GRIFFITHS ARTHUR

THE THIN RED LINE; AND BLUE BLOOD

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The Thin Red Line; and Blue Blood:

Содержание

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THE THIN RED LINE

VOLUME I

CHAPTER I.
THE COMMISSARY IS CALLED

In the Paris of the first half of this century there was no darker, dingier, or more forbidding quarter than that which lay north of the Rue de Rivoli, round about the great central market, commonly called the Halles.

The worst part of it, perhaps, was the Rue Assiette d'Etain, or Tinplate Street. All day evil-looking loafers lounged about its doorways, nodding lazily to the passing workmen, who, blue-bloused, with silk cap on head, each with his loa under his arm, came to take their meals at the wine-shop at the corner; or gossiping with the porters, male and female, while the one

followed closely his usual trade as a cobbler, and the other attended to her soup.

By day there was little traffic. Occasionally a long dray, on a gigantic pair of wheels, drawn by a long string of white Normandy horses in single file, with blue harness and jangling bells, filled up the roadway. Costermongers trundled their barrows along with strange, unmusical cries. Now and again an empty cab returning to its stable, with weary horse and semi-somnolent coachman, crawled through the street.

But at night it was otherwise. Many vehicles came dashing down Tinplate Street: carriages, public and private, of every variety, from the rattletrap cab hired off the stand, or the decent coach from the livery stable, to the smart spick-and-span brougham, with its well-appointed horses and servants in neat livery. They all set down at the same door, and took up from it at any hour between midnight and dawn, waiting patiently in file in the wide street round the corner, till the summons came as each carriage was required.

As seen in the daytime, there was nothing strange about the door, or the house to which it gave access. The place purported to be an hotel—a seedy, out-at-elbows, seemingly little-frequented hotel, rejoicing in the altogether inappropriate name of the Hôtel Paradis, or the Paradise Hotel. Its outward appearance was calculated to repel rather than invite customers; no one would be likely to lodge there who could go elsewhere. It had habitually a deserted look, with all its blinds and casements close shut, as

though its lodgers slept through the day, or had gone away, never to return.

But this was only by day. At night the street-door stood wide open, and a porter was on duty at the foot of the staircase within. He was on the inner side of a stout oaken door, in which was a small window, opening with a trap. Through this he reconnoitred all arrivals, taking stock of their appearance, and only giving admission when satisfied as to what he saw.

The Hôtel Paradis, in plain English, was a gambling-house, largely patronised, yet with an evil reputation. It was well known to, and constantly watched by, the police, who were always at hand, although they seldom interfered with the hotel.

But when the porter's wife came shrieking into the street early one summer's morning, with wildest terror depicted in her face, and shaking like a jelly, the police felt bound to come to the front.

"Has madame seen a ghost?" asked a stern official in a cocked hat and sword, accosting her abruptly.

"No, no! Fetch the commissary, quick! A crime has been committed—a terrible crime!" she gasped.

This was business, and the police-officer knew what he had to do.

"Run, Jules," he said to a colleague. "You know where M. Bontoux lives. Tell him he is wanted at the Hôtel Paradis." Then, turning to the woman, he said, "Now, madame, explain yourself."

"It is a murder, I am afraid. A gentleman has been stabbed."

"What gentleman? Where?"

"In the drawing-room, upstairs. I don't know his name, but he came here frequently. My husband will perhaps be able to tell you; he is there."

"Lead on," said the police-officer; "take me to the place. I will see to it myself."

They passed into the hotel through the inner portal, and up the stairs to the first floor, where the principal rooms were situated—three of them furnished and decorated magnificently, altogether out of keeping with the miserable exterior of the house, having enormous mirrors from ceiling to floor, gilt cornices, damask hangings, marble console tables, and chairs and sofas in marqueterie and buhl. The first room evidently served for reception; there was a sideboard in one corner, on which were the remains of a succulent repast, and dozens of empty bottles. The second and third rooms were more especially devoted to the business of the establishment. Long tables, covered with green cloth, filled up the centre of each, and were strewed with cards, dice and their boxes, croupier's rakes, and other implements of gaming.

The third room had been the scene of the crime. There upon the floor lay the body of a man, a well-dressed man, wearing the white kerseymere trousers, the light waistcoat, and long-tailed green coat which were then in vogue. His clothes were all spotted and bedrabbled with gore; his shirt was torn open, and plainly revealed the great gaping wound from which his life's blood was

quickly ebbing away.

The wounded man's head rested on the knee of the night porter, a personage wearing a kind of livery, a strongly built, truculent-looking villain, whose duties, no doubt, comprised the putting of people out as well as the letting them into the house.

"Oh, Anatole! my cherished one!" began the porter's wife. "Here are the police. Tell us then, how this occurred."

"I will tell all I know," replied her husband, looking at the police-officer. "This morning, when the clients had nearly all gone, and I was sitting half asleep in the lodge, I heard—"

"Stop," said the police-officer, "not another word. Keep all you have to say for the commissary. He is already on the stairs."

The next minute M. Bontoux entered, accompanied by his clerk and the official doctor of the quarter.

"A crime," said the commissary, slowly, and with as much dignity as was possible in a middle-aged gentleman pulled from his bed at daybreak, and compelled to dress in a hurry. "A crime," he repeated. "Of that there can be no doubt. But let us establish the fact formally. Where are the witnesses?"

The porter, having relinquished the care of the wounded man to the doctor, stood up slowly and saluted the commissary.

"Very well; tell us what you know. Sit down"—this to the clerk. "Produce your writing-materials and prepare the report."

"It must have been about four this morning, but I was very drowsy, and the gentlemen had nearly all gone," said the night porter, speaking fluently, "when I was disturbed by the noise of

a quarrel, a fight, up here in the principal drawing-room. While I was still rubbing my eyes, for I was very drowsy, and fancied I was dreaming, I heard a scream, a second, and a third, followed by a heavy fall on the floor. I rushed upstairs then, and found this poor gentleman as you see him."

"Alone?"

"Quite alone."

"But there must have been other people here. Did they come down the stairs past you?"

"No, sir; they must have escaped by that window. It was open —"

The commissary looked at the police-officer, who nodded intelligently.

"I had already noticed it, Mr. Commissary. The window gives upon a low roof, which communicates with the back street. Escape would be quite easy from that side."

"Well," said the commissary, "and you found this gentleman? Do you know him? His name? Have you ever seen him before?"

"He is M. le Baron d'Enot; he is a constant visitor at the house. Very fortunate, I believe, and I heard he won largely last night."

"Ah!" said the commissary. This fact was important, as affording a reason for the crime. "And do you suspect any one? Have you any idea who was here at the last?"

"I scarcely noticed the gentlemen as they went away; it would be impossible for me, therefore, to say who remained."

"Then there is no clue—"

"Hush! Mr. Commissary." It was the doctor's exclamation. "The victim is still alive, and is trying, I think, to speak." Evidence given at the point of death has extreme value in every country, under every kind of law. The commissary therefore bent his head, closely attentive to catch any words the dying man might utter.

"Water! water!" he gasped out. "Revenge me; it was a foul and cowardly blow."

"Who struck you, can you tell us? Do you know him?" inquired the commissary, eagerly.

"Yes. I—know—" The voice grew visibly weaker; it sank into a whisper, and could speak only in monosyllables.

"His name—quick!"

"There—were—three—I had no chance—Gas—coigne—"

"Strange name—not French?"

The dying man shook his head.

"Gasc—tell—Engl—"

It was the last supreme effort. With a long, deep groan, the poor fellow fell back dead.

"How unfortunate!" cried the commissary, "to die just when he would have told us all. These few words will scarcely suffice to identify the murderers. Can any one help us?"

M. Bontoux looked round.

"The name he mentioned I know," said the night-porter, quickly. "This M. Gascoigne came here frequently. He is an Englishman."

"So I gathered from the dead man's words. Do you know his domicile in Paris?"

"Rue St. Honoré, Hôtel Versailles and St. Cloud. I have seen him enter it more than once, with his wife. He has lived there some months."

"We must, if possible, lay hands on him at once. You, Jules, hasten with another police-agent to the Rue St. Honoré; he may have gone straight to his hotel."

"And if we find him?"

"Arrest him and take him straight to the Préfecture. I will follow. There, there! lose no time."

"I am already gone," said the police-officer as he ran downstairs.

CHAPTER II.
ARREST AND INTERROGATION

The Hôtel Versailles and St. Cloud was one of the best hotels of Paris at this time, a time long antecedent to the opening of such vast caravansaries as the Louvre, the Continental, the Athenée, or the Grand. It occupied four sides of a courtyard, to which access was had by the usual gateway. The porter's lodge was in the latter, and this functionary, in sabots and shirt-sleeves, was sweeping out the entrance when the police arrived in a cab, which they ordered to wait at the door.

"M. Gascoigne?" asked the agent.

"On the first floor, number forty-three," replied the porter, without looking up. "Monsieur has but just returned," he went on. "Knock gently, or you may disturb him in his first sleep."

"We shall disturb him in any case," said the police-officer, gruffly. "Justice cannot wait."

"The police!" cried the porter, now recognising his visitors for the first time. "What has happened, in Heaven's name?"

"Stand aside; we have no time to gossip," replied the agent, as he passed on.

The occupant of No. 43 upon the first floor was pacing his room with agitated steps—a young man with fair complexion and light curly hair; but his blue eyes were clouded, and his fresh, youthful face was drawn and haggard. His attire, too—English, like his aspect—was torn and dishevelled, his voluminous neckcloth was disarranged, his waistcoat had lost several buttons, and there were stains—dark purple stains—upon sleeves and smallclothes.

"What has become of her?" he was saying as he strode up and down; "she has not been here; she could not have come home when we parted at the door of the Vaudeville—the bed has not been slept in. Can she have gone? Is it possible that she has left me?"

He sank into a chair and hid his face in his hands.

"It was too horrible. To see him fall at my feet, struck down just when I—Who is there?" he cried suddenly, in answer to a knock at the door.

"Open, in the name of the law!"

"The police here already! What shall I do?"

"Open at once, or we shall force the door."

The young man slowly drew back the bolt and admitted the two police-agents.

"M. Gascoigne? You will not answer to your name? That is equal—we arrest you."

"On what charge?"

"It is not our place to explain. We act by authority: that is enough. Will you go with us quietly, or must we use force?"

"Of what am I accused?"

"You will hear in good time. Isidore, where is your rope?"

His colleague produced the long thin cord that serves instead of handcuffs in France.

"Must we tie you?"

"No, no! I am ready to submit, but under protest. You shall answer for this outrage. I am an Englishman. I will appeal to our ambassador."

"With all my heart! We are not afraid. But enough said. Come."

The three—police-agents and their prisoner—went out together. On the threshold of No. 43 the officer named Jules said —

"Your key, monsieur—the key of your room. I will take charge of it. Monsieur the Judge will no doubt make a searching perquisition, and no one must enter it till then."

The door was locked, M. Jules put the key in his pocket, and the party went down to the cab, which was driven off rapidly to the depôt of the Préfecture.

Here the usual formalities were gone through. Rupert Gascoigne, as the Englishman was called, was interrogated, searched, deprived of money, watch, penknife, and pencil-case; his description was noted down, and then he was asked whether he would go into the common prison, or pay for the accommodation of the *pistole* or private "side."

For sixteen sous daily they gave him a room to himself, with a little iron cot, a chair, and a table. Another franc or two got him his breakfast and dinner, and he was allowed to enjoy them with such appetite as he could command.

No one came near him till next morning, when he was roused from the heavy sleep that had only come to him after dawn by a summons to appear before the *Juge d'instruction*.

He was led by two policemen to a little room, barely furnished, with one great bureau, or desk, in the centre, at which sat the judge, his back to the window. On one side of him was a smaller desk for the clerk, and exactly opposite a chair for the accused, so arranged that the light beat full upon his face.

"Sit down," said the judge, abruptly.

He was a stern-looking man, dressed all in black, still young, with a cold and impassive face, the extreme pallor of which was heightened by his close-cut, coal-black hair, and his small, piercing, beady black eyes.

"Your name and nationality?"

"Rupert Gascoigne. I am an Englishman, and as such I must at once protest against the treatment I have received."

"You have been treated in accordance with the law—of France. You must abide by it, since you choose to live here. I do not owe you this explanation, but I give it to uphold the majesty of the law."

"I shall appeal to our ambassador."

The judge waved his hand, as though the threat did not affect him.

"I must ask you to keep silence. You are here to be interrogated; you will only speak in reply to my questions."

There was a pause, during which judge and accused looked hard at each other; the former seeking to read the other's inmost thoughts, the latter meeting the gaze with resolute and unflinching eyes.

"What is your age?"

"Twenty-six."

"Are you married?"

"Yes."

"But your wife has left you."

Gascoigne started in spite of himself.

"How do you know that?" he asked, nervously.

"It is for me to question. But I know it: that is enough. Your occupation and position in life?"

"I am a gentleman, living on my means."

"It is false." An angry flush rose to Gascoigne's face as the judge thus gave him the lie. "It is false—you are a professional gambler—a Greek—a sharper, with no ostensible means!"

"Pardon me, monsieur; you are quite misinformed. I could prove to you –"

"It would be useless; the police have long known and watched you."

"Such espionage is below contempt," cried Gascoigne, indignantly.

"Silence! Do not dare to question the conduct of the authorities. It is the visit of persons of your stamp to Paris that renders such precautions necessary."

"If you believe all you hear from your low agents, with their lying, scandalous reports—"

"Be careful, prisoner; your demeanour will get you into trouble. Our information about you is accurate and trustworthy. Judge for yourself."

Gascoigne looked incredulous.

"Listen; you arrived in Paris three months ago, accompanied by a young demoiselle whom you had decoyed from her home."

"She was my wife."

"Yes; you married her after your arrival here. The official records of the 21st arrondisement prove that—married her without her parents' consent."

"That is not so. They approved."

"How could they? Your wife's father is French vice-consul

at Gibraltar. Her mother is dead. Neither was present at your marriage; how, then, could they approve?"

Gascoigne did not answer.

"On your first arrival you were well provided with funds—the proceeds, no doubt, of some nefarious scheme; a run of luck at the tables; the plunder of some pigeon—"

"The price of my commission in the English Army."

"Bah! You never were in the English Army."

"I can prove it."

"I shall not believe you. Being in funds, I say, you lived riotously, stayed at one of the best hotels, kept a landau and pair, dined at the Trois Frères and the Rocher de Cancale, frequented the theatres; madame wore the most expensive toilettes. But you presently ran short of cash."

"It's not surprising. But I presume I was at liberty to do what I liked with my own."

"Coming to the end of your resources," went on the judge, coldly ignoring the sneer, "you tried the gaming-table again, with varying success. You went constantly to the Hôtel Paradis—"

"On the contrary, occasionally, not often."

"You were there last night; it is useless to deny it. We have the deposition of the proprietor, who is well known to the police—M. Hippolyte Ledantec; you shall be confronted with him."

"Is he in custody?" asked Gascoigne, eagerly.

"I tell you it is not your place to question."

"He ought to be. It was he who committed the murder."

"You know there was a murder, then? Curious. When the body was discovered by the porter there was no one present. How could you know of the crime unless you had a hand in it?"

