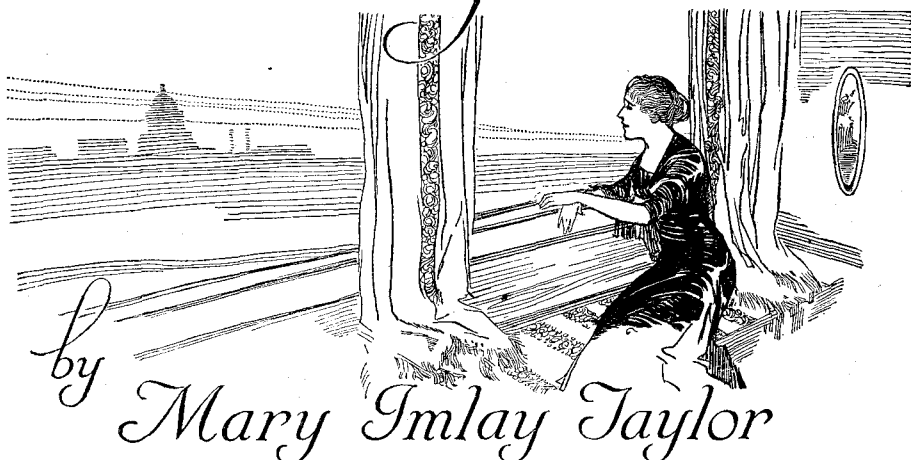


Children of Passion^{*}



by Mary Imlay Taylor

XXIX

AS Hester entered, the five men at the table turned and looked at her, a little aghast. At the head sat the chairman of the committee—Senator Campman, a big man with a white mustache and a heavy, blunted nose. Next to him, on the right, was Senator Curwood, Nicholson's bitterest assailant. On the other side were two members from the northern part of the State; at the foot, a young man who was acting as chief clerk.

The room was a spacious one. The windows facing on the street had the garish effect of shades sprung to the top, in the masculine fashion. Over the mantel hung a large portrait of a former Governor, William Nicholson's predecessor.

Hester noticed all this as she came in. She saw, too, the amazement in the committeemen's faces, which changed, as they discerned her white visage, into something like panic. But she came on into the center of the room and stood there, small and slender and almost childlike.

"Gentlemen," she began in a low voice, "I have just read the newspapers, just been told of—of your attitude toward my husband. I—"

Her voice broke, and she put out a shaking hand toward the back of the nearest chair. Two of the men stumbled to their feet, confused.

"Sit down, Mrs. Nicholson, you're ill!"

It was Curwood who got to his feet first and made her take his seat. She complied mechanically, more because she could not stand up any longer than from any wish to seem at ease with them. Sitting in the Senator's big leather armchair, her figure looked still more like a slender child's.

She clutched the arms of the chair with shaking hands. Then she collected herself and began to speak as calmly as she could.

"I didn't understand—until very lately—about this business, gentlemen. I want to tell you the truth about my—about Mr. Nicholson. I read, two days ago, a long piece in the paper saying that the Governor had refused all clemency to George Barhyte, but when he found

^{*} Copyright, 1916, by Mary Imlay Taylor—This story began in the June number of MUNSEY'S MAGAZINE

his brother was guilty he 'packed him off safely before he tried to save the innocent.' That was just the wording of it. I—I know it by heart!" she added with a gasp, as if the very construction of the sentence had a peculiar horror for her.

Curwood reddened again. He had inspired the article, which had filled two columns with vituperation against William Nicholson. He knew well enough what it had said.

"There isn't a word of truth in it," continued Hester proudly. "I'm going to tell you just what happened. When Leonard—my husband's half-brother, I mean—confessed to the Governor, I was up-stairs with a friend. I didn't know what had occurred, and when Mr. Nicholson didn't come up to dinner I called him. While we were at the table, the sheriff and the district attorney came in. I was curious to know what had happened, and I asked young Ashmead—the Governor's secretary. He told me, and told me, too, that Leonard was locked in the old study behind the library. There is a rear door to that room, and the key was lying in my husband's old cabinet drawer. He had forgotten that it was there. I got it."

She stopped for a moment, and a wave of color went up to her hair. The men facing her were filled with surprise and embarrassment; even the chairman kept tugging at his white mustache. After an instant she went on again.

