THE FIREBRAND

A STORY OF THE EARLY CARLIST UPRISING.

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Synopsis of Preceding Chapters.

Ramon Garcia, known as El Sarria, having been induced to believe that his wife, Dolores, is unfaithful, stabs a village top, Rafael Flores, whom he finds presumably kissing Dolores through the window. His estates are confiscated and he becomes a hunted man. At the same time a young Scotch adventurer, Rollo Blair, comes to Spain, and, during an inn quarrel, is aided by John Mortimer, an Englishman. The two start to visit Don Baltasar, abbot of the monastery of Montblanch. Blair and Mortimer are entertained lavishly by the abbot, and meet Etienne St. Pierre, a French gallant, who is studying for holy orders. These three, with El Sarria, who has found protection at the monastery, are commissioned by the abbot to capture the Queen Regent and her little daughter, in the interests of the church. En route for the camp of Cabrera, the Carlist General, they pass the home of El Sarria, who learns that Dolores was not false to him, and that his downfall was plotted by Luis Fernandez. Dolores is imprisoned in Luis' home, and the son to whom she had just given birth is about to be buried alive by Luis' brother, Tomas, when El Sarria falls upon him. El Sarria rescues his child and takes it to the Convent of the Holy Innocents, where Concha is immured. Then, aided by Rollo Blair, he circumvents Fernandez and finds Dolores. Blair and his companions are surprised and captured by General Cabrera, and they cannot prove their connection with the Carlist cause, because Blair was forced to leave his credentials at the convent with Concha, as indorsement for his standing as a Carlist. They are sentenced to be shot at daybreak. Rollo, through Concha, succeeds in establishing the identity of himself and comrades, and they are released and forwarded on their mission by Cabrera. Sergeant Cardono and La Giralda are sent by Rollo to San Ildefonso, near which the Queen Regent and her court, deserted by the royal guards, are staying, plague-bound and in danger of an attack by gypsies, to spy out the situation. Cardono visits the gypsy camp, where he reveals himself as Jose Maria, the brigand, who, it had been supposed, was garroted, and where he learns the plans for the proposed attack on the Queen Regent. Meanwhile La Giralda gains important information at the palace, and on the return of the two scouts Rollo proceeds, with his party, to the rescue. They barricade the palace and resist the gypsies, who succeed, however, by kidnaping the Princess Isabel. Rollo rescues Isabel, and starts with her for the hermitage. Bodies of plague victims are posted as sentinels at the doors and storehouse about the hermitage and the attack of the gypsies is awaited. The gypsies are repulsed, and Rollo, aided by Concha, restores the young Princess to the Queen.

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CHAPTER XL.—(Continued.)

After that, of course, there was no more ceremony with Senor Munoz. He was immediately relieved of his weapon, ordered to the further side of the room away from all possible avenues of escape, and further guarded by the Sergeant, who bent upon him a stern and threatening brow.

Then Rollo began to develop his intentions in a loud clear voice. For if, as he suspected, Maria Christina chanced to be within earshot, it might save an explanation in duplicate, if she should hear at first hand what he was now about to to communicate to her consort.

On either side of the young man were his two aids, the Sergeant and Ramon Garcia, the first gaunt, tough and athletic, of an age between 30 and 60, courage and invincible determination written plainly on his brow, and in his eyes when he was angered, the Angel of Death himself standing like a threat. On the other side stood Don Ramon Garcia, gigantic in stature, deep-chested and solemn, driven by fate to actions of blood, but all the same with the innocent heart of a little child within his breast.

"Senor Munoz," said Rollo, speaking sharp and sudden, "let me introduce these gentlemen to your notice. They are two of the most famous men in all Spain, and worthy of your acquaintance. This on my left is Senor Don Jose Maria, late of the town of Ronda, and this on my right is Don Ramon Garcia, better known as El Sarria of Aragon!"