"I saw it committed. I tried my best to save the Baron, but Ledantec stabbed him before I could interpose."

"An ingenious attempt to shift the guilt; but it will not serve. We know better."

"I am prepared to swear it was Ledantec. Why should I attack the Baron? I owed him no grudge."

"Why? I will tell you. For some time past, as I have reminded you, your funds have been running low, fortune has been against you at the tables, and you could not correct it at the Hôtel Paradis as you do with less clever players—"

"You are taking an unfair advantage of your position, Monsieur le Juge. Any one else who dared accuse me of cheating —"

"Bah! no heroics. You could not correct fortune, I say; yet money you must have. The hotel-keeper was pressing for his long-unpaid account. Madame, your smart wife, was dissatisfied; she made you scenes because you refused her money; in return, you ill-used her."

"It is false! My wife has always received proper consideration at my hands."

"You ill-used her, ill-treated her; we have it from herself."

"Do you know, then, where she is?" interrupted Gascoigne, with so much eagerness that it was plain he had taken his wife's

defection greatly to heart. "Why has she left me? With whom? I have always suspected that villain Ledantec; he is an arch scoundrel, a very devil!"

"The reasons for your wife's disappearance are sufficiently explained by this letter."

"To me?" said Gascoigne, stretching out his hand for it.

"To you, but impounded by us. It was found, in our search of your apartments yesterday, placed in a prominent place upon your dressing-table."

"Give it me—it is mine!"

"No! but you shall hear what it says. Listen:—

"'I could have borne with resignation the miserable part you have imposed upon me. After luring me from my home with dazzling offers, after promising me a life of luxury and splendid ease, you rudely, cruelly dispelled the illusion, and made it plain to me that I had shared the lot of a pauper. All this I could have borne—poverty, however distasteful, but not the infamy, the degradation, of being the partner and associate of your evil deeds. Sooner than fall so low I prefer to leave you for ever. Do not seek for me. I have done with you. All is at an end between us!'"

CHAPTER III.
THE MOUSETRAP

"Well," said the judge, when he had finished reading, "you see

what your wife thinks of you. What do you say now?"

"There is not a word of truth in that letter. It is a tissue of misstatements from beginning to end. You must place no reliance upon it."

"There you must allow me to differ from you. This letter is, in my belief, perfectly genuine. It supplies a most important link in the chain of evidence, and I shall give it the weight it deserves. But enough—will you still deny your guilt?"

"It is Ledantec's doing," said Gascoigne, following out a line of thought of his own. "She was nothing loth, perhaps, for he has been instilling insidious poison into her ears for these weeks past. I had my suspicions, but could prove nothing; now I know. It was for this, to put money in his purse for her extravagance, that he first robbed, then struck down the baron."

"Why do you still persist in this shallow line of defence? You cannot deceive me; it would be far better to make a clean breast of it at once."

"I have already told you all I know. I repeat, I saw Ledantec strike the blow."

"Psha! this is puerile. I will be frank with you. We have the fullest and strongest evidence of your guilt—why, then, will you not confess it?"

"I have nothing to confess; I am perfectly innocent. I was the poor man's friend, not his murderer. I tried hard to save him, but, unhappily, I was too late."

"You will not confess?"

A flush of anger rose to Gascoigne's cheek; his eyes flashed with the indignation he felt at being thus bullied and browbeaten; his lips quivered, but still he made no reply.

"Come! you have played this comedy long enough," said the judge, his manner growing more insolent, his look more threatening. "Will you, or will you not, confess?"

Gascoigne met his gaze resolutely, but with a dogged, obstinate silence, the result of a firm determination not to utter a word.

"This is unbearable," said the judge, angrily, after having repeated his question several times without eliciting any reply. "Take him away! Let him be kept in complete isolation, in one of the separate cells of the Mousetrap—the Souricière."

At a signal from within the police entered, resumed charge of the prisoner, and escorted him, by many winding passages, down a steep staircase to an underground passage, ending in a dungeon-like room, badly lighted by one small, heavily-barred window, through which no glimpse of the sky was seen.

Here he was left alone, and for a long time utterly neglected. No one came near him till late in the day, when he was brought a basin of thin soup and a hunch of coarse ammunition bread. He spoke to his jailers, asking for more and better food, but obtained no reply. He asked them for paper, pens, and ink; he wished, he said, to make a full statement of his case to the British Embassy, and demand its protection. Still no reply. Maddened by this contemptuous treatment, and despairing almost of justice,

he begged, entreated the warder to take pity on him, to tell him at least how long they meant to keep him there in such terrible solitude, cut off altogether from the advice and assistance of friends. The warder shook his head stolidly, and at length broke silence, but only to say, "It is by superior order," then left him.

Gascoigne passed a terrible night, the second night in durance, but far worse than the first. He was torn now with apprehensions as to his fate; circumstances seemed so much against him; the facts, as stated by the judge, might be grossly misrepresented; but how was he to dispute them? There was no justice in this miserable country, with such a partial and one-sided system of law. He began to fear that his life was in their hands; already he felt his head on the block, under the shadow of the awful guillotine.

Nor were his personal terrors the only nightmare that visited and oppressed him. He was harassed, tortured, by the shameless conduct of his wife; of the woman for whom he had sacrificed everything—profession, fortune, name, the affection of relatives, the respect of friends. With base, black-hearted perfidy, she had deserted him for another, had plotted against him, had helped to bring him into his present terrible straits.

Once again they awoke him, unrefreshed, from the deep sleep haunted by such hideous dreams. He was told to dress himself and come out. At the door of his cell the same escort—two police-agents—awaited him.

"Where are you taking me? Again before that hateful judge?"

"Monsieur had better speak more respectfully," replied one of them, in a warning voice.

"It is no use, I tell you, his interrogating me. I have nothing more to say."

"Silence!" cried the other, "and march."

They led him along the passage and upstairs, but not, as before, to the judge's cabinet. Turning aside, they passed on one side of it, and out into the open air. There was a cab drawn up close to the door, the prisoner was ordered to get in, one police-agent taking his seat alongside, the other mounting on the box. The glasses were drawn up, and the cab drove rapidly away.

"Where are you taking me?" asked Gascoigne.

"You will see," replied his conductor, coldly.

"To another prison?"

"Silence! A prisoner is not permitted to enter into conversation with his guard."

Thus rebuffed, Gascoigne resigned himself to gazing mournfully through the windows as the cab rattled along. He did not know this quarter of Paris well, but he could see that they were passing along one of the quays of the Ile de la Cité. He could see the houses on the opposite bank, and knew from the narrowness of the river that it was not the main stream of the Seine. It was still early morning; the streets were not as yet very crowded, but as the cab entered a wide square it came upon a throng issuing from the portals of a large church, the congregation that had been attending some celebration at Notre

Dame. He recognised the church as he passed it, still driving, however, by the quays. Then they came to a low building, with a dirty, ill-kept, unpretentious doorway. The cab passed through into an inner court, stopped, and Gascoigne was ordered to alight.

The police-agents, one on each side of him, took him to a rather large but dirty, squalid-looking room, which might have been part of an old-clothes shop. All round, hanging from pegs, each neatly ticketed with its own number, were sets of garments, male and female, of every description: rags and velvets, a common blouse and good broadcloth, side by side.

At a small common table in the centre of the room sat Gascoigne's judge, with the same cold face, only darkened now by a frown.

"Once more," he said, abruptly—"will you confess your crime?"

Gascoigne looked at him contemptuously, but held his tongue.

"Do you still refuse? Do you still obstinately persist in remaining dumb? Very well, we shall see."

The judge got up from his chair, and disappeared through a side-door.

After a short pause, Gascoigne's escort bade him march, and the three followed through the same door.

They entered a second chamber, smaller than the first, the uses of which were at once obvious to Gascoigne, although he had never been there before. It was like a low shed or workroom, lighted from above, perfectly plain—even bald—in

its decoration, but in the centre, occupying the greater part of the space, and leaving room only for a passage around, was a large flat slab of marble, something like that seen in fishmongers' shops. The similarity was maintained by the sound of water constantly flowing and falling upon the marble slab, as though to keep it and its burden always fresh and cool.

But that burden! Three corpses, stark naked but for a decent waistband, were laid out upon the marble table. One was that of a child who had been fished up from the Seine that morning; the second that of a stonemason who had fallen from a scaffolding and broken his neck and both legs; the third was the murdered man of the Hôtel Paradis, the Baron d'Enot, stripped of his well-made clothes, lying stark and stiff on his back, with the great knife-wound gaping red and festering in his breast.

"There!" cried the judge, triumphantly, leaning forward to scrutinise narrowly the effect of this hideous confrontation upon the prisoner.

To his bitter disappointment, this carefully prepared theatrical effect, so frequently practised and so often successful with French criminals, altogether failed with Gascoigne. The Englishman certainly had started at the first sight of the corpse, but it was a natural movement of horror which might have escaped any unconcerned spectator at being brought into the presence of death in such a hideous form. After betraying this first and not unnatural sign of emotion, Gascoigne remained perfectly cool, self-possessed, and unperturbed.

"You see your victim there; now will you confess?" cried the judge, almost passionately.

"Ledantec's victim, not mine," replied Gascoigne, quietly. Then, as if in apology to himself, he added, "I could not help speaking, but I shall say nothing more."

"He is very strong, extraordinarily strong!" cried the judge, his rage giving place to admiration at the obstinate fortitude of his prisoner. "In all my experience"—this was to the police and the chief custodian of the Morgue—"I have never come across a more cold-blooded, cynical wretch; but he shall not beat me; he shall not outrage and set the law at defiance; we will bend his spirit yet. Take him back to the Mousetrap; he shall stay there until he chooses to speak."

With this unfair threat, which was tantamount to a sentence of unlimited imprisonment, the judge dismissed his prisoner.

Gascoigne was marched back to the cab; the police-agents ordered him to re-enter it; one of them took his seat by his side as before, the other remounted the box. Then the cab started on its journey back to the Préfecture.

Gascoigne, silent, pre-occupied, and outwardly calm, was yet inwardly consumed with a fierce though impotent rage. He was indignant at the shameful treatment he had received. To be arraigned as a criminal prematurely, his guilt taken for granted on the testimony of unseen witnesses whose evidence he had no chance of rebutting—all this, so intolerable to the spirit of British justice, revolted him and outraged his sense of fair play.

Yet what could he do? He was without redress. They had denied him his right of appeal to his ambassador; he was forbidden to communicate with his friends. There seemed no hope for him, no chance of justice, no loophole of escape.

Stay! Escape?

As the thought flashed quickly across his brain it lingered, taking practical shape. Surely it was worth his while to make an effort, to strike one bold blow for liberty now, before it was too late!

He quickly cast up the chances for and against. The cab was following the line of quays as before, but along the northern bank of the island, that bordering the main stream. It was going at little better than a foot's pace; the door next which he sat was on the side of the river. What if he knocked his guardian senseless, striking him a couple of British blows—one, two, straight from the shoulder—then, flinging open the door, spring out, and over the parapet into the swift-flowing Seine? He was an excellent swimmer; once in the water, surely he might trust to his luck!

These were the arguments in his favour. Against him were the chances that his companion might show fight; that he might check his prisoner's exit until his comrade on the box could come to the rescue; or that some officious bystander might act on the side of the law; or that a shot might drop him as he fled; or, finally, and most probably of all, that he might be drowned in the turbulent stream.

Gascoigne was not long in coming to a decision. "Nothing

venture, nothing have," was his watchword. At this moment the cab was near the end of the Quai aux Fleurs, near the Pont d'Arcole. There was no time to be lost; at any moment it might turn down from the river, taking one of the cross streets. Setting his teeth firmly, and nerving himself for a supreme effort, Gascoigne sprang suddenly upon the police-agent, twisted his hands inside the stiff stock, and, having thus nearly throttled him, felled him with two tremendous blows.

With a groan, the man fell to the bottom of the cab; the next instant Gascoigne had opened the door and dropped into the roadway.

The escape was observed by one or two passers-by; but they were evidently people who owed the police no good-will, for, although they stood still to watch the fugitive, they did not give the alarm. This came first from the policeman who had been assaulted, who, recovering quickly from the attack, roared lustily to his fellow for help. The cab stopped, the officials alighted hurriedly, and looking to right and left caught sight of Gascoigne as he stood upon the parapet and made his plunge into the river. Both rushed to the spot, pistol in hand.

Down below was the figure of their escaped prisoner battling with the rapid stream. Both fired, almost simultaneously, and one at least must have hit the mark.

Gascoigne's body turned over and then sank, leaving a small crimson stain upon the water.

Was he killed? Drowned? That is what no one could tell;

but it was certain that no corpse answering the Englishman's description was ever recovered from the river; nor, on the other hand, did the police, in spite of an active pursuit, lay hands on their prisoner again alive.

CHAPTER IV.
A SPIDER'S WEB

Some half a dozen years after the occurrences just recorded there was a great gathering one night at Essendine House, a palatial mansion occupying the whole angle of a great London square. The reception-rooms upon the first floor, five of them, and all *en suite*, and gorgeously decorated in white and gold, were brilliantly lighted and thrown open to the best of London society. Lady Essendine was at home to her friends, and seemingly she had plenty of them, for the place was thronged.

The party was by way of being musical—that is to say, a famous pianist had been engaged to let off a lot of rockets from his finger-tips, and a buffo singer from the opera roared out his "Figaro la, Figaro quà," with all the strength of his brazen lungs; while one or two gifted amateurs sang glees in washed-out, apologetical accents, which were nearly lost in the din of the room.

But there was yet another singer, whose performance was attended with rather more display. It was preluded by a good deal of whispering and nodding of heads. Lady Essendine posed as

a charitable person, always anxious to do good, and this singer was a *protégée* of hers—an interesting but unfortunate foreigner in very reduced circumstances, whom she had discovered by accident, and to whom she was most anxious to give a helping hand.

"A sweet creature," she had said quite audibly that evening, although the object of her remarks was at her elbow. "A most engaging person; poor thing, when I found her she was almost destitute. Wasn't it sad?"

"Quite pretty, too," her friends had remarked, also ignoring the near neighbourhood of the singer.

It did not seem to matter much. The stranger sat there calmly, proudly unconscious of all that was said about her. Pretty!—the epithet was well within the mark. Beautiful, rather—magnificently, splendidly beautiful, with a noble presence and almost queenly air. Her small, exquisitely-proportioned head, crowned with a coronet of deep chestnut hair, was well poised upon a long, slender neck; she had a refined, aristocratic face, with clear-cut features, a well-shaped, aquiline nose, with slender nostrils; a perfect mouth, great lustrous dark eyes, with brows and lashes rather darker than her hair. Her teeth were perfect—perhaps she knew it, for her lower lip hung down a little, constantly displaying their pearly whiteness, and adding somewhat to the decided outline of the firm well-rounded chin.

Seated, her beauty claimed attention; but her appearance was still more attractive when she stood up and moved across the

room, to take her seat at the piano. Her figure was tall and commanding, full, yet faultless in outline, as that of one in the prime of ripe, rich womanhood, and its perfect proportions were fully set off by her close-fitting but perfectly plain black dress.