"I was horrified at the thought that the Governor must really consign his brother to death. I thought about the question of Cain—'Am I my brother's keeper?' I never thought of the right or wrong of it, but I let him out. The motor-car was in the court, and—late as it was—I motored him over to the junction. We caught the midnight train, and Leonard went. When I got back I found that the Governor was out. It was daybreak before he came home. I told him; I know now that he must have foreseen all that has happened since, but

he didn't tell me so. Instead, he took all the blame on his own shoulders, to save me."

She stopped and drew a long breath, looking up and down the long table from one face to another. They seemed to her to be either cruel or flabby and expressionless. Only the young clerk at the foot showed any sign of sympathy. She was beating her bleeding hands on a stone wall, as it were, yet she must try and try to break it down.

"To save me," she repeated, "and it ruined him! I don't know how you feel about it, but to me it's—it's utterly unjust. I don't see why you should make him suffer for what I did behind his back. It's true—even the servants know it's true. I took Leonard away when the Governor was with the sheriff and the district attorney. I can prove it! I couldn't rest until I told you, for I knew he never would."

There was a trenchant pause. Her voice, always sweet, had dropped to its lowest key, and now it stopped in a silence that seemed to smite them all in the face. Only Campman, the coarsest-fibered man there, voiced the thought that was uppermost in all minds.

"Did you tell the Governor what you had done that night, Mrs. Nicholson?" he asked dryly.

Her color deepened painfully. Campman thought she was in love with Leonard! The inference was so clear that it could not be escaped. She read it in his eyes, and her glance, shrinking back from its discovery, divined the unspoken thought in the faces of the rest. But she had come there to defend her husband, not herself.

"I told him as soon as he came home," she answered steadily. "He didn't tell me what he was going to do. I wasn't prepared for that! I couldn't imagine that men would ruin him for that—I mean, even if he had tried to save his brother."

The shot told. Curwood writhed in his chair, looking sidewise at Campman.

Hester did not know that her words had had so much effect. She was bent on saving Nicholson; her whole passionate nature had centered itself on self-immolation.

"He should have told you," she went on fervently. "But, if he had, he would have laid the blame of Leonard's escape on me, and he knew how you would take it. I see how you take it! He's too great a man to hurt a woman like that—any woman, and I'm his wife. It was my fault, but I want to tell you, too, for his sake as well as mine, that what you think isn't true! I didn't care for Leonard. I never cared for any one but my husband. If I had, I wouldn't come here to tell you how I—I helped the—the guilty man to escape. I helped him because I didn't want the Governor to feel, all his life, that he, his brother's keeper, had betrayed his trust, had as good as murdered him. You can find out that what I say is true. The servants know; and there's a station-master at the junction—he saw me going away alone. You"—she broke down, tears running down her face—"you've ruined an innocent man! You've got to believe what I tell you!"

She bent forward in her chair, holding out her hands to them. It was Senator Curwood who answered, without looking at her.

"Good Lord, madam, we do believe you!" he said.

He blurted it out like a stone from the sling of David; he hoped it would slay that fat Goliath of unbelief, the chairman.

"I want you to tell him so, then," she went on eagerly. "I want you to make him admit that I was to blame. Don't let a foolish woman ruin him!"

She thought she could say this because she already felt so widely separated from Nicholson, so far outside of his life that she could ask things that his wife could not ask. She rose amid their confusion, and the very power of her emotion steadied her.

"I've been absolutely truthful in all I've said," she reiterated. "I want you to do him justice. Don't let him ruin himself because he has a consideration for a woman, a chivalry"—she hesitated and ended lamely—"that very few other men have."

As she spoke she turned and made her way toward the door. Curwood got to his feet, too, and went with her. His impulse was to help her, she looked so ill; but she put him aside with a gesture and went out, leaving a gaping silence behind her.

The four men looked at one another, and the chairman of the committee blew his nose.

"It's a bad mess," Campman remarked; "but what's done is done!"

Curwood struck his fist down on the table.

"No, sir, it isn't! He's got to be reinstated."

No one answered this. A kind of breathless pause ensued, and then one of the younger members leaned back in his chair.

"Good Heavens, how that woman loves him!" he exclaimed.

XXX

It was Curwood who bore the news to Nicholson. There had been a prolonged meeting, a summoning of high officials, and the certainty, at last, that the Ex-Governor had been sacrificed. He had given up his career, even his good name, to shield his young wife. The chivalry of it touched them; it seemed to most of them as wild as *Don Quixote's* battle with the windmills, but it had a beauty and a virtue in it that penetrated even the most sordid minds.

Something must be done—something that would rehabilitate Nicholson. The time was approaching for a gubernatorial election, and, when the story crept out of the committee-room, enthusiasm prevailed. The man whom they had wronged, whom they had assailed with public vituperation, became a martyr.

