

AGOSTINA OF ZARAGOZA  
BY  
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The beautiful young Countess Burita was the first to set the example of heroism and humanity.

Cowering behind their insufficient walls, and hearing the terrible roar and crash of artillery about them, seeing the French take up a firm position on the Torrero, from whence they could shell the devoted city of Zaragoza at their ease, what wonder that the Spaniards—the women and children at any rate—shrank in terror from the thought of a protracted siege, and cried aloud that nothing could save them?

But the old fighting spirit of the past was arousing and awakening in the souls of the men. The tyrannical temper of Napoleon, and his aggressive disposition of the Spanish crown to his own brother, had inflamed the ire of the Spaniards from the nobles to the peasants; and, though a long period of misgovernment had weakened the country, destroyed the vigour of the nation, and rendered the soldiers of little use in the open field, yet it had not killed the old stubborn fighting spirit within them, and when their passions were aroused, the flames had still the power to spring forth from the ashes of the past, and there were moments when all the old chivalry of former ages seemed to awake within them.

It was this spirit that animated the defenders of Zaragoza when Aragon revolted against the rule of the French, and they resolved at least to hold the ancient capital against the foe.

Hopeless the task seemed; for the defences were of the most meagre description; the only strong part of the wall being the ancient Roman portion, the high brick houses within having no shelter or means of defence from the shells and bombs that came screaming and rattling over them.

But there were heroic spirits within those frail walls, and one of the first to show an example of high-hearted bravery was the beautiful young Countess. Whilst her husband gave what aid he could to the military defenders of the city, she organised her band of women and girls for the work which was only a little less urgent.

She ordered them to get together from the houses those awnings which defended the rooms from the fierce heat of the sun, and under her skilful direction these were sewn into huge bags that were filled with sand and earth and used with great advantage to stay the effects of shot and shell continually bursting over them.

The houses actually built upon the walls were pulled down, and all the beams were employed in strengthening the defences in other parts, barricading exposed windows, and making covered ways along the streets where the townsfolk could walk in comparative safety, despite the rain of bullets dropping round them.

But these things were not done without terrible scenes in the streets, brave men falling at their posts, horrible explosions tearing up the ground and scattering destruction all around. Small wonder was it, if at first the hearts of the women had failed them, and they had been ready to give way to a sense of despair. But quickly they rallied their courage, and the spirit of their ancestors entered into them. Although there were so few soldiers in the town—only between two and three hundred in the garrison—yet the townsmen offered their services and banded themselves together for the defence of their ancient city, and after the first panic had subsided, the women were eager to render every assistance that lay in their power, some even offering to serve in the ranks like men, if they could be taken on in that capacity.

There was, however, one way in which they could serve the men almost as well as by fighting beside them, and that was in bringing them food and water when they were mounted on the walls at their perilous posts.

This was rather a fearful task. The shells rushed screaming through the air from the height above, where the enemy's batteries were placed, and none knew where the deadly missile might explode. Bullets rained about the gallant defenders at their guns. It was like walking into the very mouth of hell, as many a woman shudderingly observed; and yet there were always volunteers for this perilous task. The noble Countess was the leader in every difficult enterprise, and she organised a devoted band who should carry on the work with order and system, avoiding needless exposure, but gallantly prosecuting the necessary and most perilous office.

Amongst the most ardent and devoted of this band of women and girls the Countess noted one very beautiful, strongly built, dark-eyed maiden, who seemed endowed with strength and courage beyond that of her compatriots.

Wherever the fire was fiercest and hottest, wherever the strife was direst and most deadly, there this girl was sure to be seen, waiting with her water-cans to make a dash towards the thirsty, smoke-begrimed soldiers, when a moment's respite allowed them to step back for the sorely needed drink. For the fierce heat of June was in the air, and the sunshine lay blinding upon the hot walls and ramparts, save where it was blotted out by the smoke wreaths from cannon and musket.

But there was one particular corner upon the old wall where the fight was often fiercely raging, and where this girl seemed oftenest to linger, and the Countess, observing her with more and more attention as the dire siege went forward, took the opportunity one day, when there was a little lull in the firing, to speak to her and ask her of herself.

"I am called Agostina," answered the girl, "and it is my father who serves yonder gun. He has the post of the greatest danger. I dare not tear myself away. Every day I fear to see him fall. Many have fallen at his side, but the blessed Mother of God and the holy saints have watched over him, and he has not as yet received so much as a scratch. Alas! if he should be taken, what will become of the little ones at home?" And over the girl's handsome, resolute face there swept an expression of pain and anguish that was sorrowful to see.