A little hum of approval greeted her from this well-bred audience as she sat down and swept her fingers with a flourish over the keys. Then, without further prelude, she sang a little French song in a pleasing, musical voice, without much compass, but well trained; before the applause ended she broke into a Spanish ballad, tender and passionate, which gained her still greater success; and thus accepted and approved amidst continual cries of "Brava!" and "Encore!" she was not allowed to leave her seat until she had sung at least a dozen times.

When she arose from the piano Lady Essendine went up to her, patronising and gracious.

"Oh! thank you so much. I don't know when I have heard anything so charming."

Other ladies followed suit, and, amidst the general cries of approval, the beautiful singer was engaged a dozen deep to sing at other great houses in the town.

Presently they pressed her to perform again. Was she not paid for it? No one, Lady Essendine least of all, thought for one moment of her *protégée's* fatigue, and the poor singer might have worked on till she fainted from exhaustion had not the son of the house interposed.

"You must be tired, mademoiselle," said Lord Lydstone,

coming up to the piano. "Surely you would like a little refreshment? Let me take you to the tea-room," and, offering his arm, he led her away, despite his mother's black looks and frowns of displeasure.

"Lydstone is so impulsive," she whispered to the first confidant she could find. It was Colonel Wilders, one of the family—a poor relation, in fact, commonly called by them "Cousin Bill"—a hale, hearty, middle-aged man, with grey hair he was not ashamed of, but erect and vigorous, with a soldierly air. "I wish he would not advertise himself with such a person in this way."

"A monstrously handsome person!" cried the blunt soldier, evidently cordially endorsing Lord Lydstone's taste.

"That's not the question, Colonel Wilders; it was not my son's place to take her to the tea-room, and I am much annoyed. Will you, to oblige me, go and tell Lydstone I want to speak to him?"

Cousin Bill, docile and obsequious, hurried off to execute her ladyship's commission. He found the pair chatting pleasantly together in a corner of the deserted tea-room, and delivered his message.

"Oh, bother!" cried Lord Lydstone undutifully. "What can mother want with me?"

"You had better go to her," said the colonel, who was a little afraid of his cousin, the female head of the house. "I will take your place here—that is to say, if mademoiselle will permit me."

"Madame," corrected Lord Lydstone, who had been already

put right himself. "Let me introduce you. Madame Cyprienne—my cousin, Colonel Wilders, of the Royal Rangers. I hope we shall hear you sing again to-night, unless you are too tired."

"I shall do whatever *miladi* wishes," said Madame Cyprienne, in a deep but musical voice, with a slight foreign accent. "It is for her to command, me to obey. She has been very kind, you know," she went on to Colonel Wilders, who had taken Lydstone's seat by her side. "But for her I should have starved."

"Dear me! how sad," said the colonel. "Was it so bad as that? How did it happen. Was M. Cyprienne unlucky?"

She did not answer; and the colonel, wondering, looked up, to find her fine eyes filled with tears.

"How stupid of me! What an idiot I am! Of course, your husband is –"

She pointed to her black dress, edged with crape, but said nothing.

"Yes, yes! I quite understand. Pray forgive me," stammered the colonel, and there followed an awkward pause.

"Mine is a sad story," she said at length, in a sorrowful tone. "I was left suddenly alone, unprotected, without resources, in this strange country—to fight my own battle, to earn a crust of bread by my own exertions, or starve."

"Dear, dear!" said the colonel, his sympathies fully aroused.

"I should have starved, but for Lady Essendine. She heard of me. I was trying to dispose of some lace—some very old Spanish point. You are a judge of lace, monsieur?"

"Of course, of course!" said the colonel, although, as a matter of fact, he did not know Spanish point from common *écru*.

"This was some lace that had been in our family for generations. You must understand we were not always as you see me—poor; we belong to the old nobility. My husband was highly born, but when he died I dropped the title and became Madame Cyprienne. It was better, don't you think?"

"Perhaps so; I am not sure," replied the colonel, hardly knowing what to say.

"It was. The idea of a countess a pauper, begging her bread!"

"What was your title, may I ask?" inquired the colonel, eagerly. These tender confidences, accompanied by an occasional encouraging glance from her bright eyes, were rapidly increasing the interest he took in her.

"I am the Countess de Saint Clair," replied Madame Cyprienne, proudly; "but I do not assume the title now. I do not choose it to be known that I live by singing, and by selling the remnants of our family lace."

"I hope Lady Essendine paid you a decent price," said the colonel, pleasantly.

Madame Cyprienne shook her head, with a little laugh—

"She has been very kind—exceedingly kind—but she knows how to drive a bargain: all women do."

"What a shame! And have you sold it all? You had better entrust me with the disposal of the rest."

"Oh! Colonel Wilders, I could not think of giving you so much

trouble."

"But I will; I should like to. Send it to me. My chambers are in Ryder Street; or, better still, I will call for it if you will tell me where," said the colonel, artfully.

"I am lodging in a very poor place, not at all such as the Countess de Saint Clair should receive in. But I am not ashamed of it; it is in Frith Street, Soho, No. 29a; but I do not think you ought to come there."

"A most delightful part of the town," said the colonel, who at the moment would have approved of Whitechapel or the New Cut. "When shall I call?"

"In the afternoon. In the morning I am engaged in giving lessons. But come, we have lingered here long enough. *Miladi* will expect me to sing again."

Lady Essendine frowned at Cousin Bill when he brought back her singer; but whether it was at the length of the talk, or the withdrawal of her *protégée* from the duties for which she was paid, her ladyship did not condescend to explain. It was a little of both. She was pleased to have hindered her son from paying marked attention to a person in Madame Cyprienne's doubtful position. Now she found that person exercising her fascinations upon Colonel Wilders, and it annoyed her, although Cousin Bill was surely old enough to take care of himself. Already she was changing her opinion concerning the fair singer she had introduced into the London world. She could not fail to notice the admiration Madame Cyprienne generally received, especially

from the men, and she doubted whether she had done wisely in taking her by the hand.

A few days later she had no doubt at all. To her disgust, all the old Spanish point-lace was gone; and Madame Cyprienne had told her plainly that it was her own fault for haggling over the price. Her ladyship's disgust was heightened when she found the best piece of all—a magnificent white mantilla—in the possession of a rival leader of fashion, who refused to say where she had got it, or how.

She set her emissaries at work, however—for every great London lady has a dozen devoted, unpaid *attachés*, ready to do any little commission of this kind—and the lace was traced back to Colonel Wilders.

"My dear," she said, one morning, to her lord, "I am afraid Colonel Wilders is very intimate with that Madame Cyprienne."

"Our eccentric Cousin Bill! You don't say so? Well, there's no fool like an old fool," said Lord Essendine, who was a very matter-of-fact, plain-spoken peer.

"I always thought she was an adventuress," cried Lady Essendine, angrily.

"Then why did you take her up so hotly? But for you, no one would ever have heard of the woman, least of all Cousin Bill."

"Well, I have done with her now. I shall drop her."

"The mischief's done. Unless I am much mistaken, she won't drop Cousin Bill."

Lord Essendine, who was, perhaps, behind the scenes, was

not wrong in his estimate of the influence Madame Cyprienne exercised. Before six months were out, Colonel Wilders came, with rather a sheepish air, to the head of the house, and informed him of his approaching marriage to the Countess de Saint Clair.

"That's a new title to me, Bill. Foreign, I suppose?" Lord Essendine had the usual contempt of the respectable Briton for titles not mentioned in Debrett or Burke.

"It's French, I fancy; and for the moment it is in abeyance. Madame Cyprienne tells me—"

"Gracious powers, William Wilders! have you fallen into that woman's clutches?"

"I must ask you, Lord Essendine, to speak more respectfully of the lady I propose to make my wife."

"You had better not! I warn you while there is yet time."

"What do you know against her?" asked the colonel, hotly.

"What do you know of or for her?" replied the peer, quickly. "I tell you, man, it's a disgrace to the family. Lady Essendine will be furious. If I had any authority over you I would forbid the marriage. In any case," he went on, "do not look for any countenance or support from me."

"I hope we shall be able to get on without your assistance, Lord Essendine. I thought it my duty to inform you of my marriage, and I think I might have been better received."

"Stay, you idiot; don't go off in a huff. I don't like the match, I tell you frankly; but I don't want to quarrel. Is there anything I can do for you, except attending the wedding? I won't do that."

Colonel Wilders could not bring himself to ask any favours of his unsympathetic kinsman. Nevertheless, it was through Lord Essendine's interest that he obtained a snug staff appointment in one of the large garrison towns; and he did not return indignantly the very handsome cheque paid in by his cousin to his account as a wedding present.

He was still serving at Chatsmouth, his young and beautiful wife the life of the gay garrison, when the war-clouds gathered dark upon the horizon, and, thanks again to the Essendine interest, he found himself transferred, still on the staff, to the expeditionary army under orders for the East.

CHAPTER V.
THE WAR FEVER

They were stirring times, those early days of '54. After half a century of peace the shadow of a great contest loomed dark and near. The whole British nation, sick and tired of Russian double-dealing, was eager to cut the knot of political difficulty with the sword. Everyone was mad to fight; only a few optimists, statesmen mostly, still relying on the sedative processes of diplomacy, had any hopes of averting war. A race reputed peace-loving, but most pugnacious when roused, was stirred now to its very depths. British hearts beat high throughout the length and breadth of the land, proudly mindful of their former prowess and manfully hopeful of emulating former glorious deeds.

It was the same wherever Englishmen gathered under the old flag; in every corner of the world peopled by offshoots from the old stock, most of all in those strongholds and dependencies beyond sea captured in the old wars, and still held by our arms.

It was so upon the great Rock, the commonly counted impregnable fortress, one of the ancient pillars of Hercules that still stands silently strong and watchful at the mouth of the Mediterranean Sea.

Nowhere did the war fever rage higher than at Gibraltar. Before everything, a garrison town, battlemented and fortified on every side, resonant from morning gunfire till watch-setting with martial sounds, its principal pageants military, with soldiers filling its streets, and sentinels at every corner, the prospect of active service was naturally the one theme and topic of the place.

As spring advanced, one of those balmy-scented Southern springs when flowers highly prized with us blossomed wild everywhere, even in the fissures of the rock—when the days are already long and bright, under ever-blue and cloudless skies, Gibraltar realised more fully that war was close at hand. Lying in the high road to the East, it saw daily the armed strength of England sweep proudly by. Now a squadron of men-of-war: not the hideous, shapeless ironclad of to-day, but the traditional three-decker, with its tiers of snarling teeth and its beauty of white-bellying canvas and majestic spar. Now a troopship with its consorts, two, or three, or more, tightly packed with their living cargo—whole regiments of red-coated soldiers on their way to

Malta and beyond.

Such sights as these kept the garrison—friends and comrades of those bound eastward—in a state of constant high-pitched excitement. At first, forbidden by strict quarantine, there was no communication between the sea and the shore, but all day long there were crowds of idlers ready to line the sea-wall and greet every ship that came in close enough with hearty repeated cheers. When the vexatious health-rules were relaxed, and troopships landed some of their passengers, there was endless fraternisation, eager discussion of coming operations, and unlimited denunciation of the common foe.

Members of the garrison itself were, of course, frantically jealous of all who had the better luck to belong to the expeditionary force. That they were not under orders for the East was the daily burden of complaint in every barrack-room and guard-house upon the Rock. The British soldier is an inveterate grumbler; he quarrels perpetually with his quarters, his food, his clothing, and his general want of luck. Just now the bad luck of being refused a share in an arduous campaign, with its attendant chances of hardships, sufferings, perhaps a violent death, made every soldier condemned to remain in safety at Gibraltar discontented and sore at heart.

"No orders for us by the last mail, Hyde," said a young sergeant of the Royal Picts, as he walked briskly up to the entrance of the Waterport Guard.

A tall, well-grown, clean-limbed young fellow of twenty-

four or five: one who prided himself on being a smart soldier, and fully deserved the name. He was admirably turned out; his coatee with wings, showing that he belonged to one of the flank companies, fitted him to perfection; the pale blue trousers, the hideous fashion of the day, for which Prince Albert was said to be responsible, were carefully cut; his white belts were beautifully pipe-clayed, and the use of pipe-clay was at that time an art; you could see your face in the polish of his boots. A smart soldier, and as fine-looking a young fellow as wore the Queen's uniform in 1854. He had an open, honest face, handsome withal; clear bright grey eyes, broad forehead, and a firm mouth and chin.

"Worrying yourself, as usual, for permission to have your throat cut. Can't you bide your time, Sergeant McKay?"

The answer came from another sergeant of the same regiment, an elder, sterner man—a veteran evidently, for he wore two medals for Indian campaigns, and his bronzed, weather-beaten face showed that he had seen service in many climes. As a soldier he was in no wise inferior to his comrade: his uniform and appointments were as clean and correct, but he lacked the extra polish—the military dandyism, so to speak—of the younger man.

"War is our regular trade. Isn't it natural we should want to be at it?" said Sergeant McKay.

"You talk like a youngster who doesn't know what it's like," replied Sergeant Hyde. "I've seen something of campaigning, and it's rough work at the best, even in India, where soldiers are as

well off as officers here."

"Officers!" said McKay, rather bitterly. "They have the best of it everywhere."

"Hush! don't be an insubordinate young idiot," interposed his comrade, hastily. "Here come two of them."

The sergeants sprang hastily to their feet, and, standing strictly to attention, saluted their superiors in proper military form.

"That's what I hate," went on McKay.

"Then you are no true soldier, and don't know what proper discipline means. They are as much bound to salute us as we them."

"Yes, but they don't."

"That's their want of manners; so much the worse for them. Besides, I am quite sure Mr. Wilders didn't mean it; he is far too good an officer—always civil-spoken, too, and considerate to the men."

"I object to saluting him more than any one else."

"Why, McKay! what's the matter with you? What particular fault have you to find with Mr. Wilders?"

"I am just as good as he is."

"In your own opinion, perhaps; not in that of this garrison—certainly not under the Mutiny Act and Articles of War."

"I am just as good. I am his cousin—"

Sergeant McKay stopped suddenly, bit his lip, and flushed very red.

"So you have let the cat out of the bag at last, my young

friend," said Sergeant Hyde, quietly. "I always thought this—that you were a gentleman—"

"Superior to my station, in fact."

"By no means, Sergeant McKay. I should be sorry to admit that any man, however highly born, had lost his right to be deemed a gentleman because he is a sergeant in the Royal Picts."

"You, Hyde, are a gentleman too. I am sure of that."

"I am a sergeant in the Royal Picts. That is enough for me and for you."

"Why did you enlist?"

Hyde shook his head gravely.

"There are pages in every man's life," he said, "which he does not care to lift again when they are once turned down. I have not asked you for your secret; respect mine."

"But I have nothing to conceal," said McKay, quickly. "I am ready enough to tell you why I enlisted."

"As you please; but, mind, I have not asked you."

There was little encouragement in this speech; but McKay ignored it, and went on—

"I enlisted because I could not enter the army in any other way. My friends could not afford to purchase me a commission."

"Why were you so wild to become a soldier?"

"It was my father's profession. He was a captain in—"

"That should have given you a claim for an ensigncy, as an officer's son."

"But my father was not in the English service. He was only

half an Englishman, really."

"Indeed! How so?"

"Although Scotch by extraction, as our name will tell you, my father was born in Poland. He was a Russian subject, and as such was compelled to serve in the Russian army."

"For long?"

