The careful penury of many years had not, indeed, enabled the old priest to travel by the quick diligences, which had often passed him on the road with a cloud of dust and the rattle of six horses. The great journey had been accomplished in the humbler vehicles plying from town to town, that ran as often as not by night in order to save the horses.

The priest, like his fellow-travellers, was white with dust. Dust covered his cloak so that its original hue of rusty black was quite lost. Dust coated his face and nestled in the deep wrinkles of it. His eyebrows were lost to sight, and his lashes were like those of a miller.

As he stood in the street the dust arose in whirling columns and enveloped all who were abroad; for a gale was howling across the tableland, which the Moors of old had named ‘Majerit’—a draught of wind. The conductor, who, like a good and jovial conductor, had never refused an offer of refreshment on the road, was now muddled with drink and the heat of the sun. He was, in fact, engaged in a warm controversy with a passenger. So the Padre found his own humble portmanteau, a thing of cardboard and canvas, and trudged up the Calle de Toledo, bearing the bag in one hand and his cloak in the other—a lean figure in the sunlight.

Father Concha had been in Madrid before, though he rarely boasted of it, or indeed of any of his travels.

‘The wise man does not hang his knowledge on a hook,’ he was in the habit of saying.

That this knowledge was of that useful description which is usually designated as knowing one’s

way about, soon became apparent; for the dusty traveller passed with unerring steps through the narrower streets that lie between the Calle de Toledo and the street of Segovia. Here dwell the humbler citizens of Madrid, persons engaged in the small commerce of the market-place, for in the Plazuela de la Cebada a hundred yards away is held the corn market, which, indeed, renders the dust in this quarter particularly trying to the eyes. Once or twice the priest was forced to stop at the corner of two streets and there do battle with the wind.

‘But it is a hurricane,’ he muttered; ‘a hurricane.’

With one hand he held his hat, with the other clung to his cloak and portmanteau.

‘But it will blow the dust from my poor old capa,’ he added, giving the cloak an additional shake.

He presently found himself in a street which, if narrower than its neighbours, smelt less pestiferous. The open drain that ran down the middle of it pursued its varied course with a quite respectable speed. In the middle of the street Father Concha paused and looked up, nodding as if to an old friend at the sight of a dingy piece of palm bound to the ironwork of a balcony on the second floor.

‘The time to wash off the dust,’ he muttered as he climbed the narrow stairs, ‘and then to work.’

An hour later he was afoot again in a quarter of the city which was less known to him—namely, in the Calle Preciados, where he sought a venta more or less suspected by the police. The wind had risen, and was now blowing with the force of a hurricane. It came from the north-west with a chill whistle which bespoke its birthplace among the peaks of the Gaudarramas. The streets were deserted; the oil lamps swung on their chains at the street corners, casting weird shadows that swept over the face of the houses with uncanny irregularity. It was an evening for evil deeds, except that when Nature is in an ill-humour human nature is mostly cowed, and those who have bad consciences cannot rid their minds of thoughts of the hereafter.

The priest found the house he sought, despite the darkness of the street and the absence of any from whom to elicit information. The venta was on the ground-floor, and above it towered storey after storey, built with the quaint fantasy of the middle ages, and surmounted by a deep, overhanging gabled roof. The house seemed to have two staircases of stone and two doors—one on each side of the venta. There is a Spanish proverb which says that the rat which has only one hole is soon caught. Perhaps the architect remembered this, and had built his house to suit his tenants. It was on the fifth floor of this tenement that Father Concha, instructed by Heaven knows what priestly source of information, looked to meet with Sebastian, the whilom bodyservant of the late Colonel Monreal of Xeres.

It was known among a certain section of the Royalists that this man had papers and perchance some information of value to dispose of, and more than one respectable, black-clad elbow had brushed the greasy walls of this staircase. Sebastian, it was said, passed his time in drinking and smoking. The boasted gaieties of Madrid had, it would appear, diminished to this sordid level of dissipation.

The man was, indeed, thus occupied when the old priest opened the door of his room.

‘Yes,’ he answered in a thick voice, ‘I am Sebastian of Xeres, and no other; the man who knows more of the Carlist plots than any other in Madrid.’

‘Can you read?’

‘No.’

‘Then you know nothing,’ said the Padre. ‘You have, however, a letter in a pink envelope which a friend of mine desires to possess. It is a letter of no importance, of no political value—a love letter, in fact.’

‘Ah, yes! Ah, yes! That may be, reverendo. But there are others who want it—your love letter.’

‘I offer you, on the part of my friend, a hundred pesetas for this letter.’

The priest’s wrinkled face wore a grim smile. It was so little—a hundred pesetas, the price of a dinner for two persons at one of the great restaurants on the Puerta del Sol. But to Father Concha the sum represented five hundred cups of black coffee denied to himself in the evening at the café—five hundred packets of cigarettes, so-called of Havana, unsmoked—two new cassocks in the course of twenty years—a hundred little gastronomic delights sternly resisted season after season.

‘Not enough, your hundred pesetas, reverendo, not enough,’ laughed the man. And Concha, who could drive as keen a bargain as any market-woman of Ronda, knew by the manner of saying it that Sebastian only spoke the truth when he said that he had other offers.

‘See, reverendo,’ the man went on, leaning across the table and banging a dirty fist upon it, ‘come to-night at ten o’clock. There are others coming at the same hour to buy my letter in the pink envelope. We will have an auction, a little auction, and the letter goes to the highest bidder. But what does your reverence want with a love letter, eh?’

‘I will come,’ said the Padre, and, turning, he went home to count his money once more.

There are many living still who remember the great gale of wind which was now raging, and

through which Father Concha struggled back to the Calle Preciados as the city clocks struck ten. Old men and women still tell how the theatres were deserted that night and the great cafés wrapt in darkness. For none dare venture abroad amid such whirl and confusion. Concha, however, with that lean strength that comes from a life of abstemiousness and low-living, crept along in the shadow of the houses and reached his destination unhurt. The tall house in the alley leading from the Calle Preciados to the Plazuela Santa Maria was dark, as indeed were most of the streets of Madrid this night. A small moon struggled, however, through the riven clouds at times, and cast streaks of light down the narrow streets. Concha caught sight of the form of a man in the alley before him. The priest carried no weapon, but he did not pause. At this moment a gleam of light aided him.

‘Señor Conyngham!’ he said. ‘What brings you here?’

And the Englishman turned sharply on his heel.

‘Is that you—Father Concha, of Ronda?’ he asked.

‘No other, my son.’

Standing in the doorway Conyngham held out his hand with that air of good-fellowship which he had not yet lost amid the more formal Spaniards.

‘Hardly the night for respectable elderly gentlemen of your cloth to be in the streets,’ he said; whereat Concha, who had a keen appreciation of such small pleasantries, laughed grimly.

‘And I have not even the excuse of my cloth. I am abroad on worldly business, and not even my own. I will be honest with you, Señor Conyngham. I am here to buy that malediction of a letter in a pink envelope. You remember—in the garden at Ronda, eh?’

‘Yes, I remember; and why do you want that letter?’

‘For the sake of Julia Barena.’

‘Ah! I want it for the sake of Estella Vincente.’

Concha laughed shortly.

‘Yes,’ he said. ‘It is only up to the age of twenty-five that men imagine themselves to be the rulers of the world. But we need not bid against each other, my son. Perhaps a sight of the letter before I destroy it would satisfy the señorita.’

‘No, we need not bid against each other,’ began Conyngham; but the priest dragged him back into the doorway with a quick whisper of ‘Silence!’

Someone was coming down the other stairway of the tall house, with slow and cautious steps. Conyngham and his companion drew back to the foot of the stairs and waited. It became evident that he who descended the steps did so without a light. At the door he seemed to stop, probably making sure that the narrow alley was deserted. A moment later he hurried past the door where the two men stood. The moon was almost clear, and by its light both the watchers recognised Larralde in a flash of thought. The next instant Esteban Larralde was running for his life with Frederick Conyngham on his heels.

The lamp at the corner of the Calle Preciados had been shattered against the wall by a gust of wind, and both men clattered through a slough of broken glass. Down the whole length of the Preciados but one lamp was left alight, and the narrow street was littered with tiles and fallen bricks, for many chimneys had been blown down, and more than one shutter lay in the roadway, torn from its hinges by the hurricane. It was at the risk of life that any ventured abroad at this hour and amid the whirl of falling masonry. Larralde and Conyngham had the Calle Preciados to themselves—and Larralde cursed his spurs, which rang out at each footfall, and betrayed his whereabouts.

A dozen times the Spaniard fell, but before his pursuer could reach him, the same obstacle threw Conyngham to the ground. A dozen times some falling object crashed to earth on the Spaniard’s heels, and the Englishman leapt aside to escape the rebound. Larralde was fleet of foot despite his meagre limbs, and leapt over such obstacles as he could perceive, with the agility of a monkey. He darted into the lighted doorway—the entrance to the palatial mansion of an upstart politician. The large doors were thrown open, and the hall-porter stood in full livery awaiting the master’s carriage. Larralde was already in the patio, and Conyngham ran through the marble-paved entrance hall, before the porter realised what was taking place. There was no second exit as the fugitive had hoped—so it was round the patio and out again into the dark street, leaving the hall-porter dumfounded.

Larralde turned sharply to the right as soon as he gained the Calle Preciados. It was a mere alley running the whole way round a church—and here again was solitude, but not silence, for the wind roared among the chimneys overhead as it roars through a ship’s rigging at sea. The Calle Preciados again! and a momentary confusion among the tables of a café that stood upon the pavement, amid upturned chairs and a fallen, flapping awning. The pace was less killing now, but Larralde still held his own—one hand clutched over the precious letter regained at last—and Conyngham was conscious of a sharp pain where the Spaniard’s knife had touched his lung.

Larralde ran mechanically with open mouth and staring eyes. He never doubted that death was

at his heels, should he fail to distance the pursuer. For he had recognised Conyngham in the patio of the great house, and as he ran the vague wonder filled his mind whether the Englishman carried a knife. What manner of death would it be if that long arm reached him? Esteban Larralde was afraid. His own life—Julia's life—the lives of a whole Carlist section were at stake. The history of Spain, perhaps of Europe, depended on the swiftness of his foot.

The little crescent moon was shining clearly now between the long-drawn rifts of the rushing clouds. Larralde turned to the right again, up a narrow street which seemed to promise a friendly darkness. The ascent was steep, and the Spaniard gasped for breath as he ran—his legs were becoming numb. He had never been in this street before, and knew not whither it led. But it was at all events dark and deserted. Suddenly he fell upon a heap of bricks and rubbish, a whole stack of chimneys. He could smell the soot. Conyngham was upon him, touched him, but failed to get a grip. Larralde was afoot in an instant, and fell heavily down the far side of the barricade. He gained a few yards again, and, before Conyngham's eyes, was suddenly swallowed up in a black mass of falling masonry. It was more than a chimney this time; nothing less than a whole house carried bodily to the ground by the fall of the steeple of the church of Santa Maria del Monte. Conyngham stopped dead, and threw his arms over his head. The crash was terrific, deafening—and for a few moments the Englishman was stunned. He opened his eyes and closed them again, for the dust and powdered mortar whirled round him like smoke. Almost blinded, he crept back by the way he had come, and the street was already full of people. In the Calle Preciados he sat down on a door-step, and there waited until he had gained mastery over his limbs, which shook still. Presently he made his way back to the house where he had left Concha.

The man Sebastian had, a week earlier, seen and recognised Conyngham as the bearer of the letter addressed to Colonel Monreal, and left at that officer's lodging in Xeres at the moment of his death in the streets. Sebastian approached Conyngham, and informed him that he had in his possession sundry papers belonging to the late Colonel Monreal, which might be of value to a Royalist. This was, therefore, not the first time that Conyngham had climbed the narrow stairs of the tall house with two doors.

He found Concha busying himself by the bedside, where Sebastian lay in the unconsciousness of deep drink.

'He has probably been drugged,' said the priest. 'Or, he may be dying. What is more important to us is, that the letter is not here. I have searched. Larralde escaped you?'

'Yes; and of course has the letter.'

'Of course, amigo.'

The priest looked at the prostrate man with a face of profound contempt, and, shrugging his shoulders, went towards the door.

'Come,' he said, 'I must return to Toledo and Julia. It is thither that this Larralde always returns, and she, poor woman, believes in him. Ah, my friend'—he paused and shook his long finger at Conyngham. 'When a woman believes in a man she makes him or mars him; there is no medium.'

CHAPTER XVIII IN TOLEDO

p. 197

'Meddle not with many matters; for if thou meddle much thou shalt not be innocent.'

THE Café of the Ambassadeurs in the Calle de la Montera was at this time the fashionable resort of visitors to the city of Madrid. Its tone was neither political nor urban, but savoured rather of the cosmopolitan. The waiters at the first-class hotels recommended the Café of the Ambassadeurs, and stepped round to the manager's office at the time of the New Year to mention the fact.

Sir John Pleydell had been rather nonplussed by his encounter with Conyngham, and, being a man of the world as well as a lawyer, sat down, as it were, to think. He had come to Spain in the first heat of a great revenge, and such men as he take, like the greater volcanoes, a long time to cool down. He had been prepossessed in the favour of the man who subsequently owned to being Frederick Conyngham. And the very manner in which this admission was made redounded in some degree to the honour of the young Englishman. Here, at least, was one who had no fear, and fearlessness appeals to the heart of every Briton from the peer to the navy.

Sir John took a certain cold interest in his surroundings, and in due course was recommended to spend an evening at the Café des Ambassadeurs, as it styled itself, for the habit of preferring French to Spanish designations for places of refreshment had come in since the great revolution. Sir John went, therefore, to the café, and with characteristic scorn of elemental disturbance chose to resort thither on the evening of the great gale. The few other occupants of the gorgeous room eyed his half-bottle of claret with a grave and decorous wonder, but made no attempt to converse with this chill-looking Englishman. At length, about ten o'clock or a few minutes later, entered one who bowed to Sir John with an air full of affable promise. This was Larralde, who

called a waiter and bade him fetch a coat-brush.

'Would you believe it, sir?' he said, addressing Sir John in broken English, 'but I have just escaped a terrible death.'

He shrugged his shoulders, spread out his hands, and laughed good-humouredly, after the manner of one who has no foes.

'The fall of a chimney—so—within a metre of my shoulder.' He threw back his cloak with a graceful swing of the arm and handed it to the waiter. Then he drew forward a chair to the table occupied by Sir John, who sipped his claret and bowed coldly.

'You must not think that Madrid is always like this,' said Larralde. 'But perhaps you know the city—'

'No—this is my first visit.'

Larralde turned aside to give his order to the waiter. His movements were always picturesque, and in the presence of Englishmen he had a habit of accentuating those characteristics of speech and manner which are held by our countrymen to be native to the Peninsula. There is nothing so disarming as conventionality—and nothing less suspicious. Larralde seemed ever to be a typical Spaniard—indolently polite, gravely indifferent—a cigarette-smoking nonentity.

They talked of topics of the day, and chiefly of that great event, the hurricane, which was still raging. Larralde, whose habit it was to turn his neighbour to account—a seed of greatness this!—had almost concluded that the Englishman was useless when the conversation turned, as it was almost bound to turn between these two, upon Conyngham.

'There are but few of your countrymen in Madrid at the moment,' Larralde had said.

'I know but one,' was the guarded reply.

'And I also,' said Larralde, flicking the ash from his cigarette. 'A young fellow who has made himself somewhat notorious in the Royalist cause—a cause in which I admit I have no sympathy. His name is Conyngham.'

Then a silence fell upon the two men, and over raised glasses they glanced surreptitiously at each other.

'I know him,' said Sir John at length, and the tone of his voice made Larralde glance up with a sudden gleam in his eyes. There thus sprang into existence between them the closest of all bonds—a common foe.

'The man has done me more than one ill-turn,' said Larralde after a pause, and he drummed on the table with his cigarette-stained fingers.

Sir John, looking at him, coldly gauged the Spaniard with the deadly skill of his calling. He noted that Larralde was poor and ambitious—qualities that often raise the devil in a human heart when fate brings them there together. He was not deceived by the picturesque manner of Julia's lover, but knew exactly how much was assumed of that air of simple vanity to which Larralde usually treated strangers. He probably gauged at one glance the depth of the man's power for good or ill, his sincerity, his possible usefulness. In the hands of Sir John Pleydell, Larralde was the merest tool.

They sat until long after midnight, and before they parted Sir John Pleydell handed to his companion a roll of notes, which he counted carefully and Larralde accepted with a grand air of condescension and indifference.

'You know my address,' said Sir John, with a slight suggestion of masterfulness which had not been noticeable before the money changed hands. 'I shall remain at the same hotel.'

Larralde nodded his head.

'I shall remember it,' he said. 'And now I go to take a few hours' rest. I have had a hard day, and am as tired as a shepherd's dog.'

And indeed the day had been busy enough. Señor Larralde hummed an air between his teeth as he struggled against the fierce wind.

Before dawn the gale subsided, and daylight broke with a clear, calm freshness over the city, where sleep had been almost unknown during the night. The sun had not yet risen when Larralde took the road on his poor, thin black horse. He rode through the streets, still littered with the *débris* of fallen chimneys, slates, and shutters, with his head up and his mind so full of the great schemes which gave him no rest, that he never saw Concepción Vara going to market with a basket on his arm and a cigarette, unlighted, between his lips. Concepción turned and watched the horseman, shrugged his shoulders, and quietly followed until the streets were left behind and there could no longer be any doubt that Larralde was bound for Toledo.

Thither, indeed, he journeyed throughout the day with a leisureliness begotten of the desire to enter the ancient city after nightfall only. Toledo was at this time the smouldering hotbed of those political intrigues which some years later burst into flame, and resulted finally in the expulsion of the Bourbons from the throne of Spain. Larralde was sufficiently dangerous to

require watching, and, like many of his kind, considered himself of a greater importance than his enemies were pleased to attach to him. The city of Toledo is, as many know, almost surrounded by the rapid Tagus, and entrance to its narrow confine is only to be gained by two gates. To pass either of these barriers in open day would be to court a publicity singularly undesirable at this time, for Esteban Larralde was slipping down the social slope, which gradual progress is the hardest to arrest. If one is mounting there are plenty to help him—those from above seeking to make unto themselves friends of the mammon of unrighteousness; those from below hoping to tread in the footsteps he may leave. Each step, however, of the upward progress has to be gained at the expense of another. But on the descent there are none to stay and many to push behind, while those in front make room readily enough. Larralde had for the first time accepted a direct monetary reward for his services. That this had been offered and accepted in a polite Spanish manner as an advance of expenses to be incurred was, of course, only natural under the circumstances, but the fact remained that Esteban Larralde was no longer a picturesque conspirator, serving a failing cause with that devotion which can only be repaid later by high honours, and a post carrying with it emoluments of proportionate value. He had, in fact, been paid in advance; which is the surest sign of distrust upon one side or the other.

The Barenas had been established at their house in Toledo some weeks, and, for Julia, life had been dull enough. She had hastened northward, knowing well that her lover's intrigues must necessarily bring him to the neighbourhood of the capital—perhaps to Toledo itself. Larralde had, however, hitherto failed to come near her, and the news of the day reported an increasing depression in the ranks of the Carlists. Indeed, that cause seemed now at such a low ebb that the franker mercenaries were daily drifting away to more promising scenes of warfare, while some cynically accepted commissions in the army of Espartero.