For the first time the color slowly forsook the handsome, but somewhat florid countenance of the Duke of Rianzares. He was, as his valet had truly said, engaged at his toilet, and it is certainly difficult to look impressive in a flowered dressing gown. Being Spaniards, and, therefore, gentlemen, El Sarria and the Sergeant bowed slightly at Rollo's introduction, and stood waiting. Rollo, no ways loth, continued his speech:

"Your excellency is now aware of the names of two of those whom you may thank for your safety. I myself, to whom the Queen Regent owes the recovery of her daughter, am a Scottish gentleman of good family. My companions below are severally the Count of Saint Pierre, a French nobleman of ancient family, and Don Juan Mortimer, an English merchant of unchallenged probity.

"Here, therefore, are five men who have defended the Queen Regent with their lives and who now judge it to be necessary for her and the Princess that they put themselves immediately under our protection and leave this place of instant and terrible danger!"

"The Queen will not be dictated to by any combination of men whatsoever," the Duke answered; "she resolved to remain at La Granja, and therefore nothing can move her!"

Rollo bowed gracefully, but there was a dangerous glitter in his eye, which might have warned his opponent.

"Your excellency," he went on with great calmness, "we look confidently for your voice and interest in this matter. You will have the goodness to introduce us into the presence of the Queen Regent. You are at liberty to announce our intentions and prepare Her Majesty for a visit."

A quick light flashed over the indifferent and dogged countenance of Senor Munoz. The hope of escape was written there as plainly as if printed in Roman character across his brow. But for this also Rollo had made provision.

"Guard that inner door," he cried to El Sarria, and the giant moved swiftly to his post, motioning away the gentlemen in waiting as one might displace a dog from a cushion. Then Rollo stepped briskly into the corridor, set his hand to his mouth and called a single word aloud.

"Concha!"

And the girl stood before him almost ere his voice had ceased to echo along the corridors. Silent she waited his pleasure. From this time ti was not Rollo, upon whose love for her the new sun had risen, who had called her, but Colonel Rollo Blair, the chief of the expedition of which she was an insignificant part.

"You are armed?" he queried, as she followed him within the door and her quick eyes took in the scene.

The girl nodded,a little resentfully. Surely it was a superfluous question. An Andalusian maiden, whose lover's life is in danger every hour, always goes armed.

"Then," said Rollo, firmly, "you will accompany this gentleman to the apartments of the Queen Regent. You will permit him 10 minutes' private conversation with Her Majesty in your presence. You will then accompany him back. During his absence he is not to lay his hand upon any weapon, have any personal contact with the Queen, or open any drawer, cabinet or case of arms. Also he is to return with you as soon as you inform him that the time allotted is at an end. Here is my watch."

"And if the Senor should refuse to comply with any of these demands?" suggested Concha.

"He will not refuse," answered Rollo, "but if the thing should happen, why, you have full discretion. You understand?"

Concha nodded, and her lips, ordinarily so sweet and yielding, firmed themselves with determination. She understood. So did Munoz.

"You do not need to say more," she said, clearly; "I am an Andalusian!"

Rollo turned to Munoz.

"You have heard," he said. "Treachery will do you no good, and may, indeed, suddenly deprive her reigning Majesty of the inestimable consolation of your companionship. Be good enough to accompany this young lady, sir. In 10 minutes I shall expect your return with a favorable answer! Permit them to pass, Don Ramon!"

"I WILL SHOOT THESE THREE PRISONERS TOMORROW AT SUNRISE."

But the consort of the Queen Regent Maria Christina fingered his chin uncertainly without moving, and Rollo's brow darkened ominously, while the Sergeant began to look hopeful. Neither was in the mood to put up calmly with any refusal or hesitation.

"I am quite willing—nay, even anxious to oblige you," said Munoz. "I would gladly undertake the commission, but—but——"

He stopped as if searching for words, still however, rubbing his chin.

"But what?" thundered Rollo. The blood of the fighting Blairs was rising.

"Well, to put the matter plainy, I have never appeared before Her Majesty in this condition before. You would not have me go as I am?"