"Until he was mixed in an unfortunate national movement, and only escaped execution by flight. He lived afterwards at Geneva. It was there he met my mother."

"Is it through him or her that you are related to the Wilders?"

"Through my mother. She was daughter of the Honourable Anastasius, son of the twelfth earl."

"And what might be the distinguishing numeral of the present Essendine potentate?"

"He is fourteenth earl."

"Then he and your mother are first cousins?"

"Quite so; and I am his first cousin once removed."

"Ah! that is very nice for you," said old Hyde, with a tinge of contempt in his tone. "They're not much use to you though, these fine relations. Surely Lord Essendine could have got you a commission by holding up his hand?"

"That's just what he would not do, and why I hate him and the whole of the Wilders family. Lord Essendine has never recognised us."

"Why? Is there any reason?"

"The Honourable Anastasius made a poor match, married

against his father's wish, and was cut off with a shilling. His brother, the next earl, was disposed to make it up, but my grandfather died, and my grandmother married again—an honest sea-captain—and the noble peer cut her dead."

"And so you joined the Royal Picts. But I wonder you came to this regiment to serve with your cousin."

"I enlisted, you know, a couple of years before he was gazetted to the corps."

"Do they know you took the shilling?—that you are now a colour-sergeant in the Royal Picts?"

"I don't think they are aware of my existence even."

"Well, never mind. Don't be cast down. The time may come when they will be proud to recognise you. It all depends upon yourself?"

"I will do all I know to force them, you may be sure."

"And you will have your chance, in a great war like this which is coming. Everything is possible to a man whose heart is in the right place. You have pluck and spirit."

The young fellow's eyes flashed.

"Trust me, Hyde; I sha'n't flinch, if I only get the chance."

"You are well educated; you can draw; you have picked up Spanish since you have been here; and I suppose you inherit a taste for languages from your Polish father?"

"I don't know; at any rate, I can talk French fluently, and I speak Russian of course."

"Why, man! the game is positively in your own hands. You

are bound to get on: mark my words."

"Not if we stay here, Hyde, keeping guard upon this old Rock and losing all the fun. Can you wonder why I am so anxious the regiment should get the route?"

"It will come, never fear. They will want every soldier that carries a musket before this war is over, or I'm a much-mistaken man. Only have patience."

"How can I? I am eating my heart out, Hyde."

"Was it to tell me this you came down here? What brings you to Waterport this morning? Only to gossip with me?"

"That, and something more. I am on duty, detailed as orderly sergeant to one of the Expeditionary Generals; he is just going to land from a yacht in the bay."

"Do you know his name?"

"Yes, Wilders—another of my fine cousins. You can understand now why I am so bitter against my relations to-day: there are too many of them about."

"I suppose that is what's brought our Mr. Wilders here to-day—to meet his cousin."

"And his brother; for they are on board Lord Lydstone's yacht."

"They! How many of them?"

"General Wilders has his wife with him, I believe, accompanying him to the East."

"Old idiot! Why couldn't he leave her at home? Women are in the way at these times. Soldiers have no business with wives."

"That's why you never married, I suppose?"

Hyde did not answer his question, but got up and left his comrade abruptly, to re-enter the guard-room.

CHAPTER VI.
ON DANGEROUS GROUND

The *Arcadia*, Lord Lydstone's yacht, was a fine three-masted schooner of a couple of hundred tons. She was lying far out in the bay, amidst a crowd of shipping of every kind—coal-hulks, black and grimy; H.M.S. *Samarang*, receiving-ship, and home of the captain of the port; British vessels, steamers and sailing-ships, of every rig; foreign craft of every aspect native to its waters: zebecques, faluchas, and polaccas, with their curved spars and heavy lateen sails.

A fleet of small boats surrounded the yacht, native boats of curious build, and manned by dark-skinned natives of the Rock, in nondescript attire—a noisy, pushing, quarrelsome lot, eager to do business, gesticulating wildly, and jabbering loudly in many strange tongues. Here was a pure Spaniard, with a red sash round his waist, and a velvet cap, round as a cartwheel, on his head, with a boatful of vegetables and early fruit. There was a grave and sedate Moor, in green turban and white flowing robes, with an assortment of gold-braided slippers and large brass trays. Next a Maltese milk-seller, in scanty garments, nothing but short canvas trousers and a shirt, who had come with cans full of goats'-milk

from the herds he kept on the barren slopes of the Rock. Not far off was the galley of the health-officer, with a crew of "scorpion" boatmen in neat white jackets and straw hats.

On the deck of the yacht, under an awning—for the spring sun already beat down hotly at noon—were the owner and his guests. Lord Lydstone, cigar in mouth, lounged lazily upon a heap of rugs and cushions at the feet of Mrs. Wilders, who took her ease luxuriantly in a comfortable cane arm-chair.

Blanche Cyprienne, Countess of St. Clair, had changed little since her marriage. Her beauty had gained rather than lost; her manner was more commanding, her look more haughty. Her fine eyes flashed insolently, or were veiled in lazy disdain, and her voice spoke scornfully or drawled with careless contempt, according to her mood.

"So that is the Rock—the great Rock of Gibraltar," she was saying. "What an extraordinary-looking place!"

"You will say so, Countess, when you get on shore," said Lord Lydstone.

"Is there anything really to see?" she asked. "Is it worth the trouble of landing?"

"Why, of course! I thought it was all settled. The general sent some hours ago to say he proposed to pay his respect to the Governor. You cannot help yourself now."

"Oh! the general," remarked Mrs. Wilders, as she was generally styled—the title Countess was only used by intimate friends—in a tone that implied she was not at all bound by her

husband's plans.

"Where is the good man just now?" inquired Lord Lydstone, in much the same tone.

"There, forward," said Mrs. Wilders, pointing to the part of the deck beyond the awning. "Trying to get a sunstroke by walking about with his head bare."

"He does that on principle, Countess, don't you know. He wants to harden his cranium, in case he loses his hat some day in action."

"I hope he may never go into action. If he does, I should be sorry for his men."

"Not for him?"

"That may be taken for granted," she replied, in a matter-of-fact way.

"How fond you are of him! What devoted affection! It's lucky you have little to spare!"

"I keep it for the proper person."

"Is there none for his relatives?" asked Lydstone, with a meaning look.

"Do any of them deserve my affection?"

"I try very hard, Countess; and I should so value the smallest crumb."

"Don't be foolish, Lord Lydstone! you must not try to make love to me; it would be wrong. Besides, we are too nearly connected now."

"You never throw me a single kind word, Blanche."

"Certainly not. I won't have it on my conscience that I led you astray, poor innocent lamb! A fine thing! What would your people say? They're bitter enough against me as it is!"

The Essendines had never properly acknowledged Colonel Wilders's marriage, or treated his wife, the foreign countess, other than with the coldest contempt. Lord Lydstone knew this, and knew too that his mother was right; yet he could not defend her when this woman, whom he admired still—too much, indeed, for his peace of mind—resented her treatment.

"Your mother has behaved disgracefully to me—that you must admit, Lord Lydstone."

"She is an old-fashioned, old-world lady, with peculiar straitlaced notions of her own. But, if you please, we won't talk about her."

"Why not? You cannot pretend that she was right in ignoring me, flouting me, insulting me! Am I not your near relative's wife? Why, Bill is only four off the title now."

"One of them being your humble servant, who devoutly hopes that all four will long interpose between him and the succession," said Lord Lydstone, with a pleasant laugh.

"I don't wish you any harm, of course; still it is as I say, and my son—"

"Aged two, and at present in England at nurse."

"—May be the future Earl of Essendine."

"He shan't be, if I can prevent it!" cried Lord Lydstone, gaily; "you may rely on that. But, I say, here is a smart gig coming off

from the shore. I believe the Governor has sent his own barge for you. Here, Bill! I say, Bill!"

General Wilders came aft.

"You had better put on your best clothes, general; they are coming to fetch you in state."

"I suppose, on this occasion only, you will wear a hat, Bill?" said Mrs. Wilders.

"I wish you would go down and get ready, my dear; we ought not to keep the gig," said the general, as he himself went below to dress.

"I am not so sure I shall go on shore at all," replied his wife.

"No!" cried Lord Lydstone. "Throw the general over, and stay on board with me."

"That would be too great penance," said Mrs. Wilders, as she moved towards the companion-ladder. "I've had enough of your lordship for one day."

Lydstone got up, looking rather vexed, and followed her across the deck. When he was quite close to her side he whispered with suppressed but manifest feeling—

"Why do you torture me so? Sometimes I think you care for me; sometimes that you hate and detest me. What am I think?"

"What you choose," she answered, in a low, quick voice, evidently much displeased. "I have given you no right to speak to me in this way. Let me pass, or I shall appeal to my lawful protector!"

Presently Mrs. Wilders reappeared, dressed to perfection in

some cool light fabric, serene and smiling to everyone but Lord Lydstone. She was especially gracious to young Mr. Wilders, who had come off in the Governor's gig, and had been cordially welcomed by his brother.

"Another cousin," said the general, introducing him. He was now in uniform—the general—in uniform to suit his own fancy rather than the regulations. The only orthodox articles of apparel were his twisted general's scimitar and a forage-cap with a broad gold band. His coat and waistcoat were of white cloth; he had a wide crimson sash round his waist, and his lower limbs were encased in hunting-breeches and long boots. "Anastasius, one of the Royal Picts."

"All soldiers, you Wilders, all—except one." This was specially intended to annoy Lydstone. "The future head of the house is kept in cotton-wool; he is too precious, I suppose, to be risked."

"It is not my fault," began Lydstone. It was a sore point with him that he had not been permitted—in deference to his mother's fond protests—to enter the army.

"Are you not coming with us, Lydstone?" said his young brother, greatly disappointed. "I did want to show you our mess."

"I know Gibraltar by heart, and I have letters to write. I hope you will enjoy yourself, Countess," he added, sarcastically, as they went down the side.

"There's no fear of that, now we have left you behind," replied Mrs. Wilders, sharply.

"Why can't you and Lydstone keep better friends?" said General Wilders, a little shocked at this remark.

"It's his fault, not mine, and that's enough about it," replied Mrs. Wilders, rather petulantly. "Did you ever quarrel with your brother," she went on to Anastasius, "when you were boys?"

"I would not have dared. Not that I wanted to: we three brothers were always the best of friends."

"You are an affectionate family, Mr. Wilders; I have long been convinced of that," said Mrs. Wilders, who could not leave the subject alone.

But now the gig, impelled by six stout oarsmen, was nearing the Waterport Guard, and was already under the shadow of the frowning batteries of the Devil's Tongue. High above them rose the sheer straight wall of the rock, bristling with frowning fortifications, line above line, and countless embrasures armed with heavy artillery.

The wharf itself was crowded with the usual motley polyglot gathering—sailors of all nations, soldiers of the garrison, Spanish peasants from the neighbouring villages, native scorpions, policemen, and inspectors of strangers.

"How amusing! How interesting! It's like a scene in a play!" cried Mrs. Wilders, as she stepped ashore.

Escorted by her husband and cousin, they pushed their way through the crowd towards the Waterport gateway, and under it into the main ditch. As they approached there was a cry of "Guard, turn out!" and the Waterport Guard, under its officer,

fell in with open ranks to give the general a salute. General Wilders acknowledged the compliment, and, while he stood there with two fingers to his hat, Sergeant McKay advanced and reported himself.

"Your orderly, sir."

"Eh! what?" said the general, a little surprised. "My orderly! Very considerate of Sir Thomas," he went on. "One of the Royal Picts, too, and a guard from the same regiment! Most attentive, I'm sure!"

The general went up at once to the front rank of the guard, and proceeded to inspect the men carefully. With his own hands he altered the hang of the knapsacks and the position of the belts; he measured in the regular way, with two fingers, the length of the pouch below the elbow, grumbling to himself as he went along.

"So you use harness-blacking for your pouches. I don't approve of that. And your pipe-clay; it's got too blue a tinge."

While he lingered thus fondly over the trifling details that, to his mind, summed up the whole duty of a general officer, his wife's voice was heard impatiently calling him to her side.

"Come, general, don't be all day! How can you waste time over such nonsense!"

"My dear," said her husband, gravely, as he rejoined her, "this regiment is to form part of my brigade"—McKay pricked up his ears—"it is the first time I have seen any of it. You must allow me—"

"I am going on into the town; inspecting guards doesn't amuse

me," and the general discreetly abandoned his professional duties and walked on by her side.

The guard was dismissed by its commander; the men "lodged arms" and went back to the guard-room. Only Sergeant Hyde remained outside, watching the retreating figures of the Wilders' party.

"I should have known her voice again amongst a thousand," said the old sergeant, shaking his head; "and from the glimpse I caught of her she seemed but little changed. I wonder whether she saw me. Not that she would have recognised me; I am not what I was. No one here has made me out, although a dozen years ago I was well known all over the Rock. Besides, how could she see me? I was on the other flank, and, fortunately, she left the general to inspect us by himself. Poor man! I had rather be a sergeant—a private even—than stand in that general's shoes."

CHAPTER VII.
AN OLD ACQUAINTANCE

The Wilders' party, after leaving the Waterport, passed through the Casemate Barrack Square and entered Waterport Street, the chief thoroughfare of the town. It was a narrow, unpretending street, very foreign in aspect; the houses tall and overhanging with balconies filled with flowers; the lattice-shutters gaily painted, having outside blinds of brilliantly striped stuffs.

The shop fronts were small, the wares common-place; the best show was at the drapers, where they sold British calicoes and piece-goods in flaunting colours, calculated to suit the local taste.

The street, both pavement and roadway, was crowded. In the former were long strings of pack-horses bringing in straw and charcoal from Spain; small stout donkeys laden with water-barrels; officers, some in undress uniform, many more in plain clothes, riding long-tailed barbs; occasionally a commissariat wagon drawn by a pair of sleek mules, or a high-hooded *calêche*, with its driver seated on the shafts, cut through the throng. Detachments of troops, too, marched by: recruits returning from drill upon the North Front, armed parties, guards coming off duty, and others going on fatigue—all these cleared the street before them. On the pavement the crowd was as diverse as might be expected, from the mixed population. Stately Moors rubbed elbows with stalwart British soldiers; Barbary Jews, dejected in mien, but with shrewd, cunning eyes, chaffered with the itinerant vendors of freshly caught sardines, or the newly-picked fruit of the prickly pear. Now and again, quite out of keeping with her surroundings, a rosy-cheeked British nursemaid passed by escorting her charges—the blue-eyed, flaxen-haired children of the dominant race.

General Wilders walked along with head erect, returning punctiliously the innumerable salutes he received, quite happy, and in his element in this essentially military post and stronghold. Mrs. Wilders seemed also to enjoy the busy, animated scene:

it was all so new to her, so different from anything she had expected, as she was at great pains to explain. The sight of this foreign town held by British bayonets pleased her, she said; she was proud to think that she was now an Englishwoman.

"It is your first visit to Gibraltar, then?" said young Mr. Wilders, anxious to be civil.

"Oh, yes!" she replied; "that is why I am so interested—so amused by all I see."

Was this absolutely true? She seemed, as she led the way across the casemate square and up Waterport Street, to know the road without guidance, and once or twice a passer-by paused to look at her. Were they only paying tribute to her radiant beauty, or was her's not altogether an unfamiliar face?

