

FICTION

Charles Neville Buck

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# The Key to Yesterday

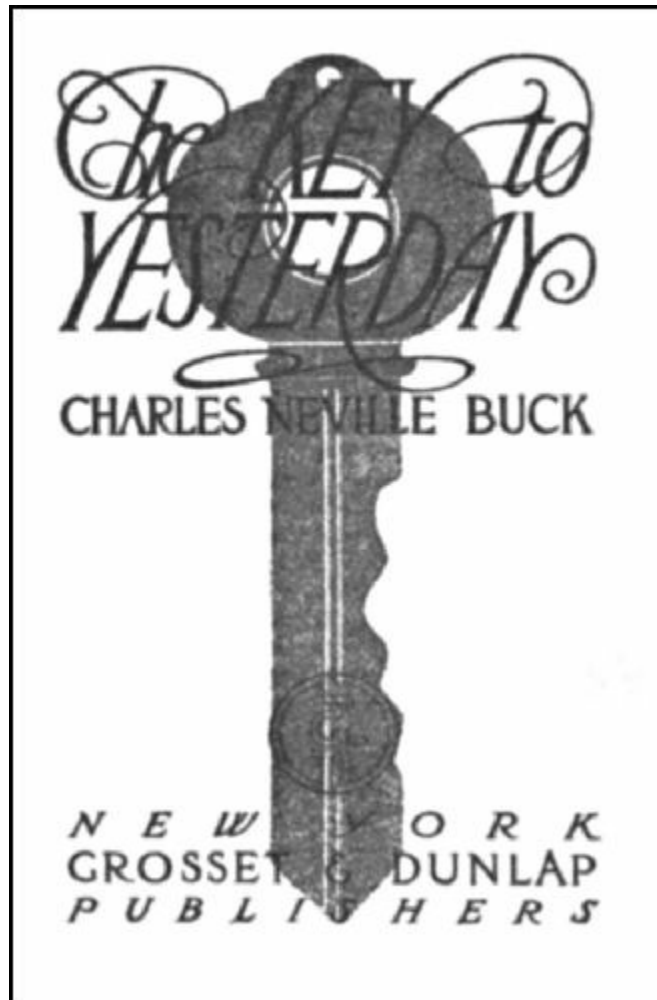


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FICTION

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## **The Key to Yesterday**

CHARLES NEVILLE BUCK

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## The Key to Yesterday

## CHAPTER I

The palings of the grandstand inclosure creaked in protest under the pressure. The shadows of forward-surg-ing men wavered far out across the track. A smother of ondriving dust broke, hurricane-like, around the last turn, sweeping before it into the straightaway a struggling mass of horse-flesh and a confusion of stable-colors. Back to the right, the grandstand came to its feet, bellowing in a madman's chorus.

Out of the forefront of the struggle strained a blood-bay colt. The boy, crouched over the shoulders, was riding with hand and heel to the last ounce of his strength and the last subtle feather-weight of his craft and skill. At his saddleskirts pressed a pair of distended nostrils and a black, foam-flecked muzzle. Behind, with a gap of track and daylight between, trailed the laboring "ruck."

A tall stranger, who had lost his companion and host in the maelstrom of the betting shed, had taken his stand near the angle where the paddock grating meets the track fence. A Derby crowd at Churchill Downs is a congestion of humanity, and in the obvious impossibility of finding his friend he could here at least give his friend the opportunity of finding him, since at this point were a few panels of fence almost clear. As the two colts fought out the final decisive furlongs, the black nose stealing inch by inch along the bay neck, the stranger's face wore an interest not altogether that of the casual race-goer. His shoulders were thrown back, and his rather lean jaw angle swept into an uncompromising firmness of chin--just now uptilted.

The man stood something like six feet of clear-cut physical fitness. There was a declaration in his breadth of shoulder and depth of chest, in his slenderness of waist and thigh, of a life spent only partly within walls, while the free swing of torso might have intimated to the expert observer that some of it had been spent in the saddle.

Of the face itself, the eyes were the commanding features. They were gray eyes, set under level brows; keenly observant by token of their clear light, yet tinged by a half-wistful softness that dwells hauntingly in the eyes of dreamers.

Just now, the eyes saw not only the determination of a four-furlong dash for two-year-olds, but also, across the fresh turf of the infield, the radiant magic of May, under skies washed brilliant by April's rains.

Then, as the colts came abreast and passed in a muffled roar of drumming hoofs, his eyes suddenly abandoned the race at the exact moment of its climax: as hundreds of heads craned toward the judges' stand, his own gaze became a stare focused on a point near his elbow.

He stared because he had seen, as it seemed to him, a miracle, and the miracle was a girl. It was, at all events, nothing short of miraculous that such a girl should be discovered standing, apparently unaccompanied, down in this bricked area, a few yards from the paddock and the stools of the bookmakers.

Unlike his own, her eyes had remained constant to the outcome of the race, and now her face was averted, so that only the curve of one cheek, a small ear and a curling tendril of brown hair under the wide, soft brim of her Panama hat rewarded him for the surrender of the spectacle on the track.

Most ears, he found himself reflecting with, a sense of triumphant discovery, simply grow on the sides of heads, but this one might have been fashioned and set by a hand gifted with the exquisite perfection of the jeweler's art.

A few moments before, the spot where she stood had been empty save for a few touts and trainers. It seemed inconceivable, in the abrupt revelation of her presence, that she could, like himself, have been simply cut off from companions and left for the interval waiting. He caught himself casting about for a less prosaic explanation. Magic would seem to suit her better than mere actuality. She was sinuously slender, and there was a splendid hint of gallantry in the unconscious sweep of her shoulders. He was conscious that the simplicity of her pongee gown loaned itself to an almost barbaric freedom of carriage with the same readiness as do the draperies of the Winged Victory. Yet, even the Winged Victory achieves her grace by a pose of triumphant action, while this woman stood in repose except for the delicate forward-bending excitement of watching the battle in the stretch.

The man was not, by nature, susceptible. Women as sex magnates had little part in his life cosmos. The interest he felt now with electrical force, was the challenge that beauty in any form made upon his enthusiasm. Perhaps, that was why he stood all unrealizing the discourtesy of his gaping scrutiny--a scrutiny that, even with her eyes turned away, she must have felt.

At all events, he must see her face. As the crescendo of the grandstand's suspense graduated into the more positive note of climax and began to die, she turned toward him. Her lips were half-parted, and the sun struck her cheeks and mouth and chin into a delicate brilliance of color, while the hat-brim threw a band of shadow on forehead and eyes. The man's impression was swift and definite. He had been waiting to see, and was prepared. The face, he decided, was not beautiful by the gauge of set standards. It was, however, beautiful in the better sense of its individuality; in the delicacy of the small, yet resolute, chin and the expressive depth of the eyes. Just now, they were shaded into dark pools of blue, but he knew they could brighten into limpid violet.

She straightened up as she turned and met his stare with a steadiness that should have disconcerted it, yet he found himself still studying her with the detached, though utterly engrossed, interest of the critic. She did not start or turn hurriedly away. Somehow, he caught the realization that flight had no part in her system of things.

The human tide began flowing back toward the betting shed, and left them alone in a cleared space by the palings. Then, the man saw a quick anger sweep into the girl's face and deepen the color of her cheeks. Her chin went up a trifle, and her lips tightened.

He found himself all at once in deep confusion. He wanted to tell her that he had not realized the actuality of his staring impertinence, until she had, with a flush of unuttered wrath and embarrassment, revealed the depth of his felony ... for he could no longer regard it as a misdemeanor.

There was a note of contempt in her eyes that stung him, and presently he found himself stammering an excuse.

"I beg your pardon--I didn't realize it," he began lamely. Then he added as though to explain it all with the frank outspokenness of a school-boy: "I was wishing that I could paint you--I couldn't help gazing."

For a few moments as she stood rigidly and indignantly silent, he had opportunity to reflect on the inadequacy of his explanation. At last, she spoke with the fine disdain of affronted royalty.

"Are you quite through looking at me? May I go now?"

He was contrite.

"I don't know that I could explain--but it wasn't meant to be--to be----" He broke off, floundering.

"It's a little strange," she commented quietly as though talking to herself, "because you *look* like a gentleman."

The man flushed.

"You are very kind and flattering," he said, his face instantly hardening. "I sha'n't tax you with explanation. I don't suppose any woman could be induced to understand that a man may look at her--even stare at her--without disrespect, just as he might look at a sunset or a wonderful picture." Then, he added half in apology, half in defiance: "I don't know much about women anyway."

For a moment, the girl stood with her face resolutely set, then she looked up again, meeting his eyes gravely, though he thought that she had stifled a mutinous impulse of her pupils to ruffle into amusement.

"I must wait here for my uncle," she told him. "Unless you have to stay, perhaps you had better go."

The tall stranger swung off toward the betting shed without a backward glance, and engulfed himself in the mob where one had to fight and shoulder a difficult way in zigzag course.

Back of the forming lines of winners with tickets to cash, he caught sight of a young man almost as tall as himself and characterized by the wholesome attractiveness of one who has taken life with zest and decency. He wore also upon feature and bearing the stamp of an aristocracy that is not decadent. To the side of this man, the stranger shouldered his way.

"Since you abandoned me," he accused, "I've been standing out there like a little boy who has lost his nurse." After a pause, he added: "And I've seen a wonderful girl--the one woman in your town I want to meet."

His host took him by the elbow, and began steering him toward the paddock gate.

"So, you have discovered a divinity, and are ready to be presented. And you are the scoffer who argues that women may be eliminated. You are--or were--the man who didn't care to know them."

The guest answered calmly and with brevity:

"I'm not talking about women. I'm talking about a woman--and she's totally different."

"Who is she, Bob?"

"How should I know?"

"I know a few of them--suppose you describe her."

The stranger halted and looked at his friend and host with commiserating pity. When he deigned to speak, it was with infinite scorn.

"Describe her! Why, you fool, I'm no poet laureate, and, if I were, I couldn't describe her!"

For reply, he received only the disconcerting mockery of ironical laughter.

"My interest," the young man of the fence calmly deigned to explain, "is impersonal. I want to meet her, precisely as I'd get up early in the morning and climb a mountain to see the sun rise over a particularly lovely valley. It's not as a woman, but as an object of art."

On other and meaner days, the track at Churchill Downs may be in large part surrendered to its more rightful patrons, the chronics and apostles of the turf, and racing may be only racing as roulette is roulette. But on Derby Day it is as though the community paid tribute to the savor of the soil, and honored in memory the traditions of the ancient regime.

To-day, in the club-house inclosure, the roomy verandahs, the close-cropped lawn and even the roof-gallery were crowded; not indeed to the congestion of the grandstand's perspiring swarm, for Fashion's reservation still allowed some luxury of space, but beyond the numbers of less important times. In the burgeoning variety of new spring gowns and hats, the women made bouquets, as though living flowers had been brought to the shrine of the thoroughbred.

A table at the far end of the verandah seemed to be a little Mecca for strolling visitors. In the party surrounding it, one might almost have caught the impression that the prettiness of the feminine display had been here arranged, and that in scattering attractive types along the front of the white club-house, some landscape gardener had reserved the most appealing beauties for a sort of climacteric effect at the end.

Sarah and Anne Preston were there, and wherever the Preston sisters appeared there also were usually gathered together men, not to the number of two and three, but in full quorum. And, besides the Preston sisters, this group included Miss Buford and a fourth girl.

Indeed, it seemed to be this fourth who held, with entire unconsciousness, more than an equal share of attention. Duska Filson was no more cut to the pattern of the ordinary than the Russian name her romantic young mother had given her was an exponent of the life about her. She was different, and at every point of her divergence from a routine type it was the type that suffered by the contrast. Having preferred being a boy until she reached that age when it became necessary to bow to the dictate of Fate and accept her sex, she had retained an understanding for, and a comradeship with, men that made them hers in bondage. This quality she had combined with all that was subtly and deliciously feminine, and, though she loved men as she loved small boys, some of them had discovered that it was always as men, never as a man.

She had a delightfully refractory way of making her own laws to govern her own world--a system for which she offered no apology; and this found its vindication in the fact that her world was well-governed--though with absolutism.

The band was blaring something popular and reminiscent of the winter's gayeties, but the brasses gave their notes to the May air, and the May air smoothed and melted them into softness. Duska's eyes were fixed on the green turf of the infield where several sentinel trees pointed into the blue.

Mr. Walter Bellton, having accomplished the marvelous feat of escaping from the bookmaker's maelstrom with the immaculateness of his personal appearance intact, sauntered up to drop somewhat languidly into a chair.

"When one returns in triumph," he commented, "one should have chaplets of bay and arches to walk under. It looks to me as though the reception-committee has not been on the job."

Sarah Preston raised a face shrouded in gravity. Her voice was velvety, but Bellton caught its undernote of ridicule.

"I render unto Caesar those things that are Caesar's--but what is your latest triumph?" She put her question innocently. "Did you win a bet?"

If Mr. Bellton's quick-flashing smile was an acknowledgment of the thrust at his somewhat notorious self-appraisal, his manner at least remained imperturbably complacent.

"I was not clamoring for my own just dues," he explained, with modesty. "For myself, I shall be satisfied with an unostentatious tablet in bronze when I'm no longer with you in the flesh. In this instance I was speaking for another."

He did not hasten to announce the name of the other. In even the little things of life, this gentleman calculated to a nicety dramatic values and effects. Just as a public speaker in nominating a candidate works up to a climax of eulogy, and pauses to let his hearers shout, "Name him! Name your man!" so Mr. Bellton paused, waiting for someone to ask of whom he spoke.

It was little Miss Buford who did so with the debutante's legitimate interest in the possibility of fresh conquest.

"And who has returned in triumph?"

"George Steele."

Sarah Preston arched her brows in mild interest.

"So, the wanderer is home! I had the idea he was painting masterpieces in the *Quartier Latin*, or wandering about with a sketching easel in southern Spain."

"Nevertheless, he is back," affirmed the man, "and he has brought with him an even greater celebrity than himself--a painter of international reputation, it would seem. I met them a few moments ago in the paddock, and Steele intimated that they would shortly arrive to lay their joint laurels at your feet."

Louisville society was fond of George Steele, and, when on occasion he dropped back from "the happy roads that lead around the world," it was to find a welcome in his home city only heightened by his long absence.

"Who is this greater celebrity?" demanded Miss Buford. She knew that Steele belonged to Duska Filson, or at least that whenever he returned it was to renew the proffer of himself, even though with the knowledge that the answer would be as it had always been: negative. Her interest was accordingly ready to consider in alternative the other man.

"Robert A. Saxon--the first disciple of Frederick Marston," declared Mr. Bellton. If no one present had ever heard the name before, the consequential manner of its announcement would have brought a sense of deplorable unenlightenment.

Bellton's eyes, despite the impression of weakness conveyed by the heavy lenses of his nose-glasses, missed little, and he saw that Duska Filson still looked off abstractedly across the bend of the homestretch, taking no note of his heralding.

"Doesn't the news of new arrivals excite you, Miss Filson?" he inquired, with a touch of drawl in his voice.

The girl half-turned her head with a smile distinctly short of enthusiasm. She did not care for Bellton. She was herself an exponent of all things natural and unaffected, and she read between the impeccably regular lines of his personality, with a criticism that was adverse.

"You see," she answered simply, "it's not news. I've seen George since he came."

"Tell us all about this celebrity," prompted Miss Buford, eagerly. "What is he like?"

Duska shook her head.

"I haven't seen him. He was to arrive this morning."

"So, you see," supplemented Mr. Bellton with a smile, "you will, after all, have to fall back on me--I have seen him."

"You," demurred the debutante with a disappointed frown, "are only a man. What does a man know about another man?"

"The celebrity," went on Mr. Bellton, ignoring the charge of inefficiency, "avoids women." He paused to laugh. "He was telling Steele that he had come to paint landscape, and I am afraid he will have to be brought lagging into your presence."

"It seems rather brutal to drag him here," suggested Anne Preston. "I, for one, am willing to spare him the ordeal."

"However," pursued Mr. Bellton with some zest of recital, "I have warned him. I told him what dangerous batteries of eyes he must encounter. It seemed to me unfair to let him charge into the lists of loveliness all unarmed--with his heart behind no shield."

"And he ... how did he take your warning?" demanded Miss Buford.



"I think it is his craven idea to avoid the danger and retreat at the first opportunity. He said that he was a painter, had even been a cow-puncher once, but that society was beyond his powers and his taste."

The group had been neglecting the track. Now, from the grandstand came once more the noisy outburst that ushers the horses into the stretch, and conversation died as the party came to its feet.

None of its members noticed for the moment the two young men who had made their way between the chairs of the verandah until they stood just back of the group, awaiting their turn for recognition.

As the horses crossed the wire and the pandemonium of the stand fell away, George Steele stepped forward to present his guest.

"This is Mr. Robert Saxon," he announced. "He will paint the portraits of you girls almost as beautiful as you really are.... It's as far as mere art can go."

Saxon stood a trifle abashed at the form of presentation as the group turned to greet him. Something in the distance had caught Duska Filson's imagination-brimming eyes. She was sitting with her back turned, and did not hear Steele's approach nor turn with the others.

Saxon's casually critical glance passed rapidly over the almost too flawless beauty of the Preston sisters and the flower-like charm of little Miss Buford, then fell on a slender girl in a simple pongee gown and a soft, wide-brimmed Panama hat. Under the hat-brim, he caught the glimpse of an ear that might have been fashioned by a jeweler and a curling tendril of brown hair. If Saxon had indeed been the timorous man Bellton intimated, the glimpse would have thrown him into panic. As it was, he showed no sign of alarm.

His presentation as a celebrity had focused attention upon him in a manner momentarily embarrassing. He found a subtle pleasure in the thought that it had not called this girl's eyes from whatever occupied them out beyond the palings. Saxon disliked the ordinary. His canvases and his enthusiasms were alike those of the individualist.

"Duska," laughed Miss Buford, "come back from your dreams, and be introduced to Mr. Saxon."

The painter acknowledged a moment of suspense. What would be her attitude when she recognized the man who had stared at her down by the paddock fence?

The girl turned. Except himself, no one saw the momentary flash of amused surprise in her eyes, the quick change from grave blue to flashing violet and back again to grave blue. To the man, the swiftly shifting light of it seemed to say: "You are at my mercy; whatever liberality you receive is at the gift and pleasure of my generosity."

"I beg your pardon," she said simply, extending her hand. "I was just thinking--" she paused to laugh frankly, and it was the music of the laugh that most impressed Saxon--"I hardly know what I was thinking."

He dropped with a sense of privileged good-fortune into the vacant chair at her side.

With just a hint of mischief riffling her eyes, but utter artlessness in her voice, she regarded him questioningly.

"I wonder if we have not met somewhere before? It seems to me----"

"Often," he asserted. "I think it was in Babylon first, perhaps. And you were a girl in Macedon when I was a spearman in the army of Alexander."

