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THE FIREBRAND

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EAN 8596547323976

DigiCat, 2022

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CHAPTER I

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THE MAKING OF AN OUTLAW

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

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

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

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

When he married little Dolóres, Ramon Garcia had not dreamed that so many things would happen. He was a rich man as men go; had his house, his garden, his vines, a

quintaine of olive-trees, was accounted quite a match by old Manuela, the village go-between, the priest's housekeeper, in whose hands were the hearts of many maids.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Caballero! Don Ramon!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The woman's countenance suddenly cleared.

"No, Don Ramon, we will not call the promised one—the blessed one, a donkey. A father! Yes, Don Ramon, but no father of *borricos*. No, no! There will not be so brave a babe from Navarra to Catalonia as yours and Lola's. But we must go quietly, very quietly. He walks far who begins slowly. He

who treads upon eggs does not dance the *bolero*. You will bide here and talk to the holy Father, and I myself will go to the house of Ramon of the Soft Heart and the Lumbering Hoofs, and warn the little one warily. For I know her—yes, Manuela knows her. I am a widow and have borne children—ay, borne them also to the grave, and who, if not I, should know the hearts of young wives that are not yet mothers!"

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

Lovers would be lovers, so she argued, God had made it so. Who was she, Manuela, the housekeeper of Padre Mateo of Sarria, to interfere for the prevention of the designs of Providence? And cousins too—the young cavalier so gallant, so handsome—and—so generous with his money. Had he not even kissed Manuela herself one night when he came coaxing her to contrive something? *Who* could resist him after that? And what was a hand thrust through the *rejas*? What a kiss if the bars of the grille happened to be broken. A glass that is drunk from, being washed, is clean as before. And when Ramon Garcia, that great Aragonese oaf, kissed little Dolóres, what knew he of pretty Don Rafael de Flores, the *alcalde's* son? They had been lovers since childhood, and there was no harm. 'Twas pity surely, to part them before the time. Rafael was to marry the rich Donna Felesia,

the daughter of the vine-grower of Montblanch, who farmed the revenues of the great abbey. He could not marry pretty little Dolóres! It was a pity—yes, but—she had a feeling heart, this Manuela, the priest's housekeeper, and the trade had been a paying one since the beginning of the world.

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

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

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

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

"Good, good!" he thought to himself, "Manuela wants something of this chuckle-head that she goes Don-ing him, and, I wager, battenning him with compliments as greasy as an old wife's cookery the first day after Lent. 'Tis only eggs

in the pan that are buttered, and I wonder why she has been buttering this oaf." Then he spoke aloud. "Ah, Ramon, back already! We thought you had been buying beeves in the Cerdagne. I suppose the little Dolóres dragged you back. Ho, ho, you young married men! Your hearts make fools of your feet. 'Tis only celibacy, that most sacred and wise institution of Holy Mother Church, that can preserve man his liberty—certainly, Manuela, I will put away my snuff-box, I was not aware that it was in my hand! And I will *not* drop any more on my new soutane, which indeed, as you say, I had no business to be wearing on an ordinary day."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"You dog of dogs!"

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

"Chica, dearest—my beloved!"

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

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

The Albacete dagger was driven deep between the shoulder-blades. The young lithe body drew itself together convulsively as a clasp knife opens and shuts again. There was a spurt of something hot on Ramon's hand that ran slowly down his sleeve, growing colder as it went. A shriek came from within the *rejas* of bowed iron.

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

CHAPTER II

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THE MAN WITHOUT A FRIEND

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

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

These were the two fairest women in all Sarria—nay, in all that border country where, watered by the pure mountain streams, fertile Catalonia meets stern and

desolate Aragon, and the foot-hills of the Eastern Pyrenees spurn them both farther from the snows.

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

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

So, many were the rich golden twilights when the two lovers whispered together beneath the broad leaves of the fig-trees, each dark leaf rimmed with the red of the glowing sky. And Rafael, who was to marry the vine-dresser's daughter, and so must not "eat the iron" to please any

maid, obeyed the word of Concha more than all Holy Writ, and let it be supposed that he went to the Ramon's house for the sake of his cousin Dolóres.

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

Thus it chanced that this foolish Rafael, the alcalde's son, marched whistling softly to his fate. His broad sombrero was cocked to the left and looped on the side. His Cordovan gloves were loosely held in his right hand along with his tasselled cane. He had an eye to the paved street, lest he should defile his lacquered shoes with the points carved like eagle's beaks. He whistled the jota of Aragon as he went, and—he quite forgot Ramon, the great good-humoured giant with whom he had jested and at whom he had laughed. He was innocent of all intent against little Lola, his playmate. He would as soon have thought of besieging his sister's balcony, or "plucking the turkey" under his own mother's window.

But he should not have forgotten that Ramon Garcia was not a man to wait upon explanations, when he chanced on what seemed to touch the honour of his house. So Rafael de

Flores, because he was to marry Felesia Grammunt and her wine-vats, and Concha the Andaluse, because to be known as Rafael's sweetheart might interfere with her other loves, took the name of Ramon Garcia's wife in vain with light reckless hearts. This was indeed valorously foolish, though Concha with her much wisdom ought to have known better. But a woman's experience, that of such a woman as Concha at least, refers exclusively to what a man will do in relation to herself. She never considered what Ramon Garcia might do in the matter of his wife Dolóres.

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

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

down his wife to see her dance the *bolero* in the Andalusian manner. It would afford Doña Dolóres much pleasure.

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

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

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

Meantime Ramon lay on his rock-ledge and wondered—where little Dolóres was, chiefly, and to this he often

returned. If he had had time that night would he have killed her? Sometimes he thought so, and then again—well, she was so small, so dainty, so full of all gentle ways and winsomenesses and—hell and furies, it was all deceit! She had been deceiving him from the first! Those upward glances, those shy, sweet confidences, sudden, irresistible revealings of her heart, he had thought they were all for him. Fool! Three times fool! He knew better now. They were practised on her husband that she might act them better before her lover. God's truth, he would go down and kill her even now, as he had killed that other. Why had he not waited? He could easily have slain the soldiers who had rushed upon him, whom that hell-cat Manuela had brought—ah, he was glad he had marked her for life.

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

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

As the sun grew stronger Ramon knew well that his mountain fastness would be stormed and enveloped, by these delusive cloud-continent. They would rise and

dissipate themselves into the faint bluish haze of noonday heat.

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

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

Ping! Ping!

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

This none knew but his friend and brother, dearer to his soul than any other, save little Dolóres alone—Luis Fernandez, whose vineyard had neighboured his in the good

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

There was the same glad defiance in the heart of El Sarria, which he had felt long ago, when as a boy he lay

hidden in the rambling cellars of the old wine-barn, while his companions exhausted themselves in loud and unavailing research behind every cask and vat.

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

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

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

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

Then it struck him suddenly that the mist must have passed. If he went now he would emerge in the clear sunshine of even. Well, it mattered not, he would wait in the cleft for sunset and make his escape then. He knew that the "Lads of the Squadron" would be very hot and eager on the chase, after one of them had tasted El Sarria's bullet in his

thigh. He would have a short shrift and no trial at all if he fell into their hands. For in those days neither Carlist nor Cristino either asked or gave quarter. And, indeed, it was more than doubtful if even the Carlists themselves would spare El Sarria, whose hand was against every man, be he King's man or Queen's man.

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

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

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

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

At last it was time.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

For this man had now neither wife nor friend.
