"THE FIREBRAND."

BY S. R. CROCKETT.

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SYNOPSIS OF PRECEDING CHAPTERS.

Ramon Garcia, known as El Sarria, having been induced to believe that his wife Dolores is unfaithful, stabs a village fop, Rafael Flores, whom he finds presumably kissing Dolores through the window. His estate are confiscated and he becomes a hunted man. At the same time a young Scotch adventurer, Rollo Blair, comes to Spain and during an inn quarrel is aided by John Mortimer, an Englishman. The two start to visit Don Baltasar, abbot of the monastery of Mont Blanch. Blair and Mortimer are entertained lavishly by the abbot and meet Etienne St. Pierre, a French gallant who is studying for holy orders. These three, with El Sarria, who has found protection at the monastery, are commissioned by the abbot to capture the Queen Regent and her little daughter in the interests of the Church.

En route for the camp of Cabrera, the Carlist General, they pass the home of El Sarria, who learns that Dolores was not false to him and that his downfall was plotted by Luis Fernandez. Dolores is imprisoned in Luis' home and the son to whom she has just given birth is about to be buried alive by Luis' brother, Tomas, when El Sarria falls upon him. Then aided by Rollo Blair and his companions he captures Fernandez' home and rescues his wife. Blair and his comrades, captured by Gen. Cabrera, cannot prove their sympathy with the Carlist cause because Blair was forced to leave his credentials at the convent as security for Dolores. They are sentenced to be shot at daybreak. Concha arrives at the convent with the credentials, saves their lives and later joins Blair's party in search of the Queen Regent.

The adventurers learn that the Queen's court at San Ildefonso has scattered because of the black plague, and Cardona and La Giralda are sent forward to reconnoitre. They learn that a band of gypsies are planning to raid the castle and Rollo hastens to the rescue of the royal party. Rollo and party barricade the palace, resist the gypsies, who succeed, however, in capturing the Princess Isabel. Rollo rescues Isabel and starts with her for the hermitage, which is threatened by gypsy brigands, and bodies of plague victims are posted as sentinels.

Rollo, aided by Concha, restores the Princess to the Queen and is betrothed to Concha. The royal party is captured by Cabrera, and their escape is undertaken by Concha. While Concha intercedes with Gen. Elliot the Queen Regent's army to rescue the royal party, but Rollo's escort, Rolo devises means for their escape.

CHAPTER XLVI.

THE SERGEANT'S LAST SALUTE.

It was almost time for starting. The two sentries lay on their faces, trussed and helpless, with gags in their mouths. El Sarria and Rollo had dropped upon them as if from the clouds a few minutes after the officer had made a two-hourly visitation. The sergeant was ready with the three horses in the hollow, keeping them quiet with cunning gipsy caresses and making soft whistling "chalan" noise in their ears.

So far all had gone well, and Rollo, standing with his knife in suggestive proximity to the tied-up sentries, silently congratulated himself. The dawn was doubtless coming up behind the hills to the east, but the darkness was still absolute as ever about the camp, save indeed for the lambent brilliancies of the stars.

They were now waiting only for the royal party, and the time seemed long to impatient Rollo. Were all his plans, so carefully laid, to be made naught because, forsooth, a Queen in danger of her life must still keep up the punctilios of a court and cherish the pettishnesses and caprices of a spoilt child? Was his reputation to go down to posterity as that of a man who, being trusted with the lives of a woman and a child, brought them straight to the shambles?

At last—there! They were coming. But why, for God's sake, could not they make less noise?

With a motion of his hand which directed El Sarria to keep an eye upon the gagged sentries, Rollo went forward to receive the Queen and conduct her to her horse. Munoz, however, came out first, carrying in his arms the little Princess, who, however, so soon as she heard Rollo's voice, whispered her desire to be transferred to him. But Rollo had already offered the Queen his arm, and whispering her to tread carefully, led the way to the little hollow, where Sergeant Cardono kept the three bridles in his hand and was cursing the slow movements of crowned heads and ennobled estanco keepers in Romany of the deepest and blackest.

He had cause to curse another peculiarity of monarchs and spoilt children before many minutes had gone by. Till now the success of the plot had been complete. There remained indeed only to mount and ride. El Sarria brought up the rear, assuring himself for the one hundredth time that his weapons were in good order and ready to his hand. No great General, Ramon Garcia was a matchless legionary.

But the Queen Regent would by no means submit to be assisted to her seat (it was a man's saddle) by Rollo. She called to her husband in a voice clearly audible all about:

"Fernando—my love! Come to me—I want you!"

As Rollo said afterward, no Queen born under the lilies of Bourbon ever ran a nearer chance of having the rude hand of a commoner set over her august mouth than did Maria Cristina of Naples on this occasion.

Nor was the appeal without effect.

Señor Muñoz instantly put the little Princess down upon the ground and hastened to his wife. What happened after that is not very clear, even after the subject has been repeatedly and exhaustingly thrashed out by the persons most immediately concerned.