"In what condition?" cried the Scot, in great astonishment.

"Unshaven, and with my hair undressed. That idiot there (pointing to the trembling valet) spilt the water just when you came in."

"Nay," laughed Rollo, much relieved that there was to be no shedding of blood; "indeed, you must forgive him for that. El Sarria there is entirely to blame. And on this occasion I trust that Her Most Catholic Majesty will pardon the informality of your appearance. You can point out to her that you come, not on your own part, but as the ambassador of others who were somewhat over-earnest in pursuading you. I am sure that my two friends here will share with me the very serious responsibility of your unshaven chin."

"That I shall not fail to represent to Her Majesty, said the Duke, bowing imperturbably.

And without any further objections he went out, followed by Concha. And that young lady, with all that weight of responsibility swelling in pride under the crossed folds of her rebozo did not vouchsafe even so much as one glance to Rollo, but passed her commanding officer with eyes like those of a rear-rank man on parade, fixed immovably on the broad back of Senor Munoz. As soon as they were alone, however, she moved up alongside, fingering her pistol but significantly. For this little Concha was quite resolved to use her discretion to the uttermost, should any treachery he intended—aye, or even the appearance of it.

During their absence the remaining quartet in the chamber of Don Fernando Munoz held their ground without a word of mutual converse. Rollo stared out of the window and listened to the slamming of doors and the faraway murmur of voices in the direction of the royal apartments.

In a straining silence, acute, almost to breaking point, they waited. Yet something of the epic's argument came to them even at that distance—a shrill woman's voice vehemently debating, then a bass mutter of masculine argument, a quick stamp, distinctly feminine, upon the floor, then the slamming of a door, and on the back of that the sound of returning footsteps.

"The Queen refuses to receive you, I am sorry to inform you, gentlemen!" said the Duke. "That I did my best, this lady will bear me witness. But having had no opportunity of private conference with Her Majesty, I was unable (as indeed I anticipated) to effect anything to the purpose!"

Rollo turned to Concha without wasting words on his former ambassador.

"Return to the Queen's chamber," he said, "and inform Her Majesty that we will wait her pleasure here for another 10 minutes. And if, by the end of that time we are not honored with a visit from Her Majesty, we shall, most reluctantly and with all respect, be compelled to shoot Senor Fernando Munoz, whose person we hold as a hostage for Her Majesty's complaisance in the affair we have undertaken. We can waste no more time!"

Concha's lips became more rigid than ever. They looked as if they never would, should, or could be kissed. Juno herself, passing sentence upon the partner of great Jove's latest transgression, could not have appeared more inflexibly stern.

But she only saluted, turned on her heel like a drill-sergeant, and marched out by the side door.

In these trying circumstances the Duke of Rianzares showed an unexpected and wholly admirable calm. He leaned against the mantlepiece, glanced once at the ormulu timepiece with the address of a Paris maker below the winding holes, and fell again to fingering his unshaven chin. He then turned quickly toward the trembling valet, who regarded him with eyes which seemed to apologize for such unprecedented circumstances.

"There would have been time to shave me, even yet," he said, "only that you were fool enough to spill the shaving water."

Then, as if relinquishing hope, he sighed again and fell listlessly to regarding himself in the mirror.

The Sergeant muttered to himself once or twice, as if making mental note of an important fact which he desired to remember.

"All dandies are not cowards!" was what he was saying.

CHAPTER XLI.

Five, six, seven, eight of the ten slow minutes passed away, and beyond a glance at the clock and a more absorbing interest in the furze on his chin, Senor Munoz had not moved. The second hand upon the clock on the mantel shelf was crawling round its miniature dial for the ninth time, with vast apparent deliberation, when a noise was heard from the direction of the Queen's apartments.

There was a rapid gabble of tongues, a scurry of footsteps, the hissing rustle of stiff silken skirts along narrow passages and a voice which exclaimed, more and more shrilly: "The murderers! The cowards! Surely they will never dare! Have they forgotten that I am a Queen?"