It was certain that he would be renominated, and they felt it to be equally certain that when the whole story was widely known he would be reelected to the office he had resigned.

The reaction was so great that it carried Nicholson's worst enemies off their feet. Curwood was sent to tell him that the committee had found the charges against him unfounded, and had declared its full confidence in him. Strange thoughts must have occupied the Senator's mind as he made the journey from town. It is certain that he remembered the day when he had gone to the Governor with his plea for Barhyte, and had been finally refused. Curwood had been largely instrumental in the ruin that had assailed the once-honored leader, and only yesterday he had been the chief instigator of the charges against him. Yet, in half an hour, Hester had broken it all down, in half an hour she had revealed a situation so totally unexpected that he had surrendered.

He looked out curiously at the high gateway and the long row of hemlocks as his motor-car turned into the driveway and approached the old house. It was supremely quiet and forsaken. It showed abruptly the aspect of the change from power to privacy, from public place to partial disgrace.

No one was here, not even a messenger-boy. The Senator got out alone, and, ascending the wide stone steps, waited a long while at the door before a drowsy footman opened it.

Nicholson was alone in his library when Curwood came in, and for a moment the two men faced each other with a flare of their old political and personal enmity. Then the Senator saw the change in his adversary, the dignity and conscious power of suffering, and involuntarily averted his eyes.

"I've come," he began in a low voice, "to withdraw the charges made against you, and to express to you the confidence of the committee. Your wife has vindicated you."

Nicholson, completely taken aback, sank into the nearest chair and stared blankly at him.

"I don't understand," he said with evident reluctance. "You speak of my wife—I know nothing of this!"

Curwood was still standing. He felt the impossibility of friendliness at such a moment, but he had been deeply moved.

"I said that your wife told us," he replied hoarsely, "and she did. She came before the committee this morning and cleared you absolutely."

A deep flush passed over Nicholson's face.

"It was without my knowledge. I never would have permitted it!"

"She told us the whole story." Curwood paused; then his eye kindled. "She's a fine woman! By Heaven, sir, I wish any woman cared for me like that!" He turned, as he spoke, and held out his hand. "I'm sorry for my part in it, Nicholson!"

The Ex-Governor rose slowly. He was pale again, but he took the Senator's hand. There was a moment of embarrassment; then Curwood briefly stated the altered attitude of the committee, the line of action likely to be followed, and the probability of a great change in public feeling.

The telling of it was more difficult than he had imagined. Nicholson was too large-minded a man to show active resentment, but he listened coldly, without enthusiasm. Nothing seemed to appeal to him greatly; he even disregarded the political aspect of the new situation. Senator Curwood saw this and fidgeted on the hearth-rug—a big, heavy man, ill at ease.

"The feeling has changed strongly in your favor," he finally concluded. "There's no doubt at all of your re-nomination."

Nicholson smiled faintly. It seemed to him that all these things—high ambitions and resolves, and wide-spread policies—were far removed. He had passed through the flames, and spiritual-

ly he was as scorched as any Shadrach or Abednego. His answer showed a deeper indifference to the fiery furnace of State politics.

"I'm not sure that I should accept."

Curwood stared.

"You don't mean to say you'd refuse a vindication?"

Nicholson frowned.

"I've never felt the need of it," he replied coldly. "There's only one thing that I'd ask, and that most earnestly. You'll talk of this, you'll all have to discuss it. Can you prevail on the others—on all of them—to leave out my wife's name?"

Curwood considered, his face flushing deeply under the other man's eyes. He knew that enough had already been said to circulate the story through the State; but the request, natural and right enough, seemed to touch a sound spot in him. He looked up.

"I'll do all I can," he said.

Nicholson thanked him with genuine gratitude. There was a brief pause, and then, unable to say more without again mentioning Hester, Curwood took his leave, awkwardly enough.

Once in the street he tried in vain to reconstruct the interview, to make out whether he had given pleasure or offense. To a man like Curwood the Ex-Governor was an inexplicable enigma, but an enigma that had to be swallowed. A keen-scented politician, the Senator knew well enough that the tragic confession of the young and lovely wife had made a hero and a martyr of her husband. Little as he liked the result, he was deeply impressed by the picture of that slender, girlish figure in the great leather chair, and of Hester's face, beautiful and fragile and poignantly sad.

Nicholson had remained standing where his visitor had left him. The rush of feeling that had choked his utterance submerged him now. Like Curwood, he saw a vision; for the picture of Hester before these men came to him as vividly as if he had seen her.