'I always said that Don Carlos would fail if he employed such men—as—well, as he does,' Madame Barena took more than one opportunity of observing at this time, and her emphatic fan rapped the personal application home.

She had just made this remark for perhaps the sixth time one evening when the door of the patio where she and Julia sat was thrown open, and Larralde—the person indirectly referred to—came towards the ladies. He was not afraid of Madame Barena, and his tired face lightened visibly at the sight of Julia. Concha was right. According to his lights Larralde loved Julia. She, who knew every expression, noted the look in his face, and her heart leapt within her breast. She had long secretly rejoiced over the failure of the Carlist cause. Such, messieurs, is the ambition of a woman for the man she really loves.

Señora Barena rose and held out her hand with a beaming smile. She was rather bored that evening, and it was pleasant to imagine herself in the midst of great political intrigues.

'We were wondering if you would come,' she said.

'I am here—there—everywhere—but I always come back to the Casa Barena,' he said gallantly.

'You look tired,' said Julia quietly. 'Where are you from?'

'At the moment I am from Madrid. The city has been wrecked by a tornado—I myself almost perished.'

He paused, shrugged his shoulders.

'What will you?' he added carelessly. 'What is life—a single life—in Spain to-day?'

Julia winced. It is marvellous how an intelligent woman may blind herself into absolute belief in one man. Señora Barena shuddered.

'Blessed Heaven!' she whispered. 'Why does not someone do something?'

'One does one's best,' answered Larralde, with his hand at his moustache.

'But yes!' said Madame eagerly. She had a shrewd common sense, as many apparently foolish women have, and probably put the right value on Señor Larralde's endeavours. Father Concha and the General were, however, far away, and all women are time-servers.

Larralde spoke of general news, and when he at length proposed to Julia that they should take a 'paseo' in the garden the elder lady made no objection. For some moments Julia was quite happy. She had schooled herself into a sort of contentment in the hope that her turn would come when ambition failed. Perhaps this moment had arrived. At all events, Larralde acquitted himself well, and seemed sincere enough in his joy at seeing her again.

'Do you love me?' he asked suddenly.

Julia gave a little laugh. Heaven has been opened by such a laugh ere now, and men have seen for a moment the brightness of it.

'Enough to leave Spain for ever and live in another country?'

'Yes.'

'Enough to risk something now for my sake?'

'Enough to risk everything,' she answered.

'I have tried to gain a great position for you,' went on Larralde, 'and fortune has been against me. I have failed. The Carlist cause is dead, Julia. Our chief has failed us—that is the truth of it. We set him up as a king, but unless we hold him upright he falls. He is a man of straw. We are making one last effort, as you know, but it is a dangerous one, and we have had misfortunes. This pestilential Englishman! No one may say how much he knows. He has had the letter too long in his possession for our safety. But I have outwitted him this time.'

Larralde paused, and drew from his pocket the letter in the pink envelope—somewhat soiled by its passage through the hands of Colonel Monreal's servant.

'It requires two more signatures and will then be complete,' said the upholder of Don Carlos. 'We shall then make our "coup," but we cannot move while Conyngham remains in Spain. It would never do for me to—well, to get shot at this moment.'

Julia breathed hard.

'And that is what Mr. Conyngham is endeavouring to bring about. In the first place he wants this letter to show to Estella Vincente—some foolish romance. In the second place he hates me, and seeks promotion in the Royalist ranks. These Englishmen are unscrupulous. He tried to take my life—only last night. I bear him no ill-feeling. *A la guerre comme à la guerre*. My only intention is to get him quietly out of Spain. It can be managed easily enough. Will you help me—to save my own life?'

'Yes,' answered Julia.

'I want you to write a letter to Conyngham saying that you are tired of political intrigue.'

'Heaven knows that would be true enough,' put in Julia.

'And that you will give him the letter he desires on the condition that he promises to show it to no one but Estella Vincente and return it to you. That you will also swear that it is the identical letter that he handed to you in the General's garden at Ronda. If Conyngham agrees, he must meet you at the back of the Church of Santo Tome in the Calle Pedro Martir here, in Toledo, next Monday evening at seven o'clock. Will you write this letter, Julia?'

'And Estella Vincente?' inquired Julia.

'She will forget him in a week,' laughed Larralde.

CHAPTER XIX

CONCEPCION TAKES THE ROAD

p. 208

'Who knows? the man is proven by the hour.'

AFTER the great storm came a calm almost as startling. It seemed indeed as if Nature stood abashed and silent before the results of her sudden rage. Day after day the sun glared down from a cloudless sky, and all Castile was burnt brown as a desert. In the streets of Madrid there arose a hot dust and the subtle odour of warm earth that rarely meets the nostrils in England. It savoured of India and other sun-steeped lands where water is too precious to throw upon the roads.

Those who could, remained indoors or in their shady patios until the heat of the day was past; and such as worked in the open lay unchallenged in the shade from midday till three o'clock. During those days military operations were almost suspended, although the heads of departments were busy enough in their offices. The confusion of war, it seemed, was past, and the sore-needed peace was immediately turned to good account. The army of the Queen Regent was indeed in an almost wrecked condition, and among the field officers jealousy and backbiting, which had smouldered through the war-time, broke out openly. General Vincente was rarely at home, and Estella passed this time in quiet seclusion. Coming as she did from Andalusia, she was accustomed to an even greater heat, and knew how to avoid the discomfort of it.

She was sitting one afternoon, with open windows and closed jalousies, during the time of the siesta, when the servant announced Father Concha.

The old priest came into the room wiping his brow with simple ill manners.

'You have been hurrying and have no regard for the sun,' said Estella.

'You need not find shelter for an old ox,' replied Concha, seating himself. 'It is the young ones that expose themselves unnecessarily.'

Estella glanced at him sharply but said nothing. He sat, handkerchief in hand, and stared at a shaft of sunlight that lay across the floor from a gap in the jalousies. From the street under the windows came the distant sounds of traffic and the cries of the vendors of water, fruit, and newspapers.

Father Concha looked puzzled, and seemed to be seeking his way out of a difficulty. Estella sat

back in her chair, half hidden by her slow-waving, black fan. There is no pride so difficult as that which is unconscious of its own existence, no heart so hard to touch as that which has thrown its stake and asks neither sympathy nor admiration from the outside world. Concha glanced at Estella and wondered if he had been mistaken. There was in the old man's heart, as indeed there is in nearly all human hearts, a thwarted instinct. How many are there with maternal instincts who have no children; how many a poet has been lost by the crying need of hungry mouths! It was a thwarted instinct that made the old priest busy himself with the affairs of other people, and always of young people.

'I came hoping to see your father,' he said at length, blandly untruthful. 'I have just seen Conyngham, in whom we are all interested, I think. His lack of caution is singular. I have been trying to persuade him not to do something most rash and imprudent. You remember the incident in your garden at Ronda—a letter which he gave to Julia?'

'Yes,' answered Estella quietly, 'I remember.'

'For some reason which he did not explain I understand that he is desirous of regaining possession of that letter, and now Julia, writing from Toledo, tells him that she will give it to him if he will go there and fetch it. The Toledo road, as you will remember, is hardly to be recommended to Mr. Conyngham.'

'But Julia wishes him no harm,' said Estella.

'My child, rarely trust a political man and never a political woman. If Julia wished him to have the letter she could have sent it to him by post. But Conyngham, who is all eagerness, must needs refuse to listen to any argument, and starts this afternoon for Toledo—alone. He has not even his servant Concepcion Vara, who has suddenly disappeared, and a woman who claims to be the scoundrel's wife from Algeciras has been making inquiries at Conyngham's lodging. A hen's eyes are where her eggs lie. I offered to go to Toledo with Conyngham, but he laughed at me for a useless old priest, and said that the saddle would gall me.'

He paused, looking at her beneath his shaggy brows, knowing, as he had always known, that this was a woman beyond his reach—cleverer, braver, of a higher mind than her sisters—one to whom he might perchance tender some small assistance, but nothing better. For women are wiser in their generation than men, and usually know better what is for their own happiness. Estella returned his glance with steady eyes.

'He has gone,' said Concha. 'I have not been sent to tell you that he is going.'

'I did not think that you had,' she answered.

'Conyngham has enemies in this country,' continued the priest, 'and despises them—a mistake to which his countrymen are singularly liable. He has gone off on this foolish quest without preparation or precaution. Toledo is, as you know, a hotbed of intrigue and dissatisfaction. All the malcontents in Spain congregate there, and Conyngham would do well to avoid their company. Who lies down with dogs gets up with fleas.'

He paused, tapping his snuffbox, and at that moment the door opened to admit General Vincente.

'Oh! the Padre!' cried the cheerful soldier. 'But what a sun, eh? It is cool here, however, and Estella's room is always a quiet one.'

He touched her cheek affectionately, and drew forward a low chair wherein he sat, carefully disposing of the sword that always seemed too large for him.

'And what news has the Padre?' he asked, daintily touching his brow with his pocket-handkerchief.

'Bad,' growled Concha, and then told his tale over again in a briefer, blunter manner. 'It all arises,' he concluded, 'from my pestilential habit of interfering in the affairs of other people.'

'No,' said General Vincente; 'it arises from Conyngham's pestilential habit of acquiring friends wherever he goes.'

The door was opened again, and a servant entered.

'Excellency,' he said, 'a man called Concepcion Vara, who desires a moment.'

'What did I tell you?' said the General to Concha. 'Another of Conyngham's friends. Spain is full of them. Let Concepcion Vara come to this room.'

The servant looked slightly surprised, and retired. If, however, this manner of reception was unusual, Concepcion was too finished a man of the world to betray either surprise or embarrassment. By good fortune he happened to be wearing a coat. His flowing unstarved shirt was as usual spotless, he wore a flower in the ribbon of the hat carried jauntily in his hand, and about his person in the form of handkerchief and faja were those touches of bright colour by means of which he so irresistibly attracted the eye of the fair.

'Excellency,' he murmured, bowing on the threshold; 'Reverendo,' with one step forward and a respectful semi-religious inclination of the head towards Concha; 'Señorita!' The ceremony here concluded with a profound obeisance to Estella full of gallantry and grave admiration. Then he stood upright, and indicated by a pleasant smile that no one need feel embarrassed, that in fact

this meeting was most opportune.

'A matter of urgency, Excellency,' he said confidentially to Vincente. 'I have reason to suspect that one of my friends—in fact, the Señor Conyngham, with whom I am at the moment in service—happens to be in danger.'

'Ah! what makes you suspect that, my friend?'

Concepción waved his hand lightly, as if indicating that the news had been brought to him by the birds of the air.

'When one goes into the café,' he said, 'one is not always so particular—one associates with those who happen to be there—muleteers, diligencia-drivers, bull-fighters, all and sundry, even contrabandistas.'

He made this last admission with a face full of pious toleration, and Father Concha laughed grimly.

'That is true, my friend,' said the General, hastening to cover the priest's little lapse of good manners, 'and from these gentlemen—honest enough in their way, no doubt—you have learnt—?'

'That the Señor Conyngham has enemies in Spain.'

'So I understand; but he has also friends?'

'He has one,' said Vara, taking up a fine, picturesque attitude, with his right hand at his waist where the deadly knife was concealed in the rolls of his faja.

'Then he is fortunate,' said the General, with his most winning smile; 'why do you come to me, my friend.'

'I require two men,' answered Concepción airily, 'that is all.'

'Ah! What sort of men. Guardias Civiles?'

'The Holy Saints forbid! Honest soldiers, if it please your Excellency. The Guardia Civil! See you, Excellency.'

He paused, shaking his outspread hand from side to side, palm downwards, fingers apart, as if describing a low level of humanity.

'A brutal set of men,' he continued; 'with the finger ever on the trigger and the rifle ever loaded. Pam! and a life is taken—many of my friends—at least, many persons I have met—in the café!'

'It is better to give him his two men,' put in Father Concha, in his atrocious English, speaking to the General. 'The man is honest in his love of Conyngham, if in nothing else.'

'And if I accord you these two men, my friend,' said the General, from whose face Estella's eyes had never moved, 'will you undertake that Mr. Conyngham comes to no harm?'

'I will arrange it,' replied Concepción, with an easy shrug of the shoulders. 'I will arrange it, never fear.'

'You shall have two men,' said General Vincente, drawing a writing-case towards himself and proceeding to write the necessary order. 'Men who are known to me personally. You can rely upon them at all times.'

'Since they are friends of his Excellency's,' interrupted Concepción with much condescension, 'that suffices.'

'He will require money,' said Estella in English—her eyes bright and her cheeks flushed. For she came of a fighting race, and her repose of manner, the dignity which sat rather strangely on her slim young shoulders, were only signs of that self-control which had been handed down to her through the ages.

The General nodded as he wrote.

'Take that to headquarters,' he said, handing the papers to Concepción, 'and in less than half an hour your men will be ready. Mr. Conyngham is a friend of mine, as you know, and any expenses incurred on his behalf will be defrayed by myself—'

Concepción held up his hand.

'It is unnecessary, Excellency,' he said. 'At present Mr. Conyngham has funds. Only yesterday he gave me money. He liquidated my little account. It has always been a jest between us—that little account.'

He laughed pleasantly, and moved towards the door.

'Vara,' said Father Concha.

'Yes, reverendo.'

'If I meet your wife in Madrid, what shall I say to her?'

Concepción turned and looked into the smiling face of the old priest.

'In Madrid, reverendo? How can you think of such a thing? My wife lives in Algeciras, and at times, see you—' he stopped, casting his eyes up to the ceiling and fetching an exaggerated sigh, 'at times my heart aches. But now I must get to the saddle. What a thing is Duty, reverendo! Duty! God be with your Excellencies.'

And he hurried out of the room.

'If you would make a thief honest, trust him,' said Concha, when the door was closed.

In less than an hour Concepción was on the road accompanied by two troopers, who were ready enough to travel in company with a man of his reputation. For in Spain, if one cannot be a bull-fighter it is good to be a smuggler. At sunset the great heat culminated in a thunderstorm, which drew a veil of heavy cloud across the sky, and night fell before its time.

The horsemen had covered two-thirds of their journey when he whom they followed came in sight of the lights of Toledo, set upon a rock like the jewels in a lady's ring, and almost surrounded by the swift Tagus. Conyngham's horse was tired, and stumbled more than once on the hill by which the traveller descends to the great bridge and the gate that Wamba built thirteen hundred years ago.

Through this gate he passed into the city, which was a city of the dead, with its hundred ruined churches, its empty palaces and silent streets. Ichabod is written large over all these tokens of a bygone glory; where the Jews flying from Jerusalem first set foot; where the Moor reigned unmolested for nearly four hundred years; where the Goth and the Roman and the great Spaniard of the middle ages have trod on each other's heels. Truly these worn stones have seen the greatness of the greatest nations of the world.

A single lamp hung slowly swinging in the arch of Wamba's Gate, and the streets were but ill lighted with an oil lantern at an occasional corner. Conyngham had been in Toledo before, and knew his way to the inn under the shadow of the great Alcazar, now burnt and ruined. Here he left his horse; for the streets of Toledo are so narrow and tortuous, so ill-paved and steep, that wheel traffic is almost unknown, while a horse can with difficulty keep his feet on the rounded cobble stones. In this city men go about their business on foot, which makes the streets as silent as the deserted houses.

Julia had selected a spot which was easy enough to find, and Conyngham, having supped, made his way thither without asking for directions.

'It is at all events worth trying,' he said to himself, 'and she can scarcely have forgotten that I saved her life on the Garonne as well as at Ronda.'

But there is often in a woman's life one man who can make her forget all. The streets were deserted, for it was a cold night, and the cafés were carefully closed against the damp air. No one stirred in the Calle Pedro Martir, and Conyngham peered into the shadow of the high wall of the Church of San Tome in vain. Then he heard the soft tread of muffled feet, and turning on his heel realised Julia's treachery in a flash of thought. He charged to meet the charge of his assailants. Two of them went down like felled trees, but there were others—four others—who fell on him silently like hounds upon a fox, and in a few moments all was quiet again in the Calle Pedro Martir.

CHAPTER XX

ON THE TALAVERA ROAD

p. 220

'Les barrières servent à indiquer où il faut passer.'

AN hour's ride to the west of Toledo, on the road to Torrijos and Talavera, and in the immediate neighbourhood of the village of Galvez, two men sat in the shadow of a great rock, and played cards. They played quietly and without vociferation, illustrating the advantages of a minute coinage. They had gambled with varying fortune since the hour of the siesta, and a sprinkling of cigarette ends on the bare rocks around them testified to the indulgence in a kindred vice.

The elder of the two men glanced from time to time over his shoulder, and down towards the dusty high road which lay across the arid plain beneath them like a tape. The country here is barren and stone-ridden, but to the west, where Torrijos gleamed whitely on the plain, the earth was green with lush corn and heavy blades of maize, now springing into ear. Where the two soldiers sat the herbage was scant and of an aromatic scent, as it mostly is in hot countries and in rocky places. That these men belonged to a mounted branch of the service was evident from their equipment, and notably from the great rusty spurs at their heels. They were clad in cotton—dusky white breeches, dusky blue tunics—a sort of undress, tempered by the vicissitudes of a long war and the laxity of discipline engendered by political trouble at home.

They had left their horses in the stable of a venta, hidden among ilex trees by the roadside, and had clambered to this point of vantage above the highway, to pass the afternoon after the manner of their race. For the Spaniard will be found playing cards amid the wreck of the world and in the intervals between the stupendous events of the last day.

'He comes,' said the elder man at length, as he leisurely shuffled the greasy cards. 'I hear his horse's hoofs.'

And, indeed, the great silence which seems to brood over the uplands of Spain—the silence, as it were, of an historic past and a dead present—was broken by the distant regular beat of hoofs.

The trooper who had spoken was a bullet-headed Castilian, with square jaw and close-set eyes. His companion, a younger man, merely nodded his head, and studied the cards which had just been dealt to him. The game progressed, and Concepción Vara, on the Toledo road, approached at a steady trot. This man showed to greater advantage on horseback and beneath God's open sky than in the streets of a city. Here, in the open and among the mountains, he held his head erect and faced the world, ready to hold his own against it. In the streets he wore a furtive air, and glanced from left to right fearing recognition.

He now took his tired horse to the stable of the little venta, where, with his usual gallantry, he assisted a hideous old hag to find a place in the stalls. While uttering a gay compliment, he deftly secured for his mount a feed of corn which was much in excess of that usually provided for the money.

'Ah!' he said, as he tipped the measure; 'I can always tell when a woman has been pretty; but with you, señora, no such knowledge is required. You will have your beauty for many years yet.'

Thus Vara and his horse fared ever well upon the road. He lingered at the stable door, knowing perhaps that corn poured into the manger may yet find its way back to the bin, and then turned his steps towards the mountain.

The cards were still falling with a whispering sound upon the rock selected as a table, and, with the spirit of a true sportsman, Concepción waited until the hand was played out before imparting his news.

'It is well,' he said at length. 'A carriage has been ordered from a friend of mine in Toledo to take the road to-night to Talavera—and Talavera is on the way to Lisbon. What did I tell you?'