And with these words Maria Christina of Naples burst like a whirlwind into the room. Her long black hair streamed down her back. Her little daughter followed, a comb still in the hand with which she had been struggling to take the place of Dona Susana, who, as before related, had gone to visit her relations.

After these two Concha followed, in appearance calm and placid as the windless Mediterranean on a day of Winter.

Upon his mistress' entrance, the Duke threw himself upon one knee. The rest of the company bowed with grace or awkwardness, according to their several abilities, but the Queen Regent did not heed them. She flew instantly to her husband and raised him in her arms.

"Fernando!" she cried, "what is this I hear? Did they threaten to kill you, if I do not grant them an interview? Well, here I am. Let them slay me instead. What have you to say to me, gentlemen and cowards? What I have to say to you is that I hope you may not live to repent having used such compulsion with a woman and a Queen!"

Rollo bowed again very low, and was about to speak, when the Queen interrupted.

"And as for this hussy," she cried, turning upon Concha, "if I had my way she should be indicted for witchcraft and burnt alive at the stake, as in the good times of the Holy Office! Yet you, Fernando, for whom I daily risk my life, you defended her—yes, defended her to my very face!"

"Beloved and most honored," said the Duke, soothingly. "I did but suggest that it would be better to convert the girl—to make a good Christian of her—"

"Yes, yes," cried the Queen, stamping her foot: "but did you not add that in that case you would like to be her father confessor?"

"Certainly I did not, most gracious one," answered her husband, soothingly. "You mistook my meaning. All that I said was no more than that many might be anxious to obtain the office of father confessor, being, as it were, eager to take the credit for the restoration of so notable a penitent."

But Rollo had small patience with the bickerings of royal lovers at such a time.

"I must crave Your Majesty's strict and instant attention," he said, suddenly dropping all ceremony. "I will only detain you a moment, if, as I anticipate, I receive your consent to what I have the honor of proposing to you."

At once the jealous woman froze into a Queen and fronted the young man with a haughty stare.

"Your Majesty," he began, "I do not dwell upon our services of the past night. They are known to you. Had it not been for my friends it is probable that no one of your party would at this moment have been left alive. Now, the day is passing and you are no safer than you were last night. It is necessary, therefore, that you put yourself unreservedly under the escort and protection of myself and friends. We must leave La Granja at once."

"Never!" cried Maria Christina, fiercely. "Am I the Queen Regent of Spain, to be thus badgered and commanded? I have never suffered it since I left my father's house at Naples! A boy and a foreigner shall not be the first. My royal guards will surely be here in an hour, at the latest. The roads will be cleared, and as for you—you shall all be safe in prison cells where, for your insolence, you ought to be lying at this moment!"

"Then," said Rollo, gravely, "I deeply regret that I am obliged to use the only means that are open me to fulfill my orders and to induce Your Highness to place herself in safety!"

"And, pray," cried Maria Christina, indignantly, "from whom can you have orders to place a Queen of Spain in restraint?"

In a moment Rollo realized that it was impossible for him to reveal his position as an officer of the Carlist armies, but a fortunate remembrance of some words dropped by the Abbot of Montblanch instantly gave him his cue.

"I act," he said calmly, "under the immediate direction of the Holy Father himself, at whose feet, in the Vatican of Rome, you shall one day kneel to ask pardon for your sins."

This unexpected reply seemed to agitate the Queen Regent, who, though forced to create herself a party out of the men of liberal opinions in her realm, was at heart, like all the Bourbons, a convinced and even bigoted religionary. But Munoz, who had hitherto been silent, stooped and whispered something in her

"How am I to be convinced of that?" she cried, turning on him fiercely. "I will not believe it, even from you!"