What she must have endured to save him, to make this impression on a man like Curwood! Was it possible that his wife loved him? The bitterness, the blank misery and loneliness, of these last months of his life seemed to engulf him. He felt like a man in the bottom of a pit who suddenly sees a light at the rim of it. He passed his hand over his eyes and, half unconsciously, he spoke her name.

"Hester!"

As if in answer, he heard footsteps in the hall. He turned eagerly toward the door. It seemed as if she might enter now just as she had entered as a bride. But it was Ashmead with a letter.

"A special messenger, sir, from Miss Warren."

Nicholson's heart sank. He tore open the envelope and saw a few lines scrawled below in pencil.

Hester has gone. She went before breakfast this morning. She was seen going out alone, and no one can find her. Is she with you? Oh, please let me know! She was heart-broken; she had an idea that she had deeply and irrevocably injured you. I'm afraid—afraid!

LAURA.

The words sent a thrill of horror through him. He awoke from his dream with a shock; when he had thought of her as coming home, she had been fleeing from him! He crushed the letter in his pocket, he would not tell even Ashmead.

Hester had borne enough, and if any one found her he must be that one. He knew what Laura did not—that she had been that morning at the Capitol; and he believed that she could not be far away.

He went out at once, leaving Ashmead to answer an insistent telephone-call, and was driven over to the Warrens'. He was admitted, but Laura was not at home. In reply to his sharp questions, the butler gave a reluctant explanation. Miss Laura had gone out an hour ago to search for Mrs. Nicholson, who had not yet come in.

Nicholson asked no more questions, but followed the man—an old and tried servant—up to the library. There he found Mrs. Warren. She started at the sight of the visitor, and, holding her staff with one hand, extended the other.

"Was she with you, William?" the old lady asked.

He shook his head. He was suddenly aware of the familiar outline of the room, and of the sound of the church-chimes sounding the hour. It was like the ancient watchman's cry of "All's well!"

"She went out alone this morning," Mrs. Warren said. "We waited breakfast; then we waited lunch. Laura has gone out to look for her. If any one can find her, Laura will!"

Nicholson began to walk the floor, his head bowed. The wild, untrammelled, girlish nature had broken through its restraints at last. Where could she be? Then he became aware of Mrs. Warren's voice.

"She was wretched, William. I wanted to send for you, but I didn't dare!"

"I wish you had!" he exclaimed bitterly. Then he took the old lady's hand and led her back to her chair. "I'm going out to find her," he said gently. "If she should come here first, will you tell her"—he spoke with difficulty—"that I entreat her to do nothing more, to say nothing more, until she sees me?"

His old friend looked at him steadily, holding his hand in hers.

"William, do you mean that you've waked up, that you know you can't let this thing go on, that you can't lose her altogether for—that?"

He pressed her hand.

"I know," he replied hoarsely. "I know I've been losing many things because—because I was the Governor!"

She leaned back in her chair.

"He that seeketh his life shall lose it," she said softly, "and he that giveth his life shall find it!"

As Nicholson went out, her voice lingered in his ears. It was a dark night,

no stars shone, and the wind was rising. A shudder of apprehension passed through him. He felt the damp and chilly air that breathed from the river; silence and death and the falling tide haunted him.

"He that seeketh his life shall lose it!" Had he sought the life of the world so keenly that he must lose all—both for Hester and himself?

He had no time to answer the question. He went out on foot to seek her, to make inquiries, to send telegrams. He was loath to publish her name to the world. He must first do his utmost to find her by his own efforts; but through the night, and well into the day, he searched in vain.

XXXI

LATE in the afternoon Nicholson went home. He was exhausted from the long strain, and without hope. A little while before he had been forced to apply to the police for help. He was now assured that Hester had not left town by any of the regular trains, nor had she hired a motor. That she was not with any friend he already knew, and the alternative foreshadowed by Laura's fear—the terrible alternative of the river—shook him to the soul.

Search had already been made along the banks of the stream, without result; in the morning the water would be dragged.

As he passed out of town the newsboys had assailed him with the evening papers, and he had bought several, possessed with a morbid horror of seeing Hester's name in print. What he found was the complete vindication for himself that Curwood had foreshadowed. His wife was mentioned, but mentioned in a way that he could not resent.

He laid the newspapers down with a sigh of relief, and turned to survey the landscape. It was still chill and bare, but there was a suggestion of spring in the sky, and the sun was casting long shadows across the road.