Perhaps the Princess, deposited thus suddenly upon the ground, caught instinctively at one of the long tails of the horses which (in common with those of all Spanish horses) almost swept the ground. Perhaps the animals themselves grew suddenly panic-stricken. At all events, one of the three lashed out sudden ly. The sergeant lent sideways to snatch Isabel from among their heels. In so doing he dropped a rein, and in another moment one of the steeds went clattering up the dry arroyo, scattering the gravel every way with a wild flourishing of heels, and making, as the sergeant growled, "enough noise to scare twenty camps."

For a hundred heartbeats all the party lost their breath. Then Rollo whispered to Señor Muñoz to mount and take the little Princess before him.

"As for you, you must run for it, Ramon," he said to El Sarria. "The fat is in the fire now, and all we can do is to hold them back as long as we can. Make straight for the gorge toward Vera. You know the way. May God help you to reach it before they can turn our flank."

Then it was that the sergeant received a distinct shock of surprise.

That queens would be foolish, arbitrary even absolutely idiotic was no marvel to him. That they should choose their favorites from estanco keepers and guardsmen and promote them at a day's notice to grandeeships, dukedoms of Spain and other privileges even higher did not in the least astonish him. But that the person so elevated should after all, in his less corporeal attributes, prove to be a man, was a first-rate surprise to José Maria.

Rollo was now to furnish the sergeant with an absolutely new sensation.

"Sir," he said, quietly addressing El Sarria, "be good enough to mount and conduct the Queen to a place of safety. I intend to remain here with these gentlemen."

Then he went to Maria Cristina and spoke a few sentences to her in a tone so low that only the last words were audible.

"If not, by the Immaculate Virgin I swear that you will never see my face again!"

"Fernando! Fernando! Fernando! You are cruel!" was the answer, uttered through choking sobs.

But El Sarria was in the saddle. The little princess was set in her place in front of him.

"Off with you!" whispered Rollo.

And in this manner the little cavalcade began its momentous march.

The Sergeant stood gazing at Muñoz who rubbed the backs of his hands alternately as if there had been a chill in the night air. Muñoz on his part turned to Rollo.

"Let me have the use of that gentleman's piece," he said. "I do not like this silence. I think we shall have a hot time of it within the next five minutes."

At that moment the escaped charger came cantering back, neighing and alarming all the picketed horses for miles, which snorted back an answer.

The ex-guardsman was right. Within less than five minutes the entire camp was awake. The escape of the prisoners had been discovered. The recovered sentry pointed out the direction of the barranco as that in which the fugitives had taken their departure.

Whereupon there ensued a hurried rush thither. Indeed scarcely had the dark forms of the two horses with their riders ceased to break the skyline upon one verge of the ravine before Cabrera's men were clambering and shouting on the other. Luckily the precipice was sheer immediately opposite and the pursuers had to try a furlong or two further down at a place where a landslide had enabled them on the previous evening to lead their horses to and from the few stagnant pools which now represented the full-fed torrent that the spring rains send down from the Sierra de Munco.

"Let them have it!" whispered Rollo, as the first straggling groups stood up dark between them and the stars.

Accordingly out of the darkness of the barranco a volley flamed irregularly enough, the rattle of musketry running down the whole front of the line. Six pieces in all spoke out their message to Cabrera's men to halt. For La Giralda, having taken possession of Concha's armament, drew a bead upon her man with probably as much success as any of the others. It was still too dark for accurate shooting and the worst shot was not much inferior to the best.

But these six bullets sent across the valley from unseen foes and spattering the stones about their feet checked the first fierce rush of these angry men. Some enemy was in force on their front—so much was evident. It would be well to discover of what sort.

"We are holding them," said Rollo triumphantly; "that is all we can hope for. Pass down the word to fire only when they advance. Time is what El Sarria and his party need. And so far as I can see, unless Concha hurries, a dead Carlist or so, more or less, will not make much difference to us!"

But Rollo soon found that the men who were opposed to him knew all there was to know about guerrilla warfare. They pushed forward steadily from rock to rock, and as they came on in overwhelming numbers the dauntless six were compelled to retire upward till they had gained the rugged brink of the barranco, from which the uplands swell away in broad unclothed downs in the direction of the gorge of Vera.

Already the morning was growing manifestly lighter. The red peaks of Moncavo above their heads began to emerge out of the gray uncolored night. They could see each other now and Rollo looked down his line with some pride.

There they were each behind his shelter, loading and firing according to his liking and the bowels that were in him—the sergeant sternly winging each shot with intent to slay, Muñoz firing as if he had been practising at a target for sport and were feeling bored for the want of a cigarette; Etienne with swift and contagious gayety of mood while John Mortimer did his work with a plain and business like devotion to the matter in hand that argued well for his father's spinning mills at Chorley if he ever should return there—a chance which at present seemed somewhat slim.

La Giralda, like the sergeant, fired to kill her man, and as for Rollo himself, he did not fire at all unless he could plant a bullet where it would induce a Carlist to alter his mind about advancing further.