The Countess walked beside her to the spot where her father stood beside his gun, taking this moment of lull to clean it well, for often it became so hot that he was afraid it would burst. His dark, smoke-grimed face, handsome like Agostina's in spite of its black veil, brightened at her approach, and on seeing the lovely, high-born lady, he doffed his cap with the instinctive grace and courtesy that the humble Spaniard has never lost.

Agostina handed him the water-can, from which he took a deep, refreshing draught, sighing with satisfaction as he handed it back to the girl. The lady regarded the pair, and thought they looked more like husband and wife than father and daughter. He seemed not old enough for her father, though there was such a bond of affection and familiarity between them.

"Take it yonder to Ruy Gomez," said the man, pointing towards a fellow-gunner a little distance off. "He is parched with thirst, and has one of the hottest places on the wall."

Agostina moved forward towards the man—she knew the names of all the gunners in this corner of the fortifications—and the Countess remained and entered into conversation with the father.

"You have a good daughter, my brave fellow. I have watched her these many days amongst the rest. She seems to know not fear—not for herself; though she spoke but now as though she lived in daily and hourly fear for her father's life!"

"Ah, poor child, poor child! It would be a sad thing for her were I to be taken. You see there are the little ones at home; she is like a mother to them, and to her it would be like being left a widow were I to fall."

"You have other children too, then? Yet Agostina is always alone in her tasks."

"Ah, yes; the others are too little, too tender. You see it was so: I married almost as a boy, I was little more when Agostina was born, and my wife died in giving her life. She grew up my comrade and plaything. I soon ceased to regret she was not a boy. She was as brave, as hardy, as skilful at games and exercises, as free from fear, as bold to brave toil and fatigue. Ah, I should weary you, Señora, were I to try and tell you of Agostina's childhood and youth! We have been more like brother and sister, comrades, lovers, than father and daughter; and yet, with all that, no daughter was ever more dutiful and loving and obedient than my Agostina!"

The man's face had kindled into a great enthusiasm as he talked of his beautiful daughter; that she was the very apple of his eye none could doubt who heard him speak. The lady almost marvelled that he had taken to himself another wife, but in his own simple fashion he explained the matter.

"It was the year when that great sickness came. I was smitten down with it, and Agostina nursed me back to health. Indeed, I was never very ill; my life was not in danger, but she almost broke her heart in fear lest she might lose me; and when I was well she was taken, and lay for long at the very gates of death. And I, what could I do? A man is a helpless creature in such times; and many of the neighbours fled from us. But there was one who came to us in our troubles, a gentle creature who had lost father and mother in the sickness. She had always loved Agostina, and Agostina had loved her. She came and watched beside her day and night. She brought her back to health and strength. She was quite alone in the world; she had no one to look to; and so I married her, and Agostina was like a sister and a daughter in one."

"And is she living yet within the city?"

"Alas, no! She was taken to her rest last year; and at home are the three little ones, to whom Agostina is more mother than sister. A neighbour takes care of them now, for Agostina must do her duty with the brave daughters of the city. You, gentle lady, have taught them this. I thank the saints and our Blessed Lady that my Agostina has been one to answer to the call of duty. She has a heart of gold."

"I have seen it," answered the Countess; "a heart of gold and arms of steel. I have watched her often with wonder and envy. She has the strength of a strong man in that light frame of hers!"

"Has she not!" answered the proud father, his eyes shining; "and not only has she strength, but she has skill and dauntless courage. She can fire this gun as well as I can myself. She has stood at my side many times helping me to load and fire it. When I have been blinded by smoke and lack of sleep, she has crept up to me and whispered in the confusion and din, 'Let me take a turn for you, father, I can do it as well as you. Sit down a moment and breathe. I will serve the gun.' Ay, and she has done it, too—my brave little Agostina."

The man's pride in his daughter was almost as touching as her devotion to him. After that day the Countess watched Agostina with affectionate interest; and, indeed, others began to note her too; for in the many fearful casualties that befell the besieged, the explosion of the powder magazine, the firing of the convent, which had been turned into a hospital for sick and wounded, Agostina was ever foremost in the work of rescue, animating by her courage

and example even the most faint-hearted, and performing miraculous feats of strength and courage and devotion.

In a city and at a time when all were heroines, Agostina began to be pointed out as the heroine of the siege; but she neither knew nor heeded. All she thought of was the safety of her father and the saving of her city. A passionate patriotism burned within her; she could face any personal peril if only the holy saints would grant them victory over their foes!

The gate near which her father served his gun was called the Portillo; and fearful was the fighting that raged round that spot one never-to-be-forgotten day of this memorable siege. The whole place seemed to shake and rock with the explosions of shells from the Torrero; fires were bursting out in many parts of the city. The sand-bags heaped up in defence of wall and building were igniting and dropping away. And around this special corner the fire was so fierce and furious that it seemed as though every living creature must be swept away, leaving the French a clear passage into the devoted town.

