

VIII

"SENORES," related the General to his guests, "though my thoughts were of love then, and therefore enchanting, the sight of that house always affected me disagreeably, especially in the moonlight, when its close shutters and its air of lonely neglect appeared sinister. Still I went on using the bridle-path by the ravine, because it was a short cut. The mad Royalist howled and laughed at me every evening to his complete satisfaction; but after a time, as if wearied with my indifference, he ceased to appear in the porch. How they persuaded him to leave off I do not know. However, with Gaspar Ruiz in the house there would have been no difficulty in restraining him by force. It was part of their policy in there to avoid anything which could provoke me. At least, so I suppose.

"Notwithstanding my infatuation with the brightest pair of eyes in Chile, I noticed the absence of the old man after a week or so. A few more days passed. I began to think that perhaps these Royalists had gone away somewhere else. But one evening, as I was hastening towards the city, I saw again somebody in the porch. It was not the madman; it was the girl. She stood holding on to one of the wooden columns, tall and white-faced, her big eyes sunk deep with privation and sorrow. I looked hard at her, and she met my stare with a strange, inquisitive look. Then, as I turned my head after riding past, she seemed to gather courage for the act, and absolutely beckoned me back.

"I obeyed, senores, almost without thinking, so great was my astonishment. It was greater still when I heard what she had to say. She began by thanking me for my forbearance of her father's infirmity, so that I felt ashamed of myself. I had meant to show disdain, not forbearance! Every word must have burnt her lips, but she never departed from a gentle and melancholy dignity which filled me with respect against my will. Senores, we are no match for women. But I could hardly believe my ears when she began her tale. Providence, she concluded, seemed to have preserved the life of that wronged soldier, who now trusted to my honour as a caballero and to my compassion for his sufferings.

"'Wronged man,' I observed coldly. 'Well, I think so too: and you have been harbouring an enemy of your cause.'

"'He was a poor Christian crying for help at our door in the name of God, senior,' she answered simply.

"I began to admire her. 'Where is he now?' I asked stiffly.

"But she would not answer that question. With extreme cunning, and an almost fiendish delicacy, she managed to remind me of my failure in saving the lives of the prisoners in the guard-room, without wounding my pride. She knew, of course, the whole story. Gaspar Ruiz, she said, entreated me to procure for him a safe-conduct from General San Martin himself. He had an important communication to make to the Commander-in-Chief.

"Por Dios, senores, she made me swallow all that, pretending to be only the mouthpiece of that poor man. Overcome by injustice, he expected to find, she said, as much generosity in me as had been shown to him by the Royalist family which had given him a refuge.

"Hal It was well and nobly said to a youngster like me. I thought her great. Alas! she was only implacable.

"In the end I rode away very enthusiastic about the business, without demanding even to see Gaspar Ruiz, who I was confident was in the house.

"But on calm reflection I began to see some difficulties which I had not confidence enough in myself to encounter. It was not easy to approach a commander-in-chief with such a story. I feared failure. At last I thought it better to lay the matter before my general-of-division, Robles, a friend of my family, who had appointed me his aide-de-camp lately.

"He took it out of my hands at once without any ceremony.

"'In the house! of course he is in the house,' he said contemptuously. 'You ought to have gone sword in hand inside and demanded his surrender, instead of chatting with a Royalist girl in the porch. Those people should have been hunted out of that long ago. Who knows how many spies they have harboured right in the very midst of our camps? A safe-conduct from the Commander-in-Chief! The audacity of the fellow! Ha! ha! Now we shall catch him to-night, and then we shall find out, without any safe-conduct, what he has got to say, that is so very important. Ha! ha! ha!'

"General Robles, peace to his soul, was a short, thick man, with round, staring eyes, fierce and jovial. Seeing my distress he added:

"'Come, come, chico. I promise you his life if he does not resist. And that is not likely. We are not going to break up a good soldier if it can be helped. I tell you what! I am curious to see your strong man. Nothing but a general will do for the picaro--well, he shall have a general to talk to. Ha! ha! I shall go myself to the catching, and you are coming with me, of course.'

"And it was done that same night. Early in the evening the house and the orchard were surrounded quietly. Later on the general and I left a ball we were attending in town and rode out at an easy gallop. At some little distance from the house we pulled up. A mounted orderly held our horses. A low whistle warned the men watching all along the ravine, and we walked up to the porch softly. The barricaded house in the moonlight seemed empty.

"The general knocked at the door. After a time a woman's voice within asked who was there. My chief nudged me hard. I gasped.

"'It is I, Lieutenant Santierra,' I stammered out, as if choked. 'Open the door.'

"It came open slowly. The girl, holding a thin taper in her hand, seeing another man with me, began to back away before us slowly, shading the light with her hand. Her impassive white face looked ghostly. I followed behind General Robles. Her eyes were fixed on mine. I made a gesture of helplessness behind my chief's back, trying at the same time to give a reassuring expression to my face. Neither of us three uttered a sound.

"We found ourselves in a room with bare floor and walls. There was a rough table and a couple of stools in it, nothing else whatever. An old woman with her grey hair hanging loose wrung her hands when we appeared. A peal of loud laughter resounded through the empty house, very amazing and weird. At this the old woman tried to get past us.

"'Nobody to leave the room,' said General Robles to me.

"I swung the door to, heard the latch click, and the laughter became faint in our ears.

"Before another word could be spoken in that room I was amazed by hearing the sound of distant thunder.