The end, however, was clearly a matter of time. The light came faster and faster up out of the east. Rollo stood on his feet, and heedless of the bullets that buzzed like bees about him looked eagerly toward the gorge at Vera. He could see nothing of Ramon Garcia or of the Queen, and his heart gave a bound of joy.

But there were ups and downs on the rolling moorland country that stretches away to the right. El Sarria and his companions might be temporarily hidden in the trough of one of these waves.

"We can hold on a while yet, lads," he cried, and clapped down behind his rock, shaking his rifle into its nook beside his ear, to be ready for the next spot of red or white crawling toward them through the dusty arroyo.

But at that moment there came from far away the sound of cheering. A mounted man dashed at full gallop up to the edge of the ravine opposite to them.

"Do not fire," said the sergeant, "that is Cabrera—he is a brave man."

But John Mortimer, not caring or not understanding the language, fired promptly, and the rifle bullet threw up a cloud of dust between the horse's feet. The animal reared and almost threw the rider. But in a moment he was erect as ever in the saddle, and Rollo could see him shouting furious commands to his men—apparently ordering them to bear round to the left, so as to take the defending party on their least defended side.

For the next few minutes, as Munoz had foretold, it was hot work enough, and Rollo had no time to look behind him, or he might have seen a sight that would have astonished him—a single horsewoman riding swiftly toward the barranco, followed at the distance of half a mile by a cloud of mounted men.

Suddenly the General on the opposite bank, who all the while had been darting about hither and thither like a gadfly, held up his arm, and with astonishing pride of horsemanship (and faith in the soundness of his girths) rode his charger straight down the shelving sides of the ravine, the slaty fragments crumbling and slipping under the iron-shod hoofs.

With a cheer the red boinas of the Estella regiment followed, and then straight up the opposite slopes of shale they dashed toward Rollo and his poor defences.

"Hold your fire!" he cried, first in English and then in Spanish. "Wait till you are sure of them. We are only half a dozen all told and we must wing a man apiece."

It chanced that just as the horseman (who, as the sergeant had supposed, was Cabrera himself) almost cut his mind with disappointed fury) surmounted the ridge a little to the right of Rollo's position, but close to where the sergeant lay behind his rock, that Concha threw herself off her charger (or rather one of Gen. Espartero's) and with a joyous shout informed them that the Queen was safe and that twelve hundred Cristino regulars were following close behind her!

Thus these two, the disappointed murderer and the triumphant deliverer, met almost face to face. Cabrera heard Concha's glad proclamation. He saw the plumes of Espartero's troopers already topping the rise, strong well-knit men of the best farming stock in Old Castile mounted on Gallegan horses.

Quite breathless with her headlong haste Concha stood panting, her hand pressed on her breast. Her eyes were wandering every way in search of Rollo, and in her haste and happiness she had left her weapons behind in the camp of Espartero.

"At any rate I will make sure of you," cried the butcher of Tortosa bitterly, and, drawing a pistol, he covered Concha at point-blank distance. But from behind his rock (as it were out of the ground) arose the tall, gaunt form and leathern visage of Sergeant Cardono.

With a sweep of the arm he set Concha behind him and as the pistol went off he received the shot in his own bosom.

The next moment the Castilian horsemen crashed full in front of Cabrera's advance and buried it down the side of the ravine, the General himself being borne away in the thickest of the surge.

But the sergeant lay still with the breast of his jacket opened, and his head on Concha's shoulder. She dropped warm tears over his face. Rollo, too, was there and held the dying man's hand. He beckoned La Giralda to him and whispered a word in Romany. She nodded and presently returned with the same great bulk of a man, brown as a Moor of Barbary, whom Rollo had encountered on the night of the plunder of San Ildefonso.

"Ezquerra," the sergeant whispered, "I am spent. There is a spike in the neckband this time. All that is honestly come by I want you to give to this young lady. You will find it by itself under the hearthstone in my house at Ronda. The rest you will take no objections to, I know, on the ground of morals! Keep it for yourself."

Concha glanced once at Rollo and then receiving his nod of approval bent down and kissed the Sergeant.

The Andalusian looked up with that wondrous flavor of gay humor which distinguishes those born in the joyous province. His saturnine visage brightened into the sweetest smile. Very feebly he raised his hand to his brow in a last salute in acknowledgment of Concha's kindness. His head fell back on her breast.

"A thousand grateful thanks, señorita!" he said. And then noting the executioner, he added: "Ah, Ezquerra, this is better than dying on the Plaza Mayor of Salamanca with the iron collar about one's neck."

They were his last words. And so passed José Maria of Ronda, whom to this day every Spanish peasant holds to have been the greatest man Spain has seen since the dead Cid rode forth on Bavieca for the last time to outface the Moors.

CHAPTER XLVI

MENDIZABAL.

Rollo and his companions rode into Madrid amid the clamor and rejoicing of thousands, as indeed he might have done behind Don Carlos had he been successful in his first intention. Madrid was healthy and hungry. The plague had been stayed by the belt of barren country which cinctures the capital of Spain. And as for fear, do not the inhabitants say that what happens not in Madrid, happens not at all?