"I regret," said Rollo, "that your Highness must be compelled to believe it. Pray do me the honor of following my argument. The Holy Father judges it necessary for the peace of this realm, and your own soul's profit that you should be placed in a situation where you may be able to act more in accordance with what he knows to be your secret desires for the welfare of the church, of which he is God's vice regent on earth."

Rollo was glad to reflect that in uttering these words he was only repeating the sonorous phrases of Don Baltaza Varela, when the abbot delivered him his commission in his own chamber at Montblanch.

But the lady chiefly concerned continued obstinate. She would not budge an inch. She professed an absolute certainty that her guards would appear in a few hours, and with them her father confessor, who would inform her how to reply to any genuine message from his Holiness Gregory the Sixteenth. Further than that, she could not be moved.

"In that case," said the young man, "I will not conceal it from your Highness that considerable discretion has been granted to me. Your company and that of your daughter we must have upon our journey. It is our intention to place you and her in a place of safety—"

"To steal us—to kidnap us, you mean!" cried the Queen, with the utmost indignation.

"Your Majesty," continued Rollo, "I am not disputing about words. Our actions of last night will best explain our intentions of this morning. But, with respect to this gentleman," he turned to Senor Munoz as he spoke; "I have no directions either to permit or compel him to accompany us. Yet, since we must act with great speed and secrecy, it is clearly impossible to leave him behind. I am compelled, therefore, to put an alternative before you, which having had an opportunity to remark the senor's courage, I am pained to declare. If your Majesty will consent to accompany us at once and without parley, Don Fernando may do so also. But if not, since we have not force sufficient to deal with additional prisoners on such a journey, it will be my unhappy duty to order the gentleman's instant execution."

A shriek from the Queen punctuated the close of this speech—one of the longest that Rollo had ever made. But the Queen, hardly yet believing in the reality of their threats, still held out. As for Munoz, he said no word until Rollo abruptly ordered him to kneel and prepare for death.

"In that case," said the ex-guardsman, "permit me to put on a decent coat. A man ought not to die in a dressing gown It is not soldierly!"

Rollo bade the valet bring his master what he wanted, and presently the Duke of Rianzares, in his best uniform, found himself in a position to die with credit and self-respect.

But so unexpected was the nerve and resolution of the Queen that it was only when the Duke had been bidden kneel down between the halves of a French window which opened out upon a balcony that Christina, flinging dignity to the winds, fell upon his neck and cried to her captors: "Take me where you wish. Do with me what you will. Only preserve to me my beloved Fernando."

In less than an hour the whole party was on its way. The Queen Regent was mounted on a white mule which had been brought in from the hill pastures above El Mar. Behind came Piebald Pedro's donkey, with a basket chair strapped upon its back for the little princes, who was in high glee, holding Concha's hand and singing for gladness to be done with La Granja. The Sergeant and El Sarria walked one on each side of Senor Munoz, who, by suggestion of Rollo, had assumed a coat less decorative than that in which he had proposed to make his exit from life.

In addition to the Queen's mule and the donkey, the Sergeant led a horse which was presently to be mounted by Munoz, so soon, that is, as the rest of the party should regain the steeds they had left behind at the deserted farmhouse on the hill. But till that time, it was judged most safe that the Queen's consort should walk between Ramon Garcia and the Sergeant. Rollo, with a wandering eye toward Concha and the Queen, walked and talked with Etienne and John Mortimer, whom of late the joint compulsions of love and war had compelled him somewhat to neglect.

But these good fellows bore no malice, though certainly Etienne grew a little red when Rollo, with the frankness that distinguished his every word and action, launched into enthusiastic praise of the nobility, courage, fidelity and every other virtue characteristic of la Senorita Concha.

"In addition to which she is very pretty," added Etienne, significantly.

Rollo stopped with the semi-indignant air of a horse pulled up short in full career. But in a moment he had recovered himself.

"Yes," he said, doggedly, "she is very pretty."

"Not that you are a man to care for beauty—you never were," persisted Etienne, with a side look at Mortimer. "You have always said so yourself, you know."