Spring! It was an April day when he had brought Hester home to the house which he was now approaching. How wistful and delicate her small face had seemed, how wonderful her eyes! Then he remembered Leonard, the boy he had tried to guide; but he had lost both of them.

What was wrong with him? He had failed—failed so absolutely that the thought of the renewal of his public life only smote him with horror. He had lived for that, and it had turned to dead-sea fruit. His heart and his hands were empty.

His old attitude of mind had unconsciously broken down; the pride which had made him cold and silent when he thought that Hester loved Leonard had crumbled away. He was overwhelmed with a sudden rush of tenderness and compassion.

Ashmead was waiting for him, and had a number of letters and despatches, but Nicholson put them aside and took up the telephone-message that his secretary had just jotted down. It came from a private detective.

Mrs. Nicholson was seen going out in the direction of your country place to-day. Will send out within an hour to investigate this clue.

Nicholson thrust the paper into his pocket and drank a cup of hot coffee which the butler had brought at his demand. He refused food, though he had eaten nothing. Then he turned to Ashmead.

"I'm going out. I may be out all night. Please stay here, Ashmead, and be ready to answer all telephones and despatches."

The secretary, deeply touched by his chief's aspect, held out a deprecating hand.

"For Heaven's sake, sir, eat something first, and rest a while. You'll—you'll break down!"

Nicholson shook his head and went out. The sun had not yet set, and there was an extreme lucidity to the atmos-

phere. It would be impossible to miss a footprint or a broken twig.

He walked down to the river's edge and followed along the stream, his heart heavy. It skirted a section of his estate and then flowed down to the bridge. He went there and, crossing, stood on the farther side, looking up the embankment.

It was very quiet. Some boys were fishing from a dory; a couple of children were playing in the edge of his own woods. It was impossible that Hester could be here, yet he looked, looked painfully, for a footprint in the sand.

A few questions brought quick negatives from the lads in the boat and those on the shore. No lady had been seen, there were no tracks but theirs. They gazed after him round-eyed, well aware that it was the Ex-Governor; but Nicholson went on, too absorbed to even notice their amazement.

A few yards more carried him into the woods, where the moss was dead underfoot and the elderberries withered and black on their stems. A squirrel darted before him, and he heard the rasp of a woodpecker overhead in the bare trees. He had a feeling that Hester would go back to the old place by the beeches, the scene of the tragedy. Something would draw her there—perhaps the thought of Leonard; yet he searched there for a long while and found no sign of her.

Dusk was beginning to fall now, and a horrible doubt assailed him again. Had he done right to seek her here, to leave the river?

Then some instinct made him turn to the pool. Not that his mind, even yet, plumbed the wayward impulses of hers, the fierce plunges into misery and remorse after her wild gaiety and fearless courage. To his usually equable temperament such extremes were as unlikely as an avalanche upon a level prairie; yet he, too, had lately tasted misery.

He hurried along the wind-blown path, the dusk falling so fast that it seemed as if it must drip down like rain. Still thinking of her, of her slender beauty,

of the white perfection of her small face and mystical eyes, he pressed forward. It seemed to him that she must be just before him. He felt her presence, almost perceived the delicate, elusive fragrance that hung about her like the essence of spring flowers.

The trees grew thick and ever thicker. Here slender stems and there sturdy, gnarled trunks and the swinging boughs of hemlocks cut off the vista. A startling whistled harshly, and its note, shrill and thin and piercing, seemed to mock him.

Would he ever find Hester again? She was his wife! It had always seemed to him that that claim was inalienable, that in making her his wife he had made sure of her wholly and forever; but to her the bond had been like a cobweb. She had been ready to brush it aside.

And yet how splendidly she had forgotten self to save him! In this keen revival of his love, his need of her came back to him. He wanted to see her, to hold her in his arms and tell her that he loved her; but she had gone!

Then, suddenly, the trees parted, and he saw a woman's figure kneeling beside the pool. In the open space the reflected sky whitened the water, and he saw her plainly.

She had taken off her hat and her long coat, and knelt there, dressed in a dull little frock which he had seen her wear at home. She was absorbed, watching the water, her eyes fascinated. Her long hair, loose and unbound, fell in a mist about her small, pale face. She looked like a mere child.

She was kneeling on a rock that jutted out over the little lake. As he watched her she rose and took a step forward. Not until that moment did he realize what she meant to do. His cry stayed her, and she turned her head and faced him as he sprang up the cliff to her side.

"Hester!" he cried, and again: "Hester!"