The two soldiers nodded. One was counting his gains, which amounted to almost threepence. The loser wore a brave air of indifference, as behoved a reckless soldier taking loss or gain in a Spartan spirit.

'There will be six men,' continued Concepción. 'Two on horseback, two on the box, two inside the carriage with their prisoner—my friend.'

'Ah!' said the younger soldier thoughtfully.

Concepción looked at him.

'What have you in your mind?' he asked.

'I was wondering how three men could best kill six.'

'Out of six,' said the older man, 'there is always one who runs away. I have found it so in my experience.'

'And of five there is always one who cannot use his knife,' added Concepción.

Still the younger soldier, who had medals all across his chest, shook his head.

'I am afraid,' he said. 'I am always afraid before I fight.'

Concepción looked at the man whom General Vicente had selected from a brigade of tried soldiers, and gave a little upward jerk of the head.

'With me,' he said, 'it is afterwards—when all is over. Then my hand shakes, and the wet trickles down my face.'

He laughed, and spread out his hands.

'And yet,' he said gaily, 'it is the best game of all—is it not so?'

The troopers shrugged their shoulders. One may have too much of even the best game.

'The carriage is ordered for eight o'clock,' continued the practical Concepción, rolling a cigarette, which he placed behind his ear where a clerk would carry his pen. 'Those who take the road when the night-birds come abroad have something to hide. We will see what they have in their carriage, eh? The horses are hired for the journey to Galvez, where a relay is doubtless ordered. It will be a fine night for a journey. There is a half moon, which is better than the full for those who use the knife; but the Galvez horses will not be required, I think.'

The younger soldier, upon whose shoulder gleamed the stars of a rapid promotion, looked up to the sky, where a few fleecy clouds were beginning to gather above the setting sun like sheep about a gate.

'A half moon for the knife and a full moon for firearms,' he said.

'Yes; and they will shoot quick enough if we give them the chance,' said Concepción. 'They are Carlists! There is a river between this and Galvez—a little stream such as we have in Andalusia—'

so small that there is only a ford and no bridge. The bed of the river is soft; the horses will stop, or, at all events, must go at the walking pace. Across the stream are a few trees' (he paused, illustrating his description with rapid gestures and an imaginary diagram drawn upon the rock with the forefinger), 'ilex, and here, to the left, some pines. The stream runs thus from north-east to south-west. This bank is high, and over here are low-lying meadows where pigs feed.'

He looked up, and the two soldiers nodded. The position lay before them like a bird's-eye view; and Concepción, in whom Spain had perhaps lost a guerilla general, had only set eyes on the spot once as he rode past it.

'This matter is best settled on foot; is it not so? We cross the stream, and tie our horses to the pine trees. I will recross the water, and come back to meet the carriage at the top of the hill—here. The horsemen will be in advance. We will allow them to cross the stream. The horses will come out of the water slowly, or I know nothing of horses. As they step up the incline, you take their riders, and remember to give them the chance of running away. In midstream I will attack the two on the box, pulling him who is not driving into the water by his legs, and giving him the blade in the right shoulder above the lung. He will think himself dead, but should recover. Then you must join me. We shall be three to three, unless the Englishman's hands are loose; then we shall be four to three, and need do no man any injury. The Englishman is as strong as two, and quick with it, as big men rarely are.'

'Do you take a hand?' asked the Castilian, fingering the cards.

'No; I have affairs. Continue your game.'

So the sun went down, and the two soldiers continued their game, while Concepción sat beside them and slowly, lovingly sharpened his knife on a piece of slate which he carried in his pocket for the purpose.

After sunset there usually arises a cold breeze which blows across the table-lands of Castile quite gently and unobtrusively. A local proverb says of this wind that it will extinguish a man but not a candle. When this arose, the three men descended the mountain-side and sat down to a simple if highly-flavoured meal provided by the ancient mistress of the venta. At half-past eight, when there remained nothing of the day but a faint greenish light in the western sky, the little party mounted their horses and rode away towards Galvez.

'Tis better,' said Concepción, with a meaning and gallant bow to the hostess. "'Tis for my peace of mind. I am but a man.'

Then he haggled over the price of the supper.

They rode forward to the ford described by Concepción, and there made their preparations—carefully and coolly—as men recognising the odds against them. The half moon was just rising as the soldiers splashed through the water leading Concepción's horse, he remaining on the Toledo side of the river.

'The saints protect us!' said the nervous soldier, and his hand shook on the bridle. His companion smiled at the recollection of former fights passed through together. It is well, in love and war, to beware of him who says he is afraid.

Shortly after nine o'clock the silence of that deserted plain was broken by a distant murmur, which presently shaped itself into the beat of horses' feet. To this was added soon the rumble of wheels. The elder soldier put a whole cigarette into his mouth and chewed it. The younger man made no movement now. They crouched low at their posts one on each side of the ford. Concepción was across the river, but they could not see him. In Andalusia they say that a contrabandist can conceal himself behind half a brick.

The two riders were well in front of the carriage, and, as had been foreseen, the horses lingered on the rise of the bank as if reluctant to leave the water without having tasted it. In a moment the younger soldier had his man out of the saddle, raising his own knee sharply as the man fell, so that the falling head and the lifted knee came into deadly contact. It was a trick well known to the trooper, who let the insensible form roll to the ground, and immediately darted down the bank to the stream. The other soldier was chasing his opponent up the hill, shelling him, as he rode away, with oaths and stones.

In mid-stream the clumsy travelling carriage had come to a standstill. The driver on the box, having cast down his reins, was engaged in imploring the assistance of a black-letter saint, upon which assistance he did not hesitate to put a price, in candles. There was a scurrying in the water, which was about two feet deep, where Concepción was settling accounts with the man who had been seated by the driver's side. A half-choked scream of pain appeared to indicate that Concepción had found the spot he sought, above the right lung, and that amiable smuggler now rose dripping from the flood and hurried to the carriage.

'Conyngham!' he shouted, laying aside that ceremony upon which he never set great store.

'Yes,' answered a voice from within. 'Is that you, Concepción?'

'Of course; throw them out.'

'But the door is locked,' answered Conyngham in a muffled voice. And the carriage began to rock and crack upon its springs, as if an earthquake were taking place inside it.

'The window is good enough for such rubbish,' said Concepción. As he spoke a man, violently propelled from within, came head foremost, and most blasphemously vociferous, into Concepción's arms, who immediately, and with the rapidity of a terrier, had him by the throat and forced him under water.

'You have hold of my leg—you, on the other side,' shouted Conyngham from the turmoil within.

'A thousand pardons, señor!' said the soldier, and took a new grip of another limb.

Concepción, holding his man under water, heard the sharp crack of another head upon the soldier's kneecap, and knew that all was well.

'That is all?' he inquired.

'That is all,' replied the soldier, who did not seem at all nervous now. 'And we have killed no one.'

'Put a knife into that son of a mule who prays upon the box there,' said Concepción judicially. 'This is no time for prayer. Just where the neck joins the shoulder—that is a good place.'

And a sudden silence reigned upon the box.

'Pull the carriage to the bank,' commanded Concepción. 'There is no need for the English Excellency to wet his feet. He might catch a cold.'

They all made their way to the bank, where, in the dim moonlight, one man sat nursing his shoulder while another lay, at length, quite still, upon the pebbles.

The young soldier laid a second victim to the same deadly trick beside him, while Concepción patted his foe kindly on the back.

'It is well,' he said, 'you have swallowed water. You will be sick, and then you will be well. But if you move from that spot I will let the water out another way.'

And, laughing pleasantly at this delicate display of humour, he turned to help Conyngham, who was clambering out of the carriage window.

'Whom have you with you?' asked Conyngham.

'Two honest soldiers of General Vincente's division. You see, señor, you have good friends.'

'Yes, I see that.'

'One of them,' said Concepción meaningly, 'is at Toledo at the moment, journeying after you.'

'Ah!'

'The Señor Pleydell.'

'Then we will go back to meet him.'

'I thought so,' said Concepción.

CHAPTER XXI

A CROSS-EXAMINATION

p. 231

'Wherein I am false I am honest—not true to be true.'

'I WILL sing you a contrabandista song,' said Concepción, as the party rode towards Toledo in the moonlight. 'The song we—they sing when the venture has been successful. You may hear it any dark night in the streets of Gaucin.'

'Sing,' said the older soldier, 'if it is in your lungs. For us—we prefer to travel silent.'

Conyngham, mounted on the horse from which the Carlist rider had been dragged unceremoniously enough, rode a few paces in front. The carriage had been left behind at the venta, where no questions were asked, and the injured men revived readily enough.

'It is well,' answered Concepción, in no way abashed. 'I will sing. In Andalusia we can all sing. The pigs sing better there than the men of Castile.'

It was after midnight when the party rode past the Church of the Cristo de la Vega, and faced the long hill that leads to the gate Del Cambron. Above them towered the city of Toledo—silent and dreamlike. Concepción had ceased singing now, and the hard breathing of the horses alone broke the silence. The Tagus, emerging here from rocky fastness, flowed noiselessly away to the west—a gleaming ribbon laid across the breast of the night. In the summer it is no uncommon thing for travellers to take the road by night in Spain, and although many doubtless heard the clatter of horses' feet on the polished cobble stones of the city, none rose from bed to watch the horsemen pass.

At that time Toledo possessed, and indeed to the present day can boast of, but one good inn—a picturesque old house in the Plaza de Zocodover, overhung by the mighty Alcazar. Here Cervantes must have eaten and Lazarillo de Tormes no doubt caroused. Here those melancholy men and mighty humorists must have delighted the idler by their talk. Concepción soon aroused the sleeping porter, and the great doors being thrown open, the party passed into the courtyard without quitting the saddle.

'It is,' said Concepción, 'an English Excellency and his suite.'

'We have another such in the house,' answered the sleepy doorkeeper, 'though he travels with but one servant.'

'We know that, my friend, which is the reason why we patronise your dog-hole of an inn. See that the two Excellencies breakfast together at a table apart in the morning.'

'You will have matters to speak about with the Señor Pleydell in the morning,' said Concepción, as he unpacked Conyngham's luggage a few minutes later.

'Yes, I should like to speak to Señor Pleydell.'

'And I,' said Concepción, turning round with a brush in his hand, 'should like a moment's conversation with Señor Larralde.'

'Ah!'

'Yes, Excellency, he is in this matter too. But the Señor Larralde is so modest—so modest! He always remains in the background.'

In the tents of Kedar men sleep as sound as those who lie on soft pillows, and Conyngham was late astir the next morning. Sir John Pleydell was, it transpired, already at his breakfast, and had ordered his carriage for an early hour to take the road to Talavera. It was thus evident that Sir John knew nothing of the arrival of his fellow-countryman at midnight.

The cold face of the great lawyer wore a look of satisfaction as he sat at a small table in the patio of the hotel and drank his coffee. Conyngham watched him for a moment from the balcony of the courtyard, himself unseen, while Concepción stood within his master's bedroom, and rubbed his brown hands together in anticipation of a dramatic moment. Conyngham passed down the stone steps and crossed the patio with a gay smile. Sir John recognised him as he emerged from the darkness of the stairway, but his face betrayed neither surprise nor fear. There was a look in the grey eyes, however, that seemed to betoken doubt. Such a look a man might wear who had long travelled with assurance upon a road which he took to be the right one, and then at a turning found himself in a strange country with no landmark to guide him.

Sir John Pleydell had always outwitted his fellows. He had, in fact, been what is called a successful man—a little cleverer, a little more cunning than those around him.

He looked up now at Conyngham, who was drawing forward a chair to the neighbouring table, and the cold eye, which had been the dread of many a criminal, wavered.

'The waiter has set my breakfast near to yours,' said Conyngham, unconcernedly seating himself.

And Concepción in the balcony above cursed the English for a cold-blooded race. This was not the sort of meeting he had anticipated. He could throw a knife very prettily, and gave a short sigh of regret as he turned to his peaceful duties.

Conyngham examined the simple fare provided for him, and then looked towards his companion with that cheerfulness which is too rare in this world; for it is born of a great courage, and outward circumstances cannot affect it. Sir John Pleydell had lost all interest in his meal, and was looking keenly at Conyngham—dissecting, as it were, his face, probing his mind, searching through the outward manner of the man, and running helplessly against a motive which he failed to understand.

'I have in my long experience found that all men may be divided into two classes,' he said acidly.

'Fools and knaves?' suggested Conyngham.

'You have practised at the Bar,' parenthetically.

Conyngham shrugged his shoulders.

'Unsuccessfully—anybody can do that.'

'Which are you—a fool or a knave?' asked Sir John.

And suddenly Conyngham pitied him. For no man is proof against the quick sense of pathos aroused by the sight of man, or dumb animal, baffled. At the end of his life Sir John had engaged upon the greatest quest of it—an unworthy quest, no doubt, but his heart was in it—and he was an old man, though he bore his years well enough.

'Perhaps that is the mistake you have always made,' said Conyngham gravely. 'Perhaps men are not to be divided into two classes. There may be some who only make mistakes, Sir John.'

Unconsciously he had lapsed into the advocate, as those who have once played the part are apt to

do. This was not his own cause, but Geoffrey Horner's. And he served his friend so thoroughly that for the moment he really was the man whose part he had elected to play. Sir John Pleydell was no mean foe. Geoffrey Horner had succeeded in turning aside the public suspicion, and in the eternal march of events, of which the sound is louder as the world grows older and hollower, the murder of Alfred Pleydell had been forgotten by all save his father. Conyngham saw the danger, and never thought to avoid it. What had been undertaken half in jest would be carried out in deadly earnest.

'Mistakes,' said Sir John sceptically. In dealing with the seamy side of life men come to believe that it is all stitches.

'Which they may pass the rest of their lives in regretting.'

Sir John looked sharply at his companion, with suspicion dawning in his eyes again. It was Conyngham's tendency to overplay his part. Later, when he became a soldier, and found that path in life for which he was best fitted, his superior officers and the cooler tacticians complained that he was over-eager, and in battle outpaced the men he led.

'Then you see now that it was a mistake?' suggested Sir John. In cross-examinations the suggestions of Sir John Pleydell are remembered in certain courts of justice to this day.

'Of course.'

'To have mixed yourself in such an affair at all?'

'Yes.'

Sir John seemed to be softening, and Conyngham began to see a way out of this difficulty which had never suggested itself to him before.

'Such mistakes have to be paid for—and the law assesses the price.'

Conyngham shrugged his shoulders.

'It is easy enough to say you are sorry—the law can make no allowance for regret.'

Conyngham turned his attention to his breakfast, deeming it useless to continue the topic.

'It was a mistake to attend the meeting at Durham—you admit that?' continued Sir John.

'Yes—I admit that, if it is any satisfaction to you.'

'Then it was worse than a mistake to actually lead the men out to my house for the purpose of breaking the windows. It was almost a crime. I would suggest to you, as a soldier for the moment, to lead a charge up a steep hill against a body of farm labourers and others entrenched behind a railing.'

'That is a mere matter of opinion.'

'And yet you did that,' said Sir John. 'If you are going to break the law you should insure success before embarking on your undertaking.'

Conyngham made no answer.

'It was also a stupid error, if I may say so, to make your way back to Durham by Ravensworth, where you were seen and recognised. You see I have a good case against you, Mr. Conyngham.'

'Yes, I admit you have a good case against me, but you have not caught me yet.'

Sir John Pleydell looked at him coldly.

'You do not even take the trouble to deny the facts I have named.'

'Why should I, when they are true?' asked Conyngham carelessly.

Sir John Pleydell leant back in his chair.

'I have classified you,' he said with a queer laugh.

'Ah!' answered Conyngham, suddenly uneasy.

'Yes—as a fool.'

He leant forward with a deprecating gesture of his thin white hand.

'Do not be offended,' he said, 'and do not reproach yourself for having given your case away. You never had a case, Mr. Conyngham. Chartists are not made of your material at all. As soon as you gave me your card in Madrid, I had a slight suspicion. I thought you were travelling under a false name. It was plain to the merest onlooker that you were not the man I sought. You are too easy-going, too much of a gentleman to be a Chartist. You are screening somebody else. You have played the part well, and with an admirable courage and fidelity. I wish my boy Alfred had had a few such friends as you. But you are a fool, Mr. Conyngham. No man on earth is worth the sacrifice that you have made.'

Conyngham slowly stirred his coffee. He was meditating.

'You have pieced together a very pretty tale,' he said at length. 'Some new scheme to get me within the reach of the English law, no doubt.'

'It is a pretty tale—too pretty for practical life. And if you want proofs I will mention the fact that the Chartist meeting was at Chester-le-Street, not Durham; that my house stands in a hollow and not on a hill; that you could not possibly go to Durham *viâ* Ravensworth, for they lie in opposite directions. No, Mr. Conyngham, you are not the man I seek. And, strange to say, I took a liking to you when I first saw you. I am no believer in instinct, or mutual sympathy, or any such sentimental nonsense. I do not believe in much, Mr. Conyngham, and not in human nature at all. I know too much about it for that. But there must have been something in that liking for you at first sight. I wish you no harm, Mr. Conyngham. I am like Balaam—I came to curse, and now stay to bless. Or, perhaps, I am more like Balaam's companion and adviser—I bray too much.'

He sat back again with a queer smile.

'You may go home to England to-morrow if you care to,' he added, after a pause, 'and if that affair is ever raked up against you I will be your counsel, if you will have me.'

'Thank you.'

'You do not want to go home to England?' suggested Sir John, whose ear was as quick as his eye.

'No, I have affairs in Spain.'

'Or—perhaps a castle here. Beware of such—I once had one.'

And the cold grey face softened for an instant. It seemed at times as if there were after all a man behind that marble casing.

'A man who can secure such a friendship as yours has proved itself to be,' said Sir John after a short silence, 'can scarcely be wholly bad. He may, as you say, have made a mistake. I promise nothing; but perhaps I will make no further attempts to find him.'

Conyngham was silent. To speak would have been to admit.

'So far as I am concerned,' said Sir John, rising, 'you are safe in this or any country. But I warn you—you have a dangerous enemy in Spain.'

'I know,' answered Conyngham, with a laugh, 'Mr. Esteban Larralde. I once undertook to deliver a letter for him. It was not what he represented it to be, and after I had delivered it he began to suspect me of having read it. He is kind enough to consider me of some importance in the politics of this country owing to the information I am supposed to possess. I know nothing of the contents of the letter, but I want to regain it—if only for a few moments. That is the whole story, and that is how matters stand between Larralde and myself.'

CHAPTER XXII

REPARATION

p. 242

'Il s'en faut bien que l'innocence trouve autant de protection que le crime.'

FOR those minded to leave Spain at this time, there was but one route, namely, the south, for the northern exits were closed by the Carlists, still in power there, though thinning fast. Indeed, Don Carlos was now illustrating the fact, which any may learn by the study of the world's history, that it is not the great causes, but the great men, who have made and destroyed nations. Nearly half of Spain was for Don Carlos. The Church sided with him, and the best soldiers were those who, unpaid, unfed, and half clad, fought on the southern slopes of the Pyrenees for a man who dared not lead them.