"No, I never did care," Rollo agreed, a little hastily. "But yonder is the farmhouse. I wonder if we shall find our horses as we left them?"

Here Etienne laughed sardonically for no reason at all.

"I am in hopes that they will be fed and refreshed," continued Rollo, imperviously; "we must let them have a feed of corn, too, before they start."

La Giralda, who had been leading the Queen's white mule, at that moment gave up her post to Concha and fell back in order to whisper something to the Sergeant.

"Ah," said he, aloud, as soon as he had listened to her, "that is well thought on. It falls out well. La Giralda and I have a little business of our own to attend to, which may occupy us a few minutes. With your leave, Colonel, we will go on ahead and arrange matters for the Queen's reception. From what La Giralda tells me, it may be as wel to avoid entering the house."

So the Queen Regent, with Concha in attendance and the little Isabel riding demurely alongside on her diminutive donkey, delighting in the unexpected excursion, found that a large barn and granary, cool, airy, and with a roof of stone arched like the vaults of a fortress, had been prepared for them. The horses of the party had been fed and watered. Cloaks had been unstrapped and laid on piles of straw for the ladies to rest upon—that is, for her Majesty the Queen Maria Christina—Concha being one of the comity, and little Isabel dancing everywhere after her inseparable slave. So constant was the companionship of these two that it was with the utmost difficulty and after several failures that Rollo managed to exchange a word with his sweetheart.

"You have been very brave," he whispered. "I should have failed but for you!"

Concha blushed hot with swift pleasure, but on this occasion her usual readiness of speech seemed to have deserted her, and she stood silent, like a tongue-tied maid, greedy for the first time in her life of her own praise.

Before either could speak again the Sergeant was back to report that La Giralda and he had dinner ready for the party.

"You must not expect much," he said; "there is little available for the pot which may, with safety, be cooked."

But indeed in such weather there was need for nothing better than the arroz con pollo—the chicken with rice, together with the abundant gazpacho, for the first of which he had found the materials in the store chamber and barnyard of the deserted farmhouse.

The Sargeant's hurriedly prepared lunch was a prodigious success.

The great folk partook as heartily as any, and (perhaps owing to their extreme youth) the pollos tasted much more tender than could have been expected, considering the fact that the Sargeant had found them industriously pecking and scratching in the dust of the farmyard upon his arrival.

Rollo ate but little, for he was intensely excited. He had succeeded beyond expectation so far, and now he was beginning to see his way past all entanglements to the successful accomplishment of his mission. His plan was to proceed by unfrequented paths, such as were, however, perfectly familiar to his Adjutant, Sergeant Cardono, along the northern slopes of the Guadarrama till he should be able to look out across the fertile plain of the Duero toward the mural front of the Sierra de Moncayo.

Thence by forced marches across the valley, undertaken at night, he might hope, in two stages at most, to put his charges under the care of General Elio, the immediate representative of Don Carlos, who had established his headquarters there. Small wonder that Rollo grew excited. The worst was over—the myriad adventures, the perilous passes, the thousand enemies. Now the plains lay before him and—Concha loved him.

If only this weight of responsibility were once off his mind—ah, then!

Poor Rollo! And, indeed, poor humankind in general. How often the wind falls to a breeze, heat-tempering, grateful, which comes in fits and starts, not severe enough to chill, yet long enough to cool the body, wearied by the Summer heats, with a sense of grateful relief.

And it is precisely in the teeth of such a gentle breathing, cheek-fanning earthwind that the thunder storm comes riding up overhead, its flanks black and ragged with rain and fierce spurts of hail, and in the midst the white desolating lightnings zigzagging to the ground.

CHAPTER XLII.

The town of Aranda lay to the left, perched high above them, on the slopes of the Sierra de Moncayo. Rollo looked past the crumbling gray turrets of the little fortalice and over the juniper-and-thyme-covered foothills to the red peaks of the Sierra. From the point at which they stood Moncayo fronted them like a lion surprised at the mouth of his lair, that raises his head haughtily to view the rash trespassers on his domain.