It was evident that there were those at Gibraltar who knew her, or mistook her for some one else.

As the party reached the Commercial Square, and the main guard, like that at Waterport, turned out to do honour to the general, a man pushed forward from a little group that stood respectfully behind the party, and whispered hoarsely in Mrs. Wilders's ear—

"*Dios mio! Cypriana! Es usted?*" (Gracious Heavens! Cyprienne! Is it you?)

Mrs. Wilders stopped and looked round. At that moment, too, young Wilders turned angrily on the man—a black-muzzled, Spanish-looking fellow, dressed in a suit of coarse brown cloth, short jacket, knee-breeches, and leather gaiters—the dress, in

fact, of a well-to-do Spanish peasant—and said, sharply, "How dare you speak to this lady? What did he say to you, Mrs. Wilders—anything rude?"

Mrs. Wilders had recovered herself sufficiently to reply in an unconcerned tone—

"I did not understand his jargon; but it does not matter in the least; don't make any fuss, I beg."

The incident had been unobserved by any but these two, and it must have been speedily forgotten by young Wilders, for he said nothing more. But Mrs. Wilders, as they passed on, and for the rest of their walk to the Convent, as the Governor's residence is still styled, looked anxiously behind to see if the man who had claimed acquaintance with her was still in sight.

Yes; he was following her. What did he mean?

Half an hour later, when the Wilders had made their bow to the Governor, and it had been arranged that the general should attend an inspection of troops upon the North Front, Mrs. Wilders declined to accept the seat in the carriage offered her. She preferred, she said, to explore the quaint old town. Mr. Wilders and one of the Governor's aides-de-camps eagerly volunteered to escort, but she declined.

"Many thanks, but I'd rather go alone. I shall be more independent."

"You'll lose your way; or be arrested by the garrison police and taken before the town major as a suspicious character, loitering too near the fortifications," said the Governor, who thought it a

capital joke.

"No one will interfere with me, I think," she replied, quietly. "I am quite able to take care of myself."

She looked it just then, with her firm-set lips and flashing eyes.

"Mrs. Wilders will have her own way," said her husband. "It's best to give in to her. That's what I've found," he added, with a laugh, in which all joined.

When the horses were brought out for the parade, Mrs. Wilders, still persisting in her intention of walking alone, said, gaily—

"Well, gentlemen, while you are playing at soldiers I shall go off on my own devices. If I get tired, Bill, I shall go back to the yacht."

And with this Mrs. Wilders walked off.

"Here, sergeant!" cried the general to his orderly, McKay. "I don't want you; you may be of use to Mrs. Wilders. Go after her."

"Shall I report myself to her, sir?"

"I don't advise you, my man. She'd send you about your business double-quick. But you can keep your eye on her, and see she comes to no harm."

Sergeant McKay saluted and hastened out of the courtyard. Mrs. Wilders had already disappeared down Convent Lane, and was just turning into the main street. McKay followed quickly, keeping her in sight.

It was evident that the best part of Gibraltar had no charms

for Mrs. Wilders; she did not want to look into the shop windows, such as they were; nor did she pause to admire the architectural beauties of the Garrison Library or other severely plain masterpieces of our military engineers. Her course was towards the upper town, and she pressed on with quick, unfaltering steps, as though she knew every inch of the ground.

Ten minutes' sharp walking, sometimes by steep lanes, sometimes up long flights of stone steps, brought her to the upper road leading to the Moorish castle. This was essentially a native quarter; Spanish was the only language heard from the children who swarmed about the doorways, or their slatternly mothers quarreling over their washtubs, or combing out and cleansing, in a manner that will not bear description, their children's hair. Spanish colour prevailed, and Spanish smells.

Still pursuing her way without hesitation, Mrs. Wilders presently turned up another steep alley bearing the historic name of "Red Hot Shot Ramp," and paused opposite a gateway leading into a dirty courtyard. The place was a kind of livery or bait stable patronised by muleteers and gipsy dealers, who brought in horses from Spain.

Picking her steps carefully, Mrs. Wilders entered the stable-yard.

"Benito Villegas?" she asked in fluent Spanish, of the ostler, who stared with open-mouthed surprise at this apparition of a fine lady in such a dirty locality.

"Benito, the commission agent and guide? Yes, señora, he is

with his horses inside," replied the ostler, pointing to the stable-door.

"Call him, then!" cried Mrs. Wilders, imperiously. "Think you that I will cross the threshold of your piggery?" and she waited, stamping her foot impatiently whilst the man did her bidding.

In another minute he came out with Benito Villegas, the man in the brown suit, who had spoken to Mrs. Wilders in the Commercial Square.

"Cypriana," he began at once, in a half-coaxing, half-apologetic tone.

"Silence! Answer my questions, or I will thrash you with your own whip. How dared you intrude yourself upon me to-day?"

"Forgive me! I was so utterly amazed. I thought some bright vision had descended from above, sent, perhaps, by the Holy Virgin"—he crossed himself devoutly—"I could not believe it was you."

"Thanks! I am not an angel from heaven, I know, but let that pass. Answer me! How dared you speak to me to-day?"

"The sight of you awoke old memories; once again I worshipped you—your shadow—the ground on which you trod. I thought of how you once returned my love."

"Miserable cur! I never stooped so low."

"You would have been mine but for that cursed Englishman who came between us, and whom you preferred. What did you gain by listening to him? He lured you from your home—"

"No more! The villain met with his deserts. He is dead—dead

these years—and with him all my old life. That is what brings me here. Attend now, Benito Villegas, to what I say!"

"I am listening," he answered, cowering before her, and in a tone of mingled fear and passion. It was evident this strange woman exercised an extraordinary influence over him.

"Never again must you presume to recognise me—to address me, anywhere. If you do, take care! I am a great lady now—the wife of an English general. I have great influence, much power, and can do what I please with such scum as you. I have been with my husband just now to the Convent, the palace of the Governor, and I have but to ask to obtain your immediate expulsion from the Rock. Do not anger or oppose me, man, or beware!"

Benito looked at her with increasing awe.

"Obey my behests, on the other hand, and I will reward you. Ask any favour! Money?"—she quickly took out a little purse and handed him a ten-pound note—"here is an earnest of what I will give you. Interest? Do you want the good-will of the authorities—a snug appointment in the Custom-house, or under the police? They are yours."

"I am your slave; I will do your bidding, and ask nothing in return but your approval."

"Nothing! You grow singularly self-denying, Señor Benito."

"The señora will really help me?" said Benito, now cringing and obsequious. "One small favour, then. I am tired of this wandering life. Here to-day in Cadiz; Ronda, Malaga, to-morrow. At everybody's beck and call—never my own master,

not for an hour. I want to settle down."

"To marry?" inquired Mrs. Wilders, contemptuously. "In your own station? That is better."

"I have not forgotten you, señora. But the wound was beginning to heal—"

She held up her hand with a menacing gesture.

"I will not deny that I have cast my eyes upon a maiden that pleases me," Benito confessed. "I have known her from childhood. Her friends approve of my suit, and would accept me; but what lot can I offer a wife?"

"Well, how is it to be mended?"

"For a small sum—five hundred dollars—I could purchase a share in these stables."

"You shall have the money at once as a gift."

"I will promise in return never to trouble you again."

"I make no conditions; only I warn you if you ever offend, if you ever presume—"

"I shall fully merit your displeasure."

"Enough said!" she cut him short. "You know my wishes; see that they are fulfilled. You shall hear from me again. For the present, good-day."

She gathered up the skirts of her dress, turned on her heel, and swept out of the place.

In the gateway she ran up against Serjeant McKay, who had been hovering about the stables from the moment he saw Mrs. Wilders enter the courtyard. He had seen nothing of what passed

inside, and as the interview with Benito occupied some time he had grown uneasy. Fearing something had happened to the general's wife, he was on the point of going in to look after her when he met her coming out.

"You have been following me," said Mrs. Wilders, sharply, and jumping with all a woman's quickness at the right conclusion. "Who set you to spy on me?"

"I beg your pardon, madam; I am not a spy," said the young serjeant, formally saluting.

"Don't bandy words with me. Tell me, I insist!"

"The general was afraid something might happen to you. He thought you might need assistance—perhaps lose your way."

She looked at him very keenly as he said these last words, watching whether there was any covert satire in them.

But McKay's face betrayed nothing.

"How long have you been at my heels? How much have you seen?"

"I followed you from the Convent, madam, to this door. I have seen nothing since you went in here."

"I daresay you are wondering what brought me to such a place. A person in whom I take a great interest, an old woman, lives here. I knew her years ago. Psha! why should I condescend to explain? Look here, Mr. Sergeant"—she took out her purse and produced a sovereign—"take this, and drink my health!"

The sergeant flushed crimson, and drew himself up stiffly, as he said, with another formal salute, "Madam, you mistake!"

"Strange!" she exclaimed, scornfully. "I thought all soldiers liked drink. Well, keep the money; spend it as you like."

"I cannot take it, madam; I am paid by the Queen to do my duty."

"And you will not take a bribe to neglect it? Very fine, truly! General Wilders shall know how well you executed his commands. But there!—I have had enough of this; I wish to return to the yacht. Show me the shortest way back to the water side. Lead on; I will follow you."

Sergeant McKay took a short cut down the steep steps, and soon regained the Waterport. There Mrs. Wilders hailed a native boat, and, without condescending to notice the orderly further, she seated herself in the stern-sheets and was rowed off to the *Arcadia*.

CHAPTER VIII.
A SOUTHERN PEARL

"Mariquita! Ma—ri—kee—tah!"

A woman's voice, shrill and quavering, with an accent of anger that increased each time the summons was repeated.

"What's come of the young vixen?" went on the speaker, addressing her husband, the Tio Pedro, who sat with her behind the counter of a small tobacconist's shop—an ugly beldame, shrank and shrivelled, with grey elf-locks, sunk cheeks, and parchment complexion, looking ninety, yet little more than half

that age. Women ripen early, are soon at their prime, and fade prematurely, under this quickening Southern sun.

The husband was older, yet better preserved, than his wife—a large, stout man, with a fierce face and black, baleful eyes. All cowered before him except La Zandunga, as they called his wife here in Bombardier Lane. He was at her mercy—a Spaniard resident on the Rock by permit granted to his wife—a native of Gibraltar, and liable to be expelled at any time unless she answered for him.

The shop and stock-in-trade were hers, not his, and she ruled him and the whole place.

"Mariquita!" she called again and again, till at length, overflowing with passion, she rushed from behind the counter into the premises at the back of the shop.

She entered a small but well-lighted room, communicating with a few square feet of garden. At the end was a low fence; beyond this the roadway intervening between the garden and the Line wall, or seaward fortifications.

La Zandunga looked hastily round the room. It contained half-a-dozen small low tables, drawn near the window and open door, and at these sat a posse of girls, busy with deft, nimble fingers, making cigarettes and cigars. These workpeople were under the immediate control of Mariquita, the mistress's niece. She was popular with them, evidently, for no one would answer when La Zandunga shrieked out an angry inquiry to each.

No answer was needed. There was Mariquita at the end of the

garden, gossiping across the fence with young Sergeant McKay.

It was quite an accident, of course. The serjeant, returning to his quarters from Waterport, had seen Mariquita within, and made her a signal she could not mistake.

"I knew you would come out," he said, pleasantly, when she appeared, shy and shrinking, yet with a glad light in her eyes.

"*Vaya!* what conceit! I was seeking a flower in the garden," she answered demurely; but her low voice and heightened colour plainly showed that she was ready to come to him whenever he called—to follow him, indeed, all over the world.

She spoke in Spanish, with its high-flown epithets and exaggerated metaphor, a language in which Stanislas McKay, from his natural aptitude and this charming tutorship, had made excellent progress.

"My life, my jewel, my pearl!" he cried.

A pearl, indeed, incomparable and above price for all who could appreciate the charms and graces of bright blooming girlhood.

Mariquita Hidalgo was still in her teens—a woman full grown, but with the frank, innocent face of a child. A slender figure, tall, but well-rounded and beautifully poised, having the free, elastic movement of her Spanish ancestors, whose women are the best walkers in the world. She had, too, the olive complexion as clear and transparent as wax, the full crimson lips, the magnificent eyes, dark and lustrous, the indices of an ardent temperament capable of the deepest passion, the strongest love, or fiercest hate.

A very gracious figure indeed was this splendid specimen of a handsome race, as she stood there coyly talking to the man of her choice.

The contrast was strongly marked between them. She, with raven hair, dark skin, and soft brown eyes, was a perfect Southern brunette: quick, impatient, impulsive, easily moved. He, fresh-coloured, blue-eyed, with flaxen moustache, stalwart in frame, self-possessed, reserved, almost cold and impassive in demeanour, was as excellent a type of a native of the North.

"What brings you this way, Señor don Sargento, at this time of day?" said Mariquita. "Was it to see me? It was unwise, indiscreet; my aunt—"

"I have been on duty at Waterport," replied McKay, with a rather ungallant frankness that made Mariquita pout.

"It is plain I am only second in your thoughts. Duty—always duty. Why did not you come last night to the Alameda when the band played?"

"I could not, star of my soul! I was on guard."

"Did I not say so?—duty again! And to-morrow? It is Sunday; you promised to take me to Europa to see the great cave. Is that, too, impossible?"

McKay shook his head laughingly, and said—

"You must not be angry with me, Mariquita; our visit to Europa must be deferred; I am on duty every day. They have made me orderly—"

"I do not believe you," interrupted the girl, pettishly. "Go

about your business! Do not trouble to come here again, Don Stanislas. Benito will take me where I want to go."

"I will break Benito's head whenever I catch him in your company," said the young serjeant, with so much energy that Mariquita was obliged to laugh. "Come, dearest, be more reasonable. It is not my fault, you know; I am never happy away from your side. But, remember, I am a soldier, and must obey the orders I receive."

"I was wrong to love a soldier," said Mariquita, growing sad and serious all at once. "Some day you will get orders to march—to India, Constantinople, Russia—where can any one say?—and I shall never see you more."

This trouble of parting near at hand had already arisen, and half-spoilt McKay's delight at the prospect of sailing for the East.

"Do you think I shall ever forget you? If I go, it will be to win promotion, fame—a better, higher, more honourable position for you to share."

It was at this moment that La Zandunga interrupted the lovers with her resonant, unpleasant voice.

"My aunt! my aunt! Run, Stanislas! do not let her see you, in Heaven's name!"

The Serjeant disappeared promptly, but the old virago caught a glimpse of his retreating figure.

"With whom were you gossiping there, good-for-nothing?" cried La Zandunga, fiercely. "I seemed to catch the colour of his coat. If I thought it was that son of Satan, the serjeant, who is

ever philandering and following you about—Who was it, I say?"

Mariquita would not answer.

"In with you, shameless, idle daughter of pauper parents, who died in my debt, leaving you on my hands! Is it thus that you repay me my bounty—the home I give you—the bread you eat? Go in, jade, and earn it, or I'll put you into the street."

The girl, bending submissively under this storm of invective and bitter reproach, walked slowly towards the house. Her aunt followed, growling fiercely.