Sir John Pleydell had intended crossing the frontier into Portugal, following the carriage conveying his prisoner to the seaport of Lisbon, where he anticipated no difficulty in finding a ship captain who would be willing to carry Conyngham to England. All this, however, had been frustrated by so unimportant a person as Concepción Vara, and the carriage ordered for nine o'clock to proceed to Talavera now stood in the courtyard of the hotel, while the Baronet in his lonely apartment sat and wondered what he should do next. He had dealt with justice all his life, and had ensued it not from love, but as a matter of convenience and a means of livelihood. From the mere habit, he now desired to do justice to Conyngham.

'See if you can find out for me the whereabouts of General Vincente at the moment, and let the carriage wait,' he said to his servant, a valet-courier of taciturn habit.

The man was absent about half an hour, and returned with a face that promised little.

'There is a man in the hotel, sir,' he said, 'the servant of Mr. Conyngham, who knows, but will not tell me. I am told, however, that a lady living in Toledo, a Contessa Barenna, will undoubtedly have the information. General Vincente was lately in Madrid, but his movements are so rapid and uncertain, that he has become a by-word in Spain.'

'So I understand. I will call on this Contessa this afternoon, unless you can get the information elsewhere during the morning. I shall not want the carriage.'

Sir John walked slowly to the window, deep in thought. He was interested in Conyngham, despite himself. It is possible that he had not hitherto met a man capable of so far forgetting his own interests as to undertake a foolish and dangerous escapade without anything in the nature of gain or advantage to recommend it. The windows of the hotel of the Comercio in Toledo look out upon the market-place, and Sir John, who was an indoor man, and mentally active enough to be intensely bored at times, frequently used this opportunity of studying Spanish life.

He was looking idly through the vile panes, when an old priest passed by, and glanced up beneath shaggy brows.

'Seen that man before,' said Sir John.

'Ah!' muttered Father Concha, as he hurried on towards the Palazzo Barenna. 'So far, so good. Where the fox is, will be found the stolen fowl.'

Concepción Vara, who was saddling his horse in the stable yard of the inn, saw the Padre pass.

'Ah, clever one!' he muttered, 'with your jokes about my wife. Now you may make a false journey for all the help you receive from me.'

And a few minutes later Concepción rode across the Bridge of Alcantara, some paces behind Conyngham, who deemed it wise to return to his duties at Madrid without delay.

Despite the great heat on the plains, which, indeed, made it almost dangerous to travel at midday, the streets of Toledo were cool and shady enough, as Sir John Pleydell traversed them in search of the Palazzo Barenna. The Contessa was in, and the Englishman was ushered into a vast room, which even the taste of the day could not entirely deprive of its mediæval grandeur. Sir John explained to the servant in halting Spanish that his name was unknown to the Señora Barenna, but that—a stranger in some slight difficulty—he had been recommended to seek her assistance.

Sir John was an imposing-looking man, with that grand air which enables some men not only to look, but to get over a wall while an insignificant wight may not so much as approach the gate. The señora's curiosity did the rest. In a few minutes the rustle of silk made Sir John turn from the contemplation of a suit of armour.

'Madame speaks French?'

'But yes, señor.'

Madame Barenna glanced towards a chair, which Sir John hastened to bring forward. He despised her already, and she admired his manner vastly.

'I have taken the immense liberty of intruding myself upon your notice, Madame.'

'Not to sell me a Bible?' exclaimed Señora Barenna, with her fan upheld in warning.

'A Bible! I believe I have one at home, in England, Madame, but—'

'It is well,' said Madame sinking back and fanning herself rather faintly. 'Excuse my fears. But there is an Englishman—what is his name? I forget.'

'Borrow.'

'Yes; that is it, Borrow. And he sells Bibles; and Father Concha, my confessor, a bear, but a holy man—a holy bear, as one might say—has forbidden me to buy one. I am so afraid of disobeying him, by heedlessness or forgetfulness. There are, it appears, some things in the Bible which one ought not to read, and one naturally—'

She finished the sentence with a shrug, and an expressive gesture of the fan.

'One naturally desires to read them,' suggested Sir John. 'The privilege of all Eve's daughters, Madame.'

Señora Barenna treated the flatterer to what the French call a *fin sourire*, and wondered how long Julia would stay away. This man would pay her a compliment in another moment.

'I merely called on the excuse of a common friendship, to ask if you can tell me the whereabouts of General Vincente,' said Sir John, stating his business in haste and when the opportunity presented itself.

'Is it politics?' asked the lady, with a hasty glance round the room.

'No, it is scarcely politics; but why do you ask? You are surely too wise, Madame, to take part in such. It is a woman's mission to please—and when it is so easy!'

He waved his thin white hand in completion of a suggestion which made his hearer bridle her stout person.

'No, no,' she whispered, glancing over her shoulder at the door. 'No; it is my daughter. Ah! señor, you can scarce imagine what it is to live upon a volcano!'

And she pointed to the oaken floor with her fan. Sir John deemed it wise to confine his display of sympathy to a glance of the deepest concern.

'No,' he said; 'it is merely a personal matter. I have a communication to make to my friend General Vincente or to his daughter.'

'To Estella?'

'To the Señorita Estella.'

'Do you think her beautiful? Some do, you know. Eyes—I admit—yes, lovely.'

'I admire the señorita exceedingly.'

'Ah yes, yes. You have not seen my daughter, have you, señor? Julia—she rather resembles Estella.'

Señora Barena paused and examined her fan with a careless air.

'Some say,' she went on, apparently with reluctance, 'that Julia is—well—has some advantages over Estella. But *I* do not, of course. I admire Estella, excessively—oh yes, yes.'

And the señora's dark eyes searched Sir John's face. They might have found more in sculptured marble.

'Do you know where she is?' asked Sir John, almost bluntly. Like a workman who has mistaken his material, he was laying aside his finer conversational tools.

'Well, I believe they arrive in Toledo this evening. I cannot think why. But with General Vincente one never knows. He is so pleasant, so playful—such a smile—but you know him. Well, they say in Spain that he is always where he is wanted. Ah!' Madame paused and cast her eyes up to the ceiling, 'what it is to be wanted somewhere, señor.'

And she gave him the benefit of one of her deepest sighs. Sir John mentally followed the direction of her glance, and wondered what the late Count thought about it.

'Yes, I am deeply interested in Estella—as indeed is natural, for she is my niece. She has no mother, and the General has such absurd ideas. He thinks that a girl is capable of choosing a husband for herself. But to you—an Englishman—such an idea is naturally not astonishing. I am told that in your country it is the girls who actually propose marriage.'

'Not in words, Madame—not more in England than elsewhere.'

'Ah,' said Madame, looking at him doubtfully, and thinking, despite herself, of Father Concha.

Sir John rose from the chair he had taken at the señora's silent invitation.

'Then I may expect the General to arrive at my hotel this evening,' he said. 'I am staying at the Comercio, the only hotel, as I understand, in Toledo.'

'Yes, he will doubtless descend there. Do you know Frederick Conyngham, señor?'

'Yes.'

'But everyone knows him!' exclaimed the lady vivaciously. 'Tell me how it is. A most pleasant young man, I allow you—but without introductions and quite unconnected. Yet he has friends everywhere.'

She paused and, closing her fan, leant forward in an attitude of intense confidence and secrecy.

'And how about his little affair?' she whispered.

'His little affair, Madame?'

'De cœur,' explained the lady, tapping her own breast with an eloquent fan.

'Estella,' she whispered after a pause.

'Ah!' said Sir John, as if he knew too much about it to give an opinion. And he took his leave.

'That is the sort of woman to break one's heart in the witness box,' he said as he passed out into the deserted street, and Señora Barena, in the great room with the armour, reflected complacently that the English lord had been visibly impressed.

General Vincente and Estella arrived at the hotel in the evening, but did not of course appear in the public rooms. The dusty old travelling carriage was placed in a quiet corner of the courtyard of the hotel, and the General appeared on this, as on all occasions, to court retirement and oblivion. Unlike many of his brothers-in-arms, he had no desire to catch the public eye.

'There is doubtless something astir,' said the waiter, who, in the intervals of a casual attendance on Sir John, spoke of these things, cigarette in mouth. 'There is doubtless something astir, since General Vincente is on the road. They call him the Stormy Petrel, for when he appears abroad there usually follows a disturbance.'

Sir John sent his servant to the General's apartment about eight o'clock in the evening asking permission to present himself. In reply, the General himself came to Sir John's room.

'My dear sir,' he cried, taking both the Englishman's hands in an affectionate grasp, 'to think that you were in the hotel and that we did not dine together. Come, yes, come to our poor apartment, where Estella awaits the pleasure of renewing your acquaintance.'

'Then the señorita,' said Sir John, following his companion along the dimly-lighted passage, 'has her father's pleasant faculty of forgetting any little *contretemps* of the past?'

'Ask her,' exclaimed the General in his cheery way. 'Ask her.' And he threw open the door of the dingy salon they occupied.

Estella was standing with her back to the window, and her attitude suggested that she had not sat down since she had heard of Sir John's presence in the hotel.

'Señorita,' said the Englishman, with that perfect knowledge of the world which usually has its firmest basis upon indifference to criticism, 'señorita, I have come to avow a mistake and to make my excuses.'

'It is surely unnecessary,' said Estella, rather coldly.

'Say rather,' broke in the General in his smoothest way, 'that you have come to take a cup of coffee with us and to tell us your news.'

Sir John took the chair which the General brought forward.

'At all events,' he said, still addressing Estella, 'it is probably a matter of indifference to you, as it is merely an opinion expressed by myself which I wish to retract. When I first had the pleasure of meeting you, I took it upon myself to speak of a guest in your father's house, fortunately in the presence of that guest himself, and I now wish to tell you that what I said does not apply to Frederick Conyngham himself, but to another whom Conyngham is screening. He has not confessed so much to me, but I have satisfied myself that he is not the man I seek. You, General, who know more of the world than the señorita, and have been in it almost as long as I have, can bear me out in the statement that the motives of men are not so easy to discern as younger folks imagine. I do not know what induced Conyngham to undertake this thing; probably he entered into it in a spirit of impetuous and reckless generosity, which would only be in keeping with his character. I only know that he has carried it out with a thoroughness and daring worthy of all praise. If such a tie were possible between an old man and a young, I should like to be able to claim Mr. Conyngham as a friend. There, señorita—thank you, I will take coffee. I made the accusation in your presence. I retract it before you. It is, as you see, a small matter.'

'But it is of small matters that life is made up,' put in the General in his deferential way. 'Our friend,' he went on after a pause, 'is unfortunate in misrepresenting himself. We also have a little grudge against him—a little matter of a letter which has not been explained. I admit that I should like to see that letter.'

'And where is it?' asked Sir John.

'Ah!' replied Vincente, with a shrug of the shoulders and a gay little laugh, 'who can tell? Perhaps in Toledo, my dear sir—perhaps in Toledo.'

CHAPTER XXIII

LARRALDE'S PRICE

p. 254

'It is as difficult to be entirely bad as it is to be entirely good.'

To those who say that there is no Faith, Spain is in itself a palpable answer. No country in the world can show such cathedrals as those of Granada, Cordova, Seville, Toledo, Burgos. In any other land any one of these great structures would suffice. But in Spain these huge monuments to that Faith which has held serenely through war and fashion, through thought and thoughtlessness, are to be found in all the great cities. And the queen of them all is Toledo.

Father Concha, that sour-visaged philosopher, had a queer pride in his profession and in the history of that Church which is to-day seen in its purest form in the Peninsula, while it is so entangled with the national story of Spain that the two are but one tale told from a different point of view. As a private soldier may take pleasure in standing on a great battlefield noting each spot of interest—here a valley of death, there the scene of a cavalry charge of which the thunder will echo down through all the ages—so Concha, a mere country priest, liked to pace the aisles of a great cathedral, indulging the while in a half-cynical pride. He was no great general, no leader, of no importance in the ranks. But he was of the army, and partook in a minute degree in those victories that belonged to the past. It was his habit thus to pay a visit to Toledo Cathedral whenever his journeys led him to Castile. It was, moreover, his simple custom to attend the early mass which is here historical; and, indeed, to walk through the church, grey and cool, with the hush that seems to belong only to buildings of stupendous age, is in itself a religious service.

Concha was passing across the nave, hat in hand, a gaunt, ill-clad, and somewhat pathetic figure, when he caught sight of Sir John Pleydell. The Englishman paused involuntarily and looked at

the Spaniard. Concha bowed.

'We met,' he said, 'for a moment in the garden of General Vincente's house at Ronda.'

'True,' answered Sir John. 'Are you leaving the Cathedral? We might walk a little way together. One cannot talk idly—here.'

He paused and looked up at the great oak screen—at the towering masonry.

'No,' answered Concha gravely. 'One cannot talk idly here.'

Concha held back the great leathern *portière*, and the Englishman passed out.

'This is a queer country, and you are a queer people,' he said presently. 'When I was at Ronda I met a certain number of persons—I can count them on my fingers. General Vincente, his daughter, Señora Barena, Señorita Barena, the Englishman Conyngham, yourself, Señor Concha. I arrived in Toledo yesterday morning; in twenty-four hours I have caught sight of all the persons mentioned, here in Toledo.'

'And here, in Toledo, is another of whom you have not caught sight,' said Concha.

'Ah?'

'Yes; Señor Larralde.'

'Is he here?'

'Yes,' said Concha.

They walked on in silence for some minutes.

'What are we all doing here, Padre?' inquired Sir John, with his cold laugh.

'What are you doing here, señor?'

Sir John did not answer at once. They were walking leisurely. The streets were deserted, as indeed the streets of Toledo usually are.

'I am putting two and two together,' the great lawyer answered at length. 'I began doing so in idleness, and now I have become interested.'

'Ah!'

'Yes. I have become interested. They say, Padre, that a pebble set in motion at the summit of a mountain may gather other pebbles and increase in bulk and speed until, in the form of an avalanche, it overwhelms a city in the valley.'

'Yes, señor.'

'And I have conceived the strange fancy that Frederick Conyngham, when he first came to this country, set such a pebble in motion at the summit of a very high mountain. It has been falling and falling silently ever since, and it is gaining in bulk. And you, and General Vincente, and Estella Vincente, and Señorita Barena, and Frederick Conyngham, and in a minor degree myself, are on the slope in the track of the avalanche, and are sliding down behind it. And the General and Estella, and yourself and Conyngham, are trying to overtake it and stop it. And, reverendo, in the valley below is the monarchy of Spain—the Bourbon cause.'

Father Concha, remembering his favourite maxim that no flies enter a shut mouth, was silent.

'The pebble was a letter,' said Sir John.

'And Larralde has it,' he added after a pause. 'And that is why you are all in Toledo—why the air is thick with apprehension, and why all Spain seems to pause and wait breathlessly. Will the avalanche be stopped, or will it not? Will the Bourbons—than whom history has known no more interesting and more unsatisfactory race, except our own Stuarts—will the Bourbons fall, Señor Padre?'

'Ah!' said Concha, whose furrowed face and pessimistic glance betrayed nothing. 'Ah!'

'You will not tell me, of course. You know much that you will not tell me, and I merely ask you from curiosity. You perhaps know one thing, and that I wish to learn from you—not out of curiosity, but because I, too, would fain overtake the avalanche and stop it. I am no politician, señor, though of course I have my views. When a man has reached my age, he knows assuredly that politics merely mean self-aggrandisement, and nothing else. No—the Bourbons may fall; Spain may follow the lead of France and make an exhibition of herself before the world as a Republic. I am indifferent to these events. But I wish to do Frederick Conyngham a good turn, and I ask you to tell me where I shall find Larralde—you who know everything, Señor Padre.'

Concha reflected while they walked along on the shady side of the narrow street. It happened to be the street where the saddlers live, and the sharp sound of their little hammers on leather and wood came from almost every darkened doorway. The Padre had a wholesome fear of Esteban Larralde, and an exaggerated estimation of that schemer's ability. He was a humble-minded old man, and ever hesitated to pit his own brain against that of another. He knew that Sir John was a cleverer man than Larralde, deeper versed in that side of human nature where the seams are and

the knots and the unsightly stitches; older, more experienced, and probably no more scrupulous.

'Yes,' said the priest, 'I can tell you that. Larralde lodges in the house of a malcontent, one Lamberto, a scribbling journalist, who is hurt because the world takes him at its own valuation and not at his. The house is next to the little synagogue in the Calle de Madrid, a small stationer's shop, where one may buy the curse of this generation—pens and paper.'

'Thank you,' said Sir John, civilly and simply. This man has no doubt been ill-painted, but some may have seen that with different companions he wore a different manner. He was, as all successful men are, an unconscious actor, and in entering into the personality of the companion of the moment he completely sank his own. He never sought to be all things to all men, and yet he came near to the accomplishment of that hard task. Sir John was not a sympathetic man; he merely mistook life for a court of justice, and arraigned all human nature in the witness-box, with the inward conviction that this should by rights be exchanged for the felon's dock.

With Concha he was as simple, as direct, and as unsophisticated as the old priest himself, and now took his leave without attempting to disguise the fact that he had accomplished a foreset purpose.

Without difficulty he found the small stationer's shop next to the synagogue in the Calle de Madrid, and bade the stationer—a spectacled individual with upright hair and the air of seeking something in the world which is not usually behind a counter—take his card to Señor Larralde. At first the stationer pretended ignorance of the name, but on discovering that Sir John had not sufficient Spanish to conduct a conversation of intrigue, disappeared into a back room, whence emanated a villanous smell of cooking.

While Sir John waited in the little shop, Father Concha walked to the Plazuela de l'Iglesia Vieja, which small square, overhanging the Tagus and within reach of its murmuring voice, is deserted except at midday, when the boys play at bull-fighting and a few workmen engage in a grave game of bowls. Concha sat, book in hand, opened honestly at the office of the day and hour, and read no word. Instead, he stared across the gorge at the brown bank of land which commands the city and renders it useless as a fortress in the days of modern artillery. He sat and stared grimly, and thought perhaps of those secret springs within the human heart that make one man successful and unhappy, while another, possessing brains and ability and energy, fails in life, yet is perhaps the happier of the two. For it had happened to Father Concha, as it may happen to writer and reader at any moment, to meet one who in individuality bears a resemblance to that self which we never know and yet are ever conscious of.

Sir John Pleydell, a few hundred yards away, obeyed the shopman's invitation to step upstairs with something approaching alacrity.

Larralde was seated at a table strewn with newspapers and soiled by cigarette ash. He had the unkempt and pallid look of one who has not seen the sun or breathed fresh air for days. For, as Concepción had said, this was a conspirator who preferred to lurk in friendly shelter while others played the bolder game at the front. Larralde had, in fact, not stirred abroad for nearly a week.

'Well, señor,' he said, with a false air of bravado. 'How fares it with your little undertaking?'

'That,' replied Sir John, 'is past—and paid for. And I have another matter for your consideration. Conyngham is not, after all, the man I seek.'

Sir John's manner had changed. He spoke as one having authority. And Larralde shrugged his shoulders, remembering a past payment.

'Ah!' he said, rolling a cigarette with a fine air of indifference.

'On the one hand,' continued Sir John judicially, 'I come to make you an offer which can only be beneficial to you; on the other hand, Señor Larralde, I know enough to make things particularly unpleasant for you.'

Larralde raised his eyebrows and sought the matchbox. His thoughts seemed to amuse him.