Indeed, so terrible was the bombardment here that the devoted band of women, ready with water-cans and fresh sand-bags to rush forward to aid their fathers and brothers, were for once driven back, and forced away by the smoke and heat and thick rain of bullets. Agostina stood her ground alone, peering into the smoke with anguished eyes; standing amid the leaden hail as though she bore a charmed life; wringing her hands together sometimes, when a cry or a groan seemed to bespeak the fact that another bullet had done its fatal work.

At last she could stand it no longer. With a cry like that of a wild creature in fury and distress, she leaped through the smoke and reek to the very wall itself; and what did her eyes see then? What sight was it that caused every drop of blood to ebb from her face, whilst the fire seemed to flash from her eyes and reflect back the sullen glow from the Torrero?

Every man amongst the besieged had fallen! Heaps of dead and dying lay at her feet. Her father—where was he? A cry of anguish broke from her as she stopped to look. From amid the heap at her feet a head was raised—a head and a hand—a hand holding a match.

"Agostina—fire—the gun."

It was his last word ere his head fell back in death. But the girl had heard, and every nerve in her body tingled in response to that dying appeal.

Through the lessening smoke wreaths she saw an appalling sight—she saw the rapid approach of the French towards the now undefended gate. It rested with Agostina alone whether or not they should win an entrance into the city.

With steady hand she adjusted the great gun that she had fired so often before. With perfect coolness and dexterity she applied her match. There was a crash, a roar, followed by the shrieks of wounded men, the oaths of their comrades. The French had believed the guns silenced; they had believed themselves secure of victory; and now their ranks were torn and mown by a well-aimed twenty-six-pounder. The officer in charge called a halt. The city was not as defenceless as they had thought.

Within the walls there was the sound of hurrying feet, as the Commander, with some troops, came hastening to the rescue. It had been told him how fearful was the peril here. Word had been brought that all the guns were silent now, and he knew but too well what that meant. Hastening to the spot in anxious fear, he had heard the booming roar of a city gun, had heard the cry of the advancing French; and now he pressed forward to the spot to find a girl seated upon the gun, which was still smoking, waving her arms above her head, and crying:

"Death or victory! Death or victory! Father, I accept your dying charge. I leave not your gun again till Zaragoza be saved! I claim it as my due!"

The next moment Agostina had sprung to her feet, for she was no longer alone with the dying and the dead. The Commander himself, Don José Palafox, a nobleman, who in this emergency had come forward and placed himself at the head of the troops of the garrison in the besieged city, was standing beside her, regarding her steadfastly; and, though perfectly fearless in the moment of danger, Agostina felt abashed before his fixed gaze, and dropped her eyes.

"Maiden," he asked gently, "whose hand was it fired that last shot, after the guns had long been silent?"

A wounded man half rose from the ground at their feet, and he pointed his finger at Agostina.

"It was she who did it, Señor; she is the daughter of one of those who lie dead beneath your feet. He had fallen. We had all fallen. Help did not come, but the foe was coming. We could hear the tramp of their approaching feet. Then Agostina was in our midst. Her father's last charge was given, 'fire the gun.' She obeyed. She checked the oncoming tide. She routed the advancing foe. Agostina did that."

But Agostina had not stayed to hear her praises sung; she was on her knees beside a mangled form. The tears were raining from her eyes. She was no longer the heroine of the gun. She was a daughter weeping for the loss of a loved and loving father.

"They loved each other so well—so well," murmured the wounded man, as his head sank back. "Poor Agostina!"

Don José would have said more to Agostina, but his kind heart told him that the moment was not yet come; and he merely ordered his men to lift up the body of the dead gunner, and to give it decent burial in any spot that Agostina should direct. It was some salve to her great grief that her father should lie in consecrated ground. So many heaps of slain had to be buried where they fell. The besieged had not time or strength to carry them away.

The following day Don José, making his rounds and instituting a more detailed survey of the wall which had been indeed terribly shaken and shattered by the firing of yesterday, was surprised to find Agostina hard at work cleaning the gun which had been her father's up till now, and to which, as yet, no fresh gunner had been appointed, for, indeed, the Commander was getting very short of men with skill enough to take charge of the guns. He stood for a few seconds watching her attentively; and when after loading the piece with the precision and skill which showed a thorough understanding of the task in hand, she raised her sad eyes, she coloured very slightly, and saluted exactly as a soldier would have done at sight of his commanding officer.

Don José returned the salute, and came up to the girl's side.

"I have been hearing of you, my brave child," he said. "What can I do for you in return for what you did yesterday for this city?"