"Cursed red-coat!—common, beggarly soldier! How can you, an Hidalgo of the best blue blood, whose ancestors were settled here before the English robbers stole the fortress—before the English?—before the Moors! You, an Hidalgo, to take up with a base-born hireling cut-throat—"

"No more, aunt!" Mariquita turned on her with flashing eyes. "Call me what you like, you shall not abuse him—my affianced lover—the man to whom I have given my troth!"

"What!" screamed the old crone, now furious with rage. "Do you dare tell me that—to my face? Never, impudent huzzy—never, while I have strength and spirit and power to say you no—shall you wed this hated English mercenary—"

"I will wed no one else."

"That will we see. Is not your hand promised—"

"Not with my consent."

"—Promised, formally, to Benito Villegas—my husband's cousin?"

"I have not consented. Never shall I agree. Benito is a villain. I hate and detest him!"

"Tell him so to his face, evil-tongued slut!—tell him if you dare! He is now in the house. That is why I came to fetch you. I saw him approaching."

"He knows my opinion of him, but if you wish it, aunt, he shall hear it again," said the young girl, undaunted; and she walked on through the workroom, straight into the little shop.

Benito was seated at the counter, talking confidentially, and in a very low voice, with Tio Pedro.

"Are the bales ready, uncle? In two days from now we can run them through like oil in a tube."

"Have you settled the terms?"

"On both sides. Here the inspectors were difficult, but I oiled their palms. On the other side the Custom-house officers are my friends. All is straight and easy. The tobacco must be shipped to-morrow—"

"In the same *falucha*?"

"Yes; for Estepona. Be ready, then, at gunfire—"

He stopped suddenly as Mariquita came in.

"Beautiful as a star!" was his greeting; and in a fulsome, familiar tone he went on—"You are like the sun at noon, my beauty, and burn my heart with your bright eyes."

"Insolent!" retorted Mariquita. "Hold your tongue."

"What! cross-grained and out of humour, sweetest? Come, sit here on my knee and listen, while I whisper some good news."

"Unless you address me more decently, Benito Villegas, I shall not speak to you at all."

"Good news! what then?" put in Tio Pedro, in a coaxing voice.

"My fortune is made. I have found powerful friends here upon the Rock. Within a few days now, through their help, I shall be part owner of la Hermandad Stable; and I can marry when I please."

"Fortunate girl!" said Tio Pedro, turning to Mariquita.

"It does not affect me," replied the girl, with chilling contempt. "Had you the wealth of the Indies, Benito Villegas, and a dukedom to offer, you should never call me yours."

Benito's face grew black as thunder at this unequivocal reply.

"Don't mind her, my son," said the old man. "She has lost her senses: the evil one has bitten her."

"Say, rather, one of those accursed red-coats," interposed his wife, "who has cast a spell over her. I thought I saw him at the garden just now. If I was only certain—"

"Silly girl, beware!" cried Benito, with bitter meaning. "I know him: hateful, despicable hound! He is only trifling with you. He cares nothing for you; you are not to his taste. What! He, a Northern pale-faced boor, choose you, with your dark skin and black hair! Never! I know better. Only to-day I saw him with the woman he prefers—a fair beauty light-complexioned like himself."

He had touched the Southern woman's most sensitive chord. Jealousy flashed from her eyes; a pang of painful doubt shot

through her, though she calmly answered—

"It is not true."

"Ask him yourself. I tell you I saw them together: first near our stables, and then down by Waterport—a splendid woman!"

Waterport! McKay had told her he was returning from that part of the Rock. There was something in it, then. Was he playing her false? No. She would trust him still.

"I do not believe you, Benito. Such suspicions are worthy only of a place in your false, black heart!" and with these words Mariquita rushed away.

CHAPTER IX.
OFF TO THE WARS

Next morning there was much stir and commotion in the South Barracks, where "lay" the Royal Picts—to use a soldier's phrase. The few words let drop by General Wilders, and overheard by Sergeant McKay, had been verified. "The route had come," and the regiment was under orders to join the expeditionary army in the East.

A splendid body, standing eight hundred strong on parade: strong, stalwart fellows, all of them, bronzed and bearded, admirably appointed, perfectly drilled—one of many such magnificent battalions, the flower of the British army, worthily maintaining the reputation of the finest infantry in the world.

Alas! that long years of peace should have rusted

administrative machinery! That so many of these and other brave men should be sacrificed before the year was out for want of food, fuel, and clothing—the commonest supplies.

There seemed little need to improve a military machine so perfect at all its points. But the fastidious eye of Colonel Blythe, who commanded the Royal Picts, saw many blemishes in his regiment, and he was determined to make the most of the time still intervening before embarkation. Parades were perpetual; for the inspection of arms and accoutrements, for developing manual dexterity, and efficiency in drill. Still he was not satisfied.

"We must have a new sergeant-major," said the old martinet to his adjutant in the orderly-room.

The post was vacant for the moment through the promotion of its late holder to be quartermaster.

"Yes, sir; the sooner the better. The difficulty is to choose."

"I have been thinking it over, Smallfield, and have decided to promote Hyde. Send for him."

Colour-sergeant Hyde, erect, self-possessed—a pattern soldier in appearance and propriety—presently marched in and stood respectfully at "attention" before his superior.

"Sergeant Hyde!" said the colonel, abruptly, "I am going to make you a sergeant-major."

"Thank you, sir," said Hyde, saluting; "I had rather not take it."

"Heavens above!" cried the colonel, fiercely. He was of the old school, and used expletives freely. "You must be an idiot!"

"I am sensible, sir, of the honour you would do me, but—"

"Nonsense, man! I insist. I must have you."

"No, sir," said Hyde, firmly, "I must decline the honour."

"Was there ever such an extraordinary fellow? Why, man alive! it will reinstate you—"

"I must beg, sir," said Hyde, hastily interrupting, and looking with intention towards the adjutant.

"Yes, yes! I understand," said the colonel. "Leave us, Mr. Smallfield; I wish to speak to Sergeant Hyde alone."

"You have my secret, Colonel Blythe," said Hyde, when the adjutant had left the room, "but I have your promise."

"I was near forgetting it, I confess; but I was so upset, so put out, at your cursed obstinacy. Why will you persist in keeping in the background? Accept this promotion, and you shall have a commission before the year is out."

"I do not want a commission; I am perfectly happy as I am."

"Was there ever such a pig-headed fellow? Come, Hyde, be persuaded." The colonel got up from his seat and walked round to where the sergeant stood, still erect and motionless. "Come, Rupert, old comrade, old friend," and he put his hand affectionately on the sergeant's shoulder.

The muscles of the sergeant's face worked visibly.

"It's no use, Blythe; I am dead to the world. I have no desire to rise."

"But it's so aggravating; it puts me in such a hole," said the colonel, striding up and down the office. "You're just the man we

want—superior in every way. You would hold your own so well with the other non-commissioned officers. I do wish—Where am I to find another?"

"I can tell you, if you will listen to my advice."

"Yes? Speak out."

"Young McKay; he would make an excellent sergeant-major."

"I know him—a smart, sensible, intelligent young fellow. But has he ballast—education?"

"He is better born than you or me, colonel. A lad of excellent parts and first-rate education. Bring him on, and he will do you and the regiment credit yet."

The colonel sat down again at his desk, and seemed lost in thought.

"I must ask Smallfield. Call in the adjutant, will you?" he added, in a voice that implied their conventional relations as superior officer and sergeant were resumed.

Half an hour later McKay was standing in Hyde's place, receiving the same offer, but accepting, although diffidently.

"I am not fit for the post, sir," he protested.

"That's my affair. I have selected you for reasons of my own, and the responsibility is mine."

"I will try my best, sir; that is all I can say."

"It's quite enough. Do your best, and you will satisfy me."

"I can't think why he chose me," confided Stanislas to his friend Hyde, later on, in the sergeants' mess.

"Can't you?" replied his friend, drily. "It's a case of hidden

merit receiving its right reward."

"I have never thought that the colonel noticed me, or distinguished me from any of the other sergeants," said Stanislas.

"Probably your good qualities were pointed out to him," replied Hyde, still in the same tone. "Or your fine friends and relations have used their influence."

"It is little likely; and, as I tell you, I don't understand it in the least."

"Leave it so. No doubt you will find out some day. In the meantime do justice to your recommendation, whoever gave it. You have got your foot on the ladder now, but no one can help you to climb; that must depend upon your own exertions."

"Yes, but you can help me, Hyde, with your advice, encouragement, support. I am very young to be put up so high, and over men of standing and experience like yourself."

"You will have no more loyal subordinate than me, Sergeant-major McKay. Come to me whenever you are in trouble or doubt. I will do all I can, you may depend. I like you, boy, and that's enough said."

The old sergeant seized McKay's hand, shook it warmly, and then abruptly quitted the room.

Stanislas was eager to tell this pleasing news of his promotion to Mariquita; but she was the last person to hear it, notwithstanding. McKay entered at once upon his new duties, and they kept him close from morning till night. A good sergeant-major allows himself no leisure. He is the first on parade, the last

to leave it. He is perpetually on the move; now inspecting guards and pickets, now superintending drills, while all day long he has his eye upon the conduct of the non-commissioned officers, and the demeanour and dress of the private men.

There was no time to hang about the tobacconist's shop in Bombardier Lane, waiting furtively for a chance of seeing Mariquita alone. They kept their eye upon her, too; and when at last he tore himself away from his new and absorbing duties he paid two or three visits to the place before he could speak to her.

Mariquita received him coldly—distantly.

They were standing, as usual, on each side of the low fence at the end of the garden.

"What's wrong, little star? How have I offended you?"

"I wonder that you trouble to come here at all, Don Stanislas. It's more than a week since I you."

"I have been so busy. My new duties: they have made me, you know—"

"Throw that bone to some other dog," interrupted Mariquita, abruptly. "I am to be no longer deceived by your pretended duties. I know the truth: you prefer some other girl."

"Mariquita!" protested McKay.

"I have heard all. Do not try to deny it. She is tall and fair; one of your compatriots. You were seen together."

"Where, pray? Who has told you this nonsense?"

"At Waterport. Benito saw you."

McKay laughed merrily.

"I see it all. Why, you foolish, jealous Mariquita, that was my general's wife—a great lady. I was attending and following her about like a lackey. I would not dare to lift my eyes to her even if I wished, which is certainly not the case."

Mariquita was beginning to relent. Her big eyes filled with tear, and she said in a broken voice, as though this quarrel with her lover had pained her greatly—

"Oh, oily-tongued! if only I could believe you!"

"Why, of course it's true. Surely you would not let that villain Benito make mischief between us? But, there; time is too precious to waste in silly squabbles. I can't stay long; I can't tell when I shall come again."

"Is your love beginning to cool, Stanislas? If so, we had better part before—"

"Listen, dearest," interrupted McKay; "I have good news for you," and he told her of his unexpected promotion, and of the excellent prospects it held forth.

"I am nearly certain to win a commission before very long. Now that we are going to the war—"

"The war!" Mariquita's face turned ghastly white; she put her hand upon her heart, and was on the point of falling to the ground when McKay vaulted lightly over the fence and saved her by putting his arm round her waist.

"Idiot that I was to blurt it out like that, after thinking all the week how best to break the news! Mariquita! Mariquita! speak to me, I implore you!"

But the poor child was too much overcome to reply, and he led her, dazed and half-fainting, to a little seat near the house, where, with soft caresses and endearing words, he sought to restore her to herself.

"The war!" she said, at length. "It has come, then, the terrible news that I have so dreaded. We are to part, and I shall never, never see you again."

"What nonsense, Mariquita! Be brave! Remember you are to be a soldier's wife. Be brave, I say."

"They will kill you! Oh! if they only dared, I would be revenged!"

"Bravo, my pet! that is the proper spirit. You would fight the Russians, wouldn't you?"

"I would do anything, Stanislas, to help you, to shield you from harm. Why can't I go with you? Who knows! I might save you. I, a weak, helpless girl, would be strong if you were in danger. I am ready, Stanislas, to sacrifice my life for yours."

Greatly touched by the deep devotion displayed by these sweet words, McKay bent his head and kissed her on the lips.

But at this moment the tender scene was abruptly ended by the shrill, strident tones of La Zandunga's voice.

"So I have caught you, shameless girl, philandering again with this rascally red-coat. May he die in a dog-kennel! Here, in my very house! But, I promise you, it is for the last time. *Hola!* Benito! Pedro! help!" and, screaming wildly, the old crone tore Mariquita from McKay's side and dragged her into the house.

The young sergeant, eager to protect his love from ill-usage, would have followed, but he was confronted by Benito, who now stood in the doorway, black and menacing, with a great two-edged Albacete knife in his hand.

"Stand back, miscreant, hated Englishman, or I will stab you to the heart."

Nothing daunted by the threat, McKay advanced boldly on Benito; with one hand he caught his would-be assailant by the throat; with the other the wrist that was lifted to strike. A few seconds more, and Benito had measured his length on the ground, while his murderous weapon had passed into the possession of McKay.

Having thus disposed of one opponent, McKay met a second, in the person of Tio Pedro, who, slower in his movements, had also come out in answer to his wife's appeal.

"Who are you that dares to intrude here?" asked Pedro, roughly. "I will complain to the town major, and have you punished for this."

"Look to yourself, rather!" replied McKay, hotly. "I stand too high to fear your threats. But you, thief and smuggler, I will bring the police upon you and your accomplice, who has just tried to murder me with his knife."

Tio Pedro turned ghastly pale at the sergeant-major's words. He had evidently no wish for a domiciliary visit, and would have been glad to be well rid of McKay.

"Let him be! Let him be!" he said, attempting to pacify

Benito, who, smarting from his recent overthrow, seemed ready to renew the struggle. "Let him be! It is all a mistake. The gentleman has explained his business here, and nothing more need be said."

"Nothing more!" hissed Benito, between his teeth. "Not when he has insulted me—struck me! Nothing more! We shall have to settle accounts together, he and I. Look to yourself Señor Englishman. There is no bond that does not some day run out; no debt that is never paid."

McKay disdained to notice these threats, and, after waiting a little longer in the hope of again seeing Mariquita, he left the house.

It was his misfortune, however, not to get speech with her again before his departure. The few short days intervening before embarkation were full of anxiety for him, and incessant, almost wearisome, activity. He had made himself one moment of leisure, and visited Bombardier Lane, but without result. Mariquita was invisible, and McKay was compelled to abandon all hope of bidding his dear one good-bye.

But he was not denied one last look at the girl of his heart. As the regiment, headed by all the bands of the garrison, marched gaily down to the New Mole, where the transport-ship awaited it, an excited throng of spectators lined the way. Colonel Blythe headed his regiment, of course, and close behind him, according to regulation, marched the young sergeant-major, in brave apparel, holding his head high, proudly conscious of his

honourable position. The colonel and the sergeant-major were the first men down the New Mole stairs; and as they passed McKay heard his name uttered with a half-scream.

He looked round hastily, and there saw Mariquita, with white, scared face and streaming eyes.

What could he do? It was his duty to march on unconscious, insensible to emotion. But this was more than mortal man could do. He paused, lingering irresolutely, when the colonel noticed his agitation, and quickly guessed the exact state of the case.

"'The girl I left behind me,' eh, sergeant-major? Well, fall out for a minute or two, if you like"—and, with this kindly and considerate permission, McKay took Mariquita aside to make his last *adieux*.