Rollo, so long accustomed to the high, clear silences of the Sierra or the scarcely less restful valleys where the birds sing all day in the spring, felt himself closed in and deafened by the clamor, blinded by the brilliant colors, and in humor with all things—chiefly, it must be confessed, because Concha, attired by the Queen's own waiting maid from Aranjuez, sat in a carriage with the aplomb of a duchess.

They were all in high favor. For Muñoz (now more than ever the Power Behind the Throne, and perhaps secretly proud of having played the man at defence of the barranco of Moncayo) had quickly turned the tide of the Queen Regent's displeasure. And at this time there was scarcely any honor that she would not have bestowed upon her preservers.

On the third day after their arrival the privilege of a royal interview was granted to the young Scot. Rollo smiled as he thought of the first he had been favored with, and of that other when he had started off a cavalcade consisting of two Queens and an outlaw under sentence of death with the loud "Arre!" of a muleteer.

But Rollo had learned to be calm-eyed before royalties. At last he stood in the great hall of audience, his plain, well-worn coat and knee-breeches the secret scorn of every courtier. But a glance at Killiecrankie, once more aswing by his side, was sufficient to sober too impertinent mirth. Meanwhile the reputation of his exploits and the keen soldier-like face which he turned so pensively toward the window awakened the liveliest interest in many a pair of dark eyes.

Somewhat after this fashion ran the prattle:

"Look—there goes the man who has delivered the Regent and the young Queen! They say that both José Maria, whom every one thought dead, and El Sarria, the outlaw, were of his band. More than that, it is certain that one very near to the Queen Regent's person was content to take service with him as a common soldier. How great and famous, then, must he be! And how certain of preferment! It were indeed well to cultivate his acquaintance. For what shall be done to the man whom two Queens and a Consort unite in delighting to honor? His threadbare coat? A mere eccentricity of genius, my love! His huge battered sword a-dangle at his side? It is said that he has slain over twenty men with that same blade! Decidedly not a man to be despised—speaks all languages, even the crabbed Gitano—Castilian like a native of Valladolid! He will marry a Spanish wife and become one of *nosotros*, as dids O'Donnell, Duke of Tetuan, Sarsfield, Blake and a score of others—all once poor and neglected, now thrice hatted and set among the finest clay of the court potter."

He had been sent for by the Queen Regent. Till then—but at that moment, after a preliminary peep from behind a curtain, the Princess herself ran skipping across the hall, and, catching Rollo by the hand, bewildered him with a chatter of joyous questionings.

Where was Concha? Would her brother never come back? Why had he not been at Aranjuez? She sent him a kiss! (The which Rollo promised without fail to deliver—and, what is more, meant to keep his word.)

Yes (he answered with amusement), perhaps one day the Princess would see Concha's brother again. It was certainly very dull in Madrid. Royal palaces were as little to his liking as to that of the Princess.

Then the little lady had her turn. Did he remember when he had hidden her underneath the great brass pot among the hay? Did he know that once a straw had tickled her beneath the chin so funnily that she came near to bursting out laughing? Rollo did not know, but the thought turned him cold even among that throng of courtiers, casting sidelong glances and trying to get near enough to listen politely to their conversation without appearing to do so.

"Ah, there he comes—just like him!" cried the little girl, stamping her foot after the pattern of her mother, "now you and I will have no more good talk. But I shall wait for you at the gate when you come out. There—now bend down. I want to give you another kiss for the pretty boy, the brother of that Concha of yours!"

As she ran off Rollo found a friendly hand on his arm, and, lo! there at his elbow was Don Fernando Muñoz, Duke of Riancares, come in person to convey him into the presence. His manner was characterized by the utmost cordiality, together with a certain humanity altogether new, which made Rollo think that a few more barrancos to defend would do this favored grandeeship a great deal of good.

Rollo had expected to be ushered into the presence of her Majesty in person, but instead a plain English-looking man stood alone in a little room, the window of which commanded a vast and desolate prospect. There was a tall chair with a golden crown over it at the top of a table covered with red cloth, while several others all uncushioned and severely plain, were ranged regularly about it.

The English-looking man came forward bluffly and put out his hand to Rollo. He looked more like a healthy fox-hunting squire, just intelligent enough to sit in Parliament and make speeches against reform and the corn laws, than the political confidant of a Queen of Spain.

Then in a moment it flashed through Rollo's mind that this hearty Anglo-Iberian could be none other than Mendizabal himself, the Prime Minister of Spain, the scourge of monks and monasteries, the promised avatar of the finances of Spain. Another thought crossed his mind also. He had actually not so very long ago practically accepted a commission to kill this man if he should chance to cross his path.

Yet the remembrance did not dim the brightness of the young man's smile as he took the other's hand.

"Ten to one he will talk to me about the weather," said Rollo to himself, "to me who ought at this moment to be inserting a 12-inch Manchegan knife between his ribs."