'I have reason to assume that a certain letter is now in your possession again. I do not know the contents of this letter, and I cannot say that I am at all interested in it. But a friend of mine is particularly anxious to have possession of it for a short space of time. I have, unasked, taken upon myself the office of intermediary.'

Larralde's eyes flashed through the smoke.

'You are about to offer me money; be careful, señor,' he said hotly, and Sir John smiled.

'Be careful, that it is enough,' he suggested. 'Keep your grand airs for your fellows, Señor Larralde. Yes, I am about to offer you two hundred pounds—say three thousand pesetas—for the loan of that letter for a few hours only. I will guarantee that it is read by one person only, and that a lady. This lady will probably glance at the first lines, merely to satisfy herself as to the nature of its contents. Three thousand pesetas will enable you to escape to Cuba if your schemes fail. If you succeed, three thousand pesetas will always be of use, even to a member of a Republican Government.'

Larralde reflected. He had lately realised the fact that the Carlist cause was doomed. There is a time in the schemes of men, and it usually comes just before the crisis, when the stoutest heart

hesitates and the most reckless conspirator thinks of his retreat. Esteban Larralde had begun to think of Cuba during the last few days, and the mention of that haven for Spanish failures almost unnerved him.

'In a week,' suggested Sir John again, 'it may be—well—settled one way or the other.'

Larralde glanced at him sharply. This Englishman was either well-informed or very cunning. He seemed to have read the thought in Larralde's mind.

'No doubt,' went on the Englishman, 'you have divined for whom I want the letter and who will read it. We have both mistaken our man. We both owe Conyngham a good turn—I, in reparation, you, in gratitude; for he undoubtedly saved the Señorita Barena from imprisonment for life.'

Larralde shrugged his shoulders.

'Each man,' he said, 'must fight for himself.'

'And the majority of us for a woman as well,' amended Sir John. 'At least, in Spain, chivalry is not dead.'

Larralde laughed. He was vain, and Sir John knew it. He had a keen sight for the breach in his opponent's armour.

'You have put your case well,' said the Spaniard patronisingly, 'and I do not see why, at the end of a week, I should not agree to your proposal. It is, as you say, for the sake of a woman.'

'Precisely.'

Larralde leant back in his chair, remembering the legendary gallantry of his race, and wearing an appropriate expression.

'For a woman,' he repeated with an eloquent gesture.

'Precisely.'

'Then I will do it, señor. I will do it.'

'For two hundred pounds?' inquired Sir John coldly.

'As you will,' answered the Spaniard, with a noble indifference to such sordid matters.

CHAPTER XXIV

PRIESTCRAFT

p. 265

'No man I fear can effect great benefits for his country without some sacrifice of the minor virtues.'

THE Señora Barena was a leading social light in Toledo, insomuch as she never refused an invitation.

'One has one's duties towards society,' she would say with a sigh. 'Though the saints know that I take no pleasure in these affairs.'

Then she put on her best Seville mantilla and bustled off to some function or another, where she talked volubly and without discretion.

Julia had of late withdrawn more and more from that life of continued and mild festivity of which it is to be feared the existence of many women is composed. This afternoon she sat alone in the great gloomy house in Toledo, waiting for Larralde. For she, like thousands of her sisters, loved an unworthy object—*faute de mieux*—with open eyes and a queer philosophy that bade her love Larralde rather than love none. She had lately spent a large part of her existence in waiting for Larralde, who, indeed, was busy enough at this time, and rarely stirred abroad while the sun was up.

'Julia,' said Señora Barena to Concha, 'is no longer a companion to me. She does not even attempt to understand my sensitive organisation. She is a mere statue, and thinks of nothing but politics.'

'For her, Madame, as for all women, there would be no politics if there were no politicians,' the priest replied.

This afternoon Julia was more restless than ever. Larralde had not been to see her for many days, and had only written a hurried note from time to time in answer to her urgent request, telling her that he was well and in no danger.

She now no longer knew whether he was in Toledo or not, but had sufficient knowledge of the schemes in which he was engaged to be aware of the fact that these were coming to a crisis. Esteban Larralde had indeed told her more than was either necessary or discreet, and it was his vanity that led him into this imprudence. We are all ready enough to impart information which

will show our neighbours that we are more important than we appear.

After a broiling day the sun was now beginning to lose a little of his terrific power, and, in the shade of the patio upon which the windows of Julia's room opened, the air was quite cool and pleasant. A fountain plashed continuously in a little basin that had been white six centuries ago, when the Moors had brought the marble across the Gulf of Lyons to build it. The very sound of the water was a relief to overstrained nerves, and seemed to diminish the tension of the shimmering atmosphere.

Julia was alone, and barely made pretence to read the book she held in her hand. From her seat she could see the bell suspended on the opposite wall of the courtyard, of which the deep voice at any time of day or night had the power of stirring her heart to a sudden joy. At last the desired sound broke the silence of the great house, and Julia stood breathless at the window while the servant leisurely crossed the patio and threw open the great door, large enough to admit a carriage and pair. It was not Larralde, but Father Concha, brought hither by a note he had received from Sir John Pleydell earlier in the afternoon.

'I shall have the letter in a week from now,' the Englishman had written.

'Which will be too late,' commented Concha pessimistically.

The señora was out, they told him, but the señorita had remained at home.

'It is the señorita I desire to see.'

And Julia, at the window above, heard the remark with a sinking heart. The air seemed to be weighted with the suggestion of calamity. Concha had the manner of one bringing bad news. She forgot that this was his usual mien.

'Ah, my child,' he said, coming into the room a minute later and sitting down rather wearily.

'What?' she asked, her two hands at her breast.

He glanced at her beneath his brows. The wind was in the north-east, dry and tingling. The sun had worn a coppery hue all day. Such matters affect women and those who are in mental distress. After such a day as had at last worn to evening, the mind is at a great tension, the nerves are strained. It is at such times that men fly into sudden anger and whip out the knife. At such times women are reckless, and the stories of human lives take sudden turns.

Concha knew that he had this woman at a disadvantage.

'What?' he echoed. 'I wish I knew. I wish at times I was no priest.'

'Why?'

'Because I could help you better. Sometimes it is the man and not the priest who is the truest friend.'

'Why do you speak like this?' she cried. 'Is there danger? What has happened?'

'You know best, my child, if there is danger; you know what is likely to happen.'

Julia stood looking at him with hard eyes—the eyes of one in mortal fear.

'You have always been my friend,' she said slowly, 'my best friend.'

'Yes. A woman's lover is never her best friend.'

'Has anything happened to Esteban?'

The priest did not answer at once, but paused, reflecting, and dusting his sleeve, where there was always some snuff requiring attention at such moments.

'I know so little,' he said. 'I am no politician. What can I say? What can I advise you when I am in the dark? And the time is slipping by—slipping by.'

'I cannot tell you,' she answered, turning away and looking out of the window.

'You cannot tell the priest—tell the man.'

Then, suddenly, she reached the end of her endurance. Standing with her back towards him, she told her story, and Concha listened with a still, breathless avidity as one who, having long sought knowledge, finds it at last when it seemed out of reach. The little fountain plashed in the courtyard below; a frog in the basin among the water-lilies croaked sociably while the priest and the beautiful woman in the room above made history. For it is not only in kings' palaces nor yet in Parliaments that the story of the world is shaped.

Concha spoke no word, and Julia, having begun, left nothing unsaid, but told him every detail in a slow mechanical voice, as if bidden thereto by a stronger will than her own.

'He is all the world to me,' she said simply, in conclusion.

'Yes; and the happiest women are those who live in a small world.'

A silence fell upon them. The old priest surreptitiously looked at his watch. He was essentially a

man of action.

'My child,' he said, rising, 'when you are an old woman with children to harass you and make your life worth living, you will probably look back with thankfulness to this moment. For you have done that which was your only chance of happiness.'

'Why do you always help me?' she asked, as she had asked a hundred times.

'Because happiness is so rare that I hate to see it wasted,' he answered, going towards the door with a grim laugh.

He passed out of the room and crossed the patio slowly. Then, when the great door had closed behind him, he gathered up the skirts of his cassock and hurried down the narrow street. In such thoroughfares as were deserted he ran with the speed and endurance of a spare, hard-living man. Woman-like, Julia had, after all, done things by half. She had timed her confession too late.

At the hotel they told the Padre that General Vincente was at dinner and could not be disturbed.

'He sees no one,' the servant said.

'You do not know who I am,' said Concha, in an irony which, under the circumstances, he alone could enjoy. Then he passed up the stairs and bade the waiter begone.

'But I carry the General's dessert,' protested the man.

'No,' said Concha half to himself, 'I have that.'

Vincente was indeed at table with Estella. He looked up as the priest entered, fingering a cigarette delicately.

'How soon can you take the road?' asked Concha abruptly.

'Ten minutes—the time for a cup of coffee,' was the answer, given with a pleasant laugh.

'Then order your carriage.'

Vincente looked at his old friend, and the smile never left his lips, though his eyes were grave enough. It was hard to say whether aught on earth could disturb this man's equanimity. Then the General rose and went to the window which opened upon the courtyard. In the quiet corner near the rain-tank, where a vine grows upon trellis-work, the dusty travelling-carriage stood, and upon the step of it, eating a simple meal of bread and dried figs, sat the man who had the reputation of being the fastest driver in Spain.

'In ten minutes, my good Manuel,' said the General.

'Bueno,' grumbled the driver, with his mouth full—a man of few words.

'Is it to go far?' asked the General, turning on his heel and addressing Concha.

'A long journey.'

'To take the road, Manuel,' cried Vincente, leaning out. He closed the window before resuming his seat.

'And now, have you any more orders?' he asked with a gay carelessness. 'I counted on sleeping in a bed to-night.'

'You will not do that,' replied Concha, 'when you hear my news.'

'Ah!'

'But first you must promise me not to make use of the information I give you against any suspected persons—to take, in fact, only preventive measures.'

'You have only to name it, my friend. Proceed.'

The old priest paused and passed his hand across his brow. He was breathless still, and looked worn.

'It is,' he said, 'a very grave matter. I have not had much experience in such things, for my path has always lain in small parochial affairs—dealings with children and women.'

Estella was already pouring some wine into a glass. With a woman's instinct she saw that the old man was overwrought and faint. It was a Friday, and in his simple way there was no more austere abstinent than Father Concha, who had probably touched little food throughout the long hot day.

'Take your time, my friend; take your time,' said the General, who never hurried and was never too late. 'A pinch of snuff now—it stimulates the nerves.'

'It is,' said Concha at length—breaking a biscuit in his long bony fingers and speaking unembarrassedly with his mouth full—'it is that I have by the merest accident lighted upon a matter of political importance.'

The General nodded, and held his wine up to the light.

'There are matters of much political importance,' he said, 'in the air just now.'

'A plot,' continued Concha, 'spreading over all Spain; the devil is surely in it, and I know the Carlists are. A plot, believe me, to assassinate and rob and kidnap.'

'Yes,' said the General with his tolerant little smile. 'Yes, my dear Padre. Some men are so bloodthirsty; is it not so?'

'This plot is directed against the little Queen; against the Queen Regent; against many who are notable Royalists occupying high posts in the Government or the army.'

He glanced at Estella, and then looked meaningly at the General, who could scarcely fail to comprehend. 'Let us deal with the Queen and the Queen Regent,' said Vincente; 'the others are probably able to take care of themselves.'

'None can guard himself against assassination.'

The General seemed for a moment inclined to dispute this statement, but shrugged his shoulders and finally passed it by.

'The Queen,' he said. 'What of her?'

In response, Concha took a newspaper from his pocket and spread it out on the table. After a brief search up and down the ill-printed columns, he found the desired paragraph, and read aloud:

'The Queen is in Madrid. The Queen Regent journeys from Seville to rejoin her daughter in the capital, prosecuting her journey by easy stages and accompanied by a small guard. Her Majesty sleeps at Ciudad Real to-night, and at Toledo to-morrow night.'

'This,' said Concha, folding the newspaper, 'is a Carlist and revolutionary rag whose readers are scarcely likely to be interested for a good motive in the movements of the Queen Regent.'

'True, my dear Padre—true,' admitted Vincente, half reluctantly.

'Many kiss hands they would fain see chopped off. In the streets and on the Plaza I have seen many reading this newspaper and talking over it with unusual interest. Like a bad lawyer, I am giving the confirmation of the argument before the argument itself.'

'No matter—no matter.'

'Ah! but we have no time to do things ill or carelessly,' said the priest. 'My story is a long one, but I will tell it as quickly as I can.'

'Take your time,' urged the General soothingly. 'This great plot, you say, which is to spread over all Spain—'

'Is for to-morrow night, my friend.'

CHAPTER XXV

SWORDCRAFT

p. 276

'Rien n'est plus courageux qu'un cœur patient, rien n'est plus sûr de soi qu'un esprit doux.'

THE General set down his glass, and a queer light came into his eyes, usually so smiling and pleasant.

'Ah! Then you are right, my friend. Tell us your story as quickly as possible.'

'It appears,' said Concha, 'that there has been in progress for many months a plot to assassinate the Queen Regent and to seize the person of the little Queen, expelling her from Spain, and bringing in, not Don Carlos, who is a spent firework, but a Republic—a more dangerous firework, that usually bursts in the hands of those that light it. This plot has been finally put into shape by a letter—'

He paused, tapped on the table with his bony fingers, and glanced at Estella.

'A letter which has been going the round of all the malcontents in the Peninsula. Each faction-leader, to show that he has read it and agrees to obey its commands, initials the letter. It has then been returned to an intermediary, who sends it to the next—never by post, because the post is watched—always by hand, and usually by the hand of a person innocent of its contents.'

'Yes,' murmured the General absently, and there was a queer little smile on Estella's lips.

'To think,' cried Concha, with a sudden fire less surprising in Spain than in England, 'to think that we have all seen it—have touched it! Name of a saint! I had it under my hand in the hotel at Algeciras, and I left it on the table. And now it has been the round, and all the initials are placed upon it, and it is for to-morrow night.'

'Where have you learnt this?' asked the General in a voice that made Estella look at him. She had never seen him as his enemies had seen him, and even they confessed that he was always visible enough in action. Perhaps there was another man behind the personality of this deprecating, pleasant-spoken little sybarite—a man who only appeared (oh *rara avis!*) when he was wanted.

'No matter,' replied Concha, in a voice as hard and sharp.

'No; after all, it is of no matter, so long as your information is reliable.'

'You may stake your life on that,' said Concha, and remembered the words ever after. 'It has been decided to make this journey from Seville to Madrid the opportunity of assassinating the Queen Regent.'

'It will not be the first time they have tried,' put in the General.

'No. But this time they will succeed, and it is to be here—to-morrow night—in Toledo. After the Queen Regent's death, and in the confusion that will supervene, the little Queen will disappear, and then upon the rubbish-heap will spring up the mushrooms as they did in France; and this rubbish-heap, like the other, will foul the whole air of Europe.'

He shook his head pessimistically till the long, wispy grey hair waved from side to side, and his left hand, resting on the wrist-bone on the table, made an indescribable gesture that showed a foetid air tainted by darksome growths.

There was a silence in the room broken by no outside sound but the chink of champed bits as the horses stood in their traces below. Indeed, the city of Toledo seemed strangely still this evening, and the very air had a sense of waiting in it. The priest sat and looked at his lifelong friend, his furrowed face the incarnation of cynical hopelessness. 'What is, is worst,' he seemed to say. His yellow, wise old eyes watched the quick face with the air of one who, having posed an insoluble problem, awaits with a sarcastic humour the admission of failure.

General Vincente, who had just finished his wine, wiped his moustache delicately with his table-napkin. He was thinking—quickly, systematically, as men learn to think under fire. Perhaps, indeed, he had the thoughts half matured in his mind—as the greatest general the world has seen confessed that he ever had—that he was never taken quite by surprise. Vincente smiled as he thought: a habit he had acquired on the field, where a staff, and perhaps a whole army, took its cue from his face and read the turn of fortune there. Then he looked up straight at Estella, who was watching him.

'Can you start on a journey, now—in five minutes?' he asked.

'Yes,' she answered, rising and going towards the door.

'Have you a white mantilla among your travelling things?' he asked again.

Estella turned at the doorway and nodded. 'Yes,' she said again.

'Then take it with you, and a cloak, but no heavy luggage.'

Estella closed the door.

'You can come with us?' said the General to Concha, half command, half interrogation.

'If you wish it.'

'You may be wanted. I have a plan—a little plan,' and he gave a short laugh. 'It may succeed.'

He went to a side table, where some cold meats still stood, and, taking up a small chicken daintily with a fork, he folded it in a napkin.

'It will be Saturday,' he said simply, 'before we have reached our journey's end, and you will be hungry. Have you a pocket?'

'Has a priest a pocket?' asked Concha, with a grim humour, and he slipped the provisions into the folds of his cassock. He was still eating a biscuit hurriedly.

'I believe you have no money?' said the General suddenly.

'I have only enough,' admitted the old man, 'to take me back to Ronda; whither, by the way, my duty calls me.'

'I think not. Your Master can spare you for a while; my mistress cannot do without you.'

At this moment Estella came back into the room ready for her journey. The girl had changed of late. Her face had lost a little roundness and had gained exceedingly in expression. Her eyes, too, were different. That change had come to them which comes to all women between the ages of twenty and thirty, quite irrespective of their state. A certain restlessness, or a quiet content, are what one usually sees in a woman's face. Estella's eyes wore that latter look, which seems to indicate a knowledge of the meaning of life and a contentment that it should be no different.

Vincente was writing at the table.

'We shall want help,' he said, without looking up. 'I am sending for a good man.'

And he smiled as he shook the small sand-caster over the paper.

'May one ask,' said Concha, 'where we are going?'

'We are going to Ciudad Real, my dear friend, since you are so curious. But we shall come back—we shall come back.'

He was writing another despatch as he spoke, and at a sign from him Estella went to the door and clapped her hands, the only method of summoning a servant in general use at that time in Spain. The call was answered by an orderly, who stood at attention in the doorway for a full five minutes while the General wrote further orders in his neat, small calligraphy. There were half a dozen letters in all—curt military despatches without preamble and without mercy. For this soldier conducted military matters in a singularly domestic way, planning his campaigns by the fireside and bringing about the downfall of an enemy while sitting in his daughter's drawing-room. Indeed, Estella's blotting-book bore the impress of more than one death warrant or an order as good as such, written casually on her stationery and with her pen.

'Will you have the goodness to despatch these at once?' was the message taken by the orderly to the General's aide-de-camp, and the gallopers, who were always in readiness, smiled as they heard the modest request.

'It will be pleasant to travel in the cool of the evening, provided that one guards against a chill,' said the General, making his final preparations. 'I require but a moment to speak to my faithful aide-de-camp, and then we embark.'

The moon was rising as the carriage rattled across the Bridge of Alcantara, and Larralde, taking the air between Wamba's Gate and the little fort that guards the entrance to the city, recognised the equipage as it passed him. He saw also the outline of Concha's figure in the darkest corner of the carriage, with his back to the horses, his head bowed in meditation. Estella he saw and recognised, while two mounted attendants clattering in the rear of the carriage testified by their presence to the fact that the General had taken the road again.