The lower slopes of the mountain were tawny yellow like the lion's fell, but from the point at which the scant mane of rock plants ceased, Moncayo shone red as blood in the level rays of the setting sun.

"There—there," thought Rollo, "I have it almost in hand now. Beyond that far-extending flank lie Vera and the headquarters of General Elio."

They were riding easily, debouching slowly and in single file out of one of the defiles with which the country was cut up. The Sergeant and Rollo were leading, when, as they issued out upon the open country, all suddenly they heard themselves called upon peremptorily to halt, at the peril of their lives.

"Whom have we here? Ah, our certificated Englishman! And in his company—whom?"

The speaker was a dark-haired man of active figure and low stature, whose eyes twinkled in his head. He was dressed in the full uniform of a Carlist General. About him rode a brilliant staff, and from behind every rock and out of every deep gully-cleft peered the muzzle of a rifle, with just one black eye peeling from under the white basque boina or the red one of Navarre.

And for the third time, Rollo Blair, out upon his adventures, had come face to face with General Don Ramon Cabrera, of Tortosa.

Yet it was with glad relief in his heart that Rolla instantly rode up to Cabrera and, having saluted, thus began his report: "I have the honor, General, to report that I have been forunate enough to induce Her Majesty, the Queen Regent of Spain, and her daughter, the young Queen Isabel, to place themselves under my protection. I am proceeding with them to the headquarters of General Elio, according to my instructions, and if it be at all convenient, I should be glad of an additional escort that I may be able to bring them safely within the lines of Vera."

The brow of General Cabrera had been darkening during this speech, and at the close he burst out with an oath:

"I know no such person as the Queen Regent of Spain. I have heard of a certain light-o'-love calling herself Maria Christina, widow of the late King Fernando the Seventh. And if this be indeed the lady and her brat, we of the true opinion owe you, Don Rollo, a debt of gratitude which shall not be easily repaid, for she and hers have troubled the peace of this country much and long. Of which now, by San Nicholas, there shall be an end!"

As he spoke he ran his eyes along the line to where Munoz rode behind his mistress.

"And the tall gentleman with the polished whiskers? Who may he be?" he cried, a yet more angry fire glittering in his eyes.

"That, General Cabrera," said Rollo quietly, "is His Excellency, the Duke of Rianzares."

"At last, estanco keeper!" cried Cabrera, riding forward as if to strike Munoz on the face. "I, Ramon Cabrera of Tortosa, have waited a long time for this pleasure."

Munoz did not answer in words, but as before preserved his imperturbable demeanor. His half-contemptuous dignity of bearing, which had irritated even Rollo, seemed to have the power of exciting Cabrera to the point of fury.

"Colonel," he cried, "I relieve you of your charge. You have done well. I am the equal in rank of General Elio, and there is no need that you should convoy this party to his camp. I will assume the full charge—yes, and responsibility. By the Holy St. Vincent, I promised them twenty for one when they slew my mother in the Square of the Barbican. But I knew not from how evil a vinestock I should gather my second vintage. A poor commandant's wife from a petty Valentian fort was the best I could do for them at the time. But now—the mother of Ramon Cabrera shall be atoned for in such a fashion as shall make the world sit dumb!"

While Cabrera was speaking, Rollo grew slowly chill and then ice-cold with horror.

"Sir," he said, his voice suddenly hoarse and broken, "surely you do not realize what you are saying. These ladies are under my protection. They have committed themselves to my care under the most sacred and absolute pledges that their lives would be respected. The same is the case with regard to Senor Munoz. It is absolutely necessary that I should place them under the care of General Elio as the personal representative of the King!"