"*Adios! vida mia*" [good-bye, my life], he was saying, when the poor girl almost fainted in his arms.

He looked round, greatly perplexed, and happily his eye fell upon Sergeant Hyde.

"Here, Hyde," he said, "take charge of this dear girl."

"What! sergeant-major, have you been caught in the toils of one of these bright-eyed damsels? It is well we have got the route. They are dangerous cattle, these women; and, if you let them, will hang like a mill-stone round a soldier's neck."

"Pshaw! man, don't moralise. This girl is my heart's choice. Please Heaven I may return to console her for present sorrow. But I can't wait. Help me: I can trust you. See Mariquita safely back to her home, and then join us on board."

"I shall be taken up as a deserter."

"Nonsense! I will see to that with the adjutant. We do not sail for two hours at least; you will have plenty of time."

Sergeant Hyde, although unwillingly, accepted the trust, and thus met Mariquita for the first time.

CHAPTER X.
A GENERAL ACTION

A long low line of coast trending along north and south as far as the eye could reach; nearest at hand a strip of beach, smooth shingle cast up by the surf of westerly gales; next, a swelling upland, dotted with grazing cattle, snug homesteads, and stacks of hay and corn; beyond, a range of low hills, steep-faced and reddish-hued.

The Crimea! The land of promise; the great goal to which the thoughts of every man in two vast hosts had been turned for many months past. On the furze-clad common of Chobham camp, on the long voyage out, at Gallipoli, while eating out their hearts at irritating inaction; on the sweltering, malarious Bulgarian plains, fever-stricken and cholera-cursed; at Varna, waiting impatiently, almost hopelessly, for orders to sail, twenty thousand British soldiers of all ranks had longed to look upon this Crimean shore. It was here, so ran the common rumour, that the chief power of the mighty Czar was concentrated; here stood Sebastopol, the famous fortress, the great stronghold and arsenal of Southern

Russia; here, at length, the opposing forces would join issue, and the allies, after months of tedious expectation, would find themselves face to face with their foe.

No wonder, then, that hearts beat high as our men gazed eagerly upon the Crimea. The prospect southward was still more calculated to stir emotion. The whole surface of that Eastern sea was covered with the navies of the Western Powers. The long array stretched north and south for many a mile; it extended westward, far back to the distant horizon, and beyond: a countless forest of masts, a jumble of sails and smoke-stacks, a crowd of fighting-ships and transports, three-deckers, frigates, great troopers, ocean steamers, full-rigged ships—an Armada such as the world had never seen before. A grand display of naval power, a magnificent expedition marshalled with perfect precision, moving by day in well-kept parallel lines; at night, motionless, and studding the sea with a "second heaven of stars."

Day dawned propitious on the morning of the landing: a bright, and soon fierce, sun rose on a cloudless sky. At a given signal the boats were lowered—a nearly countless flotilla; the troops went overboard silently and with admirable despatch, and all again, by signal, started in one long perfect line for the shore. Within an hour the boats were beached, the troops sprang eagerly to land, and the invasion was completed without accident, and unopposed.

The Royal Picts, coming straight from Gibraltar, had joined the expedition at Varna without disembarking. The regiment

had thus been long on ship-board, but it had lost none of its smartness, and formed up on the beach with as much precision as on the South Barracks parade. It fell into its place at once, upon the right of General Wilders's brigade, and that gallant officer was not long in welcoming it to his command.

Everyone was in the highest health and spirits, overflowing with excitement and enthusiasm. At the appearance of their general, the men, greatly to his annoyance, set up a wild, irregular cheer.

"Silence, men, silence! It is most unsoldierlike. Keep your shouting till you charge. Here, Colonel Blythe, we will get rid of a little of this superfluous energy. Advance, in skirmishing order, to the plateau, and hold it. There are Cossacks about, and the landing is not yet completed. But do not advance beyond the plateau. You understand?"

The regiment promptly executed the manœuvre indicated, and gained the rising ground. The view thence inland was more extended, and at no great distance a road crossed, along which was seen a long line of native carts, toiling painfully, and escorted by a few of the enemy's horse.

"We must have those carts." The speaker was a staff-officer, the quartermaster-general, an eagle-eyed, decisive-speaking, short, slender man, who was riding a splendid charger, which he sat to perfection. "Colonel Blythe! send forward your right company at the double, and capture them."

"My brigadier ordered me not to advance," replied the old

colonel, rather stolidly.

"Do as I tell you; I will take the responsibility. But look sharp!"

Already, no doubt under orders from the escort, the drivers were unharnessing their teams, with the idea of making off with the cattle. The skirmishers of the Royal Picts advanced quickly within range, and opened fire—the first shots these upon Russian soil—and some of them took effect. The carts were abandoned, and speedily changed masters.

"We shall want those carts," said old Hyde, abruptly, to his friend the sergeant-major. They had watched this little episode together.

"Yes, I suppose they will come in useful."

"I should think so. Are you aware that this fine force of ours is quite without transport? At least, I have seen none. Do you know what that means?"

"That we shall have to be our own beasts of burden," said McKay, laughing, as he touched his havresack. It was comfortably lined with biscuit and cold salt pork—three days' rations, and the only food that he or his comrades were likely to get for some time.

"I'm not afraid of roughing it," said the old soldier. "I have done that often enough. We have got our greatcoats and blankets, and I daresay we shan't hurt; but I have seen something of campaigning, and I tell you honestly I don't like the way in which we have started on this job."

"What an inveterate old grumbler you are, Hyde! Besides,

what right have you to criticise the general and his plans?"

"We have entered into this business a great deal too lightly, I am quite convinced of that," said Hyde, positively. "There has been no sufficient preparation."

"Nonsense, man! They have been months getting the expedition ready."

"And still it is wanting in the most necessary things. It has to trust to luck for its transport," and the old sergeant pointed with his thumb to the captured carts. "We may, perhaps, get as many more; but, even then, there won't be enough to supply us with food if we go much further inland; we may never see our knapsacks again, or our tents."

"We shan't want them; it won't do us any harm to sleep in the open. Napoleon always said that the bivouac was the finest training for troops."

"You will be glad enough of shelter, sergeant-major, before to-night's out, mark my words! The French are better off than we are; they have got everything to their hands—their shelter-tents, knapsacks, and all. They understand campaigning; I think we have forgotten the art."

"As if we have anything to learn from the French!" said the self-satisfied young Briton, by way of ending the conversation.

But Sergeant Hyde was right, so far as the need for shelter was concerned. As evening closed in, heavy clouds came up from the sea, and it rained in torrents all night.

A miserable night it was! The whole army lay exposed to the

fury of the elements on the bleak hillside, drenched to the skin, in pools and watercourses, under saturated blankets, without fuel, or the chance of lighting a bivouac fire. It was the same for all; the generals of division, high staff-officers, colonels, captains, and private men. The first night on Crimean soil was no bad precursor of the dreadful winter still to come.

Next day the prospect brightened a little. The sun came out and dried damp clothes; tents were landed, only to be re-embarked when the army commenced its march. This was on the third day after disembarkation, when, with all the pomp and circumstance of a parade movement, the allied generals advanced southward along the coast. They were in search of an enemy which had shown a strange reluctance to come to blows, and had already missed a splendid opportunity of interfering with the landing.

The place of honour in the order of march was assigned to the English, who were on the left, with that flank unprotected and "in the air"; on their right marched the French; on whose right, again, the Turks; then came the sea. Moving parallel with the land-forces, the allied fleets held undisputed dominion of the waters. A competent critic could detect no brilliant strategy in the operations so far; no astute, carefully calculated plan directed the march. One simple and primitive idea possessed the minds of the allied commanders, and that was to come to close quarters, and fight the Russians wherever they could be found.

There could be only one termination to such a military

policy as this when every hour lessened the distance between the opposing forces. At the end of the first day's march, most toilsome and trying to troops still harassed by fell disease, it was plain that the enemy were close at hand. Large bodies of their cavalry hung black and menacing along our front—the advance guards these of a large force in position behind. Any moment might bring on a collision. It was nearly precipitated, and prematurely, by the action of our horse—a small handful of cavalry, led by a fiery impatient soldier, eager, like all under his command, to cross swords with the enemy.

A couple of English cavalry regiments had been pushed forward to reconnoitre the strength of the Russians. The horsemen rode out in gallant style, but were checked by artillery fire; a British battery galloped up and replied. Presently the round-shot bounded like cricket balls, but at murderous pace, across the plain. More cavalry went forward on our side, and two whole infantry divisions, in one of which was the Royal Picts, followed in support.

Surely a battle was close at hand. But nothing came of this demonstration. Why, was not quite clear, till Hugo Wilders, who was a captain in the Royal Lancers, came galloping by, and exchanged a few hasty words with the general, his cousin Bill.

"What's up, Hugo?" The general was riding just in front of the Royal Picts, and his words were heard by many of the regiment.

"Just fancy! we were on the point of having a brush with the Cossacks, when Lord Raglan came up and spoiled the fun."

"Do you know why?"

"Yes; I heard him talking to our general—I am galloping, you know, for Lord Cardigan, who was mad to be at them, I can tell you, but he wasn't allowed."

"They were far too strong for you; I could see that myself."

"That's what Lord Raglan said. As if any one of us was not good enough for twenty Russians! But he was particularly anxious, so I heard him say, not to be drawn into an action to-day."

"No doubt he was right," replied old Wilders. "Only it can't be put off much longer. Unless I am greatly mistaken, to-morrow we shall be at it hammer and tongs."

"I hope I shall be somewhere near!" cried Hugo, gaily. "But where are the Royal Picts? Oh! here! I want to give Anastasius good-day."

He found his younger brother was carrying the regimental colours, and the two young fellows exchanged pleasant greetings. It was quite a little family party, for just behind, in the centre of the line, stood Sergeant-major McKay, the unacknowledged cousin. How many of these four Wilders would be alive next night?

No doubt a battle was imminent. It was more than possible that there would be a night attack, so both armies bivouacked in order of battle, ready to stand up in their places and fight at the first alarm.

But the night passed uneventfully. At daybreak the march was

resumed, and the day was still young when the allies came upon what seemed a position of immense strength, occupied in force by the Russian troops.

It was a broad barrier of hills, at right angles with the coast, lying straight athwart our line of march. The hills, highest and steepest near the water's edge, were still difficult in the centre, where the great high road to Sebastopol pierced the position by a deep defile; beyond the road, slopes more gentle ended on the outer flank in the tall buttresslike Kourgané Hill. All along the front ran a rapid river, the Alma, in a deep channel. Villages nestled on its banks—one near the sea, one midway, one on the extreme right; and all about the low ground rich vegetation flourished, in garden, vineyard, and copse.

These were the heights of the Alma—historic ground, hallowed by many memories of grim contest, vain prowess, glorious deeds, fell carnage, and hideous death.

"We are in for it now, my boy," whispered Sergeant Hyde, who was one of the colour-party, and stood in the centre of the column, near McKay.

"What is it?" asked the young sergeant-major eagerly. "A fight?"

"More than that—a general action. In another hour or two we shall be engaged hotly along the whole line. Some of us will lose the number of our mess before the day is done."

The Royal Picts formed part of the second division, under the command of Sir de Lacy Evans, a fine old soldier, who had seen

service for half a century. This division was on the right of the English army. On the left of Sir de Lacy Evans was the Light Division, beyond that the Highlanders and Guards. The Third Division was in reserve behind the Second, the Fourth far in the rear, still near the sea-shore.

The march had hitherto been in columns, a disposition that lent itself readily to deployment into line—the traditional formation, peculiar to the British arms, and the inevitable prelude to an attack.

The order now given to form line was, therefore, promptly recognised as the signal for the approaching struggle. It was rendered the more necessary by the galling fire opened upon our troops by the enemy's batteries, which crowned every point of vantage on the hills in front.

Grandly, and with admirable precision, the three leading divisions of the British army formed themselves into the historic "Thin Red Line," renowned in the annals of European warfare, from Blenheim to Waterloo.

This beautiful line, so slender, yet so imposing in its simple, unsupported strength, was more than two miles long, and faced the right half of the Russian position. As the divisions stood, the Guards and Highlanders confronted the Kourgané Hill, with its greater and lesser redoubts, armed with heavy guns and held by dense columns of the enemy. Next them was the Light Division, facing the vineyards and hamlets to the left of the great high road; before them were other earth-works, manned by a no less

formidable garrison and artillery. The Second Division lay across the high road, opposite the village of Bourliouk, high above which was an eighteen-gun battery and great masses of Russian troops.

General Wilders's brigade was on the extreme right of the British front; its right regiment was the Royal Picts, the very centre this of the battle-field, midway between the sea and the far left; and here the allied generals had their last meeting before the combat commenced.

A single figure, sitting straight and soldier-like in his saddle, with white hair blanched in the service of his country—a service fraught with the perils and penalties of war, as the empty sleeve bore witness—this single figure rode a little in advance of the British staff. It was Fitzroy Somerset, now Lord Raglan, the close comrade and trusted friend of the Iron Duke, by whose side he had ridden in every action in Spain. His face was passive and serene. Contentment shone in every feature. His martial spirit was stirred by the sights and sounds of battle, once so familiar to him, but now for forty years unheard. But the calm demeanour, the quiet voice, the steady, unflinching gaze, all indicating a noble unconsciousness of danger, were those of the chance rider in Rotten Row, not of a great commander carrying his own life and that of thousands in his hand.

The man who came to meet him was a soldier too, but of a different type, cast in another mould—a Frenchman, emotional, easily excited, quick in gesture, rapid-speaking, with a restless,

fiery eye. St. Arnaud, too, had long tried the fortunes of war. His was an intrepid, eager spirit, but he was torn and convulsed with the tortures of a mortal sickness, and at times, even at this triumphant hour, his face was drawn and pale with inward agony.

They were near enough, these supreme chiefs, for their conversation, or parts of it, to be heard around. But they spoke in French, and few but McKay understood the purport of all they said.

"I am ready to advance at any moment," said Lord Raglan. "I am only waiting for the development of your attack."

"Bosquet started an hour ago, but he has a tremendous climb up those cliffs."

It was General Bosquet's business to assault the left of the Russian position, strong in natural obstacles, and almost inaccessible to troops.

At this moment an aide-de-camp ventured to ride forward to his general's side, and said—

"Do you hear that firing, my lord? I think the French on the right are warmly engaged."

"Are they?" replied Lord Raglan, doubtfully; "I can't catch any return fire."

"In any case," observed St. Arnaud, quickly, "it is time to lend him a hand. The Prince Napoleon and Canrobert shall now advance."

"The sooner the better," said Lord Raglan, simply; "I must wait till their attack is developed before I can move."

"You shall not wait long, my friend."

The next instant the French mounted messengers were scouring the plain. St. Arnaud paused a moment, then, gathering up his reins, he put spurs to his horse and galloped away, saluted as he went by a loud and hearty cheer.

The sound must have gladdened the heart of the gallant Frenchman, for he promptly reined in his horse, and, rising in his stirrups, responded with a loud "Hurrah for Old England!" given in ringing tones, and in excellent English. Then, still followed by cheers, he went on his way.