'It is well,' said Larralde to himself. 'They are all going back to Ronda, and Julia will be rid of their influence. Ronda will serve as well as Toledo so far as Vincente is concerned. But I will wait to make sure that they are not losing sight of him.'

So Señor Larralde, cloaked to the eyebrows, leant gracefully against the wall, and, like many another upon the bridge after that breathless day, drank in the cool air that rose from the river. Presently—indeed, before the sound of the distant wheels was quite lost—two horsemen, cloaked and provided with such light luggage as the saddle can accommodate, rode leisurely through the gateway and up the incline that makes a short cut to the great road running southward to Ciudad Real. Larralde gave a little nod of self-confidence and satisfaction, as one who, having conceived and built up a great scheme, is pleased to see each component part of it act independently, and slip into its place.

The General's first thought was for Estella's comfort, and he utilised the long hill which they had to ascend on leaving the town to make such arrangements as space would allow for their common ease.

'You must sleep, my child,' he said. 'We cannot hope to reach Ciudad Real before midday tomorrow, and it is as likely as not that we shall have but a few hours' rest there.'

And Estella, who had travelled vast distances over vile roads so long as her memory went back, who had never known what it is to live in a country that is at peace, leant back in her corner and closed her eyes. Had she really been disposed to sleep, however, she could scarcely have done it, for the General's solicitude manifested itself by a hundred little devices for her greater repose. For her comfort he made Concha move.

'An old traveller like you must shift for yourself,' he said gaily.

'No need to seek shelter for an old ox,' replied Concha, moving into the other corner, where he carefully unfolded his pocket-handkerchief and laid it over his face, where his long nose, protruding, caused it to fall into fantastic folds. He clasped his hands upon his hat, which lay on his knee, and, leaning back, presently began to snore gently and regularly—a peaceful, sleep-inducing sound, and an excellent example. The General, whose sword seemed to take up half the carriage, still watched Estella, and if the air made her mantilla flutter, drew up the window with the solicitude of a lover and a maternal noiselessness. Then, with one hand on hers, and the other grasping his sword, he leant back, but did not close his eyes.

Thus they travelled on through the luminous night. The roads were neither worse nor better than they are to-day in Spain—than they were in England in the Middle Ages—and their way lay over the hill ranges that lie between the watersheds of the Tagus and the Guadiana. At times they passed through well-tended valleys, where corn and olives and vines seemed to grow on the same soil, but for the greater part of the night they ascended and descended the upper slopes, where herds of goats, half awakened as they slept in a ring about their guardian, looked at them with startled eyes. The shepherds and goatherds, who, like those of old, lay cloaked upon the ground, and tended their flocks by night, did not trouble to raise their heads.

Concha alone slept, for the General had a thousand thoughts that kept him awake and bright-eyed, while Estella knew from her father's manner and restlessness that these were no small

events that now stirred Spain, and seemed to close men's mouths, so that near friends distrusted one another, and brother was divided against brother. Indeed, others were on the road that night, and horsemen passed the heavy carriage from time to time.

In the early morning a change of horses was effected at a large inn near the summit of a pass above Malagon, and here an orderly, who seemed to recognise the General, was climbing into the saddle as the Vincentes quitted their carriage and passed into the common room of the venta for a hasty cup of coffee.

'It is the Queen's courier,' said the innkeeper grandly, 'who takes the road before her Majesty in order to secure horses.'

'Ah,' said the General, breaking his bread and dropping it into his cup. 'Is that so? The Queen Regent, you mean?'

'Queen or Queen Regent, she requires four horses this evening, Excellency—that is all my concern.'

'True, my friend; true. That is well said. And the horses will be forthcoming, no doubt.'

'They will be forthcoming,' said the man. 'And the Excellency's carriage is ready.'

In the early morning light they drove on, now descending towards the great valley of the Guadiana, and at midday, as Vincente had foreseen, gained a sight of the ancient city of Ciudad Real lying amid trees below them. Ciudad Real is less interesting than its name, and there is little that is royal about its dirty streets and ill-kept houses. No one gave great heed to the travelling-carriage, for this is a great centre where travellers journeying east or west, north or south, must needs pause for a change of horses. At the inn there were vacant rooms, and that hasty welcome accorded to the traveller at wayside houses where none stay longer than they can help.

'No,' said the landlord, in answer to the General's query. 'We are not busy, though we expect a lady who will pass the hour of the siesta here and then proceed northward.'

CHAPTER XXVI

WOMANCRAFT

p. 287

'Il est rare que la tête des rois soit faite à la mesure de leur couronne.'

IN the best room of the inn where Vincente and his tired companions sought a few hours' rest there sat alone, and in thought, a woman of middle age. Somewhat stout, she yet had that air which arouses the attention without being worthy of the name of beauty. This lady had doubtless swayed men's hearts by a word or a glance, for she still carried herself with assurance, and a hundred little details of her dress would have told another woman that she still desired to please. She wore a white mantilla.

The hour of the siesta was over, and after the great heat of the day a cool air was swinging down on the bosom of the river to the parched lowlands. It stirred the leaves of a climbing heliotrope which encircled the open windows, and wafted into the ill-furnished room a scent of stable-yard and dust.

The lady, sitting with her chin resting in the palm of her small white hand, seemed to have lately roused herself from sleep, and now had the expectant air of one who awaits a carriage and is about to set out on a long journey. Her eyes were dark and tired-looking, and their expression was not that of a good woman. A sensual man is usually weak, but women are different; and this face, with its faded complexion and tired eyes, this woman of the majestic presence and beautiful hands, was both strong and sensual. This, in a word, was a Queen who never forgot that she was a woman. As it was said of the Princess Christina, so it has been spoken of the Queen, that many had killed themselves for hopeless love of her. For this was the most dangerous of the world's creatures—a royal coquette. Such would our own Queen Bess have been had not God, for the good of England, given her a plain face and an ungainly form. For surely the devil is in it when a woman can command both love and men. Queen Christina, since the death of a husband who was years older than herself (and, as some say, before that historic event), had played a woman's game with that skill which men only half recognise, and had played it with the additional incentive that behind her insatiable vanity lay the heavier stake of a crown.

She was not the first to turn the strong current of man's passion to her own deliberate gain—nay, ninety-nine out of a hundred women do it. But the majority only play for a suburban villa and a few hundred pounds a year; Queen Christina of Spain handled her cards for a throne and the continuance of an ill-starred dynasty.

As she sat in the hotel chamber in Ciudad Real—that forlornest of royal cities—her face wore the pettish look of one who, having passed through great events, having tasted of great passions and moved amid the machinery of life and death, finds the ordinary routine of existence intolerably irksome. Many faces wear such a look in this country; every second beautiful face in London has

it. And these women—heaven help them—find the morning hours dull, because every afternoon has not its great event and every evening the excitement of a social function.

The Queen was travelling incognita, and that fact alone robbed her progress of a sense of excitement. She had to do without the shout of the multitude—the passing admiration of the man in the street. She knew that she was yet many hours removed from Madrid, where she had admirers, and the next best possession—enemies. Ciudad Real was intolerably dull and provincial. A servant knocked at the door.

‘General Vincente, your Majesty, craves the favour of a moment.’

‘Ah!’ exclaimed the Queen, the light returning to her eyes, a faint colour flushing her cheek. ‘In five minutes I will receive him.’

And there is no need to say how the Queen spent those minutes.

‘Your Majesty,’ said the General, bending over her hand, which he touched with his lips, ‘I have news of the greatest importance.’

The suggestion of a scornful smile flickered for a moment in the royal eyes. It was surely news enough for any man that she was a woman—beautiful still—possessing still that intangible and fatal gift of pleasing. The woman slowly faded from her eyes as they rested on the great soldier’s face, and the Queen it was who, with a gracious gesture, bade him be seated. But the General remained standing. He alone perhaps of all the men who had to deal with her—of all those military puppets with whom she played her royal game—had never crossed that vague boundary which many had overstepped to their own inevitable undoing.

‘It concerns your Majesty’s life,’ said Vincente bluntly, and calm in the certainty of his own theory that good blood, whether it flow in the veins of man or woman, assuredly carries a high courage.

‘Ah!’ said the Queen Regent, whose humour still inclined towards those affairs which interested her before the affairs of State. ‘But with men such as you about me, my dear General, what need I fear?’

‘Treachery, Madame,’ he answered, with his sudden smile and a bow. ‘Treachery.’

She frowned. When a Queen stoops to dalliance a subject must not be too practical.

‘Ah! What is it that concerns my life? Another plot?’ she inquired shortly.

‘Another plot, but one of greater importance than those that exist in the republican cafés of every town in your Majesty’s kingdom. This is a widespread conspiracy, and I fear that many powerful persons are concerned in it; but that, your Majesty, is not my department nor concern.’

‘What is your concern, General?’ she asked, looking at him over her fan.

‘To save your Majesty’s life to-night.’

‘To-night!’ she echoed, her coquetry gone.

‘To-night.’

‘But how and where?’

‘Assassination, Madame, in Toledo. You are three hours late in your journey. But all Toledo will be astir awaiting you, though it be till dawn.’

The Queen Regent closed her fan slowly. She was, as the rapid events of her reign and regency have proved, one of those women who rise to the occasion.

‘Then one must act at once,’ she said.

The General bowed.

‘What have you done?’ she asked.

‘I have sent to Madrid for a regiment that I know; they are as my own children. I have killed so many of them that the remainder love me. I have travelled from Toledo to meet your Majesty on the road, or here.’

‘And what means have you of preventing this thing?’

‘I have brought the means with me, Madame.’

‘Troops?’ asked the Queen doubtfully, knowing where the canker-worm lay hidden.

‘A woman and a priest, Madame.’

‘And—’

‘And I propose that your Majesty journey to Madrid in my carriage, attended only by my orderlies, by way of Aranjuez. You will be safe in Madrid, where the Queen will require her mother’s care.’

‘Yes. And the remainder of your plan?’

'I will travel back to Toledo in your Majesty's carriage with the woman and the priest and your bodyguard—just as your Majesty is in the habit of travelling. Toledo wants a fight; nothing else will satisfy them. They shall have it—before dawn. The very best I have to offer them.'

And General Vincente gave a queer, cheery little laugh, as if he were arranging a practical joke.

'But the fight will be round my carriage—'

'Possibly. I would rather that it took place in the Calle de la Ciudad, or around the Casa del Ayuntamiento, where your Majesty is expected to sleep to-night.'

'And these persons—this woman who risks her life to save mine—who is she?'

'My daughter,' answered the General gravely.

'She is here—in the hotel now?'

The General bowed.

'I have heard that she is beautiful,' said the Queen, with a quick glance towards her companion. 'How is it that you have never brought her to Court, you who come so seldom yourself?'

Vincente made no reply.

'However, bring her to me now.'

'She has travelled far, Madame, and is not prepared for presentation to her Queen.'

'This is no time for formalities. She is about to run a great risk for my sake, a greater risk than I could ever ask her to run. Present her as one woman to another, General.'

But General Vincente bowed gravely and made no reply. The colour slowly rose to the Queen Regent's face—a dull red. She opened her fan, closed it again, and sat with furtive downcast eyes. Suddenly she looked up and met his gaze.

'You refuse,' she said, with an insolent air of indifference. 'You think that I am unworthy to—meet your daughter.'

'I think only of the exigency of the moment,' was his reply. 'Every minute we lose is a gain to our enemies. If our trick is discovered Aranjuez will be no safer for your Majesty than is Toledo. You must be safely in Madrid before it is discovered in Toledo that you have taken the other route, and that the person they have mistaken for you is in reality my daughter.'

'But she may be killed,' exclaimed the Queen.

'We may all be killed, Madame,' he replied lightly. 'I beg that you will start at once in my carriage with your chaplain and the holy lady who is doubtless travelling with you.'

The Queen glanced sharply at him. It was known that although her own life was anything but exemplary, she loved to associate with women who, under the cloak of religion and an austere virtue, intrigued with all parties and condoned the Queen's offences.

'I cannot understand you,' she said, with that sudden lapse into familiarity which had led to the undoing of more than one ambitious courtier. 'You seem to worship the crown and despise the head it rests on.'

'So long as I serve your Majesty faithfully—'

'But you have no right to despise me,' she interrupted passionately.

'If I despised you, should I be here now—should I be doing you this service?'

'I do not know. I tell you I do not understand you.'

And the Queen looked hard at the man who, for this very reason, interested one who had all her life dealt and intrigued with men of obvious motive and unblushing ambition.

So strong is a ruling passion that even in sight of death (for the Queen Regent knew that Spain was full of her enemies and rendered callous to bloodshed by a long war) vanity was alert in this woman's breast. Even while General Vincente, that unrivalled strategist, detailed his plans, she kept harking back to the question that puzzled her, and but half listened to his instructions.

Those desirous of travelling without attracting attention in Spain are wise to time their arrival and departure for the afternoon. At this time, while the sun is yet hot, all shutters are closed, and the business of life, the haggling in the market-place, the bustle of the barrack yard, the leisurely labour of the fields, are suspended. It was about four o'clock—indeed, the city clocks were striking that hour—when the two carriages in the inn yard at Ciudad Real were made ready for the road. Father Concha, who never took an active part in passing incidents while his old friend and comrade was near, sat in a shady corner of the patio and smoked a cigarette. An affable ostler had in vain endeavoured to engage him in conversation. Two small children had begged of him, and now he was left in meditative solitude.

'In a short three minutes,' said the ostler, 'and the Excellencies can then depart. In which direction, reverendo, if one may ask?'

'One may always ask, my friend,' replied the priest. 'Indeed, the holy books are of opinion that it cannot be overdone. That chin strap is too tight.'

'Ah, I see the reverendo knows a horse.'

'And an ass,' added Concha.

At this moment the General emerged from the shadow of the staircase, which was open and of stone. He was followed by Estella, as it would appear, and they hurried across the sunlighted patio, the girl carrying her fan to screen her face.

'Are you rested, my child?' asked Concha at the carriage door.

The lady lowered the fan for a moment and met his eyes. A quick look of surprise flashed across Concha's face and he half bowed. Then he repeated his question in a louder voice:

'Are you rested, my child, after our long journey?'

'Thank you, my father, yes.'

And the ostler watched with open-mouthed interest.

The other carriage had been drawn up to that side of the courtyard where the open stairway was, and here also the bustle of departure and a hurrying female form, anxious to gain the shade of the vehicle, were discernible. It was all done so quickly, with such a military completeness of detail, that the carriages had passed through the great doorway and the troopers—merely a general's escort—had clattered after them before the few onlookers had fully realised that these were surely travellers of some note.

The ostler hurried to the street to watch them go.

'They are going to the north,' he said to himself, as he saw the carriages turn in the direction of the river and the ancient Puerta de Toledo. 'They go to the north—and assuredly the General has come to conduct her to Toledo.'

Strange to say, although it was the hour of rest, many shutters in the narrow street were open, and more than one peeping face was turned towards the departing carriages.

CHAPTER XXVII

A NIGHT JOURNEY

p. 298

'Let me but bear your love, I'll bear your cares.'

At the cross-roads on the northern side of the river the two carriages parted company, the dusty equipage of General Vincente taking the road to Aranjuez that leads to the right and mounts steadily through olive groves. The other carriage—which, despite its plain and sombre colours, still had an air of grandeur and almost of royalty, with its great wheels and curved springs—turned to the left and headed for Toledo. Behind it clattered a dozen troopers, picked men, with huge swinging swords and travel-stained clothes. The dust rose in a cloud under the horses' feet and hovered in the sullen air. There was no breath of wind, and the sun shone through a faint haze which seemed only to add to the heat.

Concha lowered the window and thrust forward his long inquiring nose.

'What is it?' asked the General.

'Thunder—I smell it. We shall have a storm to-night.' He looked out mopping his brow. 'Name of a saint! how thick the air is.'

'It will be clear before the morning,' said Vincente the optimist.

And the carriage rattled on towards the city of strife, where Jew, Goth and Roman, Moor and Inquisitor, have all had their day. Estella was silent, drooping with fatigue. The General alone seemed unmoved and heedless of the heat—a man of steel, as bright and ready as his own sword.

There is no civilised country in the world so bare as Spain, and no part of the Peninsula so sparsely populated as the Castiles. The road ran for the most part over brown and barren uplands, with here and there a valley where wheat and olives and vineyards graced the lower slopes. The crying need of all nature was for shade; for the ilex is a small-leaved tree giving a thin shadow with no cool depths amid the branches. All was brown and barren and parched. The earth seemed to lie fainting and awaiting the rain. The horses trotted with extended necks and open mouths, their coats wet with sweat. The driver—an Andalusian, with a face like a Moorish pirate—kept encouraging them with word and rein, jerking and whipping only when they seemed likely to fall from sheer fatigue and sun-weariness. At last the sun began to set in a glow like that of a great furnace, and the reflection lay over the land in ruddy splendour.

'Ah!' said Concha, looking out, 'it will be a great storm—and it will soon come.'

Vast columns of cloud were climbing up from the sunset into a sullen sky, thrown up in spreading mares' tails by a hundred contrary gusts of wind, as if there were explosive matter in the great furnace of the west.

'Nature is always on my side,' said Vincente, with his chuckling laugh. He sat, watch in hand, noting the passage of the kilometres.

At last the sun went down behind a distant line of hill—the watershed of the Tagus—and immediately the air was cool. Without stopping, the driver wrapped his cloak round him, and the troopers followed his example. A few minutes later a cold breeze sprung up suddenly, coming from the north and swirling the dust high in the air.

'It is well,' said Vincente, who assuredly saw good in everything; 'the wind comes first, and therefore the storm will be short.'

As he spoke the thunder rolled among the hills.

'It is almost like guns,' he added, with a queer look in his eyes suggestive of some memory.

Then, preceded by a rushing wind, the rain came, turning to hail, and stopping suddenly in a breathless pause, only to recommence with a renewed and splashing vigour. Concha drew up the windows, and the water streamed down them in a continuous ripple. Estella, who had been sleeping, roused herself. She looked fresh, and her eyes were bright with excitement. She had brought home with her from her English school that air of freshness and a dainty vigour which makes Englishwomen different from all other women in the world, and an English schoolgirl one of the brightest, purest, and sweetest of God's creatures.

Concha looked at her with his grim smile—amused at a youthfulness which could enable her to fall asleep at such a time and wake up so manifestly refreshed.

A halt was made at a roadside venta, where the travellers partook of a hurried meal. Darkness came on before the horses were sufficiently rested, and by the light of an ill-smelling lamp the General had his inevitable cup of coffee. The rain had now ceased, but the sky remained overcast and the night was a dark one. The travellers took their places in the carriage, and again the monotony of the road, the steady trot of the horses, the sing-song words of encouragement of their driver, monopolised the thoughts of sleepy minds. It seemed to Estella that life was all journeys, and that she had been on the road for years. The swing of the carriage, the little varieties of the road, but served to add to her somnolence. She only half woke up when, about ten o'clock, a halt was made to change horses, and the General quitted the carriage for a few minutes to talk earnestly with two horsemen, who were apparently awaiting their arrival. No time was lost here, and the carriage went forward with an increased escort. The two new-comers rode by the carriage, one on either side.

When Estella woke up, the moon had risen and the carriage was making slow progress up a long hill. She noticed that a horseman was on either side, close by the carriage window.