She sat as reflective and grave as though she were searching her recollections of Babylon and Macedon for a chance acquaintance, but under the gravity was a repressed sparkle of mischievous delight.

After a moment, he demanded brazenly:

"Would you mind telling me which colt won that first race?"

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## CHAPTER II

"His career has been pretty much a march of successive triumphs through the world of art, and he has left the critics only one peg on which to hang their carping."

Steele spoke with the warmth of enthusiasm. He had succeeded in capturing Duska for a few minutes of monopoly in the semi-solitude of the verandah at the back of the club-house. Though he had a hopeless cause of his own to plead, it was characteristic of him that his first opportunity should go to the praise of his friend.

"What is that?" The girl found herself unaccountably interested and ready to assume this stranger's defense even before she knew with what his critics charged him.

"That he is a copyist," explained the man; "that he is so enamored of the style of Frederick Marston that his pictures can't shake off the influence. He is great enough to blaze his own trail--to create his own school, rather than to follow in the tracks of another. Of course," he hastened to defend, "that is hardly a valid indictment. Every master is, at the beginning of his career, strongly affected by the genius of some greater master. The only mistake lies in following in the footsteps of one not yet dead. To play follow-the-leader with a man of a past century is permissible and laudable, but to give the same allegiance to a contemporary is, in the narrow view of the critics, to accept a secondary place."

The Kentuckian sketched with ardor the dashing brilliance of the other's achievement: how five years had brought him from lethal obscurity to international fame; how, though a strictly American product who had not studied abroad, his *Salon* pictures had electrified Paris. And the girl listened with attentive interest.

When the last race was ended and the thousands were crowding out through the gates, Saxon heard his host accepting a dinner invitation for the evening.

"I shall have a friend stopping in town on his way East, whom I want you all to meet," explained Mr. Bellton, the prospective host. "He is one Senor Ribero, an attache of a South American legation, and he may prove interesting."

Saxon caught himself almost frowning. He did not care for society's offerings, but the engagement was made, and he had now no alternative to adding his declaration of pleasure to that of his host. He was, however, silent to taciturnity as Steele's runabout chugged its way along in the parade of motors and carriages through the gates of the race-track inclosure. In his pupils, the note of melancholy unrest was decided, where ordinarily there was only the hint.

"There is time," suggested the host, "for a run out the Boulevard; I'd like to show you a view or two."

The suggestion of looking at a promising landscape ordinarily challenged Saxon's interest to the degree of enthusiasm. Now, he only nodded.

It was not until Steele, who drove his own car, stopped at the top of the Iroquois Park hill that Saxon spoke. They had halted at the southerly brow of the ridge from which the eye sweeps a radius of twenty miles over purpled hills and polychromatic valleys, to yet other hills melting into a sky of melting turquoise. Looking across the colorful reaches, Saxon gave voice to his enthusiasm.

They left the car, and stood on the rocks that jut out of the clay at the road's edge. Beneath them, the wooded hillside fell away, three hundred feet of precipitous slope and tangle. For a time, Saxon's eyes were busy with the avid drinking in of so much beauty, then once more they darkened as he wheeled toward his companion.

"George," he said slowly, "you told me that we were to go to a cabin of yours tucked away somewhere in the hills, and paint landscape. I caught the idea that we were to lead a sort of camp-life--that we were to be hermits except for the companionship of our palettes and nature and each other--and the few neighbors that one finds in the country, and----" The speaker broke off awkwardly.

Steele laughed.

"'It is so nominated in the bond.' The cabin is over there--some twenty miles." He pointed off across the farthest dim ridge to the south. "It is among hills where--but to-morrow you shall see for yourself!"

"To-morrow?" There was a touch of anxious haste in the inquiry.

"Are you so impatient?" smiled Steele.

Saxon wheeled on his host, and on his forehead were beads of perspiration though the breeze across the hilltops was fresh with the coming of evening. His answer broke from his lips with the abruptness of an exclamation.

"My God, man, I'm in panic!"

The Kentuckian looked up in surprise, and his bantering smile vanished. Evidently, he was talking with a man who was suffering some stress of emotion, and that man was his friend.

For a moment, Saxon stood rigidly, looking away with drawn brow, then he began with a short laugh in which there was no vestige of mirth:

"When two men meet and find themselves congenial companions," he said slowly, "there need be no questions asked. We met in a Mexican hut."

Steele nodded.

"Then," went on Saxon, "we discovered a common love of painting. That was enough, wasn't it?"

Steele again bowed his assent.

"Very well." The greater painter spoke with the painfully slow control of one who has taken himself in hand, selecting tone and words to safeguard against any betrayal into sudden outburst. "As long as it's merely you and I, George, we know enough of each other. When it becomes a matter of meeting your friends, your own people, you force me to tell you something more."

"Why?" Steele demanded; almost hotly. "I don't ask my friends for references or bonds!"

Saxon smiled, but persistently repeated:

"You met me in Mexico, seven months ago. What, in God's name, do you know about me?"

The other looked up, surprised.

"Why, I know," he said, "I know----" Then, suddenly wondering what he did know, he stopped, and added lamely: "I know that you are a landscape-painter of national reputation and a damned good fellow."

"And, aside from that, nothing," came the quick response. "What I am on the side, preacher, porch-climber, bank-robber--whatever else, you don't know." The speaker's voice was hard.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that, before you present me to your friends, to such people for example--well such people as I met to-day--you have the right to ask; and the unfortunate part of it is that, when you ask, I can't answer."

"You mean----" the Kentuckian halted in perplexed silence.

"I mean," said Saxon, forcing his words, "that God Almighty only knows who I am, or where I came from. I don't."

Of all the men Steele had ever known, Saxon had struck him, through months of intimacy, as the most normal, sane and cleanly constituted. Eccentricity was alien to him. In the same measure that all his physical bents were straight and clean-cut, so he had been mentally a contradiction of the morbid and irrational. The Kentuckian waited in open-eyed astonishment, gazing at the man whose own words had just convicted him of the wildest insanity.

Saxon went on, and even now, in the face of self-conviction of lunacy, his words fell coldly logical:

"I have talked to you of my work and my travels during the past five or six years. I have told you that I was a cow-puncher on a Western range; that I drifted East, and took up art. Did I ever tell you one word of my life prior to that? Do you know of a single episode or instance preceding these few fragmentary chapters? Do you know who, or what I was seven years ago?"

Steele was dazed. His eyes were studiously fixed on the gnarled roots and twisted hole of a scrub oak that hung out over the edge of things with stubborn and distorted tenacity.

"No," he heard the other say, "you don't, and I don't."

Again, there was a pause. The sun was setting at their backs, but off to the east the hills were bright in the reflection that the western sky threw across the circle of the horizon. Already, somewhere below them, a prematurely tuneful whippoorwill was sending out its night call.

Steele looked up, and saw the throat of the other work convulsively, though the lips grimly held the set, contradictory smile.

"The very name I wear is the name, not of my family, but of my race. R. A. Saxon, Robert Anglo Saxon or Robert Anonymous Saxon--take your choice. I took that because I felt that I was not stealing it."

"Go on," prompted Steele.

"You have heard of those strange practical jokes which Nature sometimes--not often, only when she is preternaturally cruel--plays on men. They have pathological names for it, I believe--loss of memory?"

Steele only nodded.

"I told you that I rode the range on the Anchor-cross outfit. I did not tell you why. It was because the Anchor-cross took me in when I was a man without identity. I don't know why I was in the Rocky Mountains. I don't know what occurred there, but I do know that I was picked up in a pass with a fractured skull. I had been stripped almost naked. Nothing was left as a clew to identity, except this----"

Saxon handed the other a rusty key, evidently fitting an old-fashioned lock.

"I always carry that with me. I don't know where it will fit a door, or what lies behind that door. I only know that it is in a fashion the key that can open my past; that the lock which it fits bars me off from all my life except a fragment."

Steele mechanically returned the thing, and Saxon mechanically slipped it back into his pocket.

"I know, too, that a scar I wear on my right hand was not fresh when those many others were. That, also, belongs to the veiled years.

"Some cell of memory was pressed upon by a splinter of bone, some microscopic atom of brain-tissue was disturbed--and life was erased. I was an interesting medical subject, and was taken to specialists who tried methods of suggestion. Men talked to me of various things: sought in a hundred ways to stimulate memory, but the reminder never came. Sometimes, it would seem that I was standing on the verge of great recollections--recollections just back of consciousness--as a forgotten name will sometimes tease the brain by almost presenting itself yet remaining elusive."

Steele was leaning forward, listening while the narrator talked on with nervous haste.

"I have never told this before," Saxon said. "Slowly, the things I had known seemed to come back. For example, I did not have to relearn to read and write. All the purely impersonal things gradually retrieved themselves, but, wherever a fact might have a tentacle which could grasp the personal--the ego--that fact eluded me."

"How did you drift into art?" demanded Steele.

"That is it: I drifted into it. I had to drift. I had no compass, no port of departure or destination. I was a derelict without a flag or name."

"At the Cincinnati Academy, where I first studied, one of the instructors gave me a hint. He felt that I was struggling for something which did not lie the way of his teaching. By that time, I had acquired some little efficiency and local reputation. He told me that Marston was the master for me to study, and he advised me to go further East where I could see and understand his work. I came, and saw, 'The Sunset in Winter.' You know the rest."

"But, now," Steele found himself speaking with a sense of relief, "now, you are Robert A. Saxon. You have made yourself from unknown material, but you have made yourself a great painter. Why not be satisfied to abandon this unknown past as the past has abandoned you?"

"Wait," the other objected, with the cold emphasis of a man who will not evade, or seek refuge in specious alternatives.

"Forget to-night who I am, and to-morrow I shall have no assurance that the police are not searching for me. Why, man, I may have been a criminal. I have no way of knowing. I am hand-tied. Possibly, I have a wife and family waiting for me somewhere--needing me!"

His breath came in agitated gasps.

"I am two men, and one of them does not know the other. Sometimes, it threatens me with madness--sometimes, for a happy interval, I almost forget it. At first, it was insupportable, but the vastness of the prairie and the calm of the mountain seemed to soothe me into sanity, and give me a grip on myself. The starlight in my face during nights spent in the saddle--that was soothing; it was medicine for my sick brain. These things at least made me physically perfect. But, since yesterday is sealed, I must remain to some extent the recluse. The sort of intercourse we call society I have barred. That is why I am anxious for your cabin, rather than your clubs and your entertainments."

"You didn't have to tell me," said Steele slowly, "but I'm glad you did. I and my friends are willing to gauge your past by

your present. But I'm glad of your confidence."

Saxon raised his face, and his eyes wore an expression of gratification.

"Yes, I'm glad I told you. If I should go out before I solve it, and you should ever chance on the answer, I'd like my own name over me--and both dates, birth as well as death. My work is, of course, to learn it all--if I can; and I hope--" he forced a laugh--"when I meet the other man, he will be fit to shake hands with."

"Listen," Steele spoke eagerly. "How long has it been?"

"Over six years."

"Then, why not go on and round out the seven? Seven years of absolute disappearance gives a man legal death. Let the old problem lie, and go forward as Robert Saxon. That is the simplest way."

The other shook his head.

"That would be an evasion. It would prove nothing. If I discover responsibilities surviving from the past, I must take them up."

"What did the physicians say?"

"They didn't know." Saxon shook his head. "Perhaps, some strong reminder may at some unwarned moment open the volume where it was closed; perhaps, it will never open. To-morrow morning, I may awaken Robert Saxon--or the other man." He paused, then added quietly: "Such an unplaced personality had best touch other lives as lightly as it can."

Steele went silently over, and cranked the machine. As he straightened up, he asked abruptly:

"Would you prefer calling off this dinner?"

"No." The artist laughed. "We will take a chance on my remaining myself until after dinner, but as soon as convenient--"

"To-morrow," promised Steele, "we go to the cabin."

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### CHAPTER III

Perhaps, the same futile vanity that led Mr. Bellton to import the latest sartorial novelties from the *Rue de la Paix* for the adornment of his person made him fond of providing foreign notables to give color to his entertainments.

Mr. Bellton was at heart the *poseur*, but he was also the fighter. Even when he carried the war of political reform into sections of the town where the lawless elements had marked him for violence, he went stubbornly in the conspicuousness of ultra-tailoring. Though he loved to address the proletariat in the name of brotherhood, he loved with a deeper passion the exclusiveness of presiding as host at a board where his guests included the "best people."

Senor Ribero, who at home used the more ear-filling entitlement of Senor Don Ricardo de Ribero y Pierola, was hardly a notable, yet he was a new type, and, even before the ladies had emerged from their cloak-room and while the men were apart in the grill, the host felt that he had secured a successful ingredient for his mixture of personal elements.

After the fashion of Latin-American diplomacy, educated in Paris and polished by great latitude of travel, the attache had the art of small talk and the charm of story-telling. To these recommendations, he added a slender, almost military carriage, and the distinction of Castilian features.

A punctured tire had interrupted the homeward journey of Steele and Saxon, who had telephoned to beg that the dinner go on, without permitting their tardiness to delay the more punctual.

The table was spread in a front room with a balcony that gave an outlook across the broad lawn and the ancient trees which bordered the sidewalk. At the open windows, the May air that stirred the curtains was warm enough to suggest summer, and new enough after the lately banished winter to seem wonderful—as though the rebirth of nature had wrought its miracle for the first time.

Ribero was the only guest who needed presentation, and, as he bowed over the hand of each woman, it was with an almost ornate ceremoniousness of manner.

Duska Filson, after the spontaneous system of her opinions and prejudices, disliked the South American. To her imaginative mind, there was something in his jetlike darkness and his quick, almost tigerish movements that suggested the satanic. But, if the impression she received was not flattering to the guest, the impression she made was evidently profound. Ribero glanced at her with an expression of extreme admiration, and dropped his dark lashes as though he would veil eyes from which he could not hope to banish flattery too fulsome for new acquaintanceship.

The girl found herself seated with the diplomat at her right, and a vacant chair at her left. The second vacant seat was across the round table, and she found herself sensible of a feeling of quarantine with an uncongenial companion, and wondering who would fill the empty space at her left. The name on the place card was hidden. She rather hoped it would be Saxon. She meant to ask him why he did not break away from the Marston influence that handicapped his career, and she believed he would entertain her. Of course, George Steele was an old friend and a very dear one, but this was just the point: he was not satisfied with that, and in the guise of lovers only did she ever find men uninteresting. It would, however, be better to have George make love than to be forced to talk to this somewhat pompous foreigner.

"I just met and made obeisance to the new Mrs. Billie Bedford," declared Mr. Bellton, starting the conversational ball rolling along the well-worn groove of gossip. "And, if she needs a witness, she may call on me to testify that she's as radiant in the part of Mrs. Billie as she was in her former role of Mrs. Jack."

Miss Buford raised her large eyes. With a winter's popularity behind her, she felt aggrieved to hear mentioned names that she did not know. Surely, she had met everybody.

"Who is Mrs. Bedford?" she demanded. "I don't think I have ever met her. Is she a widow?"

Bellton laughed across his consomme cup. "Of the modern school," he enlightened. "There were 'no funeral baked meats to furnish forth the marriage feast.' Matrimonially speaking, this charming lady plays in repertoire."

"What has become of Jack Spotswood?" The older Miss Preston glanced up inquiringly. "He used to be everywhere, and I haven't heard of him for ages."

"He's still everywhere," responded Mr. Bellton, with energy; "everywhere but here. You see, the papers were so busy with Jack's affairs that they crowded Jack out of his own life." Mr. Bellton smiled as he added: "And so he went away."

"I wonder where he is now. He wasn't such a bad sort," testified Mr. Cleaver, solemnly. "Jack's worse portion was his better half."

"Last heard," informed Mr. Bellton, "he was seen in some town in South America--the name of which I forget."

Senor Ribero had no passport of familiarity into local personalities, and he occupied the moment of his own conversational disengagement in a covert study of the face and figure beside him. Just now, the girl was looking away at the indolently stirring curtains with an expression of detachment. Flippant gossip was distasteful to her, and, when the current set that way, she drew aside, and became the non-participant.

Ribero read rightly the bored expression, and resolved that the topic must be diverted, if Miss Filson so wished.

"One meets so many of your countrymen in South America," he suggested, "that one might reasonably expect them to lose interest as types, yet each of them seems to be the center of some gripping interest. I remember in particular one episode--"

The recital was cut short by the entrance of Steele and Saxon. Ribero, the only person present requiring introduction, rose to shake hands.



The attache was trained in diplomacy, and the rudiments of diplomacy should teach the face to become a mask when need be, yet, as his eyes met those of Saxon, he suddenly and involuntarily stiffened. For just a moment, his outstretched hand hesitated with the impulse to draw back. The lips that had parted in a casual smile hardened rigidly,

and the eyes that rested on the face of Steele's celebrity were so intently focused that they almost stared. The byplay occupied only a moment, and, as Ribero had half-turned from the table to greet those entering at his back, it escaped the notice of everyone except Saxon himself. The newcomer felt the momentary bar of hostility that had been thrown between them and as quickly withdrawn. The next moment, he was shaking the extended hand, and hearing the commonplace:

"Much pleased, senor."

Ribero felt a momentary flash of shame for the betrayal of such undiplomatic surprise, and made amends with added courtesy when he spoke.

The artist, dropping into his seat at the side of Miss Filson, felt a flush of pleasure at his position. For the instant, the other man's conduct became a matter of negligible importance, and, when she turned to him with a friendly nod and smile, he forgot Ribero's existence.

"Mr. Ribero," announced Mr. Bellton, "was just about to tell us an interesting story when you two delinquents came in. I'm sure he still has the floor."

The diplomat had forgotten what he had been saying. He was covertly studying the features of the man just beyond Miss Filson. The face was turned toward the girl, giving him a full view, and it was a steady, imperturbable face. Now, introduced as raconteur, he realized that he must say something, and at the moment, with a flash of inspiration, he determined to relate a bit of history that would be of interest at least to the narrator. It was not at all the story he might have told had he been uninterrupted, but it was a story that appealed to his diplomatic taste, because he could watch the other face as he told it and see what the other face might betray. This newcomer had jarred him from his usual poise. Now, he fancied it was the other's turn to be startled.

"It was," he said casually, "the narrowest escape from death that I have seen--and the man who escaped was an American."

As Saxon raised his eyes, with polite interest, to those of the speaker, he became aware that they held for him a message of almost sardonic challenge. He felt that the story-teller was only ostensibly addressing the table; that the man was talking at him, as a prosecutor talks at the defendant though he may direct himself to the jury. The sense that brought this realization was perhaps telepathic. To the other eyes and ears, there were only the manner of the raconteur and the impersonal tone of generality.

"It occurred in Puerto Frio," said the South American, reminiscently. He paused for a moment, and smiled at Saxon, as though expecting a sign of confusion upon the mention of the name, but he read only courteous interest and impenetrability.