And it fell out even as he had anticipated.

"You have been favored with fine weather for your many adventures," said the prime minister of the Queen Regent. "It is almost like an English June, dear, but with a touch of cold in the mornings and after sunset."

Rollo modestly supplied the appropriate conversational counter.

"Your name strikes me in some way familiar," said Mendizabal. "Was not your father Alistair Blair of Blair Castle, a client of mine when I was a banker in London and operating on the Stock Exchange?"

"He was, sir," quoth candid Rollo, "not greatly to his advantage or mine!"

The premier colored a little, but did not alter his friendly tone.

"Well, perhaps not," he said. "I myself lost every penny I possessed in the world at the same time. Our Spanish stocks were not so favorable an investment as they have become since we obtained recognition and a guarantee from England. But when I have been turned out of my present occupation I wish you would permit me to look into your affairs. Your father's vouchers should be worth something now. You have not, I hope, had to sell the old place of your ancestors!"

"No," said Rollo, carelessly, "an old retainer of the family lives in the castle with his wife. There is a dovecote in the yard, so they eat the pigeons which eat the farmers' crops, who in turn forget to pay their rents. Thus the ball rolls. And, indeed, the years have been so bad of late that I have not asked them!"

"You prefer a life of adventure abroad?" asked the premier, who had not ceased to look at Rollo with the most earnest attention.

Rollo shrugged his shoulders slightly at the question.

"I do not know," he said simply. "I have not tried. The most ordinary affairs turn out adventurous to me. But then I would rather undergo any conceivable hardship than live on in one place like a beetle pinned to a card, able only to waggle my feet, till a merciful death puts a limit to my sufferings."

Further conversation was cut short by the entrance of the Queen Regent. Her husband conducted her to the door, or rather portière curtain of the council room, and immediately withdrew—a slight waving of the tapestry, however, affording some reason for suspecting that his Excellency the Duke of Rianzares had not removed himself the distance required by etiquette from the councils of his sovereign.

Maria Cristina extended first to Mendizabal and then to Rollo a plump hand to kiss.

"I have to thank you," she said to the latter, not ungraciously, "for the many and great services you have rendered to me, my daughter and to other friends also. The result has certainly been most fortunate, though the manner of service at times left something to be desired."

Then, as Rollo kept his head modestly lowered, the Queen Regent relented a little, thinking him covered with confusion at her severity, which was far from being his real state of mind.

"But, after all, you are a brave young man of excellent parts and personable to a degree——"

"Which in this age and country go for no little," said Mendizabal, bowing to the Queen as if he intended a compliment. "You have heard how our soldiers chant as they go to battle:

"'Old Carlo is a crusty churl,
But Isabel's a sweet young girl!'"

The Queen bowed, with, however, a little frown upon her face. She was never quite sure whether her Prime Minister were laughing at her or not. Then she returned to the subject of Rollo.

"You have some employment of a sort suited to the taste of this adventurous young man? I understand and sympathize with his desire not return to the wars in the north."

"There is the matter of the suppression of the monasteries," returned Mendizabal, "to take effect (as your Majesty doubtless remembers) on the 20th of the month. It is already the 6th. There may be some slight trouble where the orders are strong. I propose that we send this distinguished young Scotch soldier (whose noble father I had the honor of knowing somewhat intimately) to Valencia or the Baleares with viceregal powers. We have great need of such men at such a time."

Rollo gasped and bowed his head. The crimson rose to his cheek. "To be a Governor, with almost regal powers and soldiers at his beck, to hold a turbulent province quiet under his hand. How he wished there were no such thing as "honor" anywhere, keeping him by mere iteration and irritance to the resolution his conscience had extorted from him.

Mendizabal thought the young man only doubtful of his capacity, and patted him on the shoulder with a fatherly tolerance and encouragement.

"You will do very well," he said, kindly; "we will give you a free hand, full powers and as many soldiers as you want. Besides, the Carlists have been some while in these regions, and we have not been able to get our own men. Now you can look them up."

Then Rollo, suddenly finding words, spoke his mind fully and freely.

"I can not go," he said, "at least, not till I have fulfilled a sacred duty which lies heavily upon me. I took up a charge. I have not fulfilled it. I can not serve the Queen Regent till I have laid down that which I undertook, and to the person who charged me with the mission!"

The Queen stared at the bold young man, but the Prime Minister understood better.

"It is his point of honor," he explained to Maria Cristina, "those of his nation can not help it. It is in the blood and in the gloomy creed which they profess—a sour and inconvenient religion, in which there is no confession."

"No confession!" cried the Queen casting up her hands in horror; "no absolution! How, then, can they go on living from day to day?"

"Much like other people," said the Premier, smiling; "they repent, and then repent of their repentances."

"And is this young man not a Christian?" cried the Queen. "Is he also of this dark and gloomy superstition—what was it that you called the heresy?"

"I am indeed a Presbyterian" said Rollo, smiling; "at least, my father was and I am what, in any one contradicts me. For the rest, I am, I fear, but an indifferent Christian."