'Who is that?' she asked.

'Conyngham,' replied the General.

'You sent for him?' inquired Estella, in a hard voice.

'Yes.'

Estella was wakeful enough now, and sat upright, looking straight in front of her. At times she glanced towards the window, which was now open, where the head of Conyngham's charger appeared. The horse trotted steadily, with a queer jerk of the head and that willingness to do his best which gains for horses a place in the hearts of all who have to do with them.

'Will there be fighting?' asked Estella suddenly.

The General shrugged his shoulders.

'One cannot call it fighting. There may be a disturbance in the streets,' he answered.

Concha, quiet in his corner, with his back to the horses, watched the girl, and saw that her eyes were wide with anxiety now—quite suddenly. She, who had never thought of fear till this moment. She moved uneasily in her seat, fidgeting as the young ever do when troubled. It is only with years that we learn to bear a burden quietly.

'Who is that?' she asked shortly, pointing to the other window, which was closed.

'Concepción Vara—Conyngham's servant,' replied the General, who for some reason was inclined to curtness in his speech.

They were approaching Toledo, and passed through a village from time to time, where the cafés were still lighted up, and people seemed to be astir in the shadow of the houses. At last, in the main thoroughfare of a larger village within a stage of Toledo, a final halt was made to change horses. The street, dimly lighted by a couple of oil lamps swinging from gibbets at the corners of a crossroad, seemed to be peopled by shadows surreptitiously lurking in doorways. There was a false air of quiet in the houses, and peeping eyes looked out from behind the bars that covered every window, for even modern Spanish houses are barred as if for a siege, and in the ancient

villages every man's house is indeed his castle.

The driver had left the box, and seemed to be having some trouble with the ostlers and stable-helpers; for his voice could be heard raised in anger and urging them to greater haste.

Conyngham, motionless in the saddle, touched his horse with his heel, advancing a few paces so as to screen the window. Concepción, on the other side, did the same, so that the travellers in the interior of the vehicle saw but the dark shape of the horses and the long cloaks of their riders. They could perceive Conyngham quickly throw back his cape in order to have a free hand. Then there came the sound of scuffling feet and an indefinable sense of strife in the very air.

'But we will see—we will see who is in the carriage!' cried a shrill voice, and a hoarse shout from many bibulous throats confirmed the desire.

'Quick!' said Conyngham's voice. 'Quick—take your reins—never mind the lamps.'

And the carriage swayed as the man leapt to his place. Estella made a movement to look out of the window, but Concha had stood up against it, opposing his broad back alike to curious glances or a knife or a bullet. At the other window the General, better versed in such matters, held the leather cushion upon which he had been sitting across the sash. With his left hand he restrained Estella.

'Keep still,' he said. 'Sit back. Conyngham can take care of himself.'

The carriage swayed forward, and a volley of stones rattled on it like hail. It rose jerkily on one side, and bumped over some obstacle.

'One who has his quietus,' said Concha; 'these royal carriages are heavy.'

The horses were galloping now. Concha sat down rubbing his back. Conyngham was galloping by the window, and they could see his spur flashing in the moonlight as he used it. The reins hung loose, and both his hands were employed elsewhere, for he had a man half across the saddle in front of him, who held to him with one arm thrown round his neck, while the other was raised and a gleam of steel was at the end of it. Concepción, from the other side, threw a knife over the roof of the carriage—he could hit a cork at twenty paces but he missed this time.

The General, from within, leant across Estella, sword in hand, with gleaming eyes. But Conyngham seemed to have got the hold he desired, for his assailant came suddenly swinging over the horse's neck, and one of his flying heels crashed through the window by Concha's head, making that ecclesiastic swear like any layman. The carriage was lifted on one side again, and bumped heavily.

'Another,' said Concha, looking for broken glass in the folds of his cassock. 'That is a pretty trick of Conyngham's.'

'And the man is a horseman,' added the General, sheathing his sword—'a horseman. It warms the heart to see it.'

Then he leant out of the window and asked if any were hurt.

'I am afraid, Excellency, that I hurt one,' answered Vara. 'Where the neck joins the shoulder. It is a pretty spot for the knife—nothing to turn a point.'

He rubbed a sulphur match on the leg of his trouser, and lighted a cigarette as he rode along.

'On our side no accidents,' continued Vara, with a careless grandeur, 'unless the reverendo received a kick in the face.'

'The reverendo received a stone in the small of the back,' growled Concha pessimistically, 'where there was already a corner of lumbago.'

Conyngham, standing in his stirrups, was looking back. A man lay motionless on the road, and beyond, at the cross-roads, another was riding up a hill to the right at a hand gallop.

'It is the road to Madrid,' said Concepción, noting the direction of the Englishman's glance.

The General, leaning out of the carriage window, was also looking back anxiously.

'They have sent a messenger to Madrid, Excellency, with the news that the Queen is on the road to Toledo,' said Concepción.

'It is well,' answered Vincente, with a laugh.

As they journeyed, although it was nearly midnight, there appeared from time to time, and for the most part in the neighbourhood of a village, one who seemed to have been awaiting their passage, and immediately set out on foot or horseback by one of the shorter bridle-paths that abound in Spain. No one of these spies escaped the notice of Concepción, whose training amid the mountains of Andalusia had sharpened his eyesight and added keenness to every sense.

'It is like a cat walking down an alley full of dogs,' he muttered.

At last the lights of Toledo hove in sight, and across the river came the sound of the city clocks tolling the hour.

'Midnight,' said Concha. 'And all respectable folk are in their beds. At night all cats are grey.'

No one heeded him. Estella was sitting upright, bright-eyed and wakeful. The General looked out of the window at every moment. Across the river they could see lights moving, and many houses that had been illuminated were suddenly dark.

'See,' said the General, leaning out of the window and speaking to Conyngham, 'they have heard the sound of our wheels.'

At the farther end of the Bridge of Alcantara, on the road which now leads to the railway station, two horsemen were stationed, hidden in the shadow of the trees that border the pathway.

'Those should be Guardias Civiles,' said Concepcion, who had studied the ways of those gentry all his life. 'But they are not. They have horses that have never been taught to stand still.'

As he spoke the men vanished, moving noiselessly in the thick dust which lay on the Madrid road.

The General saw them go—and smiled. These men carried word to their fellows in Madrid for the seizure of the little Queen. But before they could reach the capital the Queen Regent herself would be there—a woman in a thousand, of inflexible nerve, of infinite resource.

The carriage rattled over the narrow bridge which rings hollow to the sound of wheels. It passed under the gate that Wamba built and up the tree-girt incline to the city. The streets were deserted, and no window showed a light. A watchman in his shelter, at the corner by the synagogue, peered at them over the folds of his cloak, and noting the clank of scabbard against spur, paid no further heed to a traveller who took the road with such outward signs of authority.

'It is still enough—and quiet,' said Concha, looking out.

'As quiet as a watching cat,' replied Vincente.

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE CITY OF STRIFE

p. 309

'What lot is mine
Whose foresight preaches peace, my heart so slow
To feel it!'

THROUGH these quiet streets the party clattered noisily enough, for the rain had left the rounded stones slippery, and the horses were too tired for a sure step. There were no lights at the street corners, for all had been extinguished at midnight, and the only glimmer of a lamp that relieved the darkness was shining through the stained-glass windows of the Cathedral, where the sacred oil burnt night and day.

The Queen was evidently expected at the Casa del Ayuntamiento, for at the approach of the carriage the great doors were thrown open and a number of servants appeared in the patio, which was but dimly lighted. By the General's orders the small body-guard passed through the doors, which were then closed, instead of continuing their way to the barracks in the Alcazar.

This Casa del Ayuntamiento stands, as many travellers know, in the Plaza of the same name, and faces the Cathedral, which is without doubt the oldest, as it assuredly is the most beautiful, church in the world. The mansion-house of Toledo, in addition to some palatial halls which are of historic renown, has several suites of rooms used from time to time by great personages passing through or visiting the city. The house itself is old, as we esteem age in England, while in comparison to the buildings around it it is modern. Built, however, at a period when beauty of architecture was secondary to power of resistance, the palace is strong enough, and General Vincente smiled happily as the great doors were closed. He was the last to look out into the streets and across the little Plaza del Ayuntamiento, which was deserted and looked peaceful enough in the light of a waning moon.

The carriage door was opened by a lacquey, and Conyngham gave Estella his hand. All the servants bowed as she passed up the stairs, her face screened by the folds of her white mantilla. There was a queer hush in this great house, and in the manner of the servants. The cathedral clock rang out the half-hour. The General led the way to the room on the first floor that overlooks the Plaza del Ayuntamiento. It is a vast apartment, hung with tapestries and pictures such as men travel many miles to see. The windows, which are large in proportion to the height of the room, open upon a stone balcony, which runs the length of the house and looks down upon the Plaza and across this to the great façade of the Cathedral. Candles, hurriedly lighted, made the room into a very desert of shadows. At the far end, a table was spread with cold meats and lighted by high silver candelabra.

'Ah!' said Concha, going towards the supper-table.

Estella turned, and for the first time met Conyngham's eyes. His face startled her. It was so grave.

'Were you hurt?' she asked sharply.

'Not this time, señorita.'

Then she turned with a sudden laugh towards her father. 'Did I play my part well?' she asked.

'Yes, my child.' And even he was grave.

'Unless I am mistaken,' he continued, glancing at the shuttered windows, 'we have only begun our task.' He was reading, as he spoke, some despatches which a servant had handed to him.

'There is one advantage in a soldier's life,' he said, smiling at Conyngham, 'which is not, I think, sufficiently recognised—namely, that one's duty is so often clearly defined. At the present moment it is a question of keeping up the deception we have practised upon these good people of Toledo sufficiently long to enable the Queen Regent to reach Madrid. In order to make certain of this we must lead the people to understand that the Queen is in this house until, at least, daylight. Given so much advantage, I think that her Majesty can reach the capital an hour before any messenger from Toledo. Two horsemen quitted the Bridge of Alcantara as we crossed it, riding towards Madrid; but they will not reach the capital—I have seen to that.'

He paused and walked to one of the long windows, which he opened. The outer shutters remained closed, and he did not unbar them, but stood listening.

'All is still as yet,' he said, returning to the table, where Father Concha was philosophically cutting up a cold chicken. 'That is a good idea of yours,' he said. 'We may all require our full forces of mind and body before the dawn.'

He drew forward a chair, and Estella, obeying his gesture, sat down and so far controlled her feelings as to eat a little.

'Do queens always feed on old birds such as this?' asked Concha discontentedly; and Vincente, spreading out his napkin, laughed with gay good humour.

'Before the dawn,' he said to Conyngham, 'we may all be great men, and the good Concha here on the high road to a bishopric.'

'He would rather be in bed,' muttered the priest, with his mouth full.

It was a queer scene, such as we only act in real life. The vast room, with its gorgeous hangings, the flickering candles, the table spread with delicacies, and the strange party seated at it—Concha eating steadily, the General looking round with his domesticated little smile, Estella with a new light in her eyes and a new happiness on her face, Conyngham, a giant among these southerners, in his dust-laden uniform—all made up a picture that none forgot.

'They will probably attack this place,' said the General, pouring out a glass of wine; 'but the house is a strong one. I cannot rely on the regiments stationed at Toledo, and have sent to Madrid for cavalry. There is nothing like cavalry—in the streets. We can stand a siege—till the dawn.'

He turned, looking over his shoulder towards the door; for he had heard a footstep unnoticed by the others. It was Concepción Vara who came into the room, coatless, his face grey with dust, adding a startling and picturesque incongruity to the scene.

'Pardon, Excellency,' he said, with that easy grasp of the situation which always made an utterly unabashed smuggler of him, 'but there is one in the house whom I think his Excellency should speak with.'

'Ah!'

'The Señorita Barena.'

The General rose from the table.

'How did she get in here?' he asked sharply.

'By the side door in the Calle de la Ciudad. The keeper of that door, Excellency, is a mule. The señorita forced him to admit her. The sex can do so much,' he added, with a tolerant shrug of the shoulders.

'And the other—this Larralde?'

Concepción raised his hand with outspread fingers, and shook it slowly from side to side from the wrist, with the palm turned towards his interlocutor—a gesture which seemed to indicate that the subject was an unpleasant, almost an indelicate, one.

'Larralde, Excellency,' he said, 'is one of those who are never found at the front. He will not be in Toledo to-night—that Larralde.'

'Where is the Señorita Barena?' asked the General.

'She is downstairs—commanding his Excellency's soldiers to let her pass.'

'You go down, my friend, and bring her here. Then take that door yourself.'

Concepción bowed ceremoniously and withdrew. He might have been an ambassador, and his

salutation was worthy of an Imperial Court.

A moment later Julia Barenna came into the room, her dark eyes wide with terror, her face pale and drawn.

'Where is the Queen Regent?' she asked, looking from one face to the other, and seeing all her foes assembled as if by magic before her.

'Her Majesty is on the road between Aranjuez and Madrid—in safety, my dear Julia,' replied the General soothingly.

'But they think she is here. The people are in the streets. Look out of the window. They are in the Plaza.'

'I know it, my dear,' said the General.

'They are armed—they are going to attack this house.'

'I am aware of it.'

'Their plan is to murder the Queen.'

'So we understand,' said the General gently. He had a horror of anything approaching sensation or a scene, a feeling which Spaniards share with Englishmen. 'That is the Queen for the time being,' added Vincente, pointing to Estella.

Julia stood looking from one to the other—a self-contained woman made strong by love. For there is nothing in life or human experience that raises and strengthens man or woman so much as a great and abiding love. But Julia Barenna was driven and almost panic-stricken. She held herself in control by an effort that was drawing lines in her face never to be wiped out.

'But you will tell them? I will do it. Let me go to them. I am not afraid.'

'No one must leave this house now,' said the General. 'You have come to us, my dear, you must now throw in your lot with ours.'

'But Estella must not take this risk,' exclaimed Julia. 'Let me do it.'

And some woman's instinct sent her to Estella's side—two women alone in that great house amid this man's work, this strife of reckless politicians.

'And you, and Señor Conyngham,' she cried, 'you must not run this great risk.'

'It is what we are paid for, my dear Julia,' answered the General, holding out his arm and indicating the gold stripes upon it.

He walked to the window and opened the massive shutters, which swung back heavily. Then he stepped out on to the balcony without fear or hesitation.

'See,' he said, 'the square is full of them.'

He came back into the room, and Conyngham, standing beside him, looked down into the moonlit Plaza. The square was, indeed, thronged with dark and silent shadows, while others, stealing from the doorways and narrow alleys with which Toledo abounds, joined the groups with stealthy steps. No one spoke, though the sound of their whispering arose in the still night air like the murmur of a breeze through reeds. A hundred faces peered upwards through the darkness at the two intrepid figures on the balcony.

'And these are Spaniards, my dear Conyngham,' whispered the General. 'A hundred of them against one woman. Name of God! I blush for them.'

The throng increased every moment, and withal the silence never lifted, but brooded breathlessly over the ancient town. Instead of living men, these might well have been the shades of the countless and forgotten dead who had come to a violent end in the streets of a city where Peace has never found a home since the days of Nebuchadnezzar. Vincente came back into the room, leaving shutter and window open.

'They cannot see in,' he said, 'the building is too high. And across the Plaza there is nothing but the Cathedral, which has no windows accessible without ladders.'

He paused, looking at his watch.

'They are in doubt,' he said, speaking to Conyngham. 'They are not sure that the Queen is here. We will keep them in doubt for a short time. Every minute lost by them is an inestimable gain to us. That open window will whet their curiosity, and give them something to whisper about. It is so easy to deceive a crowd.'

He sat down and began to peel a peach. Julia looked at him, wondering wherein this man's greatness lay, and yet perceiving dimly that, against such as he, men like Esteban Larralde could do nothing.

Concha, having supped satisfactorily, was now sitting back in his chair seeking for something in the pockets of his cassock.

'It is to be presumed,' he said, 'that one may smoke—even in a palace.'

And under their gaze he quietly lighted a cigarette with the deliberation of one in whom a long and solitary life had bred habits only to be broken at last by death.

Presently the General rose and went to the window again.

'They are still doubtful,' he said, returning, 'and I think their numbers have decreased. We cannot allow them to disperse.'

He paused, thinking deeply.

'My child,' he said suddenly to Estella, 'you must show yourself on the balcony.'

Estella rose at once; but Julia held her back.

'No,' she said; 'let me do it. Give me the white mantilla.'

There was a momentary silence while Estella freed herself from her cousin's grasp. Conyngham looked at the woman he loved while she stood, little more than a child, with something youthful and inimitably graceful in the lines of her throat and averted face. Would she accept Julia's offer? Conyngham bit his lip and awaited her decision. Then, as if divining his thought, she turned and looked at him gravely.

'No,' she said; 'I will do it.'

She went towards the window. Her father and Conyngham had taken their places, one on each side, as if she were the Queen indeed. She stood for a moment on the threshold, and then passed out into the moonlight, alone. Immediately there arose the most terrifying of all earthly sounds—the dull, antagonistic roar of a thousand angry throats. Estella walked to the front of the balcony and stood, with an intrepidity which was worthy of the royal woman whose part she played, looking down on the upturned faces. A red flash streaked the darkness of a far corner of the square, and a bullet whistled through the open window into the woodwork of a mirror.

'Come back,' whispered General Vincente. 'Slowly, my child—slowly.'

Estella stood for a moment looking down with a royal insolence, then turned, and with measured steps approached the window. As she passed in she met Conyngham's eyes, and that one moment assuredly made two lives worth living.

CHAPTER XXIX

MIDNIGHT AND DAWN

p. 320

'I have set my life upon a cast
And I will stand the hazard of the die.'

'EXCELLENCY,' reported a man who entered the room at this moment, 'they are bringing carts of fuel through the Calle de la Ciudad to set against the door and burn it.'

'To set against which door, my honest friend?'

'The great door on the Plaza, Excellency; the other is an old door of iron.'

'And they cannot burn it or break it open?'

'No, Excellency. And, besides, there are loopholes in the thickness of the wall at the side.'

The General smiled on this man as being after his own heart.

'One may not shoot to-night, my friend. I have already given the order.'

'But one may prick them with the sword, Excellency?' suggested the trooper, with a sort of suppressed enthusiasm.

The General shrugged his shoulders, wisely tolerant.

'Oh yes,' he answered, 'I suppose one may prick them with the sword.'

Conyngham, who had been standing half in and half out of the open window, listening to this conversation, now came forward.

'I think,' he said, 'that I can clear the Plaza from time to time if you give me twenty men. We can thus gain time.'

'Street-fighting,' answered the General gravely. 'Do you know anything of it? It is nasty work.'

'I know something of it. One has to shout very loud. I studied it—at Dublin University.'

'To be sure—I forgot.'

Julia and Estella watched and listened. Their lot had been cast in the paths of war, and since childhood they had remembered naught else. But neither had yet been so near to the work, nor

had they seen and heard men talk and plan with a certain grim humour—a curt and deliberate scorn of haste or excitement—as these men spoke and planned now. Conyngham and Concepción Vara were altered by these circumstances—there was a light in their eyes which women rarely see, but the General was the same little man of peace and of a high domestic virtue, who seemed embarrassed by a sword which was obviously too big for him. Yet in all their voices there rang alike a queer note of exultation. For man is a fighting animal, and from St. Paul down to the humblest little five-foot-one recruit, would find life a dull affair were there no strife in it.