"This countryman of yours," he went on smoothly, his English touched and softened by the accent of the foreigner, "had indulged in the dangerous, though it would seem alluring, pastime of promoting a revolution. Despite his unscrupulous character, he was possessed of an engaging personality, and, on brief acquaintance, I, for one, liked him. His skill and luck held good so long that it was only when the insurgents were at the gates of the capital that a summary court-martial gave him the verdict of death. I have no doubt that by the laws of war it was a just award, yet so many men are guilty of peddling revolutions, and the demand for such wares is so great in some quarters, that he had my sympathy." The speaker bowed slightly, as though conceding a point to a gallant adversary. It chanced that he was looking directly at Saxon as he bowed.

The painter became suddenly conscious that he was according an engrossed attention, and that the story-teller was narrowly watching his fingers as they twisted the stem of his sauterne glass. The fingers became at once motionless.

"He bore himself so undeniably well when he went out to his place against a blank wall in the plaza, escorted by the firing squad," proceeded Senor Ribero evenly, "that one could not withhold admiration. The picture remains with me. The sun on the yellow cathedral wall ... a vine heavy with scarlet blossoms like splashes of blood ... and twenty paces away the firing squad with their Mausers."

Once more, the speaker broke off, as though lost in retrospection of something well-remembered. Beyond the girl's absorbed gaze, he saw that of the painter, and his dark eyes for an instant glittered with something like direct accusation.

"As they arranged the final details, he must have reflected somewhat grimly on the irony of things, for at that very moment he could hear the staccato popping of the guns he had smuggled past the vigilance of the customs. The sound was coming nearer--telling him that in a half-hour his friends would be victorious--too late to save him."



As Ribero paused, little Miss Buford, leaning forward across the table, gave a sort of gasp.

"He was tall, athletic, gray-eyed," announced the attache irrelevantly; "in his eyes dwelt something of the spirit of the dreamer. He never faltered."

The speaker lifted his sauterne glass to his lips, and sipped the wine deliberately.

"The *teniente* in command inquired if he wished to pray," Ribero added then, "but he shook his head almost savagely. 'No, damn you!' he snapped out, as though he were in a hurry about it all, 'Go on with your rat-killing. Let's have it over with.'"

The raconteur halted in his narrative.

"Please go on," begged Duska, in a low voice. "What happened?"

The foreigner smiled.

"They fired." Then, as he saw the slight shudder of Duska's white shoulder, he supplemented: "But each soldier had left the task for the others.... Possibly, they sympathized with him; possibly, they sympathized with the revolution; possibly, each of the six secretly calculated that the other five would be sufficient. *Quien sabe?* At all events, he fell only slightly wounded. One bullet--" he spoke thoughtfully, letting his eyes drop from Saxon's face to the table-cloth where Saxon's right hand lay--"one bullet pierced his right hand from back to front."

Then, a half-whimsical smile crossed Ribero's somewhat saturnine features, for Miss Filson had dropped her napkin on Saxon's side, and, when the painter had stooped to recover it, he did not again replace the hand on the table.

"Before he could be fired on a second time," concluded the diplomat with a shrug, "a new *presidente* was on his way to the palace. Your countryman was saved."

If the hero of Ribero's narrative was a malefactor, at least he was a malefactor with the sympathy of Mr. Bellton's dinner-party, as was attested by a distinctly audible sigh of relief at the end of the story. But Senor Ribero was not quite through.

"It is not, after all, the story that discredits your countryman," he explained, "but the sequel. Of course, he became powerful in the new regime. It was when he was lauded as a national hero that his high fortunes intoxicated him, and success rotted his moral fiber. Eventually, he embezzled a fortune from the government which he had assisted to establish. There was also a matter of--how shall I say?--of a lady. Then, a duel which was really an assassination. He escaped with blood on his conscience, presumably to enjoy his stolen wealth in his own land."

"I have often wondered," pursued Ribero, "whether, if that man and I should ever be thrown together again, he would know me ... and I have often wished I could remember him only as the brave adventurer--not also as the criminal."

As he finished, the speaker was holding Saxon with his eyes, and had a question in his glance that seemed to call for some expression from the other. Saxon bowed with a smile.

"It is an engrossing story."

"I think," said Duska suddenly, almost critically, "the first part was so good that it was a pity to spoil it with the rest."

Senor Ribero smiled enigmatically into his wine-glass.

"I fear, *senorita*, that is the sad difference between fiction and history. My tale is a true one."

"At all events," continued the girl with vigor, "he was a brave man. That is enough to remember. I think it is better to forget the rest."

It seemed to Ribero that the glance Saxon flashed on her was almost the glance of gratitude.

"What was his name?" she suddenly demanded.

"He called himself--at that time--George Carter," Ribero said slowly, "but gentlemen in the unrecognized pursuits quite frequently have occasion to change their names. Now, it is probably something else."

After the dinner had ended, while the guests fell into groups or waited for belated carriages, Saxon found himself standing apart, near the window. It was open on the balcony, and the man felt a sudden wish for the quiet freshness of the outer air on his forehead. He drew back the curtain, and stepped across the low sill, then halted as he realized that he was not alone.

The sputtering arc-light swinging over the street made the intervening branches and leaves of the sidewalk sycamores stand out starkly black, like a ragged drop hung over a stage.

The May moon was only a thin sickle, and the other figure on the darkly shadowed balcony was vaguely defined, but Saxon at once recognized, in its lithe slenderness and grace of pose, Miss Filson.

"I didn't mean to intrude," he hastily apologized. "I didn't know you were here."

She laughed. "Would that have frightened you?" she asked.

She was leaning on the iron rail, and the man took his place at her side.

"I came with the Longmores," she explained, "and their machine hasn't come yet. It's cool here--and I was thinking--"

"You weren't by any chance thinking of Babylon?" he laughed, "or Macedonia?"

She shook her head. "Mr. Ribero's story sticks in my mind. It was so personal, and--I guess I'm a moody creature. Anyway, I find myself thinking of it."

There was silence for a space, except for the laughter that floated up from the verandah below them, where a few of the members sat smoking, and the softened clicking of ivory from the open windows of the billiard-room. The painter's fingers, resting on the iron rail, closed over a tendril of clambering moon-flower vine, and nervously twisted the stem.

With an impulsive movement, he leaned forward. His voice was eager.

"Suppose," he questioned, "suppose you knew such a man--can you imagine any circumstances under which you could make excuses for him?"

She stood a moment weighing the problem. "It's a hard question," she replied finally, then added impulsively: "Do you know, I'm afraid I'm a terrible heathen? I can excuse so much where there is courage--the cold sort of chilled-steel courage that he had. What do you think?"

The painter drew his handkerchief from his pocket, and wiped his moist forehead, but, before he could frame his answer, the girl heard a movement in the room, and turned lightly to join her chaperon.

Following her, Saxon found himself saying good-night to a group that included Ribero. As the attache shook hands, he held Saxon's somewhat longer than necessary, seeming to glance at a ring, but really studying a scar.

"You are a good story-teller, Mr. Ribero," said Saxon, quietly.

"Ah," countered the other quickly, "but that is easy, senor, where one has so good a listener. By the way, senor, did you ever chance to visit Puerto Frio?"

The painter shook his head.

"Not unless in some other life--some life as dead as that of the pharaohs."

"Ah, well--" the diplomat turned away, still smiling--"some of the pharaohs are remarkably well preserved."



## CHAPTER IV

Steele himself had not been a failure at his art. There was in him no want of that sensitive temperament and dream-fire which gives the artist, like the prophet, a better sight and deeper appreciation than is accorded the generality. The only note missing was the necessity for hard application, which might have made him the master where he was satisfied to be the dilettante. The extreme cleverness of his brush had at the outset been his handicap, lulling the hard sincerity of effort with too facile results. Wealth, too, had drugged his energies, but had not crippled his abilities. If he drifted, it was because drifting in smooth seas is harmless and pleasant, not because he was unseaworthy or fearful of stormier conditions. In Saxon, he had not only recognized a greater genius, but found a friend, and with the insouciance of a graceful philosophy he reasoned it out to his own contentment. Each craft after its own uses! Saxon was meant for a greater commerce. His genius was intended to be an argosy, bearing rich cargo between the ports of the gods and those of men. If, in the fulfillment of that destiny, the shallow of his own lesser talent and influence might act as convoy and guide, luring the greater craft into wider voyaging, he would be satisfied. Just now, that guidance ought to be away from the Marston influence where lay ultimate danger and limitation. He was glad that where people discussed Frederick Marston they also discussed his foremost disciple. Marston himself had loomed large in the star-chart of painting only a dozen years ago, and was now the greatest of luminaries. His follower had been known less than half that long. If he were to surpass the man he was now content to follow, he must break away from Marston-worship and let his maturer efforts be his own--his ultimate style his own. Prophets and artists have from the beginning of time arisen from second place to a preeminent first--pupils have surpassed their teachers. He had hoped that these months in a new type of country and landscape would slowly, almost insensibly, wean Saxon away from the influence that had made his greatness and now in turn threatened to limit its scope.

The cabin to which he brought his guest was itself a reflection of Steele's whim. Fashioned by its original and unimaginative builders only as a shelter, with no thought of appearances, it remained, with its dark logs and white "chinking," a thing of picturesque beauty. Its generous stone chimneys and wide hearths were reminders of the ancient days. Across its shingled roof, the sunlight was spotted with shadows thrown down from beeches and oaks that had been old when the Indian held the country and the buffalo gathered at the salt licks. Vines of honeysuckle and morning-glory had partly preempted the walls. Inside was the odd mingling of artistic junk that characterizes the den of the painter.

Saxon's enthusiasm had been growing that morning since the automobile had left the city behind and pointed its course toward the line of knobs. The twenty-mile run had been a panorama sparkling with the life of color, tempered with tones of richness and soft with haunting splendor. Forest trees, ancient as Druids, were playing at being young in the almost shrill greens of their leafage. There were youth and opulence in the way they filtered the sun through their gnarled branches with a splattering and splashing of golden light. Blossoming dogwood spread clusters of white amid endless shades and conditions of green, and, when the view was not focused into the thickness of woodland interiors, it offered leagues of yellow fields and tender meadows stretching off to soberer woods in the distance. Back of all that were the hills, going up from the joyous sparkle of the middle distance to veiled purple where they met the bluest of skies. Saxon's fingers had been tingling for a brush to hold and his lids had been unconsciously dropping, that his eyes might appraise the colors in simplified tones and values.

At last, they had ensconced themselves, and a little later Saxon emerged from the cabin disreputably clad in a flannel shirt and briar-torn, paint-spotted trousers. In his teeth, he clamped a battered briar pipe, and in his hand he carried an equally battered sketching-easel and paint-box.

Steele, smoking a cigar in a hammock, looked up from an art journal at the sound of a footstep on the boards.

"Did you see this?" he inquired, holding out the magazine. "It would appear that your eccentric demi-god is painting in Southern Spain. He continues to remain the recluse, avoiding the public gaze. His genius seems to be of the shrinking type. Here's his latest sensation as it looks to the camera."

Saxon took the magazine, and studied the half-tone reproduction.

"His miracle is his color," announced the first disciple, briefly. "The black and white gives no idea. As to his personality, it seems to be that of the *poseur*--almost of the snob. His very penchant for frequent wanderings incognito and revealing himself only through his work is in itself a bid for publicity. He arrogates to himself the attributes of traveling royalty. For my master as the man, I have small patience. It's the same affectation that causes him to sign nothing. The arrogant confidence that no one can counterfeit his stroke, that signature is superfluous."

Steele laughed.

"Why not show him that some one can do it?" he suggested. "Why not send over an unsigned canvas as a Marston, and drag him out of his hiding place to assert himself and denounce the impostor?"

"Let him have his vanities," Saxon said, almost contemptuously. "So long as the world has his art, what does it matter?" He turned and stepped from the low porch, whistling as he went.

The stranger strolled along with a free stride and confident bearing, tempted by each vista, yet always lured on by other vistas beyond.

At last, he halted near a cluster of huge boulders. Below him, the creek reflected in rippled counterpart the shimmer of overhanging greenery. Out of a tangle of undergrowth beyond reared two slender poplars. The middle distance was bright with young barley, and in the background stretched the hills in misty purple.

There, he set up his easel, and, while his eyes wandered, his fingers were selecting the color tubes with the deft accuracy of the pianist's touch on the keys.

For a time, he saw only the thing he was to paint; then, there rose before his eyes the face of a girl, and beyond it the sinister visage of the South American. His brow darkened. Always, there had lurked in the background of his thoughts a specter, some Nemesis who might at any moment come forward, bearing black reminders--possible accusations. At last, it seemed the specter had come out of the shadow, and taken the center of the stage, and in the spotlight he wore the features of Senor Ribero. He had intended questioning Ribero, but had hesitated. The thing had been sudden, and it is humiliating to go to a man one has never met before to learn something of one's self, when that man has assumed an attitude almost brutally hostile from the outset. The method must first be considered, and, when early that morning he had inquired about the diplomat, it had been to learn that a night train had taken the man to his legation in Washington. He must give the problem in its new guise reflection, and, meanwhile, he must live in the shadow of its possible tragedy.

There was no element of the coward's procrastination in Saxon's thoughts. Even his own speculation as to what the other man might have been, had never suggested the possibility that he was a craven.

He held up his hand, and studied the scar. The bared forearm, under the uprolled sleeve, was as brown and steady as a sculptor's work in bronze.

Suddenly, he heard a laugh at his back, a tuneful laugh like a trill struck from a xylophone, and came to his feet with a realization of a blue gingham dress, a girlish figure, a sunbonnet and a huge cluster of dogwood blossoms. The sunbonnet and dogwood branches seemed conspiring to hide all the face except the violet eyes that looked out from them. Near by stood a fox terrier, silently and alertly regarding him, its head cocked jauntily to the side.

But, even before she had lowered the dogwood blossoms enough to reveal her face, the lancelike uprightness of her carriage brought recognition and astonishment.

"Do you mind my staring at you?" she demanded, innocently. "Isn't turn-about fair play?"

"But, Miss Filson," he stammered, "I--I thought you lived in town!"

"Then, George didn't tell you that we were to be the closest sort of neighbors?" The merriment of her laugh was spontaneous. She did not confide to Saxon just why Steele's silence struck her as highly humorous. She knew, however, that the place had originally recommended itself to its purchaser by reason of just that exact circumstance--its proximity.

The man took a hasty step forward, and spoke with the brusqueness of a cross-examiner:

"No. Why didn't he tell me? He should have told me! He--" He halted abruptly, conscious that his manner was one of resentment for being led, unwarned, into displeasing surroundings, which was not at all what he meant. Then, as the radiant smile on the girl's face--the smile such as a very little girl might have worn in the delight of perpetrating an innocent surprise--suddenly faded into a pained wonderment, he realized the depth of his crudeness. Of course, she could not know that he had come there to run away, to seek asylum. She could not guess, that, in the isolation of such a life as his uncertainty entailed, associates like herself were the most hazardous; that, because she seemed to him altogether wonderful, he distrusted his power to quarantine his heart against her artless magnetism. As he stood abashed at his own crassness, he wanted to tell her that he developed these crude strains only when he was thrown into touch with so fine grained a nature as her own; that it was the very sense of his own pariah-like circumstance. Then, before she had time to speak, came a swift artistic leaping at his heart. He should have known that she would be here! It was her rightful environment! She belonged as inherently under blossoming dogwood branches as the stars belong beyond the taint of earth-smoke. She was a dryad, and these were her woods. After all, how could it matter? He

had run away bravely. Now, she was here also, and the burden of responsibility might rest on the woodsprites or the gods or his horoscope or wherever it belonged. As for himself, he would enjoy the present. The future was with destiny. Of course, friendship is safe so long as love is barred, and of course it would be only friendship! Does the sun shine anywhere on trellised vines with a more golden light than where the slopes of Vesuvius bask just below the smoking sands? He, too, would enjoy the radiance, and risk the crater.

She stood, not angry, but a trifle bewildered, a trifle proud in her attitude of uptilted chin. In all her little autocratic world, her gracious friendliness had never before met anything so like rebuff.

Then, having resolved, the man felt an almost boyish reaction to light-hearted gayety. It was much the same gay abandonment that comes to a man who, having faced ruin until his heart and brain are sick, suddenly decides to squander in extravagant and riotous pleasure the few dollars left in his pocket.

"Of course, George should have told me," he declared. "Why, Miss Filson, I come from the world where things are commonplace, and here it all seems a sequence of wonders: this glorious country, the miracle of meeting you again--after--" he paused, then smilingly added--"after Babylon and Macedonia."

"From the way you greeted me," she naively observed, "one might have fancied that you'd been running away ever since we parted in Babylon and Macedon. You must be very tired."

"I *am* afraid of you," he avowed.

She laughed.

"I know you are a woman-hater. But I was a boy myself until I was seventeen. I've never quite got used to being a woman, so you needn't mind."

"Miss Filson," he hazarded gravely, "when I saw you yesterday, I wanted to be friends with you so much that--that I ran away. Some day, I'll tell you why."

For a moment, she looked at him with a puzzled interest. The light of a smile dies slowly from most faces. It went out of his eyes as suddenly as an electric bulb switched off, leaving the features those of a much older man. She caught the look, and in her wisdom said nothing--but wondered what he meant.

Her eyes fell on the empty canvas. "How did you happen to begin art?" she inquired. "Did you always feel it calling you?"

He shook his head, then the smile came back.

"A freezing cow started me," he announced.

"A what?" Her eyes were once more puzzled.

"You see," he elucidated, "I was a cow-puncher in Montana, without money. One winter, the snow covered the prairies so long that the cattle were starving at their grazing places. Usually, the breeze from the Japanese current blows off the snow from time to time, and we can graze the steers all winter on the range. This time, the Japanese current seemed to have been switched off, and they were dying on the snow-bound pastures."

"Yes," she prompted. "But how did that--?"

"You see," he went on, "the boss wrote from Helena to know how things were going. I drew a picture of a freezing, starving cow, and wrote back, 'This is how.' The boss showed that picture around, and some folk thought it bore so much family resemblance to a starving cow that on the strength of it they gambled on me. They staked me to an education in illustrating and painting."

"And you made good!" she concluded, enthusiastically.

"I hope to make good," he smiled.

After a pause, she said:

"If you were not busy, I'd guide you to some places along the creek where there are wonderful things to see."

The man reached for his discarded hat.

"Take me there," he begged.

"Where?" she demanded. "I spoke of several places."

"To any of them," he promptly replied; "better yet, to all of them."

She shook her head dubiously.

"I ought not to begin as an interruption," she demurred.

"On the contrary," he argued confidently, "the good general first acquaints himself with his field."

An hour later, standing at a gap in a tangle of briar, where the paw-paw trees grew thick, he watched her crossing the meadow toward the roof of her house which topped the foliage not far away. Then, he held up his right hand, and scrutinized the scar, almost invisible under the tan. It seemed to him to grow larger as he looked.