"Señor," she replied, "I have but one boon to crave. Give me my father's place here at this gun. Let me serve it as he served it, so long as the siege lasts. He has taught me how. You shall not find me remiss. I think I am not unskilful. Yesterday, in the presence of the dead, I vowed a vow—I vowed not to leave my post here till the French should retreat from Zaragoza. Let me but keep that vow. Give me here the right to hold my father's place, the right to draw his pay, and that portion of food for the helpless babes at home that every soldier's family may claim. I ask nothing else!" She spoke very simply; there was no thought in her heart of playing the hero's part. She asked bread for the children, and the right to

earn it for them. If deep down in her heart the fire of patriotism was burning fiercely, she never thought of posing as a heroine sacrificing herself for her country. No, hers was a simple nature. She loved her father with passionate devotion. She longed to accomplish the work which had been his. She yearned after the little helpless children, and felt she must earn for them the necessities of life. Provisions were beginning to run short. Rations were provided for the soldiers and their families; but the citizens were face to face with a scarcity that might become actual famine ere long. The little ones must not starve; such had been Agostina's leading thought. She would win for them their daily bread. She had been a mother to them for long; now she would be a father too.

Don José's face was gravely tender as he replied:

"My child, your petition is granted. No more noble or courageous custodian of that gun could I find within these walls. I appoint you its gunner, with double pay. When peace has been restored, and I can tell to the world the story of the Maid of Zaragoza, it will go hard if the nation do not provide a pension too for so brave a daughter of her soil!"

Agostina's cheek glowed; she bent her knee for a moment, and ere Don José quite knew what she was about to do, she had pressed her lips upon his hand.

"Our Blessed Lady guard and keep you, Señor," she said. "You have granted me my heart's desire!"

It was a strange heart's desire, in truth! To stand upon that battered wall in the teeth of the enemy's guns; to be a target for the shot and shell of those terrible batteries; to serve that smoking gun, and send its fierce answers forth into the hostile camp of the invaders. Others fell about and around Agostina, but no shot touched her. They came to say that she bore a charmed life; and it, at least, was plain that the thought of fear could never find a lodging place within her breast.

Then came a desperate day when it seemed indeed as though all were lost. A new battery was being built over against a convent, whose walls were weak already, and almost ready to fall. Strengthen them as they might, the garrison was helpless to effect any real improvement in their condition. They fell almost at the first shock when the new battery opened fire, and the French, rushing in through the breaches made, took possession of one quarter of the city, and sent a haughty summons to Don José to surrender.

The situation was tragic enough. They were now between two fires, and only a wide space like a boulevard separated the hostile camps. Don José had long been expecting succour from his brother, Don Francisco, who had sent word that he was marching to his relief with three thousand men and stores of food and ammunition. But there was no sign of his near approach as yet; and the city was in pitiful plight.

"Surrender! By capitulation alone can Zaragoza be saved."

Such was the haughty message from the French General Lefèvre, brought to Don José and his exhausted men after the fall of the quarter of the city called St. Engracia.

The Commander looked around upon the ring of gaunt men about him, and over at the shattered buildings of the town. What answer was it his duty to return? Was he justified in sacrificing all these brave lives? What did the people of Zaragoza think of it themselves? They had at least a right to be asked. It was they upon whom the brunt of these fearful days fell.

"What answer shall we return to General Lefèvre?" he asked, looking from one to the other; and the men themselves seemed scarce to know what answer to make.

Then a voice from the crowd shouted out the words:

"Let us ask the Maid of Zaragoza!"

Don José's face lighted at the suggestion. He turned in the direction of the speaker, and cried aloud:

"Go—ask the Maid of the Gun what answer we shall send back. By her word we will abide!"

A strange thrill of enthusiasm ran through the whole city as the messenger sped forth to the farther wall to ask of Agostina what the Commander should answer. Strange as was the choice of such an umpire, there was something fitting and dramatic about it that fired the Spaniards, and wrought a strange kind of exultation among them.

Soon a gathering murmur in the distance, which increased to a perfect roar as the crowd surged onwards, showed that the answer was being brought back, and that it had stirred to the depths the impulsive and excitable populace.

"War to the knife! War to the knife!" The words detached themselves at last from the general clangour, and the soldiers, flashing out their swords, took up the answer of the Maid of Zaragoza, and the welkin rang with the shout—"War to the knife!"

A few days after those four words had been sent by Don José to General Lefèvre, the longed-for help came; and the eyes of Agostina shone and glowed as she watched from her gun upon the wall the French soldiers in full retreat blocking the road to Pamplona. The siege of Zaragoza was at an end; and the Commander came himself and fastened a medal of honour upon the heroine's breast.



***Free***editorial 