‘Yes,’ said the General, after a moment’s reflection, ‘that is a good idea, and will gain time. But let them first bring their fuel and set it up. Every moment is a gain.’

At this instant some humorist in the crowd threw a stone in at the open window. The old priest picked up the missile and examined it curiously.

‘It is fortunate,’ he said, ‘that the stones are fixed in Toledo. In Xeres they are loose, and are always in the air. I wonder if I can hit a citizen.’ And he threw the stone back.

‘Close the shutters,’ said the General. ‘Let us avoid arousing ill-feeling.’

The priest drew the jalousies together, but did not quite shut them. Vincente stood and looked out through the aperture at the moonlit square and the dark shadows moving there.

‘I wish they would shout,’ he said. ‘It is unnatural. They are like children. When there is noise there is little mischief.’

Then he remained silent for some minutes, watching intently. All in the room noted his every movement. At length he turned on his heel.

‘Go, my friend,’ he said to Conyngham. ‘Form your men in the Calle de la Ciudad, and charge round in line. Do not place yourself too much in advance of your men, or you will be killed, and remember—the point! Resist the temptation to cut—the point is best.’

He patted Conyngham on the arm affectionately, as if he were sending him to bed with a good wish, and accompanied him to the door.

‘I knew,’ he said, returning to the window and rubbing his hands together, ‘that that was a good man the first moment I saw him.’

He glanced at Estella, and then, turning, opened another window, setting the shutters ajar so as to make a second point of observation.

‘My poor child,’ he whispered, as she went to the window and looked out, ‘it is an ill-fortune to have to do with men whose trade this is.’

Estella smiled—a little whitely—and said nothing. The moon was now shining from an almost cloudless sky. The few fleecy remains of the storm sailing towards the east only added brightness to the night. It was almost possible to see the faces of the men moving in the square below, and to read their expressions. The majority stood in a group in the centre of the Plaza, while a daring few, reckoning on the Spanish aversion to firearms, ran forward from time to time and set a bundle of wood or straw against the door beneath the balcony.

Some, who appeared to be the leaders, looked up constantly and curiously at the windows, wondering if any resistance would be made. Had they known that General Vincente was in that silent house they would probably have gone home to bed, and the crowd would have dispersed like smoke.

Suddenly there arose a roar to the right hand of the square where the Calle de la Ciudad was situated, and Conyngham appeared for a moment alone, running towards the group, with the moonlight flashing on his sword. At his heels an instant later a single line of men swung round the corner and charged across the square.

‘Dear, dear,’ muttered the General; ‘too quick, my friend, too quick!’

For Conyngham was already among the crowd, which broke and surged back towards the Cathedral. He paused for a moment to draw his sword out of a dark form that lay upon the ground, as a cricketer draws a stump. He had, at all events, remembered the point. The troopers swept across the square like a broom, sending the people as dust before them, and leaving the clean, moonlit square behind. They also left behind one or two shadows, lying stark upon the ground. One of these got upon its knees and crawled painfully away, all one-sided, like a beetle that has been trodden underfoot. Those watching from the windows saw with a gasp of horror that part of him—part of an arm—had been left behind, and a sigh of relief went up when he stopped crawling and lay quite still.

The troopers were now retreating slowly towards the Calle de la Ciudad.

‘Be careful, Conyngham,’ shouted the General from the balcony. ‘They will return.’

And as he spoke a rattling fire was opened upon them from the far corner of the square, where the crowd had taken refuge in the opening of the Calle del Arco. Immediately, the people, having noted that the troopers were few in number, charged down upon them. The men fought in line, retreating step by step, their swords gleaming in the moonlight. Estella, hearing footsteps in the room behind her, turned in time to see her father disappearing through the doorway.

Concepción Vara, coatless, as he loved to work, his white shirtsleeves fluttering as his arm swung, had now joined the troopers, and was fighting by Conyngham's side.

Estella and Julia were out on the balcony now, leaning over and forgetting all but the breathless interest of battle. Concha stood beside them, muttering and cursing like any soldier.

They saw Vincente appear at the corner of the Calle de la Ciudad and throw away his scabbard as he ran.

'Now, my children!' he cried in a voice that Estella had never heard before, which rang out across the square, and was answered by a yell that was nothing but a cry of sheer delight. The crowd swayed back as if before a gust of wind, and the General, following it, seemed to clear a space for himself as a reaper clears away the standing corn before him. It was, however, only for a moment. The crowd surged back, those in front against their will, and on to the glittering steel—those behind shouting encouragement.

'Name of God!' shouted Concha, and was gone. They saw him a minute later appear in the square, having thrown aside his cassock. He made a strange lean figure of a man with his knee-breeches and dingy purple stockings, his grey flannel shirt, and the moonlight shining on his tonsured head. He fought without skill, and heedless of danger, swinging a great sword that he had picked up from the hand of a fallen trooper, and each blow that he got home killed its victim. The metal of the man had suddenly shown itself after years of suppression. This, as Vincente had laughingly said, was no priest, but a soldier. Concepción, in the thick of it, using the knife now with a deadly skill, looked over his shoulder and laughed.

Suddenly the crowd swayed. The faint sound of a distant bugle came to the ears of all.

'It is nothing,' shouted Concha, in English. 'It is nothing. It is I who sent the bugler round.'

And his great sword whistled into a man's brain. In another moment the square was empty, for the politicians who came to murder a woman had had enough steel. The sound of the bugle, intimating, as they supposed, the arrival of troops, completed the work of demoralisation which the recognition of General Vincente had begun.

The little party—the few defenders of the Casa del Ayuntamiento—were left in some confusion in the Plaza, and Estella saw with a sudden cold fear that Conyngham and Concha were on their knees in the midst of a little group of hesitating men. It was Concha who rose first and held up his hand to the watchers on the balcony, bidding them stay where they were. Then Conyngham rose to his feet slowly, as one bearing a burden. Estella looked down in a sort of dream, and saw her lover carrying her father towards the house, her mind only half comprehending, in that semi-dreamlike reception of sudden calamity which is one of Heaven's deepest mercies.

It was Concepción who came into the room first, his white shirt dyed with blood in great patches like the colour on a piebald horse. A cut in his cheek was slowly dripping. He went straight to a sofa covered in gorgeous yellow satin, and set the cushions in order.

'Señorita,' he said, and spread out his hands. The tears were in his eyes, 'Half of Spain,' he added, 'would rather that it had been the Queen—and the world is poorer.'

A moment later Concha came into the room dragging on his cassock.

'My child, we are in God's hand,' he said, with a break in his gruff voice.

And then came the heavy step of one carrying sorrow.

Conyngham laid his burden on the sofa. General Vincente was holding his handkerchief to his side, and his eyes, which had a thoughtful look, saw only Estella's face.

'I have sent for a doctor,' said Conyngham. 'Your father is wounded.'

'Yes,' said Vincente immediately; 'but I am in no pain, my dear child. There is no reason, surely, for us to distress ourselves.'

He looked round and smiled.

'And this good Conyngham,' he added, 'carried me like a child.'

Julia was on her knees at the foot of the sofa, her face hidden in her hands.

'My dear Julia,' he said, 'why this distress?'

'Because all of this is my doing,' she answered, lifting her drawn and terror-stricken face.

'No, no!' said Vincente, with a characteristic pleasantry. 'You take too much upon yourself. All these things are written down for us beforehand. We only add the punctuation—delaying a little or hurrying a little.'

They looked at him silently, and assuredly none could mistake the shadows that were gathering on his face. Estella, who was holding his hand, knelt on the floor by his side, quiet and strong, offering silently that sympathy which is woman's greatest gift.

Concepción, who perhaps knew more of this matter than any present, looked at Concha and shook his head. The priest was buttoning his cassock, and began to seek something in his

pocket.

'Your breviary?' whispered Concepción; 'I saw it lying out there—among the dead.'

'It is a comfort to have one's duty clearly defined,' said the General suddenly, in a clear voice. He was evidently addressing Conyngham. 'One of the advantages of a military life. We have done our best, and this time we have succeeded. But—it is only deferred. It will come at length, and Spain will be a republic. It is a failing cause—because, at the head of it, is a bad woman.'

Conyngham nodded, but no one spoke. No one seemed capable of following his thoughts. Already he seemed to look at them as from a distance, as if he had started on a journey and was looking back. During this silence there came a great clatter in the streets, and a sharp voice cried 'Halt!' The General turned his eyes towards the window.

'The cavalry,' said Conyngham, 'from Madrid.'

'I did not expect—them,' said Vincente slowly, 'before the dawn.'

The sound of the horses' feet and the clatter of arms died away as the troop passed on towards the Calle de la Ciudad, and the quiet of night was again unbroken.

Then Concha, getting down on to his knees, began reciting from memory the office—which, alas! he knew too well.

When it was finished, and the gruff voice died away, Vincente opened his eyes.

'Every man to his trade,' he said, with a little laugh.

Then suddenly he made a grimace.

'A twinge of pain,' he said deprecatingly, as if apologising for giving them the sorrow of seeing it. 'It will pass—before the dawn.'

Presently he opened his eyes again and smiled at Estella, before he moved with a tired sigh and turned his face towards that Dawn which knows no eventide.

CHAPTER XXX

THE DAWN OF PEACE

p. 331

'Quien no ama, no vive.'

THE fall of Morella had proved to be, as many anticipated, the knell of the Carlist cause. Cabrera, that great general and consummate leader, followed Don Carlos, who had months earlier fled to France. General Espartero—a man made and strengthened by circumstances—was now at the height of his fame, and for the moment peace seemed to be assured to Spain. It was now a struggle between Espartero and Queen Christina. But with these matters the people of Spain had little to do. Such warfare of the council-chamber and the boudoir is carried on quietly, and the sound of it rarely reaches the ear, and never the heart, of the masses. Politics, indeed, had been the daily fare of the Spaniards for so long that their palates were now prepared to accept any sop so long as it was flavoured with peace. Aragon was devastated, and the northern provinces had neither seed nor labourers for the coming autumn. The peasants who, having lost faith in Don Carlos, rallied round Cabrera, now saw themselves abandoned by their worshipped leader, and turned hopelessly enough homewards. Thus gradually the country relapsed into quiet, and empty garners compelled many to lay aside the bayonet and take up the spade who, having tasted the thrill of battle, had no longer any taste for the ways of peace.

Frederick Conyngham was brought into sudden prominence by the part he played in the disturbance at Toledo—which disturbance proved, as history tells, to be a forerunner of the great revolution a year later in Madrid. Promotion was at this time rapid, and the Englishman made many strides in a few months. Jealousy was so rife among the Spanish leaders, Christinos distrusted so thoroughly the reformed Carlists, that one who was outside these petty considerations received from both sides many honours on the sole recommendation of his neutrality.

'And besides,' said Father Concha, sitting in the sunlight on his church steps at Ronda, reading to the barber, and the shoemaker, and other of his parishioners, the latest newspaper, 'and besides—he is clever.'

He paused, slowly taking a pinch of snuff.

'Where the river is deepest it makes least noise,' he added.

The barber wagged his head after the manner of one who will never admit that he does not understand an allusion. And before any could speak the clatter of horses in the narrow street diverted attention. Concha rose to his feet.

'Ah!' he said, and went forward to meet Conyngham, who was riding with Concepción at his side.

'So you have come, my son,' he said, shaking hands. He looked up into the Englishman's face, which was burnt brown by service under a merciless sun. Conyngham looked lean and strong, but his eyes had no rest in them. This was not a man who had all he wanted.

'Are you come to Ronda, or are you passing through?' asked the priest.

'To Ronda. As I passed the Casa Barenna I made inquiries. The ladies are in the town, it appears.'

'Yes; they are with Estella in the house you know—unless you have forgotten it.'

'No,' answered Conyngham getting out of the saddle. 'No; I have forgotten nothing.'

Concepción came forward and led the horse away.

'I will walk to the Casa Vincente. Have you the time to accompany me?' said Conyngham.

'I have always time—for my neighbour's business,' replied Concha. And they set off together.

'You walk stiffly,' said Concha. 'Have you ridden far?'

'From Osuna—forty miles since daybreak.'

'You are in a hurry.'

'Yes, I am in a hurry.'

Without further comment he extracted from inside his smart tunic a letter—the famous letter in a pink envelope—which he handed to Concha.

'Yes,' said the priest, turning it over. 'You and I first saw this in the Hotel de la Marina at Algeciras, when we were fools not to throw it into the nearest brazier. We should have saved a good man's life, my friend.'

He handed the letter back, and thoughtfully dusted his cassock where it was worn and shiny with constant dusting, so that the snuff had nought to cling to.

'And you have got it—at last. Holy saints—these Englishmen! Do you always get what you want, my son?'

'Not always,' replied Conyngham, with an uneasy laugh. 'But I should be a fool not to try.'

'Assuredly,' said Concha, 'assuredly. And you have come to Ronda—to try?'

'Yes.'

They walked on in silence, on the shady side of the street, and presently passed and saluted a priest—one of Concha's colleagues in this city of the South.

'There walks a tragedy,' said Concha, in his curt way. 'Inside every cassock there walks a tragedy—or a villain.'

After a pause it was Concha who again broke the silence. Conyngham seemed to be occupied with his own thoughts.

'And Larralde—?' said the priest.

'I come from him—from Barcelona,' answered Conyngham, 'where he is in safety. Catalonia is full of such as he. Sir John Pleydell, before leaving Spain, bought this letter for two hundred pounds—a few months ago—when I was a poor man and could not offer a price for it. But Larralde disappeared when the plot failed, and I have only found him lately in Barcelona.'

'In Barcelona?' echoed Concha.

'Yes; where he can take a passage to Cuba, and where he awaits Julia Barenna.'

'Ah!' said Concha, 'so he also is faithful—because life is not long, my son. That is the only reason. How wise was the great God when He made a human life short!'

'I have a letter,' continued Conyngham, 'from Larralde to the Señorita Barenna.'

'So you parted friends in Barcelona—after all—when his knife has been between your shoulders?'

'Yes.'

'God bless you, my son!' said the priest, in Latin, with his careless, hurried gesture of the Cross.

After they had walked a few paces he spoke again.

'I shall go to Barcelona with her,' he said, 'and marry her to this man. When one has no affairs of one's own there always remain—for old women and priests—the affairs of one's neighbour. Tell me—' he paused and looked fiercely at him under shaggy brows—'tell me why you came to Spain.'

'You want to know who and what I am—before we reach the Calle Mayor?' said Conyngham.

'I know what you are, *amigo mio*, better than yourself, perhaps.'

As they walked through the narrow streets Conyngham told his simple history, dwelling more particularly on the circumstances preceding his departure from England, and Concha listened with no further sign of interest than a grimace or a dry smile here and there.

'The mill gains by going, and not by standing still,' he said, and added, after a pause, 'But it is always a mistake to grind another's wheat for nothing.'

They were now approaching the old house in the Calle Mayor, and Conyngham lapsed into a silence which his companion respected. They passed under the great doorway into the patio, which was quiet and shady at this afternoon hour. The servants, of whom there are a multitude in all great Spanish houses, had apparently retired to the seclusion of their own quarters. One person alone was discernible amid the orange trees and in the neighbourhood of the murmuring fountain. She was asleep in a rocking-chair, with a newspaper on her lap. She preferred the patio to the garden, which was too quiet for one of her temperament. In the patio she found herself better placed to exchange a word with those engaged in the business of the house, to learn, in fact, from the servants the latest gossip, to ask futile questions of them, and to sit in that idleness which will not allow others to be employed. In a word, this was the Señora Barena, and Concha, seeing her, stood for a moment in hesitation. Then, with a signal to Conyngham, he crept noiselessly across the tessellated pavement to the shadow of the staircase. They passed up the broad steps without sound and without awaking the sleeping lady. In the gallery above, the priest paused and looked down into the courtyard, his grim face twisted in a queer smile. Then, at the woman sitting there—at life and all its illusions, perhaps—he shrugged his shoulders and passed on.

In the drawing-room they found Julia, who leapt to her feet and hurried across the floor when she saw Conyngham. She stood looking at him breathlessly, her whole history written in her eyes.

'Yes,' she whispered, as if he had called her. 'Yes—what is it? Have you come to tell me—something?'

'I have come to give you a letter, señorita,' he answered, handing her Larralde's missive. She held out her hand, and never took her eyes from his face.

Concha walked to the window—the window whence the Alcalde of Ronda had seen Conyngham hand Julia Barena another letter. The old priest stood looking down into the garden, where, amid the feathery foliage of the pepper trees and the bamboos, he could perceive the shadow of a black dress. Conyngham also turned away, and thus the two men who held this woman's happiness in the hollow of their hands stood listening to the crisp rattle of the paper as she tore the envelope and unfolded her lover's letter. A great happiness and a great sorrow are alike impossible of realisation. We only perceive their extent when their importance has begun to wane.

Julia Barena read the letter through to the end, and it is possible (for women are blind in such matters) failed to perceive the selfishness in every line of it. Then, with the message of happiness in her hand, she returned to the chair she had just quitted, with a vague wonder in her mind, and the very human doubt that accompanies all possession, as to whether the price paid has not been too high.

Concha was the first to move. He turned and crossed the room towards Conyngham.

'I see,' he said, 'Estella in the garden.'

And they passed out of the room together, leaving Julia Barena alone with her thoughts. On the broad stone balcony Concha paused.

'I will stay here,' he said. He looked over the balustrade. Señora Barena was still asleep.

'Do not awake her,' he whispered. 'Let all sleeping things sleep.'

Conyngham passed down the stairs noiselessly, and through the doorway into the garden.

'And at the end—the Gloria is chanted,' said Concha, watching him go.

The scent of the violets greeted Conyngham as he went forward beneath the trees planted there in the Moslems' day. The running water murmured sleepily as it hurried in its narrow channel towards the outlet through the grey wall, whence it leapt four hundred feet into the Tajo below.

Estella was seated in the shade of a gnarled fig tree, where tables and chairs indicated the Spanish habit of an out-of-door existence. She rose as he came towards her, and met his eyes gravely. A gleam of sun glancing through the leaves fell on her golden hair, half hidden by the mantilla, and showed that she was pale with some fear or desire.

'Señorita,' he said, 'I have brought you the letter.' He held it out, and she took it, turning over the worn envelope absent-mindedly.

'I have not read it myself, and am permitted to give it to you on one condition—namely, that you destroy it as soon as you have read it.'

She looked at it again.

'It contains the lives of many men—their lives and the happiness of those connected with them,' said Conyngham. 'That is what you hold in your hand, señorita—as well as my life and

happiness.’

She raised her dark eyes to his for a moment, and their tenderness was not of earth or of this world at all. Then she tore the envelope and its contents slowly into a hundred pieces, and dropped the fluttering papers into the stream pacing in its marble bed towards the Tajo and the oblivion of the sea.

‘There—I have destroyed the letter,’ she said, with a thoughtful little smile. Then, looking up, she met his eyes.

‘I did not want it. I am glad you gave it to me. It will make a difference to our lives. Though—I never wanted it.’

Then she came slowly towards him.

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