## CHAPTER V

Horton House, where Duska Filson made her home with her aunt and uncle, was a half-mile from the cabin in which the two painters were lodged. That was the distance reckoned via driveway and turnpike, but a path, linking the houses, reduced it to a quarter of a mile. This "air line," as Steele dubbed it, led from the hill where the cabin perched, through a blackberry thicket and paw-paw grove, across a meadow, and then entered, by a picket gate and rose-cumbered fence, the old-fashioned garden of the "big house."

Before the men had been long at their summer place, the path had become as well worn as neighborly paths should be. To the gracious household at Horton House, they were "the boys." Steele had been on lifelong terms of intimacy, and the guest was at once taken into the family on the same basis as the host.

"Horton House" was a temple dedicated to hospitality. Mrs. Horton, its delightful mistress, occasionally smiled at the somewhat pretentious name, but it had been "Horton House" when the Nashville stage rumbled along the turnpike, and the picturesque little village of brick and stone at its back had been the "quarters" for the slaves. It would no more do to rechristen it than to banish the ripened old family portraits, or replace the silver-laden mahogany sideboard with less antique things. The house had been added to from time to time, until it sprawled a commodious and composite record of various eras, but the name and spirit stood the same.

Saxon began to feel that he had never lived before. His life, in so far as he could remember it, had been varied, but always touched with isolation. Now, in a family not his own, he was finding the things which had hitherto been only names to him and that richness of congenial companionship which differentiates life from existence. While he felt the wine-like warmth of it in his heart, he felt its seductiveness in his brain. The thought of its ephemeral quality brought him moments of depression that drove him stalking away alone into the hills to fight things out with himself. At times, his canvases took on a new glow; at times, he told himself he was painting daubs.

About a week after their arrival, Mrs. Horton and Miss Filson came over to inspect the quarters and to see whether bachelor efforts had made the place habitable.

Duska was as delighted as a child among new toys. Her eyes grew luminous with pleasure as she stood in the living-room of the "shack" and surveyed the confusion of canvases, charcoal sketches and studio paraphernalia that littered its walls and floor. Saxon had hung his canvases in galleries where the juries were accounted sternly critical; he had heard the commendation of brother artists generously admitting his precedence. Now, he found himself almost flutteringly anxious to hear from her lips the pronouncement, "Well done."

Mrs. Horton, meanwhile, was sternly and beneficently inspecting the premises from living-room to pantry, with Steele as convoy, and Saxon was left alone with the girl.

As he brought canvas after canvas from various unturned piles and placed them in a favorable light, he found one at whose vivid glow and masterful execution, his critic caught her breath in a delighted little gasp.

It was a thing done in daring colors and almost blazing with the glare of an equatorial sun. An old cathedral, partly vine-covered, reared its yellowed walls and towers into a hot sky. The sun beat cruelly down on the cobbled street while a clump of ragged palms gave the contrasting key of shade.

Duska, half-closing her eyes, gazed at it with uptilted chin resting on slender fingers. For a time, she did not speak, but the man read her delight in her eyes. At last, she said, her voice low with appreciation:

"I love it!"

Turning away to take up a new picture, he felt as though he had received an accolade.

"It might have been the very spot," she said thoughtfully, "that Senor Ribero described in his story."

Saxon felt a cloud sweep over the sunshine shed by her praise. His back was turned, but his face grew suddenly almost gray.

The girl only heard him say quietly:

"Senor Ribero spoke of South America. This was in Yucatan."

When the last canvas had been criticized, Saxon led the girl out to the shaded verandah.

"Do you know," she announced with severe directness, "when I know you just a little better, I'm going to lecture you?"

"Lecture me!" His face mirrored alarm. "Do it now--then, I sha'n't have it impending to terrorize better acquaintance."

She gazed away for a time, her eyes clouding with doubt. At last, she laughed.

"It makes me seem foolish," she confessed, "because you know so much more than I do about the subject of this lecture--only," she added with conviction, "the little I know is right, and the great deal you know may be wrong."

"I plead guilty, and throw myself on the mercy of the court." He made the declaration in a tone of extreme abjectness.

"But I don't want you to plead guilty. I want you to reform."

Not knowing the nature of the reform required, Saxon remained discreetly speechless.

"You are the first disciple of Frederick Marston," she said, going to the point without preliminaries. "You don't have to be anybody's disciple. I don't know a great deal about art, but I've stood before Marston's pictures in the galleries abroad and in this country. I love them. I've seen your pictures, too, and you don't have to play tag with Frederick Marston."

For a moment, Saxon sat twisting his pipe in his fingers. His silence might almost have been an ungracious refusal to discuss the matter.

"Oh, I know it's sacrilege," she said, leaning forward eagerly, her eyes deep in their sincerity, "but it's true."

The man rose and paced back and forth for a moment, then halted before her. When he spoke, it was with a ring like fanaticism in his voice.

"There is no Art but Art, and Marston is her prophet. That is my Koran of the palette." For a while, she said nothing, but shook her head with a dissenting smile, which carried up the corners of her lips in maddeningly delicious fashion. Then, the man went on, speaking now slowly and in measured syllables:

"Some day--when I can tell you my whole story--you will know what Marston means to me. What little I have done, I have done in stumbling after him. If I ever attain his perfection, I shall still be as you say only the copyist--yet, I sometimes think I would rather be the true copyist of Marston than the originator of any other school."

She sat listening, the toe of one small foot tapping the floor below the short skirt of her gown, her brow delightfully puckered with seriousness. A shaft of sun struck the delicate color of her cheeks, and discovered coppery glints in her brown hair. She was very slim and wonderful, Saxon thought, and out beyond the vines the summer seemed to set the world for her, like a stage. The birds with tuneful delirium provided the orchestration.

"I know just how great he is," she conceded warmly; "I know how wonderfully he paints. He is a poet with a brush for a pen. But there's one thing he lacks--and that is a thing you have."

The man raised his brows in challenged astonishment.

"It's the one thing I miss in his pictures, because it's the one thing I most admire--strength, virility." She was talking more rapidly as her enthusiasm gathered headway. "A man's pictures are, in a way, portraits of his nature. He can't paint strong things unless he is strong himself."

Saxon felt his heart leap. It was something to know that she believed his canvases reflected a quality of strength inherent to himself.

"You and your master," she went on, "are unlike in everything except your style. Can you fancy yourself hiding away from the world because you couldn't face the music of your own fame? That's not modesty--it's insanity. When I was in Paris, everybody was raving about some new pictures from his brush, but only his agent knew where he actually was, or where he had been for years."

"For the man," he acceded, "I have as small respect as you can have, but for the work I have something like worship! I began trying to paint, and I was groping--groping rather blindly after something--I didn't know just what. Then, one day, I stood before his 'Winter Sunset.' You know the picture?" She nodded assent. "Well, when I saw it, I wanted to go out to the Metropolitan entrance, and shout Eureka up and down Fifth Avenue. It told me what I'd been reaching through the darkness of my novitiate to grasp. It seemed to me that art had been revealed to me. Somehow," the man added, his voice falling suddenly from its enthused pitch to a dead, low one, "everything that comes to me seems to come by revelation!"

Into Duska's eyes came quick light of sympathy. He had halted before her, and now she arose impulsively, and laid a light hand for a moment on his arm.



"I understand," she agreed. "I think that for most artists to come as close as you have come would be triumph enough, but you--" she looked at him a moment with a warmth of confidence--"you can do a great deal more." So ended her first lesson in the independence of art, leaving the pupil's heart beating more quickly than at its commencement.

In the days that followed, as May gave way to June and the dogwood blossoms dropped and withered to be supplanted by flowering locust trees, Saxon confessed to himself that he had lost the first battle of his campaign. He had resolved that this close companionship should be platonically hedged about; that he would never allow himself to cross the frontier that divided the realm of friendship from the hazardous territory of love. Then, as the cool, unperfumed beauty of the dogwood was forgotten for the sense-steeping fragrance of the locust, he knew that he was only trying to deceive himself. He had really crossed this forbidden frontier when he passed through the gate that separated the grandstand at Churchill Downs from the club-house inclosure. With the realization came the resolution of silence. He was a man whose life might at any moment renew itself in untoward developments. Until he could drag the truth from the sphinx that guarded his secret, his love must be as inarticulate as was his sphinx. He spent harrowing afternoons alone, and swore with many solemn oaths that he would never divulge his feelings, and, when he sought about for the most sacred and binding of vows, he swore by his love for Duska.

Because of these things, he sometimes shocked and startled her with sporadic demonstrations of the brusquerie into which he withdrew when he felt too potential an impulse urging him to the other extreme. And she, not understanding it, yet felt that there was some riddle behind it all. It pained and puzzled her, but she accepted it without resentment--belying her customary autocracy. While she had never gone into the confessional of her heart as he had done, these matters sometimes had the power of making her very miserable.

His happiest achievements resulted from sketching trips taken to points she knew in the hills. He had called her a dryad when she first appeared in the woods, and he had been right, for she knew all the twisting paths in the tangle of the knobs, unbroken and virgin save where the orchards of peach-growers had reclaimed bits of sloping soil. One morning at the end of June, they started out together on horseback, armed with painting paraphernalia, luncheon and rubber ponchos in the event of rain. For this occasion, she had saved a coign of vantage she knew, where his artist's eye might swing out from a shelving cliff over miles of checkered valley and flat, and league upon league of cloud and sky. She led the way by zigzag hill roads where they caught stinging blows from back-lashing branches and up steep, slippery acclivities. It was one of the times when Saxon was drinking the pleasant nectar of to-day, refusing to think of to-morrow. She sang as she rode in advance, and he followed with the pleasure of a man to whom being unmounted brings a sense of incompleteness. He knew that he rode no better than she--and he knew that he could ride. In his ears was the exuberance of the birds saluting the morning, and in his nostrils the loamy aroma stirred by their horses' hoofs from the steeping fragrance of last year's leaves. At the end was a view that brought his breath in deep draughts of delight.

For two hours, he worked, and only once his eyes left the front. On that occasion, he glanced back to see her slim figure stretched with childlike and unconscious grace in the long grass, her eyes gazing unblinkingly and thoughtfully up to the fleece that drifted across the blue of the sky. Clover heads waved fragrantly about her, and one long-stemmed blossom brushed her cheek. She did not see him, and the man turned his gaze back to the canvas with a leap in his pulses. After that, he painted feverishly. Finally, he turned to find her at his elbow.

"What is the verdict?" he demanded.

She looked with almost tense eyes. Her voice was low and thrilled with wondering delight.

"There is something," she said slowly, "that you never caught before; something wonderful, almost magical. I don't know what it is."

With a swift, uncontrollable gesture, he bent a little toward her. His face was the face of a man whose heart is in insurrection. His voice was impassioned.

"I know what it is," he cried. Then, as she read his look, her cheeks crimsoned, and it would have been superfluous for him to have added, "Love." He drew back almost with a start, and began to scrape the paint smears from his palette. He had quelled the insurrection. At least in words, he had not broken his vow.

For a moment, the girl stood silent. She felt herself trembling; then, taking refuge in childlike inconsequence, she peered over the edge of the cliff.

"Oh!" she exclaimed as though the last few moments had not been lived through, "there is the most wonderfulest flower!" Her voice was disappointment-laden. "And it's just out of reach."

Saxon had regained control of himself. He answered with a composure too calm to be genuine and an almost flippant

note that rang false.

"Of course. The most wonderfulest things are always just out of reach. The edelweiss grows only among the glaciers, and the excelsior crop must be harvested on inaccessible pinnacles."

He came and looked over the edge, stopping close to her shoulder. He wanted to demonstrate his regained command of himself. A delicate purple flower hung on the cliff below as though it had been placed there to lure men over the edge.

He looked down the sheer drop, appraised with his eye the frail support of a jutting root, then slipped quietly over, resting by his arms on the ledge of rock and groping for the root with his toe.

With a short, gasping exclamation, the girl bent forward and seized both his elbows. Her fingers clutched him with a strength belied by their tapering slenderness.

"What are you doing?" she demanded.

She was kneeling on the ledge, and in her eyes, only a few inches from his own, he read, not only alarm, but back of that in the depths of the pupils something else. It might have been the reflection of what she had a few moments before read in his own. He could feel the soft play of her breath on his forehead, and his heart pounded so wildly that it seemed to him he must raise his voice to be heard above it. Yet, his words and smile were sane.

"I am going to gather flowers," he assured her. "You see," he added with an irrelevant whimsicality, "I want to see if the unattainable is really beyond me."

"If you go," she said with ominous quietness of voice, "I shall come, too."

The man clambered back to the ledge. "I'm not going," he announced.

For a time, neither spoke. Each, with a consciousness of being much shaken, was seeking about for the safe ground of commonplace. The man's face had suddenly become almost drawn. He was conscious of having been too close to the edge in more ways than one, and with the consciousness came the old sense of necessity for silence. He was approaching one of the moods that puzzled the girl: the attitude of fighting her off; the turtle's churlish defense of drawing into himself.

It was Duska who spoke first. She laughed as she said lightly:

"For a man who is a great artist, you are really very young and very silly."

His voice was hard.

"I'm worse than that," he acceded.

For a moment more, there was awkward silence; then, Duska asked simply:

"Aren't you going to paint any more?"

He was gazing at the canvas moodily, almost savagely.

"No," he answered shortly; "if I were to touch it now, I should ruin it."

The girl said nothing. She half-turned away from him, and her lips set themselves tightly.

As he began packing the impedimenta, storm-pregnant clouds rolled swiftly forth over the valley, and emptied themselves in a deluge on the two wanderers. The girl, riding under dripping trees, her poncho and "nor'wester" shining like metal under the slanting lines of rain, went on ahead. In her man's saddle, she sat almost rigidly erect, and the gauntleted hand that held the reins of the heavy cavalry bridle clutched them with unconscious tautness of grip. Saxon's face was a picture of struggle, and neither spoke until they had come to the road at the base of the hill where two horses could go abreast. Then, he found himself quoting:

"Her hand was still on her sword hilt, the spur was still on her heel,  
She had not cast her harness of gray war-dinted steel;  
High on her red-splashed charger, beautiful, bold and browned,  
Bright-eyed out of the battle, the Young Queen rode to be crowned."

He did not realize that he had repeated the lines aloud, until she turned her face and spoke with something nearer to bitterness than he had ever heard in her voice:

"Rode to be crowned--did you say?" And she laughed unhappily.



## CHAPTER VI

For more than a week after the ride to the cliff, Duska withdrew herself from the orbit in which Saxon revolved, and the man, feeling that she wished to dismiss him, in part at least, used the "air line" much less frequently than in the days that had been. Once, when Steele had left the cabin early to dine at the "big house," Saxon protested that he must stay and write letters. He slipped away, however, in the summer starlight, and took one of the canoes from the boat-house on the river. He drove the light craft as noiselessly and gloomily as a funeral barge along the shadow of the bank, the victim of utter misery, and his blackness of mood was intensified when he saw a second canoe pass in mid-channel, and recognized Steele's tenor in the drifting strains of a sentimental song. There was no moon, and the river was only a black mirror for the stars. The tree-grown banks were blacker fringes of shadow, but he could make out a slender figure wielding the stern paddle with an easy grace which he knew was Duska's. His sentiment was in no wise jealousy, but it was in every wise heart-hunger.

When they did meet, she was cordial and friendly, but the old intimate regime had been disturbed, and for the man the sun was clouded. He was to send a consignment of pictures to his Eastern agent for exhibition and sale, and he wished to include several of the landscapes he had painted since his arrival at the cabin. Finding creative work impossible, he devoted himself to that touching up and varnishing which is largely mechanical, and made frequent trips to town for the selection of frames.

So much of his time had been spent at Horton House that unbroken absence would have been noticeable. His visits were, however, rarer, and on one occasion Mrs. Horton made an announcement which he found decidedly startling.

"I have been wanting to take a trip to Cuba early in the fall, and possibly go on to Venezuela where some old friends are in the diplomatic service," she said, "but Mr. Horton pleads business, and I can't persuade Duska to go with me."

At once, Steele had taken up the project with enthusiasm, asking to be admitted to the party and beginning an outline of plans.

Saxon found himself shuddering at the idea of the girl's going to the coast where perhaps he himself had a criminal record. He had procrastinated too long. He had secretly planned his own trip of self-investigation for a time when the equatorial heat had begun to abate its midsummer ferocity. Evidently, he must hasten his departure. But the girl's answer in part reassured him.

"It doesn't appeal, Aunty. Why not get the Longmores? They are always ready to go touring. They've exhausted the far East, and are weeping for new worlds."

Saxon went back early that night, and once more tramped the woods. Steele lingered, and later, while the whippoorwills were calling and a small owl plaintively lamenting, he and Duska sat alone on the white-columned verandah.

"Duska," he said suddenly, "is there no chance for me--no little outside chance?"

She looked up, and shook her head slowly.

"I wish I could say something else, George," she answered earnestly, "because I love you as a very dearest brother and friend, but that is all it can ever be."

"Is there no way I can remake or remold myself?" he urged. "I have held the Platonic attitude all summer, but to-night makes all the old uncontrollable thoughts rise up and clamor for expression. Is there no way?"

"George"--her voice was very soft--"it hurts me to hurt you--but I'd have to lie to you if I said there was a way. There can't be--ever."

"Is there any--any new reason?" he asked.

For a moment, she hesitated in silence, and the man bent forward.

"I shouldn't have asked that, Duska--I don't ask it," he hastened to amend. "Whether there is a new reason or just all the old ones, is there any way I can help--any way, leaving myself out of it, of course?"

Again, she shook her head.

"I guess there's no way anyone can help," she said.

Back at the cabin, Steele found his guest moodily pacing the verandah. The glow of his pipe bowl was a point of red against the black. The Kentuckian dropped into a chair, and for a time neither spoke.

At last, Steele said slowly:

"Bob, I have just asked Duska if I had a chance."

The other man wheeled in astonishment. Steele had indeed maintained his Platonic pose so well that the other had not suspected the fire under what he believed to be an extinct crater. His own feeling had been the one thing he had not confided. They had never spoken to each other of Duska in terms of love.

"You!" he said, dully. "I didn't know--"

Steele rose. With his hand on the door-knob, he paused.

"Bob," he said, "the answer was the old one. It's also been, 'No.' I've had my chance. Of course, I really knew it all the while, and yet I had to ask once more. I sha'n't ask again. It hurts her--and I want to see her happy." He turned and went in, closing the door behind him.

But Duska was far from happy, however much Steele and others might wish to see her so. She spent much time in solitary rides and walks. She knew now that she loved Saxon, and she knew that he had shown in every wordless way that he loved her, yet could she be mistaken? Would he ever speak, since he had not spoken at the cliff? Her own eyes had held a declaration, and she had read in his that he understood the message. His silence at that time must be taken to mean silence for all time.

Saxon had reached his conclusion. He knew that he had hurt her pride, had rejected his opportunity. But that might be a transient grief for her. For him, it would of course be permanent. Men may love at twenty, and recover and love again, even to the number of many times, but to live to the age which he guessed his years would total, and then love as he did, was irremediable. For just that reason, he must remain silent, and must go away. To enter her life by the gate she seemed willing to open for him would mean the taking into that sacred inclosure of every hideous possibility that clouded his own future. He must not enter the gate, and, in order to be sure that a second mad impulse would not drive him through it, he must put distance between himself and the gate.