"I have already told you, sir," cried Cabrera, furiously, "that I am of equal rank with any Elio or other General in the armies of Don Carlos. Have not I done more than any other? Was it not I who carried my command to the gates of Madrid? Aye, and had I been left to myself, I should have succeeded in cutting off that fox Mendizabal. Now, however, I am absolutely independent, owing authority to no man, save to the King alone. It is mine to give or to withhold, to punish or to pardon. Therefore I, General Ramon Cabrera, having sworn publicly to avenge my mother, when, where and how I can, solemnly declare that, as a further retaliation, I will shoot these three prisoners tomorrow at sunrise, even as Nogueras, the representative of this woman who calls herself Queen Regent of Spain, shot down my innocent mother for the sole crime of giving birth to an unworthy son. Take them away! I will hear no more!"

Thus, in a moment, was Rollo toppled from that highest pinnacle of happiness, for such to a young man is the hope of immediate success. He cursed the hour that he had entered the bloodthirsty land of Spain. He cursed his visit to the Abbey of Montblanch, and the day on which he accepted a commission from men without honor or humanity. He was, indeed, almost in case to do himself a hurt, and both Concha and the Sergeant watched him with solicitude during the remainder of the afternoon, as he wandered disconsolately about the little camp, twirling his moustache and clanking Killiecrankie at his heels with so fierce an air that even Cabrera's officers, no laggards on the field, kept prudently out of his way.

The royal party had been disposed in a small house, a mere Summer residence of some of the bourgeois folk of Aranda, and there, by an unexpected act of grace and at the special supplication of the Sergeant, La Giralda had been permitted to wait upon them.

To the secret satisfaction of Rollo, the Sergeant did not resume his duties in the camp of Cabrera. The troop to which he belonged had been left behind to watch the movements of the enemy, for Cabrera had barely escaped from a strong force under Espartero near the walls of Madrid itself by showing the cleanest of heels possible.

Cardono, therefore, still attached himself unreproved to the party of Rollo, which camped a little apart. A guard of picked men was, however, placed over the quarters of the royal family. This Cabrera saw to himself, and then sullenly withdrew into his tent for the night to drink aguardiente by himself, in gloomy converse with a heart into whose dark secrets at no time could any man enter. It is, indeed, the mast charitable supposition that at this period of his life Ramon Cabrera's love for a mother most cruelly murdered had rendered him temporarily insane.

Deprived of La Giralda and judging that Rollo was in no mood to be spoken with, Concha Cabezos took refuge in the society of El Sarria. That stalwart man of few words, though in the days of her light-heartedness quite careless of her wiles, and indeed unconscious of them, was in his way strongly attached to her. He loved the girl for the sake of her devotion to Dolores, as well as because of the secret preference which all grave and silent men have for the winsome and gay.

"This butcher of Tortosa," she said, in a low voice, to Ramon Garcia, 'will surely never do the thing he threatens. Not even a devil out of hell could slay in cold blood, not the Queen Regent only, but also the innocent little maid, who never did any man a wrong.

El Sarria looked keenly about him for possible witness. Concha and he sat at some distance above the camp, and El Sarria was idly employed in breaking off pieces of shaly rock and trying to hit a certain pinnacle of white quartz which made a prominent target a few yards beneath them.

"I think he will," said Ramon Garcia, slowly. "Cabrera is a sullen dog at all times, and the very devil in his cups. Besides, who am I to blame him—is there not the matter of his mother? Had it been Dolores—well, I would have shot a dozen royal families."

"The thing will break our Rollo's heart, if it cannot be prevented," sighed Concha; "for he hath taken it in his head that the Queen and her husband trusted themselves to his word of honor."

Ramon Garcia shook his head sadly.

"Ah, 'tis his sacred thing, that honor of his—his image of the Virgin which he carries about with him," he said, "and indeed, El Sarria has little cause to complain, for had it not been for that same honor of Don Rollo's, Dolores Garcia might at this moment have been in the hands of Luis Fernandez!"

"Aye, or dead," said Concha; "she would never have lived in the clutches of the evil-hearted! I know her better. But, Don Ramon, what can we, who owe him so much, do for our Don Rollo?"

(To be continued.)

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