In Kedar's Tents

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by Henry Seton Merriman.

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CHAPTER I. ONE SOWETH.

'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, to-day, 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, debonnaire, 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.

'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 gintleman, 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 galere 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.

'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 bete 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.

'A 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 senoras--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.

'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, senor,' 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, senor. 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.

'Senor,' he said, with a gesture of the hat, courteous and yet manly enough to savour more of the camp than the court, 'senor, 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 Senorita 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 Senorita 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 Senorita 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.

'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 Concepcion Vara that the English Excellency had selected him on his--the host's--assurance that Algeciras contained no other so honest.

'Tell him,' answered Concepcion 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.'

Concepcion, 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.

Concepcion 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.

Concepcion 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, Concepcion 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 Concepcion 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 Concepcion 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, Concepcion 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.

Concepcion 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, Senor Vara,' he added to the guide, 'I shoot you first, understand that.'

'He says,' answered Concepcion 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 Concepcion 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, Concepcion 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 Concepcion'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 Concepcion, throwing down his cigarette.

'Mother of God! these Guardias Civiles!'

The two guards came clambering down the face of the rock. Concepcion 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.'

Concepcion 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 Concepcion Vara, we all know him.'

Concepcion 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 Concepcion 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.

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

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 Conynghamn. '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 Senor 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, Senor 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 senorita?' inquired the General.

'The senorita 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.

'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 thirteenpence 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, senorita,' 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, senorita, 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, senorita, 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, senorita,' 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 Barenna in Ronda, senorita?' thereby proving that General Espartero would do ill to give him an appointment requiring even the earliest rudiments of diplomacy.

'Julia Barenna is my cousin. Her mother was my mother's sister. Do you know them, Senor 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, senorita. 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 Senora 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 Senora 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 Senora 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, Senor 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.

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

'I think I have met him, senora.'

'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 Senora 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 Senora Barenna sharply; and the two young ladies laughed.

Senora 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,' Senora Barenna was saying, though nobody heeded her; 'one must not talk nor even think politics in this country. You are no politician, I trust, Senor Conyngham--Senor Conyngham, I ask you, you are no politician?'

'No, senora,' 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, senorita--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, senorita, 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.

'Senorita, I have a letter for you.'

'Not yet--wait!'

Senora 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, senorita. 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 Senora 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.

'Senorita,' 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, Senor 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 senorita has said. It is true, senor, that you surreptitiously handed to the Senorita Barenna a letter expressing your love?'

'Since the senorita 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.

'La discretion est l'art du mensonge.'

The Alcalde blew out his cheeks and looked at General Vincente. Senora 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 Senora Barenna with his most reassuring smile.

'It is nothing, my dear Inez,' 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 Inez, 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 Senorita Barenna, 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 Senorita Barenna 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, Senor 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.

Senora Barenna 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 senorita 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 beaute 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 Concepcion 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 Concepcion, 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 Concepcion 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.

Concepcion 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, senorita.'

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

CHAPTER X. THE CITY OF DISCONTENT.

'En paroles ou en actions, etre 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.'

Concepcion 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 Concepcion, urging his horse to keep pace with the trot of Conyngham's huge mount.

'Ah!'

'No,' pursued Concepcion. '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, Senor 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: "Concepcion 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.'

Concepcion 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 Concepcion 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 Concepcion 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 Concepcion, '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 fete 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, Concepcion!' 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 Concepcion 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 Concepcion. '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.'

Concepcion 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 new-comer. 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 Barenna 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

Concepcion. '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, senor?'

'For Ronda.'

Concepcion 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 Concepcion.

'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 Senorita Barenna 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.'

Concepcion 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 Senor 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 Concepcion 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, Concepcion 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.

'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.' Senora 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 Senora 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 Senora 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.'

Senora 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.'

Senora 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.'

Senora 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 senorita,' 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 Cafe 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 Senor 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 Concepcion Vara doing in the neighbourhood of Ronda to-night?'

CHAPTER XII. ON THE TOLEDO ROAD.

'Une bonne intention est une echelle 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,' Concepcion 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 Concepcion 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 Concepcion 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 Concepcion 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 Concepcion 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. Senora Barenna 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 Concepcion 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 Concepcion 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 Concepcion Vara. Conyngham would have known him at once. This was one wearing a better coat; indeed Concepcion 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 Cony

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