On one point, he temporized. He was eager to do one piece of work that should be his masterpiece. The greatest achievement of his art life must be her portrait. He wanted to paint it, not in the conventional evening-gown in which she seemed a young queen among women, but in the environment that he liked to think was her own by divine right. It was the dryad that he sought to put on canvas.

He asked her with so much genuine pleading in his voice that she smilingly consented, and the sittings began in the old-fashioned garden at Horton House. She was posed under a spread of branches and in such a position that the sun struck down through the leaves, kissing into color her cheeks and eyes and hair. It was a pose that called for a daring palette, one which, if he succeeded in getting on his canvas what he felt, would give a result whereon he might well rest his reputation. But to him it meant more than just that, for it was giving expression to what he saw through his love of art and his art of love.

The hours given to the first sittings were silent hours, but that was not remarkable. Saxon always worked in silence, though there were times when he painted with gritted teeth because of thoughts he read in the face he was studying--thoughts which the model did not know her face revealed. At times, Mrs. Horton sat in the shade near by, and watched the hand that nursed the canvas with its brush, the steady, bare forearm that needed no mahlstick for support and the eyes that were narrowed to slits as he studied his tones and wide as he painted. Sometimes, Steele lingered near with a novel which he read aloud, but it happened that in the final sittings there was no one save painter and model.

It was now late in July, and the canvas had begun to take form with a miraculous quality and glow. Perhaps, the man himself did not realize that he could never again paint such a portrait, or any landscape that would be comparable with it. Some men write love-letters that are wonderful heart documents, but they write them in black and white, with words. Saxon was not only writing a love-letter, but was painting all that his resolve did not let him say. He was putting into the work pent-up love of such force that it was almost bursting his heart. Here on canvas as through some wonderful safety-valve, he was passionately converting it all into the vivid eloquence of color.

It had been his fancy, since the picture had become something more than a strong, preliminary sketch, that Duska should not see it until it neared completion, and she, wishing to have her impression one unspoiled by foretastes, had assented to the idea. Each day after the posing ended, and while he rested, and let her rest, the face of the canvas was covered with another which was blank. Finally came the time to ask her opinion. The afternoon light had begun to change with the hint of lengthening shadows. The out-door world was aglow with gracious weather and the air had the wonderful, almost pathetic softness that sometimes comes to Kentucky for a few days in July, bringing, as it seems, a fragment strayed out of Indian Summer and lost in the mid-heat of the year.

The man stood back and covered the portrait, then, when the girl had seated herself before the easel, he stepped forward, and laid his hand on the covering. He hesitated a moment, and his fingers on the blank canvas trembled. He was unveiling the effort of his life, and to him she was the world. If he had failed! Then, with a deft movement, he lifted the concealing canvas, and waited.

For a moment, the girl looked with bated breath, then something between a groan and a stifled cry escaped her. She turned her eyes to him, and rose unsteadily from her seat. Her hands went to her breast, and she wavered as though she would fall. Saxon was at her side in a moment, and, as he supported her, he felt her arm tremble.

"Are you ill?" he asked, in a frightened voice.

She shook her head, and smiled. She had read the love-letters, and she had read, too, what silence must cost him. Other persons might see only wonderful art in the portrait, but she saw all the rest, and, because she saw it, silence seemed futile.

"It is a miracle!" she whispered.

The man stood for a moment at her side, then his face became gray, and he half-wheeled and covered it with his hands.

The girl took a quick step to his side, and her young hands were on his shoulders.

"What is it, dear?" she asked.

With an exclamation that stood for the breaking of all the dykes he had been building and fortifying and strengthening through the past months, he closed his arms around her, and crushed her to him.

For a moment, he was oblivious of every lesser thing. The past, the future had no existence. Only the present was alive and vital and in love. There was no world but the garden, and that world was flooded with the sun and the light of love. The present could not conceivably give way to other times before or after. It was like the hills that looked down--unchangeable to the end of things!

Nothing else could count--could matter. The human heart and human brain could not harbor meaner thoughts. She loved him. She was in his arms, therefore his arms circled the universe. Her breath was on his face, and life was good.

Then came the shock of realization. His sphinx rose before him--not a sphinx that kept the secrets of forty dead centuries, but one that held in cryptic silence all the future. He could not offer a love tainted with such peril without explaining how tainted it was. Now, he must tell her everything.

"I love you," he found himself repeating over and over; "I love you."

He heard her voice, through singing stars:

"I love you. I have never said that to anyone else--never until now. And," she added proudly, "I shall never say it again--except to you."

In his heart rose a torrent of rebellion. To tell her now--to poison her present moment, wonderful with the happiness of surrender--would be cruel, brutal. He, too, had the right to his hour of happiness, to a life of happiness! In the strength of his exaltation, it seemed to him that he could force fate to surrender his secret. He would settle things without making her a sharer in the knowledge that peril shadowed their love. He would find a way!

Standing there with her close to his heart, and her own palpitating against his breast, he felt more than a match for mere facts and conditions. It seemed ridiculous that he had allowed things to bar his way so long. Now, he was thrice armed, and must triumph!

"I know now why the world was made," he declared, joyfully. "I know why all the other wonderful women and all the other wonderful loves from the beginning of time have been! It was," he announced with the supreme egotism of the moment, "that I might compare them with this."

And so the resolve to be silent was cast away, and after it went the sudden resolve to tell everything. Saxon, feeling only triumph, did not realize that he had, in one moment, lost his second and third battles.

An hour later, they strolled back together toward the house. Saxon was burdened with the canvas on which he had painted his masterpiece. They were silent, but walking on the milky way, their feet stirring nothing meaner than stardust. On the verandah, Steele met them, and handed his friend a much-forwarded letter, addressed in care of the Louisville club where he had dined. It bore the stamp of a South American Republic.

It was not until he had gone to his room that night that the man had time to glance at it, or even to mark its distant

starting point. Then, he tore open the envelope, and read this message:

"MY ERSTWHILE COMRADE:

"Though I've had no line from you in these years I don't flatter myself that you've forgotten me. It has come to my hearing through certain channels--subterranean, of course--that your present name is Saxon and that you've developed genius and glory as a paint-wizard.

"It seems you are now a perfectly respectable artist! Congratulations--also bravo!

"My object is to tell you that I've tried to get word to you that despite appearances it was not I who tipped you off to the government. That is God's truth and I can prove it. I would have written before, but since you beat it to God's Country and went West your whereabouts have been a well-kept secret. I am innocent, as heaven is my witness! Of course, I am keeping mum.

"H. S. R."



## CHAPTER VII

A short time ago, Saxon had felt stronger than all the forces of fate. He had believed that circumstances were plastic and man invincible. Now, as he bent forward in his chair, the South American letter hanging in limp fingers and the coal-oil lamp on the table throwing its circle of light on the foreign postmark and stamp of the envelope, he realized that the battle was on. The forces of which he had been contemptuous were to engage him at once, with no breathing space before the combat. Viewing it all in this light, he felt the qualms of a general who encounters an aggressive enemy before his line is drawn and his battle front arranged.

He had so entirely persuaded himself that his duty was clear and that he must not speak to the girl of love that now, when he had done so, his entire plan of campaign must be revised, and new problems must be considered. When he had been swept away on the tide that carried him to an avowal, it had been with the vague sense of realization that, if he spoke at all, he must tell the whole story. He had not done so, and now came a new question: Had he the right to tell the story until, in so far as possible, he had probed its mystery? Suppose his worst fears proved themselves. The certainty would be little harder to confess than the presumption and the suspense. Suppose, on the other hand, the fighting chance to which every man clings should, after all, acquit him? Would it not be needless cruelty to inflict on her the fears that harried his own thoughts? Must he not try first to arm himself with a definite report for, or against, himself?

After all, he argued weakly, or perhaps it was the devil's advocate that whispered the insidious counsel, there might be a mistake. The man of Ribero's story might still be some one else. He had never felt the instincts of murder. Surely, he had not been the embezzler, the libertine, the assassin! But, in answer to that argument, his colder logic contended there might have been to his present Dr. Jekyll a Mr. Hyde of the past. The letter he held in his hand of course meant nothing more than that Ribero had talked to some one. It might be merely the fault of some idle gossip in a Latin-American cafe, when the claret flowed too freely. The writer, this unknown "H. S. R.," had probably taken Ribero's testimony at its face value. Then, out of the page arose insistently the one sentence that did mean something more, the new link in a chain of definite conclusion. "Since you beat it to God's Country and went West--" That was the new evidence this anonymous witness had contributed. He had certainly gone West!

Assuredly, he must go to South America, and prosecute himself. To do this meant to thrust himself into a situation that held a hundred chances, but there was no one else who could determine it for him. It was not merely a matter of collecting and sifting evidence. It was also a test of subjecting his dormant memory to the stimulus of place and sights and sounds and smells. When he stood at the spot where Carter had faced his executioners, surely, if he were Carter, he would awaken to self-recognition. He would slip away on some pretext, and try out the issue, and then, when he spoke to Duska, he could speak in definite terms. And if he were the culprit? The question came back as surely as the pendulum swings to the bottom of the arc, and rested at the hideous conviction that he must be the malefactor. Then, Saxon rose and paced the floor, his hand convulsively crushing the letter into a crumpled wad.

Well, he would not come back! If that were his world, he would not reenter it. He was willing to try himself--to be his own prosecutor, but, if the thing spelled a sentence of disgrace, he reserved the right to be also his own executioner.

Then, the devil's advocate again whispered seductively into his perplexity.

Suppose he went and tested the environment, searching conscience and memory--and suppose no monitor gave him an answer. Would he not then have the right to assume his innocence? Would he not have the right to feel certain that his memory, so stimulated and still inactive, was not only sleeping, but dead? Would he not be justified in dismissing the fear of a future awakening, and, as Steele had suggested, in going forward in the person of Robert A. Saxon, abandoning the past as completely as he had perhaps abandoned previous incarnations?

So, for the time, he stilled his fears, and under his brush the canvases became more wonderful than they had ever been. He had Duska at his side, not only in the old intimacy, but in the new and more wonderful intimacy that had come of her acknowledged love. He would finish the half-dozen pictures needed to complete the consignment for the Eastern and European exhibits, then he would start on his journey.

A week later, Saxon took Duska to a dance at the club-house on the top of one of the hills of the ridge, and, after she had tired of dancing, they had gone to a point where the brow of the knob ran out to a jutting promontory of rock. It was a cape in the dim sea of night mist which hung upon, and shrouded, the flats below. Beyond the reaches of silver gray, the more distant hills rose in mystic shadow-shapes of deep cobalt. There were stars overhead, but they were pale in the whiter light of the moon, and all the world was painted, as the moon will paint it, in silvers and blues.

Back of them was the softened waltz-music that drifted from the club-house and the bright patches of color where the



Chinese lanterns swung among the trees.

As they talked, the man felt with renewed force that the girl had given him her love in the wonderful way of one who gives but once, and gives all without stint or reserve. It was as though she had presented him unconditionally with the key to the archives of her heart, and made him possessor of the unspent wealth of all the Incas.

Suddenly, he realized that his plan of leaving her without explanation, on a quest that might permit no return, was meeting her gift with half-confidence and deception. What he did with himself now, he did with her property. He was not at liberty to act without her full understanding and sympathy in his undertakings. The plan was one of infinite brutality.

He must tell her everything, and then go. He struck a match for his cigar, to give himself a moment of arranging his words, and, as he stood shielding the light against a faintly stirring breeze, the miniature glare fell on her delicately chiseled lips and nose and chin. Her expression made him hesitate. She was very young, very innocently childlike and very happy. To tell her now would be like spoiling a little girls' party. It must be told soon, but not while the dance music was still in their ears and the waxy smell of the dance candles still in their nostrils.

When he left her at Horton House, he did not at once return to the cabin. He wanted the open skies for his thoughts, and there was no hope of sleep.

He retraced his steps from the road, and wandered into the old-fashioned garden. At last, he halted by the seat where he had posed her for the portrait. The moon was sinking, and the shadows of the garden wall and trees and shrubs fell in long, fantastic angles across the silvered earth. The house itself was dark except where the panes of her window still glowed. Standing between the tall stalks of the hollyhocks, he held his watch up to the moon. It was half-past two o'clock.

Then, he looked up and started with surprise as he saw her standing in the path before him. At first, he thought that his imagination had projected her there. Since she had left him at the stairs, the picture she had made in her white gown and red roses had been vividly permanent, though she herself had gone.

But, now, her voice was real.

"Do you prowl under my windows all night, kind sir?" she laughed, happily. "I believe you must be almost as much in love as I am."

The man reached forward, and seized her hand.

"It's morning," he said. "What are you doing here?"

"I couldn't sleep," she assured him. Then, she added serenely: "Do you suppose that the moon shines like this every night, or that I can always expect times like these? You know," she taunted, "it was so hard to get you to admit that you cared that it was an achievement. I must be appreciative, mustn't I? You are an altogether reserved and cautious person."

He seized her in his arms with neither reserve nor caution.

"Listen," he said in an impassioned voice, "I have no right to touch you. In five minutes, you will probably not even let me speak to you. I had no right to speak. I had no right to tell you that I loved you!"

She did not draw away. She only looked into his eyes very solemnly.

"You had no right?" she repeated, in a bewildered voice. "Don't you love me?"

"You don't have to ask that," he avowed. "You know it. Your own heart can answer such questions."

"Then," she decreed with womanlike philosophy, "you had a right to say so--because I love you, and that is settled."

"No," he expostulated, "I tell you I did not have the right. You must forget it. You must forget everything." He was talking with mad impetuosity.

"It is too late," she said simply. "Forget!" There was an indignant ring in her words. "Do you think that I could forget--or that, if I could, I would? Do you think it is a thing that happens every day?"

From a tree at the fence line came the softly lamenting note of a small owl, and across the fields floated the strident shriek of a lumbering night freight.

To Saxon's ears, the inconsequential sounds came with a painful distinctness. It was only his own voice that seemed to

him muffled in a confusion of roaring noises. His lips were so dry that he had to moisten them with his tongue.

To hesitate, to temporize, even to soften his recital, would mean another failure in the telling of it. He must plunge in after his old method of directness, even brutality, without preface or palliation.

Here, at all events, brutality were best. If his story appalled and repelled her, it would be the blow that would free her from the thralldom of the love he had unfairly stolen. If she turned from him with loathing, at least anger would hurt her less than heartbreak.

"Do you remember the story Ribero so graphically told of the filibuster and assassin and the firing squad in the plaza?" As he spoke, Saxon knew with a nauseating sense of certainty that his brain had never really doubted his identity. He had futilely argued with himself, but it was only his eagerness of wish that had kept clamoring concerning the possibility of a favorable solution. All the while, his reason had convicted him. Now, as he spoke, he felt sure, as sure as though he could really remember, and he felt also his unworthiness to speak to her, as though it were not Saxon, but Carter, who held her in his arms. He suddenly stepped back and held her away at arms' length, as though he, Saxon, were snatching her from the embrace of the other man, Carter. Then, he heard her murmuring:

"Yes, of course I remember."

"And did you notice his look of astonishment when I came? Did you catch the covert innuendoes as he talked--the fact that he talked at me--that he was accusing me--my God! recognizing me?"

The girl put up her hands, and brushed the hair back from her forehead. She shook her head as though to shake off some cloud of bewilderment and awaken herself from the shock of a nightmare. She stood so unsteadily that the man took her arm, and led her to the bench against the wall. There, she sank down with her face in her hands. It seemed a century, but, when she looked up again, her face, despite its pallor in the moonlight, was the face of one seeking excuses for one she loves, one trying to make the impossible jibe with fact.

"I suppose you did not catch the full significance of that narrative. No one did except the two of us--the unmasker and the unmasked. Later, he studied a scar on my hand. It's too dark to see, but you can feel it."

He caught her fingers in his own. They were icy in his hot clasp, as he pressed them against his right palm.

"Tell me how it happened. Tell me that--that the sequel was a lie!" She imperiously commanded, yet there was under the imperiousness a note of pleading.

"I can't," he answered. "He seemed to know the facts. I don't."

Her senses were unsteady, reeling things, and he in his evening clothes was an axis of black and white around which the moonlit world spun drunkenly.

Her voice was incredulous, far away.

"You don't know?" she repeated, slowly. "You don't know what you did?"

Then, for the first time, he remembered that he had not told her of the blind door between himself and the other years. He had presented himself only on a plea of guilty to the charge, without even the palliation of forgetfulness.

Slowly steeling himself for the ordeal, he went through his story. He told it as he had told Steele, but he added to it all that he had not told Steele--all of the certainty that was building itself against his future out of his past. He presented the case step by step as a prosecutor might have done, adding bit of testimony after bit of testimony, and ending with the sentence from the letter, which told him that he had gone West. He had played the coward long enough. Now, he did not even mention the hope he had tried to foster, that there might be a mistake. It was all so horribly certain that those hopes were ghosts, and he could no longer call them from their graves. The girl listened without a word or an interruption of any sort.

"And so," he said calmly at the end, "the possibility that I vaguely feared has come forward. The only thing that I know of my other life is a disgraceful thing--and ruin."

There was a long, torturing silence as she sat steadily, almost hypnotically, gazing into his eyes.

Then, a remarkable thing happened. The girl came to her feet with the old lithe grace that had for the moment forsaken her, leaving her a shape of slender distress. She rose buoyantly and laughed! With a quick step forward, she threw her arms around his neck, and stood looking into his drawn face.

He caught at her arms almost savagely.

"Don't!" he commanded, harshly. "Don't!"

"Why?" Her question was serene.

"Because it was Robert Saxon that you loved. You sha'n't touch Carter. I can't let Carter touch you." He was holding her wrists tightly, and pressing her away from him.

"I have never touched Carter," she said, confidently. "They lied about it, dear. You were never Carter."

In the white light, her upturned eyes were sure with confidence.

"Now, you listen," she ordered. "You told me a case that your imagination has constructed from foundation to top. It is an ingenious case. Its circumstantial evidence is skilfully woven into conviction. They have hanged men on that sort of evidence, but here there is a court of appeals. I know nothing about it. I have only my woman's heart, but my woman's heart knows you. There is no guilt in you--there never has been. You have tortured yourself because you look like a man whose name is Carter."

She said it all so positively, so much with the manner of a decree from the supreme bench, that, for a moment, the ghosts of hope began to rise and gather in the man's brain; for a moment, he forgot that this was not really the final word.

He had crucified himself in the recital to make it easier for her to abandon him. He had told one side only, and she had seen only the force of what he had left unsaid. If that could be possible, it might be possible she was right. With the reaction came a wild momentary joyousness. Then, his face grew grave again.

"I had sworn by every oath I knew," he told her, "that I would speak no word of love to you until I was no longer anonymous. I must go to Puerto Frio at once, and determine it."

Her arms tightened about his neck, and she stood there, her hair brushing his face as though she would hold him away from everything past and future except her own heart.