"I had carried in with me into the house a vivid impression of a beautiful, clear, moonlight night, without a speck of cloud in the sky. I could not believe my ears. Sent early abroad for my education, I was not familiar with the most dreaded natural phenomenon of my native land. I saw, with inexpressible astonishment, a look of terror in my chief's eyes. Suddenly I felt giddy! The general staggered against me heavily; the girl seemed to reel in the middle of the room, the taper fell out of her hand and the light went out; a shrill cry of Misericordia! from the old woman pierced my ears. In the pitchy darkness I heard the plaster off the walls falling on The floor. It is a mercy there was no ceiling. Holding on to the latch of

the door, I heard the grinding of the roof-tiles cease above my head. The shock was over.

"Out of the house! The door! Fly, Santierra, fly!" howled the general. You know, senores, in our country the bravest are not ashamed of the fear an earthquake strikes into all the senses of man. One never gets used to it.

"Repeated experience only augments the mastery of that nameless terror.

"It was my first earthquake, and I was the calmest of them all. I understood that the crash outside was caused by the porch, with its wooden pillars and tiled roof projection, falling down. The next shock would destroy the house, maybe. That rumble as of thunder was approaching again. The general was rushing round the room, to find the door, perhaps. He made a noise as though he were trying to climb the walls, and I heard him distinctly invoke the names of several saints. 'Out, out, Santierra!' he yelled.

"The girl's voice was the only one I did not hear.

"General,' I cried, 'I cannot move the door. We must be locked in.'

"I did not recognise his voice in the shout of malediction and despair he let out. Senores I know many men in my country, especially in the provinces most subject to earthquakes, who will neither eat, sleep, pray, nor even sit down to cards with closed doors. The danger is not in the loss of time, but in this--that the movement of the walls may prevent a door being opened at all. This was what had happened to us. We were trapped, and we had no help to expect from anybody. There is no man in my country who will go into a house when the earth trembles. There never was--except one: Gaspar Ruiz.

"He had come out of whatever hole he had been hiding in outside, and had clambered over the timbers of the destroyed porch. Above the awful subterranean groan of coming destruction I heard a mighty voice shouting the word 'Erminia!' with the lungs of a giant. An earthquake is a great leveller of distinctions. I collected all my resolution against the terror of the scene. 'She is here,' I shouted back. A roar as of a furious wild beast answered me--while my head swam, my heart sank, and the sweat of anguish streamed like rain off my brow.

"He had the strength to pick up one of the heavy posts of the porch. Holding it under his armpit like a lance, but with both hands, he charged madly the rocking house with the force of a battering-ram, bursting open the door and rushing in, headlong, over our prostrate bodies. I and the general, picking ourselves up, bolted out together, without looking round once till we got across the road. Then,

clinging to each other, we beheld the house change suddenly into a heap of formless rubbish behind the back of a man, who staggered towards us bearing the form of a woman clasped in his arms. Her long black hair hung nearly to his feet. He laid her down reverently on the heaving earth, and the moonlight shone on her closed eyes.

"senores, we mounted with difficulty. Our horses, getting up, plunged madly, held by the soldiers who had come running from all sides. Nobody thought of catching Gaspar Ruiz then. The eyes of men and animals shone with wild fear. My general approached Gaspar Ruiz, who stood motionless as a statue above the girl. He let himself be shaken by the shoulder without detaching his eyes from her face.

"'Que guape!' shouted the general in his ear. 'You are the bravest man living. You have saved my life. I am General Robles. Come to my quarters to-morrow, if God gives us the grace to see another day.'

"He never stirred--as if deaf, without feeling, insensible.

"We rode away for the town, full of our relations, of our friends, of whose fate we hardly dared to think. The soldiers ran by the side of our horses. Everything was forgotten in the immensity of the catastrophe overtaking a whole country."

Gaspar Ruiz saw the girl open her eyes. The raising of her eyelids seemed to recall him from a trance. They were alone; the cries of terror and distress from homeless people filled the plains of the coast, remote and immense, coming like a whisper into their loneliness.

She rose swiftly to her feet, darting fearful glances on all sides. "What is it?" she cried out low, and peering into his face. "Where am I?"

He bowed his head sadly, without a word.

"... Who are you?"

He knelt down slowly before her, and touched the hem of her coarse black baize skirt. "Your slave," he said.

She caught sight then of the heap of rubbish that had been the house, all misty in the cloud of dust. "Ah!" she cried, pressing her hand to her forehead.

"I carried you out from there," he whispered at her feet.

"And they?" she asked in a great sob.

He rose, and taking her by the arms, led her gently towards the shapeless ruin half overwhelmed by a land-slide. "Come and listen," he said.

The serene moon saw them clambering over that heap of stones, joists and tiles, which was a grave. They pressed their ears to the interstices, listening for the sound of a groan, for a sigh of pain.

At last he said, "They died swiftly. You are alone."

She sat down on a piece of broken timber and put one arm across her face. He waited--then, approaching his lips to her ear, "Let us go," he whispered.

"Never--never from here," she cried out, flinging her arms above her head.

He stooped over her, and her raised arms fell upon his shoulders. He lifted her up, steadied himself and began to walk, looking straight before him.

"What are you doing?" she asked feebly.

"I am escaping from my enemies," he said, never once glancing at his light burden.

"With me?" she sighed helplessly.

"Never without you," he said. "You are my strength."

He pressed her close to him. His face was grave and his footsteps steady. The conflagrations bursting out in the ruins of destroyed villages dotted the plain with red fires; and the sounds of distant lamentations, the cries of "Misericordia! Misericordia!" made a desolate murmur in his ears. He walked on, solemn and collected, as if carrying something holy, fragile and precious.

The earth rocked at times under his feet.