"Ah," murmured the Queen, with a reflective sigh, "yet even heretics may have their uses. In that case it will be easier for you to oppress—I mean to argue with and convince the holy friars of the righteous intention of the Government with regard to them!"

"Well," said Mendizabal, quickly, desirous of diverting the conversation from a dangerous subject; "off with you, sirrah! Go satisfy that Calvinistic conscience of yours! But first kiss her Majesty's royal hands. Let no one spoil your beauty, and return betimes to the post which we will keep open for you."

Rollo did as he was bidden. He kissed the hands of the Queen, who was graciously pleased to give his fingers a slight pressure as hers rested a moment upon his. For the handsome face and high bearing of Rollo Blair had been working their usual way with Maria Cristina.

The Prime Minister, noting a slight movement of the portière curtains, bustled Rollo off lest he should lose favor with the Power Behind the Throne. But, pausing a moment at the door, he whispered in his ear, "Have you any objection to telling me the name of the person from whom you had this commission? I promise you upon my sacred honor that you shall have no cause to repent of your frankness. Neither you nor he shall suffer on account of my knowledge—no, not if it were Don Carlos himself."

"His name is Don Baltasar Varela, prior of the Abbey of Montblanch!" said Rollo, after a moment's hesitation.

"I understand!" said Mendizabal, with an inscrutable expression. "Nevertheless, I shall keep my word."

CHAPTER XLVII

A POINT OF HONOR.

There remained Concha to be dealt with. Ah, yes, and also her companions, El Sarria, Mortimer and Etienne. Only they did not count. What man does count when the woman is in the question? Friends of a lifetime are skipped like the historical introduction of an exciting romance, through whose pages battle, murder and sudden death play gayly a' leap frog and devil-take-the-hindmost.

He found them seated in the lodgings which Rollo had secured for Concha and La Giralda in a house that looked upon the Puerta del Sol—opposite, upon the same staircase and landing, lodged El Sarria, who, if it would have given any pleasure to Rollo, would have slept all night outside his sweetheart's door.

Etienne, Mortimer and Rollo himself had rooms on the other side of the great square. But with Rollo's return all were now assembled in Concha's sitting room, as had grown to be their easy custom. Concha needed no chaperon, and if the straighter convenances required one, was there not La Giralda with her myriad wrinkles busied about the pots in the little adjacent kitchen or seated with her knitting in the window seat like a favored guest. For it was in this simple fashion that these six people had come to dwell together. And as he entered the heart of the young man smote him sore.

Alas! that he, Rollo Blair, whom these had followed loyally, questionless, as clansmen follow their chief through mirk midnight and the brazen glare of noon, should come among these faithful hearts like a mute with the bowstring, to put an end to all this comradeship and true comity.

All knew in a moment that there was something in the air, for though Concha offered to prepare a cigarette with her own fingers, Rollo declined it and sat down heavy and sad. It was some time before he could bring himself to speak.

"You are all my friends," he said, "my best and only friends—listen to me. I will hide nothing from you. I have come directly from the Queen. She and Mendizabal have offered me high position, and one in which we might all have kept together in great content, if such had been your desire. Yet for the present I cannot take it. I am not a free man. For it lies on my soul that the Abbot of Montblanch trusted us three when we had neither aim nor end in life. He gave us both of these. He fitted us out for our mission. For me he did much more. He made me an officer in the army of Don Carlos, though, heaven knows, Don Carlos was no more to me than any other stupid fool—I crave your pardon, Etienne! I forget your relationship."

"Say on," cried Etienne, gayly, flipping his cigarette ash with his little finger, "do not consider my feelings. All my cousins are stupid fools! I have always said so!"

"Well, then," said Rollo, "to this man who among other things gave us each other's friendship, and" (here he reached out his hand to take Concha's) "who gave me this——"

He was silent for some moments, still holding the girl's hand, while her eyes were doubtless lovely as moonlit waters could any man have seen them. But no man did, for her fringed lashes remained resolutely, if tremulously, downcast.

"Well then, I cannot leave this man to think me a mere common traitor. No, not if it loses me life and all. I have failed in his mission. Not only so, but by the irony of fate I have fought against his friends and then been saved by his enemies."

"We were saved by Concha Cabezos, there, I tell you," said John Mortimer, who thought all this mere rant. "Let the old priest alone, Rollo. Marry the girl you want to marry, and take a good job when it is offered to you. You may not get a second chance of either. And that is a plain man's mind upon the matter, whether you want it or no!"

Sadly but determinedly Rollo shook his head.

"No, John," he said, "that I cannot do. I were bankrupt for life in my own esteem if I did not go straight to the prior, frankly explain our failure, resign my commission into his hands and offer him any other service in my power. I think I see my way to one even now."