"No! no!" she passionately dissented. "Even if you were the man, which you are not, you are no more responsible for that dead life than for your acts in some other planet. You are mine now, and I am satisfied."

"But, if afterward," he went on doggedly, "if afterward I should awake into another personality--don't you see? Neither you nor I, dearest, can compromise with doubtful things. To us, life must be a thing clean beyond the possibility of blot."

She still shook her head in stubborn negation.

"You gave yourself to me," she said, "and I won't let you go. You won't wake up in another life. I won't let you--and, if you do--" she paused, then added with a smile on her lips that seemed to settle matters for all time--"that is a bridge we will cross when we come to it--and we will cross it together."



## CHAPTER VIII

When he reached the cabin, Saxon found Steele still awake. The gray advance-light of dawn beyond the eastern ridges had grown rosy, and the rosiness had brightened into the blue of living day when an early teamster, passing along the turnpike, saw two men garbed in what he would have called "full-dress suits," still sitting over their cigars on the verandah of the hill shack. A losing love either expels a man into the outer sourness of resentment, or graduates him into a friendship that needs no further testing. Steele was not the type that goes into an embittered exile. His face had become somewhat fixed as he listened, but there had been no surprise. He had known already, and, when the story was ended, he was an ally.

"There are two courses open to you," he said, when he rose at last from his seat, "the plan you have of going to South America, and the one I suggested of facing forward and leaving the past behind. If you do the first, whether or not you are the man they want, the circumstantial case is strong. You know too little of your past to defend yourself, and you are placing yourself in the enemy's hands. The result will probably be against you with equal certainty whether innocent or guilty."

"Letting things lie," demurred Saxon, "solves nothing."

"Why solve them?" Steele paused at his door. "It would seem to me that with her in your life you would be safe against forgetting your present at all events--and that present is enough."

The summer was drawing to its close while Saxon still wavered. Unless he faced the charge that seemed impending near the equator, he must always stand, before himself at least, convicted. Yet, Duska was immovable in her decision, and Steele backed her intuition with so many plausible, masculine arguments that he waited. He was packing and preparing the pictures that were to be shipped to New York. Some of them would be exhibited and sold there. Others, to be selected by his Eastern agent, would go on to the Paris market. He had included the landscape painted on the cliff, on the day when the purple flower lured him over the edge, and the portrait of the girl. These pictures, however, he specified, were only for exhibition, and were not under any circumstances to be sold.

Each day, he insisted on the necessity of his investigation, and argued it with all the forcefulness he could command, but Duska steadfastly overruled him.

Once, as the sunset dyed the west with the richness of gold and purple and orange and lake, they were walking their horses along a hill lane between pines and cedars. The girl's eyes were drinking in the color and abundant beauty, and the man rode silent at her saddle skirt. She had silenced his continual argument after her usual decisive fashion. Now, she turned her head, and demanded:

"Suppose you went and settled this, would you be nearer your certainty? The very disproving of this suspicion would leave you where you were before Senor Ribero told his story."

"It would mean this much," he argued. "I should have followed to its end every clew that was given me. I should have exhausted the possibilities, and I could then with a clear conscience leave the rest to destiny. I could go on feeling that I had a right to abandon the past because I had questioned it as far as I knew."

She was resolute.

"I should," he urged, "feel that in letting you share the danger I had at least tried to end it."

She raised her chin almost scornfully, and her eyes grew deeper.

"Do you think that danger can affect my love? Are we the sort of people who have no eyes in our hearts, and no hearts in our eyes, who live and marry and die, and never have a hint of loving as the gods love? I want to love you that way--audaciously--taking every chance. If the stars up there love, they love like that."

Some days later, Mrs. Horton again referred to her wish to make the trip to Venezuela. To the man's astonishment, Duska appeared this time more than half in favor of it, and spoke as though she might after all reconsider her refusal to be her aunt's traveling companion. Later, when they were alone, he questioned her, and she laughed with the note of having a profound secret. At last, she explained.

"I am interested in South America now," she informed him. "I wasn't before. I shouldn't think of letting you go there, but I guess I'm safe in Puerto Frio, and I might settle your doubts myself. You see," she added judicially, "I'm the one person you can trust not to betray your secret, and yet to find out all about this mysterious Mr. Carter."

Saxon was frankly frightened. Unless she promised that she would do nothing of the sort, he would himself go at once.

He had waited in deference to her wishes, but, if the thing were to be recognized as deserving investigation at all, he must do it himself. He could not protect himself behind her as his agent. She finally assented, yet later Mrs. Horton once more referred to the idea of the trip as though she expected Duska to accompany her.

Then it was that Saxon was driven back on strategy. The idea was one that he found it hard to accept, yet he knew that he could never gain her consent, and her suggestion proved that, though she would not admit it, at heart she realized the necessity of a solution. The hanging of his canvases for exhibition afforded an excuse for going to New York. On his arrival there, he would write to her, explaining his determination to take a steamer for the south, and "put it to the touch, to win or lose it all." There seemed to be no alternative.

He did not take Steele into his confidence, because Steele agreed with Duska, and should be able to say, when questioned, that he had not been a party to the conspiracy. When Saxon stood, a few days later, on the step of an inbound train, the girl stood waving her sunbonnet, slenderly outlined against the green background of the woods beyond the flag-station. A sudden look of pain crossed the man's face, and he leaned far out for a last glimpse of her form.

Steele saw Duska's smile grow wistful as the last car rounded the curve.

"I can't quite accustom myself to it," he said, slowly: "this new girl who has taken the place of the other, of the girl who did not know how to love."

"I know more about it," she declared, "than anybody else that ever lived. And I've only one life to give to it."

Saxon's first mistake was born of the precipitate haste of love. He wrote the letter to Duska that same evening on the train. It was a difficult letter to write. He had to explain, and explain convincingly, that he was disobeying her expressed command only because his love was not the sort that could lull itself into false security. If fate held any chance for him, he would bring back victory. If he laid the ghost of Carter, he would question his sphinx no further.

The writing was premature, because he had to stop in Washington and seek Ribero. He had some questions to ask. But, at Washington, he learned that Ribero had been recalled by government. Then, hurrying through his business in New York, Saxon took the first steamer sailing. It happened to be by a slow line, necessitating several transfers.

It was characteristic of Duska that, when she received the letter hardly a day after Saxon's departure, she did not at once open it, but, slipping it, dispatch-like, into her belt, she called the terrier, and together they went into the woods. Here, sitting among the ferns with the blackberry thicket at her back and the creek laughing below, she read and reread the pages.

For a while, she sat stunned, her brow drawn; then, she said to the terrier in a voice as nearly plaintive as she ever allowed it to be:

"I don't like it. I don't want him ever to go away--and yet--" she tossed her head upward--"yet, I guess I shouldn't have much use for him if he didn't do just such things."

The terrier evidently approved the sentiment, for he cocked his head gravely to the side, and slowly wagged his stumpy tail.

But the girl did not remain long in idleness. For a time, her forehead was delicately corrugated under the stress of rapid thinking as she sat, her fingers clasped about her updrawn knees, then she rose and hurried to Horton House. There were things to be done and done at once, and it was her fashion, once reaching resolution, to act quickly.

It was necessary to take Mrs. Horton into her full confidence, because it was necessary that Mrs. Horton should be ready to go with her, as fast as trains and steamers could carry them, to a town called Puerto Frio in South America, and South America was quite a long way off. Mrs. Horton had known for weeks that something more was transpiring than showed on the surface. She had even inferred that there was "an understanding" between her niece and the painter, and this inference she had not found displeasing. The story that Duska told did astonish her, but under her composure of manner Mrs. Horton had the ability to act with prompt decision. Mr. Horton knew only part, but was complacent, and saw no reason why a trip planned for a later date should not be "advanced on the docket," and it was so ordered.

Steele, of course, already knew most of the story, and it was he who kept the telephone busy between the house and the city ticket-offices. While the ladies packed, he was acquiring vast information as to schedules and connections. He learned that they could catch an outgoing steamer from New Orleans, which would probably put them at their destination only a day or two behind Saxon. Incidentally, in making these arrangements, Steele reserved accommodations for himself as well as Mrs. Horton and her niece.

With the American coast left behind, Saxon's journey through the Caribbean, even with the palliation of the trade-winds, was insufferably hot. The slenderly filled passenger-list gave the slight alleviation of an uncrowded ship. Those few travelers whose misfortunes doomed them to such a cruise at such a time, lay listlessly under the awnings, and watched the face of the water grow bluer, bluer, bluer to the hot indigo of the twentieth parallel, where nothing seemed cool enough for energy or motion except the flying fish and the pursuing gull.

There were several days of this to be endured, and the painter, thinking of matters further north and further south, found no delight in its beauty. He would stand, deep in thought, at the bow when day died and night was born without benefit of twilight, watching the disk of the sun plunge into the sea like a diver. It seemed that Nature herself was here sudden and passionate in matters of life and death. He saw the stars come out, low-hanging and large, and the water blaze with phosphorescence wherever a wave broke, brilliantly luminous where the propeller churned the wake. It was to him an ominous beauty, fraught with crowding portents of ill omen.

The entering and leaving of ports became monotonous. Each was a steaming village of hot adobe walls, corrugated-iron custom houses and sweltering, ragged palms. At last, at a town no more or less appealing than the others, just as the ear-splitting whistle screeched its last warning of departure, a belated passenger came over the side from a frantically-driven row-boat. The painter was looking listlessly out at the green coast line, and did not notice the new arrival.

The newcomer followed his luggage up the gangway to the deck, his forehead streaming perspiration, his none-too-fresh gray flannels splashed with salt water. At the top, he shook the hand of the second officer, with the manner of an old acquaintance.

"I guess that was close!" he announced, as he mopped his face with a large handkerchief, and began fanning himself with a stained Panama hat. "Did the--the stuff get aboard all right at New York?"

The officer looked up, with a quick, cautious glance about him.

"The machinery is stowed away in the hold," he announced.

"Good," replied the newcomer, energetically. "That machinery must be safeguarded. It is required in the development of a country that needs developin'. Do I draw my usual stateroom? See the purser? Good!"

The tardy passenger was tall, a bit under six feet, but thin almost to emaciation. His face was keen, and might have been handsome except that the alertness was suggestive of the fox or the weasel--furtive rather than intelligent. The eyes were quick-seeing and roving; the nose, aquiline; the lips, thin. On them sat habitually a half-satirical smile. The man had black hair sprinkled with gray, yet he could not have been more than thirty-six or seven.

"I'll just run in and see the purser," he announced, with his tireless energy. Saxon, turning from the hatch, caught only a vanishing glimpse of a tall, flannel-clad figure disappearing into the doorway of the main saloon, as he himself went to his stateroom to freshen himself up for dinner.

As the painter emerged from his cabin a few minutes before the call of the dinner-bugle, the thin man was lounging against the rail further aft.

Saxon stood for a moment drinking in the grateful coolness that was creeping into the air with the freshening of the evening breeze.

The stranger saw him, and started. Then, he looked again, with the swift comprehensiveness that belonged to his keen eyes, and stepped modestly back into the protecting angle where he could himself be sheltered from view by the bulk of a tarpaulined life-boat. When Saxon turned and strolled aft, the man closely followed these movements, then went into his own cabin.

That evening, at dinner, the new passenger did not appear. He dined in his stateroom, but later, as Saxon lounged with his own thoughts on the deck, the tall American was never far away, though he kept always in the blackest shadow thrown by boats or superstructure on the moonlit deck. If Saxon turned suddenly, the other would flatten himself furtively and in evident alarm back into the blackness. He had the manner of a man who is hunted, and who has recognized a pursuer.

Saxon, ignorant even of the other's presence, had no knowledge of the interest he was himself exciting. Had his curiosity been aroused to inquiry, he might have learned that the man who had recently come aboard was one Howard Stanley Rodman. It is highly improbable, however, that he would have discovered the additional fact that the "stuff" Rodman had asked after as he came aboard was not the agricultural implements described in its billing, but revolutionary muskets to be smuggled off at sunrise to-morrow to the coast village La Punta, five miles above Puerto

Frio.

Not knowing that a conspirator was hiding away in a cabin through fear of him, Saxon was of course equally unconscious of having as shipmate a man as dangerous as the cornered wolf to one who stands between itself and freedom.

La Punta is hardly a port. The shipping for this section of the east coast goes to Puerto Frio, and Saxon had not come out of his cabin the next morning when Rodman left. The creaking of crane chains disturbed his sleep, but he detected nothing prophetic in the sound. To have done so, he must have understood that the customs officer at this ocean flag station was up to his neck in a revolutionary plot which was soon to burst; that the steamship line, because of interests of its own which a change of government would advance, had agreed to regard the rifles in the hold as agricultural implements, and that Mr. Rodman was among the most expert of traveling salesmen for revolutions and organizers of *juntas*. To all that knowledge, he must then have added the quality of prophecy. It is certain, however, that, had he noted the other's interest in himself and coupled with that interest the coincidence that the initials of the furtive gentleman's name on the purser's list were "H. S. R.," he would have slept still more brokenly.

If he had not looked Mr. Rodman up on the list, Mr. Rodman had not been equally delinquent. The name Robert A. Saxon had by no means escaped his attention.



## CHAPTER IX

Puerto Frio sits back of its harbor, a medley of corrugated iron roofs, adobe walls and square-towered churches. Along the water front is a fringe of ragged palms. At one end of the semicircle that breaks the straight coast line, a few steamers come to anchorage; at the other rise jagged groups of water-eaten rocks, where the surf runs with a cannonading of breakers, and tosses back a perpetual lather of infuriated spray. From the mole, Saxon had his first near view of the city. He drew a long inhalation of the hot air, and looked anxiously about him.

He had been asking himself during the length of his journey whether a reminder would be borne in on his senses, and awaken them to a throb of familiarity. He had climbed the slippery landing stairs with the oppressing consciousness that he might step at their top into a new world—or an old and forgotten world. Now, he drew to one side, and swept his eyes questioningly about.

Before him stretched a broad open space, through which the dust swirled hot and indolent. Beyond lay the Plaza of Santo Domingo, and on the twin towers of its church two crosses leaned dismally askew. A few barefooted natives slouched across the sun-refracting square, their shadows blue against the yellow heat. Saxon's gaze swung steadily about the radius of sight, but his brain, like a paralyzed nerve, touched with the testing-electrode, gave no reflex—no response.

There was a leap at his heart which became hope as his cab jolted on to the Hotel Frances y Ingles over streets that awoke no convicting memories. He set out almost cheerfully for the American Legation to present the letters of introduction he had brought from New York and to tell his story. Thus supplied with credentials and facts, the official might be prepared to assist him.

His second step—the test upon which he mainly depended—involved a search for a yellow cathedral wall, surrounded with red flowers and facing an open area. There, Saxon wanted to stand, for a moment, against the masonry, with the sounds of the street in his ears and the rank fragrance of the vine in his nostrils. There he would ask his memory, under the influence of these reminders, the question the water-front had failed to answer.

That wandering, however, should be reserved for the less conspicuous time of night. He would spend the greater part of the day, since his status was so dubious, in the protection of his room at the hotel.

If night did not answer the question, he would go again at sunrise, and await the early glare on the wall, since that would exactly duplicate former conditions. The night influences would be softer, less cruel—and less exact, but he would go first by darkness and reconnoiter the ground—unless his riddle were solved before.

The American Legation, he was informed, stood as did his hostelry, on the main Plaza, only a few doors distant and directly opposite the palace of the President.

He was met by Mr. Partridge, the secretary of legation. The minister was spending several days at Miravista, but was expected back that evening, or to-morrow morning at the latest. In the meantime, if the secretary could be of service to a countryman, he would be glad. The secretary was a likable young fellow with frank American eyes. He fancied Saxon's face, and was accordingly cordial.

"There is quite a decent club here for Anglo-Saxon exiles," announced Mr. Partridge. "Possibly, you'd like to look in? I'm occupied for the day, but I'll drop around for you this evening, and make you out a card."

Saxon left his letters with the secretary to be given to the chief on arrival, and returned to the "Frances y Ingles."

He did not again emerge from his room until evening, and, as he left the *patio* of the hotel for his journey to the old cathedral, the moon was shining brightly between the shadows of the adobe walls and the balconies that hung above the pavements. As he went out through the street-door, Mr. Howard Stanley Rodman glanced furtively up from a corner table, and tossed away a half-smoked cigarette.

The old cathedral takes up a square. In the niches of its outer wall stand the stone effigies of many saints. Before its triple, iron-studded doors stretches a tiled terrace. At its right runs a side-street, and, attracted by a patch of clambering vine on the time-stained walls, where the moon fell full upon them, Saxon turned into the byway. At the far end, the facade rose blankly, fronting a bare drill-ground, and there he halted. The painter had not counted on the moon. Now, as he took his place against the wall, it bathed him in an almost effulgent whiteness. The shadows of the abutments were inky in contrast, and the disused and ancient cannon, planted at the curb for a corner post, stood out boldly in relief. But the street was silent and, except for himself, absolutely deserted.

For a time, he stood looking outward. From somewhere at his back, in the vaultlike recesses of the building, drifted the



heavy pungency of incense burning at a shrine.

His ears were alert for the sounds that might, in their drifting inconsequence, mean everything. Then, as no reminder came, he closed his eyes, and wracked his imagination in concentrated thought as a monitor to memory. He groped after some detail of the other time, if the other time had been an actual fragment of his life. He strove to recall the features of the officer who commanded the death squad, some face that had stood there before him on that morning; the style of uniforms they wore. He kept his eyes closed, not only for seconds, but for minutes, and, when in answer to his focused self-hypnotism and prodding suggestion no answer came, there came in its stead a torrent of joyous relief.

Then, he heard something like a subdued ejaculation, and opened his eyes upon a startling spectacle.

Leaning out from the shadow of an abutment stood a thin man, whose face in the moon showed a strange mingling of savagery and terror. It was a face Saxon did not remember to have seen before. The eyes glittered, and the teeth showed as the thin lips were drawn back over them in a snarling sort of smile. But the most startling phase of the tableau, to the man who opened his eyes upon it without warning, was the circumstance of the unknown's pressing an automatic pistol against his breast. Saxon's first impression was that he had fallen prey to a robber, but he knew instinctively that this expression was not that of a man bent on mere thievery. It had more depth and evil satisfaction. It was the look of a man who turns a trick in an important game.

As the painter gazed at the face and figure bending forward from the abutment's sooty shadow like some chimera or gargoyle fashioned in the wall, his first sentiment was less one of immediate peril than of argument with himself. Surely, so startling a denouement should serve to revive his memory, if he had faced other muzzles there!

When the man with the pistol spoke, it was in words that were illuminating. The voice was tremulous with emotion, probably nervous terror, yet the tone was intended to convey irony, and was partly successful.

"I presume," it said icily, "you wished to enjoy the sensation of standing at that point--this time with the certainty of walking away alive. It must be a pleasant reminiscence, but one never can tell." The thin man paused, and then began afresh, his voice charged with a bravado that somehow seemed to lack genuineness.