It is but poor fun waiting while others begin a great game—poor fun and dangerous too, as the English line presently realised, while they looked impatiently for the order to advance. The Russian gunners had got their range, and were already plying them with shot and shell. At the first gun, fired evidently at the British staff, Lord Raglan, as cool and self-possessed as ever, turned to General Wilders, and said, briefly—

"Your men had better lie down."

"May I not cast loose cartridges first, my lord?" said the old soldier, anxious to prepare for the serious business of the day.

"With all my heart! But be quick; they must not stand up here to be shot at for nothing." Then Lord Raglan himself, erect and fearless, resumed his observation of the advancing French columns.

"Dear, dear! how slow they are!" cried the eager voice of Airey, the quartermaster-general.

"Look! they are checked!" said another; "they can't stomach the climb."

"They have a tough job before them," said a third. "It will try them hard."

That the French were in difficulties was evident, for now an aide-de-camp came galloping from Bosquet with the grave news that the division was in danger. He was followed by another prominent person on St. Arnaud's staff, bringing an earnest entreaty that the English should not delay their advance. A fierce storm of iron hail, moreover, made inaction more and more intolerable.

The time was come! Lord Raglan turned and spoke five words to General Airey. The next minute staff-officers were galloping to each division with the glad tidings: "The line will advance!"

All along it men rose from the ground with a resolute air, fell into their ranks, and then the "Thin Red Line," having a front of two miles and a depth of two men, marched grandly to the fight.

It is with the doings of the Second Division, or more exactly with Wilders's brigade of that body, that we are now principally concerned.

The task before it was arduous and full of danger, demanding devoted courage and unflinching hearts.

At the moment of the advance the village immediately in front of them burst into flames—a fierce conflagration, lighted by the retreating foe. The dense columns of smoke hid the batteries beyond, and magnified the dangers of attack; the fierce fire

narrowed the path of progress and squeezed in the advancing line. On the left, the Light Division, moving forward with equal determination, still further limited the ground for action; and, thus straitened and compressed, the division marched upon a small front swept by a converging fire. So cruelly hampered was the Second Division, so stinted in breathing space, that a portion of General Wilders's command was shut out of the advancing line, and circled round the right of the burning village.

In this way the Royal Picts got divided; part went with the right of the brigade, still under the personal direction of its brigadier; part stuck to the main body, and followed on with the general tide of advance. With the latter went the headquarters of the regiment; its colonel, colours, and sergeant-major.

They were travelling into the very jaws of death, as it seemed. Progress was slow, and hindered by many vexatious obstacles—low walls and brushwood, ruined cottages, and many dangerous pitfalls on the vine-clad slopes—obstacles that forbade all speed, yet gave no cover from the pitiless fire that searched every corner, and mowed men down like grass.

Casualties were terribly numerous; yet still the line, undaunted but with sadly decreasing numbers, kept on its perilous way. Presently, having won through the broken ground, a new barrier interposed. They came upon the rapid river, rushing between steep banks, and deep enough to drown all who risked the fords. But there was no pause or hesitation; the men plunged bravely into the water, and, battling with the torrent, crossed, not without

difficulty and serious loss.

Colonel Blythe, with the Royal Picts, was one of the first men over. He rode a snow-white charger, which he put bravely at the steep bank, and clambered up with the coolness of one who rode well to hounds. He gained the top, and served as a rallying-point for the shattered remnant of his regiment, which there quickly re-formed with as much coolness and fastidious nicety as on a barrack-square at home.

They were under shelter here, and, pausing to recover breath, could look round and watch how the fight fared towards the left.

At this moment the Light Division had effected a lodgment in the great redoubt; but, even while they gazed, the Russian reserves were forcing back the too-presumptuous few. Behind, a portion of the brigade of Guards was advancing to reinforce the wavering line and renew the attack. Beyond, further on the left, in an échelon, advanced three lines, one behind the other, the Highlanders and their stout leader, Sir Colin Campbell.

It was only a passing glimpse, however, that our friends obtained. Their leader knew that the fortunes of the day were still in doubt, and that every man must throw his weight into the scale if victory was to be assured.

The line was again ordered to advance. The slope was steeper now; they were scaling, really, the heights themselves. Just above them yawned the mouths of the heavy guns that had been dealing such havoc while they were painfully threading the intricacies of the low ground.

"We must drive them out of that!" shouted old Blythe. "That battery has been playing the mischief with us all along. Now, lads, shoulder to shoulder; reserve your fire till we are at close quarters, then give them the cold steel!"

The Royal Picts set up a ringing cheer in cordial response to their chieftain's call. The cheer passed quickly along the line, and all again pressed forward in hot haste, with set teeth, and bayonets at the charge.

A withering fire of small arms met the Royal Picts as they approached the battery; it was followed by the deafening roar of artillery; and the murderous fire of the guns, great and small, nearly annihilated the gallant band. Small wonder, then, that the survivors halted irresolute, half disposed to turn back. Colonel Blythe was down. They missed his encouraging voice; his noble figure was no more visible, while his fine old white charger, riderless, his flanks streaming with gore, was galloping madly down the hill. Many more officers were laid low by this murderous discharge; amongst others, Anastasius Wilders had fallen, severely wounded, and his blood had spurted out in a great pool upon the colour he carried.

All this happened in less time than it takes to describe. It was one of those moments of dire emergency, of great opportunity—suddenly arising, gone as swiftly beyond recall, unless snatched up and dealt with by a prompt, audacious spirit.

Young McKay saw it with the unerring instinct of a true soldier. He acted instantaneously, and with bold decision.

Stooping over his prostrate cousin, who lay entangled amidst the folds of the now crimson silk, he gently detached the colour, and, raising it aloft, cried—

"Come on, Royal Picts!"

The men knew his voice, and, weakened, though not dispirited, they gallantly responded to the appeal. Once more the line pressed forward. The short space between them and the earthwork was quickly traversed. Before the artillery could deal out a second salvo, the Royal Picts were over the parapet and in the thick of the Russians, bayoneting them as they stood at their guns.

The battery was won.

"Well done, sergeant-major—right well done! I saw it all. It shan't be forgotten if we two come out of this alive!"

The speaker was Colonel Blythe, who, happily, although dismounted by the shot that wounded his horse, had so far escaped unhurt.

"But this is no time for compliments; we must look to ourselves. The enemy is still in great strength. They are bringing up the reserves."

Above the battery a second line of columns loomed large and menacing. Was this gallant handful of Englishmen, which had so courageously gained a footing in the enemy's works, to bear the brunt of a fresh conflict with a new and perfectly fresh foe? The situation was critical. To advance would be madness; retreat was not to be thought of; yet it might cost them their lives to maintain

the ground they held.

While they paused in anxious debate, there came sounds of firing from their right, aimed evidently at the Russians in front of them, for the shot and shell ploughed through the ranks of the foe.

"What guns can those be?" asked Colonel Blythe. "They are catching them nicely in flank."

"French, sir, I expect," replied McKay. "That is the side of their attack."

"Those are English guns, I feel sure. I know the crack they make."

He was right; the guns belonged to Turner's battery, brought up at the most opportune juncture by Lord Raglan's express commands. To understand their appearance, and the important part they played in deciding the battle on this portion of the field, we must follow the other wing of the Royal Picts, which, when separated from the rest of the brigade, passed round the right flank of the village.

Hyde was with this detachment, and, as he afterwards told McKay, he saw Lord Raglan and his staff ride forward, alone and unprotected, across the river, straight into the enemy's position. In the river two of his staff were shot down, and the commander-in-chief promptly realised the meaning of this fire.

"Ah!" he cried. "If they can enfilade us here, we can certainly enfilade them on the rising ground above. Bring up some guns!"

It was not easy travelling for artillery, but Turner was a man

whom no difficulties dismayed. Within an hour a couple of his guns had been dragged up the steep gradient, were unlimbered, and served by the officers themselves.

It was the fire of this artillery that relieved the Royal Picts of their most serious apprehensions. It tided them over the last critical phase of the hotly-contested action, and completed the discomfiture of the enemy on this side.

Matters had gone no less prosperously on the left. The renewed attack of the Light Division, supported by the Guards, had ended in the capture of the great redoubt; while Sir Colin Campbell, a veteran warrior, at the head of his "bare-legged savages," as they were christened by their affrighted foe, had made himself master of the Kourgané Hill.

CHAPTER XI.
AFTER THE BATTLE

The Battle of the Alma was won! Three short hours had sufficed to finish it, and by four o'clock the enemy was in full retreat. It was a flight rather than a retreat—a headlong, ignominious stampede, in which the fugitives cast aside their arms, accoutrements, knapsacks, everything that could hinder them as they ran. Pursuit, if promptly and vigorously carried out, would assuredly have cost them dear. But the allies were short of cavalry; the British, greatly weakened by their losses in this hard-fought field, could spare no fresh troops to follow; the

French, although they had scarcely suffered, and had a large force available, would do nothing more; St. Arnaud declared pursuit impossible, and this, the first fatal error in the campaign, allowed the beaten general to draw off his shattered battalions.

But, if the allied leaders rejected the more abiding and substantial fruits of victory, they did not disdain the intoxicating but empty glories of an ovation from their troops. The generals were everywhere received with loud acclaims.

Deafening cheers greeted Lord Raglan as he rode slowly down the line. The cry was taken up by battalion after battalion, and went echoing along—the splendid, hearty applause of men who were glorifying their own achievements as well.

There was joy on the face of every man who had come out of the fight unscathed—the keen satisfaction of success, gloriously but hardly earned. Warm greetings were interchanged by all who met and talked together. Thus Lord Raglan and Sir Colin Campbell, both Peninsular veterans, shook hands in memory of comradeship on earlier fields. Few indeed had thus fought together before; but none were less cordial in their expressions of thankfulness and cordial good-will. They told each other of their adventures in the day—its episodes, perils, narrow, hair-breadth escapes! they inquired eagerly for friends; and then, as they learnt gradually the whole terrible truth, the awful price at which victory had been secured, moments that had been radiant grew overcast, and short-lived gladness fled.

"Next to a battle lost, nothing is so dreadful as a battle won,"

said Wellington, at the end, too, of his most triumphant day. The slaughter is a sad set-off against the glory; groans of anguish are the converse of exulting cheers. The field of conquest was stained with the life's blood of thousands. The dead lay all around; some on their backs, calmly sleeping as though death had inflicted no pangs; the bodies of others were writhed and twisted with the excruciating agony of their last hour. The wounded in every stage of suffering strewed the ground, mutilated by round shot and shell, shattered by grape, cut and slashed and stabbed by bayonet and sword.

Their cries, the loud shriek of acute pain, the long-drawn moan of the dying, the piercing appeal of those conscious, but unable to move, filled every echo, and one of the first and most pressing duties for all who could be spared was to afford help and succour.

Now the incompleteness of the subsidiary services of the English army became more strikingly apparent. It possessed no carefully organised, well-appointed ambulance trains, no minutely perfect field-hospitals, easily set up and ready to work at a moment's notice; medicines were wanting; there was little or no chloroform; the only surgical instruments were those the surgeons carried, while these indispensable assistants were by no means too numerous, and already worked off their legs.

Parties were organised by every regiment, with stretchers and water-bottles, to go over the field, to carry back the wounded to the coast, and afford what help they could. The Royal Picts, like

the rest, hasten to send assistance to their stricken comrades. The bandsmen, who had taken no part in the action, were detailed for the duty, and the sergeant-major, at his own earnest request, was put in charge.

As they were on the point of marching off, General Wilders rode up. He had been separated, it will be remembered, from part of his brigade, and had still but a vague idea of how it had fared in the fight.

"I saw nothing of you, colonel, during the action. Worse luck I went with the wrong lot, on the right of the village."

"It is well some of the regiment escaped what we went through," said Colonel Blythe, sadly. "My left wing was nearly cut to pieces. I was never under such a fire."

"How many have you lost, do you suppose?"

"We are now mustering the regiment: a sorrowful business enough. Seven officers are missing."

"What are their names?"

"Popham, Smart, Drybergh, Arrowsmith—"

"Anastasius—my young cousin—is he safe?" hastily interrupted the general.

Colonel Blythe shook his head.

"I missed him half way up the hill; he was carrying the regimental colour, but when we got into the battery it was in the sergeant-major's hands. I wish to bring his—the sergeant-major's—conduct especially before your notice, general."

"The sergeant-major's? Very good. But if he took the colour

he must know what happened to Anastasius. Call him, will you?"

Sergeant-major McKay came up and saluted.

"Mr. Wilders, sir," he told the general, "was wounded as we were breasting the slope."

"You saw him go down? Where was he hit?"

"I hadn't time to wait, sir."

"I should think not," interrupted Colonel Blythe; "but for him, general, we should never have carried the battery. I was dismounted, the men were checked, and just at the right moment the sergeant-major led them on."

"Bravely done, my lad! You shall hear of this again; I will make a special report to the commander of the forces. But there, that will keep. We must see after this poor boy."

"I was just sending off a party for the purpose," said the colonel.

"That's right. You have some idea, I suppose"—this was to McKay—"of the place where Mr. Wilders fell?"

"Certainly, sir. I think I can easily find it."

"Very well; show us the way. And you, Powys"—this was to the aide-de-camp—"ride over to the Royal Lancers and tell Hugo Wilders what has happened."

Then the little band of Good Samaritans set out upon its painful mission. The autumn evening was already closing in; the night air blew chill across the desolate plain; already numbers of men were busy amongst the wounded, assuaging their thirst from water-bottles, covering the prostrate forms with blankets,

and lending the surgeons a helping hand.

Half an hour brought the searchers of the Royal Picts to where young Anastasius Wilders lay. McKay was the first to find him, and he raised a shout of recognition as he ran forward to the wounded officer. Unslinging his water-bottle, he put it to his cousin's lips; but young Wilders waved the precious liquid aside, saying, although in a feeble voice—

"Thank you; but I can wait. Give it to that poor chap over there; he is far worse hit than I am."

It was a private of the regiment, whose breast a bullet had pierced, and whose tortures seemed terrible.

But now the rest of the party came up. General Wilders dismounted, flask in hand, and the wounded lad was rewarded for his self-denial.

A surgeon, too, had arrived, and he was anxiously questioned as to the nature of young Wilders's wound.

The right leg had been shattered below the knee by a round shot; the wound had bled profusely, but the poor lad managed to stanch it with his shirt.

"Can you save it?" whispered the general.

"Impossible!" replied the surgeon, in the same tone.

"We must amputate above the knee at once," and he turned up his sleeves and gave instructions to an assistant to get ready the instruments.

The operation, performed without chloroform, and borne with heroic fortitude, was over when Hugo Wilders rode up to

the spot. Anastasius recognised his brother, and answered his anxious, sorrowful greeting with a faint smile.

"What is to be done with him now?" asked the general.

"We must get him on board ship—to-night, if possible; but how?"

"We will carry him every inch of the way," said one of the bandsmen of the Royal Picts. Young Wilders was idolised by the men.

"It is three miles to the sea-shore: a long journey."

"They can march in two reliefs, four carrying, four resting," said McKay.

"You must be very careful," said the surgeon.

"Never fear! We will carry him as easy as a baby in its cot," replied one of the soldiers.

"Yes, yes! you can trust us," added McKay.

"Are you going with them?" asked the general.

"I should like to do so, sir."

"And of course I shall go too," added Captain Wilders; and the procession, thus formed, wended its way to the shore.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.