"My advice," said Etienne, suddenly striking in, "is to let my good uncle continue in his mistake a little longer, if indeed any mistake there be. You use a delicacy he would have been the last to use with you. I do not believe the old fox would have cared a straw if all our throats had been cut, so that we had served his turn. Depend upon it, we three were the poorest kind of pawns in his game. If I am not greatly mistaken, Cabrera and Elio were his prancing knights, and Don Carlos, my dear cousin, the stupid old king who is of no use except to get himself checkmated."

"And who," said Rollo, smiling for the first time, "may the queen be, upon this little family chessboard?"

"There is, indeed, rather a superabundance of queens, as we have seen," said Etienne, "but he who pushes about all the pieces is doubtless the petticoated old rogue himself. Baltasar Varela has been at the bottom of every plot these thirty years, and if anything goes wrong he will be the first to skip over the mountains. Take a friend's advice, Rollo," (here the honest fellow grasped his friend's hand hard) "send your explanations and unused commissions to my respected relative by post. For me, I would not go within fifty miles of him for all the revenues of Montblanch twice told."

"Well, El Sarria, what say you? They are all against me, you see," said Rollo mournfully, adding after a moment, "as indeed I knew they would be." As usual, the ex-outlaw had little to say and was deplorably reluctant in saying it.

"Señor," he said, after a long pause, "you have doubtless your own point of honor. I had one once, which very nearly cost myself and another a lifetime of misery. Let the señor weigh the matter well and often before he runs a like risk."

"That also is against me," said Rollo, smiling. "Concha, you have heard all the others—what do you say?"

Concha rose and stood beside him. She put her arm gently on his shoulder so that her hand touched his cheek.

"I understand, if they do not," she said; "I understand all. You are right! Go!"

* * * * * * *

So Rollo set forth, and with him there also journeyed to the north Etienne—first, because he was tired of Madrid, second, because he was returning to France, third (and privately), because the village of Sarria and a certain green garden lattice were to be found on the way thither—John Mortimer, because if Rollo were bound to see the prior, perhaps, after all, something might be done about the *pronto*—El Sarria, because night and morning, noon and midnight, he prayed with his face toward that Convent of the Holy Innocents, where Dolores and her baby waited for him—La Giralda, because she might as well go northward as in any other direction—and Concha. But it is superfluous to say why Concha was going.

Nevertheless, Rollo insisted that, since he was solely responsible, he alone should adventure the angers of the prior—though indeed, any or all of the others would readily have accompanied him to Montblanch.

In due time, therefore, after leaving Madrid, the party arrived at the village of Sarria. For, being possessed of all manner of governmental passes and recommendations, they travelled rapidly and luxuriously, considering the difficult and troublous times. At Sarria, Rollo looking out eagerly northward to where above the horizon the peaks of Montblanch pushed themselves up blue and soft, like a row of ragged and battered nimpins, paused only to assure himself of the well-doing of Dolores Garcia and her son under the roof of the good sisters in the Convent of the Holy Innocents. There were also a few arrangements to make—and his will, which last did not take a long time. It contained only one clause:

"I leave all of which I die possessed to my betrothed wife, Concha Cabezos of Seville. Rollo Blair."

The arrangements were these—Concha remained to assist Don Ramon, who had once more assumed the position of a property holder and man of position among his townsfolk, to open out and prepare his house for the reception of Dolores. The little wife and mother, in spite of her new joy, continued delicate in health, though (needless to say) the nuns had given her the very best of possible nursing. But those who saw the meeting of husband and wife knew that now she would have a better chance of recovery than all the bitter tisanes and laborious simples which the sisters' store cupboard had afforded her.

Etienne and John Mortimer decided to await events at the hostelry of Gaspar Perico. The former took the first opportunity of converting the silent serving maid as far as possible to his interests by a judicious gift of half a dozen gold pieces. Immediately thereafter, having thus protected his rear, he sought the green lattice. It had been taken down, and a seven-foot wall had been built. Indeed, a mason, who was at that moment engaged in laying the coping, informed him that the family had left for South America. Whereupon Etienne went back and found the bare-footed Abigail.

"Why did you not tell me that they were gone before?" he demanded angrily.

"Before what?" asked the Abigail, putting the corner of her apron to her mouth and biting it with the utmost simplicity.

"Before I gave you that money."

"Because—why, because your Excellency never asked me."

"And pray, señorita," growled Etienne, waxing grimly satirical, "what did you suppose that I gave you the money for?"

The maid servant let go the apron, put one finger to her mouth instead, and, looking down with infinite modesty, sketched with her bare toe upon the ground.

"Well?" queried Etienne, impatiently and with a sharp raising inflection.

"Because," fluttered the little maid-of-all-work, "because I—I thought you liked me!"

Etienne turned away in a dumb rage, and the small, sharp-featured Abigail got behind the back kitchen door to dance a double shuffle all to herself.

When he had recovered his powers of speech Etienne called her the several kinds of fiend, which can be defined by the French language, but this broke no bones.

"Well, dear señorita," she remarked very sagely, when tasked by Concha with duplicity (after the manner of Satan reproving sin,) "he never asked me and, besides, then he would not have given me the six Napoleons!"