"Last time, you expected to be carried away dead--and went away living. This time, you expected to walk away in safety, and, instead, you've got to die. Your execution was only delayed." He gave a short, nervous laugh, then his voice came near breaking as he went on almost wildly: "I've got to kill you, Carter. God knows I don't want to do it, but I must have security! This knowledge that you are watching me to drop on me like a hawk on a rat, will drive me mad. They've told me up and down both these God-forsaken coasts, from Ancon to Buenos Ayres, from La Boca to Concepcion, that you would get me, and now it's sheer self-defense with me. I know you never forgave a wrong--and God knows that I never did you the wrong you are trying to revenge. God knows I am innocent."

Rodman halted breathless, and stood with his flat chest rising and falling almost hysterically. He was in the state when men are most irresponsible and dangerous.

Meanwhile, a pistol held in an unsteady hand, its trigger under an uncertain finger, emphasized a situation that called for electrical thinking. To assert a mistake in identity would be ludicrous. Saxon was not in a position to claim that. The other man seemed to have knowledge that he himself lacked. Moreover, that knowledge was the information which Saxon, as self-prosecutor, must have. The only course was to meet the other's bravado with a counter show of bravado, and keep him talking. Perhaps, some one would pass in the empty street.

"Well," demanded Rodman between gasping breaths, "why in hell don't you say something?"

Saxon began to feel the mastery of the stronger man over the weaker, despite the fact that the weaker supplemented his inferiority with a weapon.

"It appears to me," came the answer, and it was the first time Rodman had heard the voice, now almost velvety, "it appears to me that there isn't very much for me to say. You seem to be in the best position to do the talking."

"Yes, damn you!" accused the other, excitedly. "You are always the same--always making the big pyrotechnic display! You have grandstanded and posed as the debonair adventurer, until it's come to be second nature. That won't help now!" The thin man's braggadocio changed suddenly to something like a whine.

"You know I'm frightened, and you're throwing a bluff. You're a fool not to realize that it's because I'm so frightened that I am capable of killing you. I've craned my neck around every corner, and jumped at every shadow since that day--always watching for you. Now, I'm going to end it. I see your plan as if it were printed on a glass pane. You've discovered my doings, and, if you left here alive, you'd inform the government."

Here, at least, Saxon could speak, and speak truthfully.

"I don't know anything, or care anything, about your plans," he retorted, curtly.

"That's a damned lie!" almost shrieked the other man. "It's just your style. It's just your infernal chicanery. I wrote you that letter in good faith, and you tracked me. You found out where I was and what I was doing. How you learned it, God knows, but I suppose it's still easy for you to get into the confidence of the *juntas*. The moment I saw you on the boat, the whole thing flashed on me. It was your fine Italian brand of work to come down on the very steamer that carried my guns--to come ashore just at the psychological moment, and turn me over to the authorities on the exact verge of my success! Your brand of humor saw irony in that--in giving me the same sort of death you escaped. But it's too late. Vegas has the guns in spite of you! There'll be a new president in the palace within three days." The man's voice became almost triumphant. He was breathing more normally once again, as his courage gained its second wind.

Saxon was fencing for time. Incidentally, he was learning profusely about the revolution of to-morrow, but nothing of the revolution of yesterday.

"I neither know, nor want to know, anything about your dirty work," he said, shortly. "Moreover, if you think I'm bent on vengeance, you are a damned fool to tell me."

Rodman laughed satirically.

"Oh, I'm not so easy as you give me credit for being. You are trying to 'kiss your way out,' as the thieves put it. You're trying to talk me out of killing you, but do you know why I'm willing to tell you all this?" He halted, then went on tempestuously. "I'll tell you why. In the first place, you know it already, and, in the second place, you'll never repeat any information after to-night. It's idiotic perhaps, but my reason for not killing you right at the start is that I've got a fancy for telling you the true facts, whether you choose to believe them or not. It will ease my conscience afterward."

Saxon stood waiting for the next move, bracing himself for an opportunity that might present itself, the pistol muzzle still pointed at his chest.

"I'm not timid," went on the other. "You know me. Howard Rodman, speakin' in general, takes his chances. But I am afraid of you, more afraid than I am of the devil in hell. I know I can't bluff you. I saw you stand against this wall with the soldiers out there in front, and, since you can't be frightened off, you must be killed." The man's voice gathered vehemence as he talked, and his face showed growing agitation. "And the horrible part is that it's all a mistake, that I'd rather be friends with you, if you'd let me. I never was informant against you."

He paused, exhausted by his panic and his flow of words. Saxon, with a strong effort, collected his staggered senses.

"Why do you think I come for vengeance?" he asked.

"Why do I think it?" The thin man laughed bitterly. "Why, indeed? What except necessity or implacable vengeance could drive a man to this God-forsaken strip of coast? And you--you with money enough to live richly in God's country, you whose very face in these boundaries invites imprisonment or death! What else could bring you? But I knew you'd come--and, so help me God, I'm innocent."

A sudden idea struck Saxon. This might be the cue to draw on the frightened talker without self-revelation.

"What do you want me to believe were the real facts?" he demanded, with an assumption of the cold incredulity that seemed expected of him.

The other spoke eagerly.

"That morning when General Ojedas' forces entered Puerto Frio, and the government seized me, you were free. Then, I was released, and you arrested. You drew your conclusions. Oh, they were natural enough. But, before heaven, they were wrong!"

Saxon felt that, until he had learned the full story, he must remain the actor. Accordingly, he allowed himself a skeptical laugh. Rodman, stung by the implied disbelief, took up his argument again:

"You think I'm lying. It sounds too fishy! Of course, it was my enterprise. It was a revolution of my making. You were called in as the small lawyer calls in the great one. I concede all that. For me to have sacrificed you would have been infamous, but I didn't do it. I had been little seen in Puerto Frio. I was not well known. I had arranged it all from the outside while you had been in the city. You were less responsible, but more suspected. You remember how carefully we planned--how we kept apart. You know that even you and I met only twice, and that I never even saw your man, Williams."

Through the bitterness of conviction, a part of Saxon's brain seemed to be looking on impersonally and marveling,

almost with amusement, at the remarkable position in which he found himself. Here stood a man before him with a pistol pressed close to his chest, threatening execution, denouncing, cursing, yet all the while giving evidence of terror, almost pleading with his victim to believe his story! It was the armed man who was frightened, who dreaded the act he declared he was about to commit. And, as Saxon stood listening, it dawned upon him, in the despair of the moment, that it was a matter of small concern to himself whether or not the other fired. The story he had heard had already done the injury. The bullet would be less cruel.... Rodman went on:

"I bent every effort to saving you, but Williams had confessed. He was frightened. It was his first experience. He didn't know of my connection with the thing. So help me God, that is the true version."

The story sickened Saxon, coming to him as it did in a form he could no longer disbelieve. He raised his hands despairingly. At last, he heard the other's voice again.

"When the scrap ended, and you were in power, I had gone. I was afraid to come back. I knew what you would think, and then, after you left the country, I couldn't find where you had gone."

"You may believe me or not," the painter said apathetically, "but I have forgotten all that. I have no resentment, no wish for vengeance. I had not even suspected you. I give you my word on that."

"Of course," retorted Rodman excitedly, "you'd say that. You're looking down a gun-barrel. You're talking for your life. Of course, you'd lie."

Then, the revolutionist did a foolish and unguarded thing. He came a step nearer, and pressed the muzzle closer against Saxon's chest, his own eyes glaring into those of his captive. The movement threw Saxon's hands out of his diminished field of sight. In an instant, the painter had caught the wrist of the slighter man in a grip that paralyzed the hand, and forced it aside. The pistol fell from the nerveless fingers, and dropped clattering to the flagstones. As it struck, Saxon swept it backward with his foot.

Rodman leaped frantically backward, and stood for a moment rearranging his crumpled cuff with the dazed manner of a man who hopes for no quarter. His lower jaw dropped, and he remained trembling, almost idiotic of mien. Then, as Saxon picked up the weapon and stood fingering its trigger, the filibuster drew himself up really with dignity. He stretched out both empty hands, and shrugged his shoulders.

The fear of an enemy silently stalking him had filled his days with terror. Now that he regarded death as certain, his cowardice dropped away like a discarded cloak.

"I don't ask much," he said simply; "only, for God's sake kill me here! Don't surrender me to the government! At least, let the other fellows know that I was dead before their plans were betrayed."

"I told you," said Saxon in a dull voice, "that I had no designs on you. I meant it! I told you I had forgotten. I meant it!"

As he spoke, Saxon's head dropped forward on his chest, and he stood breathing heavily. The moonlight, falling full on his face, showed such heart-broken misery as might have belonged to the visage of some unresting ghost in an Inferno. His eyes were the eyes of utter despair, and the hand that held the pistol hung limp at his side, the weapon lying loose in its palm. Rodman stood wide-eyed before him. Had he already been killed and returned to life, he could hardly have been more astonished, and, when Saxon at last raised his face and spoke again, the astonishment was greater than ever.

"Take your gun," said the painter, raising his hand slowly, and presenting the weapon stock first. "If you want to kill me--go ahead."

Rodman, for an instant, suspected some subterfuge; then, looking into the eyes before him, he realized that they were too surcharged with sadness to harbor either vengeance or treachery. He could not fathom the meaning, but he realized that from this man he had nothing to fear. He slowly reached out his hand, and, when he had taken the pistol, he put it away in his pocket.

Saxon laughed bitterly.

"So, that's the answer!" he muttered.

Without a word, the painter turned, and walked toward the front of the cathedral; without a word, Rodman fell in by his side, and walked with him. When they had gone a square, Saxon was again himself except for a stonily set face. Rodman was wondering how to apologize. Carter had never been a liar. If Carter said he had no thought of vengeance, it was true, and Rodman had insulted him with the surmise.

Finally, the thin man inquired in a different and much softer voice:

"What are you doing in Puerto Frio?"

"It has nothing to do with revenge or punishment," replied Saxon, "and I don't want to hear intrigues."

A quarter of an hour later, they reached the main plaza, Rodman still mystified and Saxon walking on aimlessly at his side. He had no definite destination. Nothing mattered. After a long silence, Rodman demanded:

"Aren't you taking a chance--risking it in Puerto Frio?"

"I don't know."

There was another pause, broken at last by Rodman:

"Take this from me. Get at once in touch with the American legation, and keep in touch! Stand on your good behavior. You may get away with it." He interrupted himself abruptly with the question: "Have you been keeping posted on South American affairs of late?"

"I don't know who is President," replied Saxon.

"Well, I'll tip you off. The only men who held any direct proof about--about the \$200,000 in gold that left about the same time you did"--Saxon winced--"went into oblivion with the last revolution. Time is a great restorer, and so many similar affairs have intervened that you are probably forgotten. But, if I were you, I would get through my affairs early and--beat it. It's a wise boy that is not where he is, when he's wanted by some one he doesn't want."

Saxon made no reply.

"Say," commented the irrepressible revolutionist, as they strolled into the arcade at the side of the main plaza, "you've changed a bit in appearance. You're a bit heavier, aren't you?"

Saxon did not seem to hear.

The plaza was gay with the life of the miniature capital. Officers strolled about in their brightest uniforms, blowing cigarette smoke and ogling the señoritas, who looked shyly back from under their mantillas.

From the band-stand blared the national air. Natives and foreigners sauntered idly, taking their pleasure with languid ease. But Rodman kept to the less conspicuous sides and the shadows of the arcade, and Saxon walked with him, unseeing and deeply miserable.

Between the electric glare of the plaza and the first arc-light of the *Calle Bolivar* is a corner comparatively dark. Here, the men met two army officers in conversation. Near them waited a handful of soldiers. As the Americans came abreast, an officer fell in on either side of them.

"Pardon, señors," said one, speaking in Spanish with extreme politeness, "but it is necessary that we ask you to accompany us to the Palace."

The soldiers had fallen in behind, following. Now, they separated, and some of them came to the front, so that the two men found themselves walking in a hollow square. Rodman halted.

"What does this signify?" he demanded in a voice of truculent indignation. "We are citizens of the United States!"

"I exceedingly deplore the inconvenience," declared the officer. "At the Palace, I have no doubt, it will be explained."

"I demand that we be taken first to the United States Legation," insisted Rodman.

The officer regretfully shook his head. "Doubtless, señors," he assured them, "your legation will be immediately communicated with. I have no authority to deviate from my orders."

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## CHAPTER X

At the Palace, the Americans were separated. Saxon was ushered into a small room, barely furnished. Its one window was barred, and the one door that penetrated its thick wall was locked from the outside. It seemed incredible that under such stimulus his memory should remain torpid. This must be an absolute echo from the past--yet, he could not remember. But Rodman remembered--and evidently the government remembered.

About the same hour, Mr. Partridge called at the "Frances y Ingles," where he learned that Senor Saxon had gone out. He called again late in the evening. Saxon had not returned.

The following morning, the Hon. Charles Pendleton, Envoy Extraordinary and Minister Plenipotentiary of the United States of America, read Saxon's letters of introduction. The letters sufficiently established the standing of the artist to assure him his minister's interest. Partridge was dispatched to the hotel to bring the traveler to the legation. Partridge came back within the hour, greatly perturbed. Having found that Saxon had not returned during the night, and knowing the customs of the country, he had spent a half-hour in investigating by channels known to himself. He learned, at the end of much questioning and cross-questioning, that the senor, together with another gentleman evidently also an *Americano del Nordo*, had passed the street-door late in the evening, with military escort.

Mr. Partridge hastened to his legation at a rate of speed subversive of all Puerto Frio traditions. In Puerto Frio, haste is held to be an affront to dignity, and dignity is esteemed.

The Hon. Charles Pendleton listened to his subordinate's report with rising choler.

His diplomacy was of the aggressive type, and his first duty was that of making the protecting pinions of the spread eagle stretch wide enough to reach every one of those entitled to its guardianship.

Saxon and Rodman had the night before entered the frowning walls of the Palace through a narrow door at the side. The American minister now passed hastily between files of presented arms. Inside, he learned that his excellency, *el Presidente*, had not yet finished his breakfast, but earnestly desired his excellency, *el ministro*, to share with him an alligator pear and cup of coffee.

In the suave presence of the dictator, the minister's choler did not cease. Rather, it smoldered while he listened perfunctorily to flattering banalities. He had struck through intermediary stages; had passed over the heads of departments and holders of portfolios, to issue his ultimatum to the chief executive. Yet, in approaching his subject, he matched the other's suavity with a pleasantness that the dictator distrusted. The dark face of the autocrat became grave until, when Mr. Pendleton reached the issue, it was deeply sympathetic, surprised and attentive.

"I am informed that some one--I can not yet say who--wearing your excellency's uniform, seized an American citizen of prominence on the streets of Puerto Frio last evening."

The President was shocked and incredulous.

"Impossible!" he exclaimed with deep distress; then, again: "Impossible!"

From the diplomat's eloquent sketching of the situation, it might have been gathered that the United States war department stood anxiously watching for such affronts, and that the United States war department would be very petulant when notification of the incident reached it. Mr. Pendleton further assured his excellency, *el Presidente*, that it would be his immediate care to see that such notification had the right of way over the Panama cable.

"I have information," began the dictator slowly, "that two men suspected of connection with an insurgent *junta* have been arrested. As to their nationality, I have received no details. Certainly, no American citizen has been seized with my consent. The affair appears grave, and shall be investigated. Your excellency realizes the necessity of vigilance. The revolutionist forfeits his nationality." He spread his hands in a vague gesture.

"Mr. Robert Saxon," retorted the minister, "should hardly be a suspect. The fact that he was not a guest at my legation, and for the time a member of my family, was due only to the accident of my absence from the city on his arrival yesterday."

With sudden bustle, the machinery of the Palace was set in motion. Of a surety, some one had blundered, and "some one" should be condignly punished!

It was a very irate gentleman, flushed from unwonted exertion in the tropics, who was ushered at last into Saxon's room. It was a very much puzzled and interested gentleman who stood contemplatively studying the direct eyes of the prisoner a half-hour later.

Saxon had told Mr. Pendleton the entire narrative of his quest of himself, and, as he told it, the older man listened without a question or interruption, standing with his eyes fixed on the teller, twisting an unlighted cigar in his fingers.

"Mr. Saxon, I am here to safeguard the interests of Americans. Our government does not, however, undertake to chaperon filibustering expeditions. It becomes necessary to question you."

There followed a brief catechism in which the replies seemed to satisfy the questioner. When he came to the incident of his meeting with Rodman, Saxon paused.

"As to Rodman," he said, "who was arrested with me, I have no knowledge that would be evidence. I know nothing except from the hearsay of his recital."

Mr. Pendleton raised his hand.

"I am only questioning you as to yourself. This other man, Rodman, will have to prove his innocence. I'm afraid I can't help him. According to their own admissions, they know nothing against you beyond the fact that you were seen with him last night."

Saxon came to his feet, bewildered.

"But the previous matter--the embezzlement?" he demanded. "Of course, I had nothing to do with this affair. It was that other for which I was arrested."

The envoy laughed.

"You punched cows six years ago. You cartooned five years ago, and you have painted landscapes ever since. I presume, if it became necessary, you could prove an alibi for almost seven years?"

Saxon nodded. He fancied he saw the drift of the argument. It was to culminate in the same counsel that Steele had given. He would be advised to allow the time to reach the period when his other self should be legally dead.

Mr. Pendleton paced the floor for a space, then came back and halted before the cot, on the edge of which the prisoner sat.

"I have been at this post only two years, but I am, of course, familiar with the facts of that case." He paused, then added with irrelevance: "It may be that you bear a somewhat striking resemblance to this particularly disreputable conspirator. Of course, that's possible, but--"

"But highly improbable," admitted Saxon.

"Oh, you are not that man! That can be mathematically demonstrated," asserted Mr. Pendleton suddenly. "I was only reflecting on the fallibility of circumstantial evidence. I am a lawyer, and once, as district attorney, I convicted a man on such evidence. He's in the penitentiary now, and it set me wondering if--"

But Saxon stood dumfounded, vainly trying to speak. His face was white, and he had seized the envoy by the arm with a grip too emphatic for diplomatic etiquette.

"Do you know what you are saying?" he shouted. "I am not that man! How do you know that?"

"I know it," responded Mr. Pendleton calmly, "because the incident of the firing-squad occurred five years ago--and the embezzlement only four years back."

Saxon remained staring in wide-eyed amazement. He felt his knees grow suddenly weak, and the blood cascaded through the arteries of his temples. Then, he turned, and, dropping again to the edge of the cot, covered his face with his hands.

"You see," explained Mr. Pendleton, "there is only one ground upon which any charge against you can be reinstated--an impeachment of your evidence as to how you have put in the past five years. And," he smilingly summarized, "since the case comes before this court solely on your self-accusation, since you have journeyed some thousands of miles merely to prosecute yourself, I regard your evidence on that point as conclusive."