She said nothing, but clasped her shaking hands against her breast and

stood watching him like a frightened child. He was her husband, but so much seemed to lie between them! She looked up at him. The wild beauty of her face and the mystic charm of her eyes deepened. Never had she seemed so like a wood-nymph.

"I—I'm glad you've come!" she said, a little wildly. "I didn't mean to see you again; but I wanted to tell you how sorry I am. I didn't mean to shame you so, but everything I did was wrong. I ruined you. Can you ever forgive me?"

"Forgive you? What a strange thing to say to me, when you came here to save me! You brave little thing, you dear, dear child!" he cried, and caught her in his arms.

She threw her head back, looking up at him, trembling.

"I've brought all this on you, broken your career, ruined you!" she said wildly. "And I loved you all the time! I came out here to kill myself." He shuddered, holding her close. Her eyes searched his. "You must hate me!"

"Hate you? I count it all well lost, compared to what I've gained!"

"You mean—"

"The knowledge that you cared enough to face them all for me!"

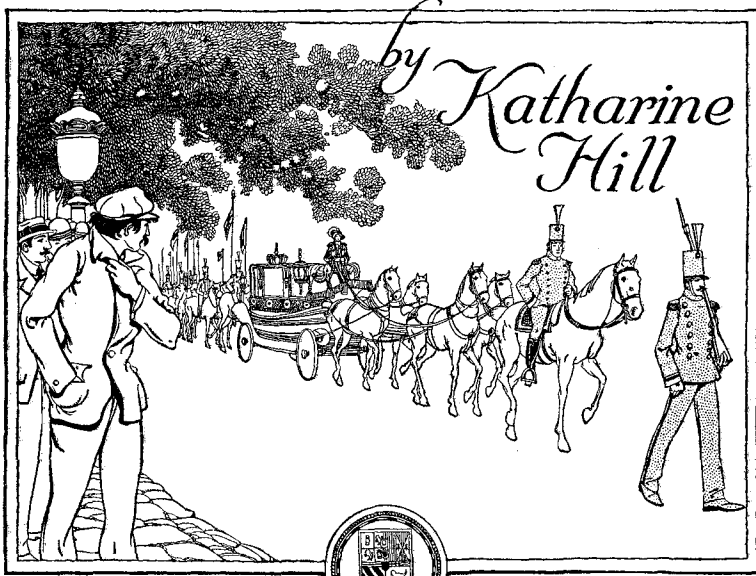
"I've been what they call a child of passion, I think," she said, still distraught; "but it's all burned out of me now. I never did anything they thought I did. I'm not wicked like that—you know it, William!"

"Hester!"

She sighed; her eyes deepened with ineffable tenderness, but she did not speak. A little while before she had stood at the threshold of another world, face to face with that climax of passion which culminates when the edge of life seems near. What need had they for words? They clung together silently, and the rush of mutual feeling that finally united their souls made that moment, in the lives of both, as supreme as it was immortal.

THE END

The Bomb



"WHEN you speak of this girl as your wife, it's merely a concession to convention, is it not? You didn't really submit her and yourself to the degrading ceremony of a marriage?"

Jaime reddened.

"She is truly my wife," he confessed, abashed.

"I see! It is only since then that you became one of us."

The two men sat in a corner of the long, bare room where presently the circle of anarchists to which they belonged would assemble for the meeting. It was natural enough that Jaime Isteve should be there so early, for the night was wet and stormy outside, and he was homeless except for the shelter of this hall, on whose bare benches a man so well trusted as Jaime could always claim the right to sleep.

But that Pedro Fuentes—the great Pedro, leader of the anarchists of Spain—Pedro, who had spent one-third of his adult life in prison, who had undergone

torture at Montjuich, whose steps were ever dogged by detectives, and whose lightest suggestion was sure to be eagerly carried out by the ardent hero-worshippers surrounding him—that Pedro should come early and unescorted to a meeting was unusual.

"No one here but you, Jaime?" he had exclaimed on entering. "Was not the meeting called for ten o'clock, then? And it is already half past."

"For eleven, comrade," Jaime said, his thin, sensitive face lighting with proud pleasure at the prospect of spending half an hour at least alone with the great man. There would be something to boast of, if he ever got back to Seville!

"As Fuentes said to me one night in Barcelona—

"Fuentes disapproves those tactics. Oh, he doesn't say so on the platform, but he told me—"

How casually he would let fall such sentences, big with the greatest name he knew, and how the radicals of his acquaintance in Seville, discontented men