Which proposition of the Abigail of Sarria would not have gained in credibility had it been supported by a papal bull.

To be continued.

REASONS FOR THE ST. CLAIR AND ERIE SHIP CANAL.

Latest Demand for It Comes From Buffalo—Its Value to Shipping on the Great Lakes—Plans for Its Route—Estimated Cost—Money Saved by It.

From Buffalo comes the latest demand for the building of the St. Clair and Erie Ship Canal. The project has been under consideration for several years. The plan calls for a canal only 13½ miles long, which would save in the through navigation of the Great Lakes a distance of seventy-nine miles.

Just what this saving would mean may be understood fully by a glance at the enormous freight traffic of these waters, the increase in that traffic in recent years, and the tolls and profits incident to it. The topographical features of the territory through which the canal would pass would make it easy of construction and the cost of the entire work would be comparatively small. These are briefly the reasons of those interested most directly in the building of the canal for their confidence that it must shortly be built. Indirectly interested in the project is the general population of the United States and Canada, since the people commonly are benefited by any cheapening of the cost of transportation of food products, coal, &c., and such a cheapening, it is declared, must follow the shortening and straightening of the route, particularly when in the process there is secured also an increase of safety in navigation.

The St. Clair and Erie Canal is to cross the small Canadian peninsula between Lakes St. Clair and Erie. Because it is to be wholly in Canadian territory and will benefit directly American transportation traffic almost wholly, this project is considered to be out of the range of possible Government work on either side, and is conceded to be legitimately a field for private enterprise. A charter has been secured from the Canadian Government to enable the building of the canal, while Americans will probably be the persons who will in due time undertake the work. The United States Deep Waterways Commission has approved the canal as the shortest and safest route between the two lakes.

The dredge and the steam shovel would do the work of making the waterway. Borings have shown that the underlying rock is too deep down to require any attention from the canal builders. The difference in level of the two lakes is only three feet so there need be no locks. It is proposed that the canal shall be twenty-one feet deep and so be in conformity with the general plan for the improvement of Great Lakes navigation paths, which contemplates a twenty-one foot channel throughout the course.

The Erie Canal connected the Lakes with New York in 1830. Ten years later the railroads entered the field of competition for the transportation traffic from the West to the East. By the middle of the century a fleet of 300-ton freighters had been constructed to ply regularly between Buffalo and the Western ports. They were limited by the shoal waters of the connecting rivers to a draught of eight feet, but the pressure of commerce soon forced the Canadian Government to build locks at the St. Mary's River Falls and to deepen the channel to ten feet at the St. Clair Flats. Next Superior's mine products forced the construction of new locks at the Soo with a 16-foot waterway and the deepening of the St. Clair Flats channel to a similar guage, as well as the blasting away of the rocky obstructions of the Detroit River. The century closed with the beginning of work looking to the construction of a 21-foot channel all the way through the course of Great Lakes navigation, with the ultimate aim of the channel's extension to the sea.

In fifty years the 300-ton freighter has become the 500-foot steamer with 10,000 tons' carrying capacity, and the cost of transporting a bushel of wheat from Chicago to Buffalo has come down to one-tenth of the charge of fifty years ago. Through the St. Mary's River there is now carried annually 26,643,073 tons of freight and through the Detroit River more than 40,000,000 tons. The 40,000,000 tons is carried in seven months and exceeds the annual bulk of Suez Canal tonnage fourfold. It exceeds by nearly 15,000,000 tons the total of clearances, foreign and domestic, of the port of New York for the last year.

The Hay Lake channel in the St. Mary's River which straightens out some bends and shortens the channel by eleven miles, was completed by the Government at a cost of about $2,500,000. The estimated cost of the St. Clair and Erie Canal is from $6,500,000 to $7,000,000, according to whether bridges or tunnels are built for the four railroads which cross the canal. The company's charter permits it to sell bonds to the amount of $10,000,000 for the construction work.

Among the plans incidental to the canal project is the construction of a harbor at the Lake Erie end of the canal. It is said that there is no safe harbor in the western end of Lake Erie for many miles around the neighborhood of the proposed canal outlet, and that the proposed harbor would therefore be regarded as desirable by the lake navigators. A shipyard and coal-storage yards are also planned along or contiguous to the canal, and owing to peculiar conditions which keep a channel open at the western end of Lake Erie throughout the winter, a car-ferry may be operated from Cleveland to the canal mouth through the closed season of through lake navigation.

In ten years from 1890 to 1900 the freight passing Detroit increased from 21,684,000 more than 40,000,000 tons. More than 90 per cent. of this was through traffic. A boat with a twelve-mile speed would save by the St. Clair and Erie Canal six hours each way or half a day on a round trip. These freight boats now make twenty-one round trips in a season and by this saving would be enabled to make an extra trip every year.

This, the projectors of the canal figure out, will make the gross receipts of that trip net profit to the shipowner. For a freighter of 3,000 tons registry this sum would be now about $5,000. For the twenty-two round trips the canal tolls would be $3