Later, the envoy, with his arm through that of the liberated prisoner, walked out past deferential sentries into the Plaza.

"And, now, the blockade being run," he amiably inquired, "what are your plans?"

"Plans!" exclaimed Saxon scornfully; "plans, sir, is plural. I have only one: to catch the next boat that's headed north. Why," he explained, "there is soon going to be an autumn in the Kentucky hills with all the woods a blaze of color."

The minister's eyes took on a touch of nostalgia.

"I guess there's nothing much the matter with the autumn in Indiana, either," he affirmed.

They walked on together at a slow gait, for the morning sun was already beginning to beat down as if it were focused through a burning-glass.

"And say," suggested Mr. Pendleton at last, "if you ever get to a certain town in Indiana called Vevay, which is on some of the more complete maps, walk around for me and look at the Davis building. You won't see much--only a hideous two-story brick, with a metal roof and dusty windows, but my shingle used to hang out there--and it's in God's country!"

Before they had reached the legation, Saxon remembered that his plans involved another detail, and with some secrecy he sought the cable office, and wrote a message to Duska. Its composition consumed a half-hour, yet he felt it was not quite the masterpiece the occasion demanded. It read:

"Arrived yesterday. Slept in jail. Out to-day. Am not he."

The operator, counting off the length with his pencil, glanced up thoughtfully.

"It costs a dollar a word, sir," he vouchsafed.

But Saxon nodded affluently, for he knew that the *City of Rio* sailed north that afternoon, and he did not know that her sister ship, the *Amazon*, with Duska on board, was at this moment nosing its way south through the tepid water--only twenty-four hours away.

As the *City of Rio* wound up her rusty anchor chains that afternoon, Saxon was jubilantly smoking his pipe by the rail.

In the launch just putting off from the steamer's side stood the Hon. Mr. Pendleton, waving his hat, and Jimmy Partridge wildly shouting, "Give my regards to Broadway!" The minister's flag, which had floated over the steamer while the great personage was on board, was just dipping, and Saxon's hand was still cramped under the homesick pressure of the farewell grips.

Suddenly, the traveler had a feeling of a presence at his elbow, and, turning, was profoundly astonished to behold again the complacent visage of Mr. Rodman.

"You see, I still appear to be among those present," announced the filibuster, with some breeziness of manner. "It's true that I stand before you, 'my sweet young face still haggard with the anguish it has worn,' but I'm here, which is, after all, the salient feature of the situation. Say, what did you do to them?"

"I?" questioned Saxon. "I did nothing. The minister came and took me out of their Bastile."

"Well, say, he must have thrown an awful scare into them." Mr. Rodman thoughtfully stroked his chin with a thin forefinger. "He must have intimidated them unmercifully and brutally. They stampeded into my wing of the Palace, and set me free as though they were afraid I had the yellow-fever. 'Wide they flung the massive portals'--all that sort of thing. Now, what puzzles me is, why did they do it? They had the goods on me--almost. However, I'm entirely pleased." Rodman laughed as he lighted a cigar, and waved his hand with mock sentiment toward the shore. "And I had put the rifles through, too," he declared, jubilantly. "I'd turned them over to the *insurrecto* gentleman in good order. Did they clamor for your blood about the \$200,000?"

"Rodman," said Saxon slowly, "I hardly expect you to believe it, but that was a case of mistaken identity. I'm not the man you think. I was never in Puerto Frio before."

Rodman let the cigar drop from his astonished lips, and caught wildly after it as it fell overboard.

"What?" he demanded, at last. "How's that?"

"It was a man who looked like me," elucidated Saxon.

"You are damned right--he looked like you!" Rodman halted, amazed into silence. At last, he said: "Well, you have got the clear nerve! What's the idea, anyhow. Don't you trust me?"

The artist laughed.

"I hardly thought you would credit it," he said. "After all, that doesn't make much difference. The point is, my dear boy, I know it."

But Rodman's debonair smile soon returned. He held up his hand with a gesture of acceptance.

"What difference does it make? A gentleman likes to change his linen--why not his personality? I dare say it's a very decent impulse."

For a moment, Saxon looked up with an instinctive resentment for the politely phrased skepticism of the other. Then, his displeasure changed to a smile. He had, for a moment, felt the same doubt when Mr. Pendleton brought his verdict. Rodman had none of the facts, and a glance at the satirical features showed that it would be impossible for this unimaginative adventurer to construe premises to a seemingly impossible conclusion. He was the materialist, and dealt in palpable appearances. After all, what did it matter? He had made his effort, and would, as he had promised Duska, vex his Sphinx with no more questioning. He would go on as Robert Saxon, feeling that he had done his best with conscientious thoroughness. It was, after all, only cutting the Gordian knot in his life. After a moment, he looked up.

"Which way do you go?" he inquired.

The other man shrugged his shoulders.

"I go back to Puerto Frio--after the blow-off."

"After the blow-off?" Saxon repeated, in interrogation.

"Sure!" Rodman stretched his thin hand shoreward, and dropped his voice. "Take a good look at yon fair city," he laughed, "for, before you happen back here again, it may have fallen under fire and sword."

The soldier of fortune spoke with some of the pride that comes to the man who feels he is playing a large game, whether it be a game of construction or destruction, or whether, as is oftener the case, it be both destruction and construction.

The painter obediently looked back at the adobe walls and cross-tipped towers.

"Puerto Frio has been very good to me," he said, in an enigmatical voice.

But Rodman was thinking too much of his own plans to notice the comment.

"Do you see the mountain at the back of the city?" he suddenly demanded. "That's San Francisco. Do you see anything queer about it?"

The artist looked at the peak rearing its summit against the hot blue overhead, and saw only a sleeping tropical background for the indolent tropical panorama stretching at its base.

"Well--" Rodman dropped his voice yet lower--"if you had a pair of field glasses and studied the heights, you could see a few black specks that are just now disused guns. By day after to-morrow, or, at the latest, one day more, each of those specks will be a crater, and the town will be under a shower of solid shot. There's some class to work that can turn as mild a mannered hill as that into a volcano--no?"

Saxon stood gazing with fascination.

"Meanwhile," he heard the other comment, "shipboard is good enough for yours truly--because, as you know, shipboard is neutral ground for political offenders--and the next gentleman who occupies the Palace will be a friend who owes me something."





## CHAPTER XI

Saxon denied himself the lure of the deck that evening. Though he would probably be close behind his messages in arriving, he was devoting himself to a full narration embodied in a love-letter.

He bent over the task in the closeness of the dining saloon, with such absorption that he did not rise to investigate even when, with a protracted shrieking of whistles, there came sudden cessation from the jarring throb of screw-shaft and engines. Then, the *City of Rio* came to a full stop. He vaguely presumed that another important port had been reached, and did not suspect that the vessel lay out of sight of land, and that a second steamer, southbound, had halted on signal, and lay likewise motionless, her lights glittering just off the starboard bow.

When, almost two hours later, he had folded the last of many pages, and gone on deck for a breath before turning in, the engines were once more noisily throbbing, and he saw only the bulk and lights of another vessel pointed down-world under steam.

But, as usual, Rodman, gentleman of multifarious devices, was not letting facts escape him. Indeed, it was at Rodman's instance that two mail ships, the *City of Rio* and the *Amazon*, had marked time for an hour and a half. In the brewing of affairs, Rodman was just now an important personage, and the commanders of these lines were under instructions from their offices to regard his requests as orders, and to obey them with due respect and profound secrecy. The shifting of administrations at Puerto Frio meant certain advantages in the way of concessions to gentlemen in Wall Street whose word, with these steamers, was something more than influential.

Mr. Rodman had been rowed across from the *Rio* to the *Amazon*, and he had taken with him the hand-luggage that made his only impedimenta. In Mr. Rodman's business, it was important to travel light. If he found Senor Miraflores among the passengers of the *Amazon*, it was his intention to right-about-face, and return south again.

Senor Miraflores had been in the States as the secret and efficient head of that *junta* which Rodman served. He had very capably directed the shipping of rifles and many *sub-rosa* details that must be handled beyond the frontier, when it is intended to change governments without the knowledge or consent of armed and entrenched incumbents. The home-coming of Senor Miraflores must of necessity be unostentatious, since his arrival would be the signal for the conversion of the quiet steeps of San Francisco into craters.

Rodman knew that, if the senor were on board the *Amazon*, his name would not be on the sailing-list, and his august personality would be cloaked in disguise. His point of debarkation would be some secluded coast village where fellow conspirators could hide him. His advent into the capital itself would not be made at all unless made at the head of an invading army, and, if so made, he would remain as minister of foreign affairs in the cabinet of General Végas, to whom just now, as to himself, the city gates were closed.

But Senor Miraflores had selected a more cautious means of entry than the ship, which might bear travelers who knew him. Rodman spent an hour on the downward steamer. He managed to see the face of every passenger, and even investigated the swarthy visages in the steerage. He asked of some tourists casual questions as to destination, and chatted artlessly, then went over the side again, and was rowed back across the intervening strip of sea. Immediately upon his departure overside, the *Amazon* proceeded on her course, and five minutes later the *City of Rio* was also under way.

The next morning, after a late breakfast, Saxon was lounging at the rail amidship. He had ceased looking backward, and all his gaze was for the front. Ahead of him, the white superstructure, the white-duck uniform of the officer pacing the bridge, the whiteness of the holystoned deck, all stood boldly out against the deep cobalt of the gently swelling sea. Saxon was satisfied with life, and, when he saw Rodman sauntering toward him, he looked up with a welcoming nod.

"Hello, Carter--I mean Saxon." The gun-smuggler corrected his form of address with a laugh.

The breezy American was a changed and improved man. The wrinkled gray flannels had given way to natty white duck. His Panama hat was new and of such quality that it could be rolled and drawn through a ring as large as a half-dollar. He was shaven to an extreme pinkness of face. As Saxon glanced up, his eyes wearing tell-tale recognition of the transformation, the thin man laughed afresh.

"Notice the difference, don't you?" he genially inquired, rolling a cigarette. "The gray grub is splendidly changed into the snow-white butterfly. I'm a very flossy bug, eh, Saxon?"

The painter admitted the soft self-impeachment with a qualification.

"I begin to think you are a very destructive one."

"I am," announced Rodman, calmly. "I could spin you many a yarn of intrigue, but for the fact that, since you began wearing a halo instead of a hat, you have become too sanctified to listen."

"Inasmuch," smilingly suggested the painter, "as we might yet be languishing in the *cuartel* except for the fact that I was able to give so good an account of myself, I don't see that you have any reasonable quarrel with my halo."

Rodman raised his brows.

"Oh, I never lost sight of the fact that you had some reason for the saint role, and, as you say, I was in on the good results. But, now that you are flitting northward, what's the idea of keeping your ears stopped?"

"They are open," declared Mr. Saxon graciously; "you are at liberty to tell me anything you like, but only what you like. I'm not thirsting for criminal confessions."

"That's all right, but you--" Rodman broke off, and his lips twisted into ironical good humor--"no, I apologize--I mean, a fellow who looked remarkably like you used to be so deeply versed in international politics that I think this new adventure would appeal to you. Ever remember hearing of one Senor Miraflores?"

Saxon shook his head, whereupon Rodman laughed with great sophistication. Carter had known Senor Miraflores quite well, and Rodman knew that Carter had known him.

"Very consistent acting," he approved. "You're a good comedian. In the Chinese theaters, they put flour on the comedian's nose to show that he's not a tragedian, but you don't need the badge. You're all right. You know how to get a laugh. But this isn't dramatic criticism. It's wars and rumors of wars."

The adventurer drew a long puff from his cigarette, inhaled it deeply, and stood idly watching the curls of outward-blown smoke hanging in the hot air, before he went on.

"Well, Miraflores has once more been at the helm. Of course, in the lower commissions of the *insurrecto* organization, we have the usual assortment of foreign officers, odds and ends, but the chief difference between this enterprise and the other one--the one Carter knew about--is the fact that we have some artillery, and that, when we start things going, we can come pretty near battering down the old town."

Rodman proceeded to sketch the outlines of the conspiracy. It was much the stereotyped arrangement with a few variations. Two regiments in the city barracks, suspected of disloyalty, had been practically disarmed by the President, but these troops had been secretly rearmed with a part of the guns brought in by Rodman, and would be ready to rise at the signal, together with several other disaffected commands--not for the government, but against it.

The mountain of San Francisco is really not a mountain at all, but a foot hill of the mountains. Yet, it looks down on the city of Puerto Frio as Marathon on the sea, and here are guns trained inward as well as outward. These guns can shell the capital into ruins in the space of a few hours; then, they can hurl their projectiles further, and play havoc with the environs. Also, they can guard the city from the approach that lies along the roads from the interior. A commander who holds San Francisco stands at the door of Puerto Frio with a latch-key in his hand. The revolutionists under Végas had arranged their attack on the basis of unwarned assault. The Dictator had indeed some apprehensions, but they were fears for the future--not for the immediate present. The troops garrisoned on San Francisco, ostensibly the loyal legion of the Dictator's forces, were in reality watching the outward approaches only as doors through which they were to welcome friends. The guns that were trained and ready to belch fire on signal from Végas, were the guns trained inward on the city, and, when they opened, the main plaza would resemble nothing so much as the far end of a bowling alley when an expert stands on the foul-line, and the palace of the President would be the kingpin for their gunnery. The *insurrecto* forces were to enter San Francisco without resistance, and the opening of its crater was to be the signal for hurling through the streets of the city itself those troops that had been secretly armed with the smuggled weapons, completing the confusion and throwing into stampeding panic the demoralized remnants upon which the government depended.

Unless there were a traitor in very exclusive and carefully guarded councils, there would hardly be a miscarriage of the plans.

Saxon stood idly listening to these confidences. Nothing seemed strange to him, and least of all the entire willingness of the conspirator to tell him things that involved life and death for men and governments. He knew that, in spite of all he had said, or could say, to the other man, he was the former ally in crime. He had thought at first that Rodman would ultimately discover some discrepancy in appearance which would undeceive him, but now he realized that the secret of the continued mistake was an almost miraculous resemblance, and the fact that the other man had, in the former affair, met him in person only twice, and that five years ago.

"And so," went on Rodman in conclusion, "I'm here adrift, waiting for the last act. I thought Miraflores might possibly be on the *Amazon* last night, and so, while you sat dawdling over letter-paper and pen, little Howard Stanley was up and doing. I went across to the other boat, and made search, but it was another case of nothing transpiring. Miraflores was too foxy to go touring so openly."

Saxon felt that some comment was expected from him, yet his mind was wandering far afield from the doings of *juntas*. All these seemed as unreal as scenes from an extravagantly staged musical comedy. What appeared to him most real at that moment was the picture of a slim girl walking, dryad-like, through the hills of her Kentucky homeland, and the thought that he would soon be walking with her.

"It looks gloomy for the city," he said, abstractedly.

"Say," went on Rodman, "do you know that the only people on that boat booked for Puerto Frio were three fool American tourists, and that, of the three, two were women? Now, what chance have those folks got to enjoy themselves? Do you think Puerto Frio, say day after to-morrow, will make a hit with them?" The informant laughed softly to himself, but Saxon was still deep in his own thoughts. It suddenly struck him with surprised discovery that the view from the deck was beautiful. And Rodman, also, felt the languid invitation of the sea air, and it made him wish to talk. So, unmindful of a self-absorbed listener, he went on garrulously.

"You know, I felt like quoting to them, 'Into the jaws of death, into the mouth of hell, sailed the three tourists,' but that would have been to tip off state secrets. If people will fare forth for adventure, I guess they've got to have it."

"Do you suppose," asked Saxon perfunctorily, "they'll be in actual danger?"

"Danger!" repeated the filibuster with sarcasm. "Danger, did you say? Oh, no, of course not. It will be a pink tea! You know that town as well as I do. You know there are two places in it where American visitors can stop--the *Frances y Ingles*, where you were, and the American Legation. By day after to-morrow, that plaza will be the bull's-eye for General Végas's target-practice. General Végas has a mountain to rest his target-gun on, and it's loaded with shell. Oh, no, there won't be any danger!"

"Wasn't there some pretext on which you could warn them off?" inquired the painter.

Rodman shook his head.

"You see, I have to be careful in my talk. I might say too much. As it was, I knocked the town to the fellow all I could. But he seemed hell-bent on getting there, and getting there quick. He was a fool Kentuckian, and you can't head off a bull-headed Kentuckian with subtleties or hints. I've met one or two of them before. And there was a girl along who seemed as anxious to get there as he was. That girl was all to the good!"

Saxon leaned suddenly forward.

"A Kentuckian?" he demanded. "Did you hear his name?"

"Sure," announced Mr. Rodman. "Little Howard Stanley picks up information all along the way. The chap was named George Steele, and----"

But the speaker broke off in his story, to stand astounded at the conduct of his auditor.

"And the girl!" shouted Saxon. "Her name?"

"Her name," replied the intriguer, "was Miss Filson."

Suddenly, the inattention of the other had fallen away, and he had wheeled, his jaw dropping. For an instant, he stood in an attitude of bewildered shock, gripping the support of the rail like a prize-fighter struggling against the groggy blackness of the knock-out blow.

Saxon stood such a length of time as it might have required for the referee to count nine over him, had the support he gripped been that of the prize-ring instead of the steamer's rail. Then, he stepped forward, and gripped Rodman's arm with fingers that bit into the flesh.

"Rodman," he said in a low voice that was almost a whisper, between his labored breathings, "I've got to talk to you--alone. There's not a minute to lose. Come to my stateroom."

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## CHAPTER XII

Below, in the narrow confines of the cabin, Saxon paced back and forth excitedly as he talked. For five minutes, he did not pause, and the other man, sitting on the camp-stool in a corner of the place, followed him with eyes much as a lion-tamer, shut in a cage with his uncertain charge, keeps his gaze bent on the animal. As he listened, Rodman's expression ran a gamut from astonishment, through sympathy, and into final distrust. At last, Saxon ended with:

"And, so, I've got to get them away from there. I've got to get back to that town, and you must manage it. For God's sake, don't delay!" The painter had not touched on the irrelevant point of his own mystery, or why the girl had followed him. That would have been a story the other would not have believed, and there was no time for argument and futile personalities. The slow northward fifteen knots had all at once become a fevered racing in the wrong direction, and each throb of the shafts in the engine-room seemed to hurl him madly through space away from his goal.

When he halted in his narrative, the other man looked sternly up, and his sharp features were decisively set.

"Suppose I should get you there," he began swiftly. "Suppose it were possible to get back in time, what reason have I to trust you? Suppose I were willing to trust you absolutely, what right have I--a mere agent of a cause that's bigger than single lives--to send you back there, where a word from you would spoil everything? My God, man, there are thousands of people there who are risking their lives to change this government. Hundreds of them must die to do it. For months, we have worked and planned, covering and secreting every detail of our plotting. We have all taken our lives in our hands. Now, a word of warning, an indiscreet act, the changing of the garrison on San Francisco, and where would we be? Every platoon that follows Vegas and Miraflores marches straight into a death-trap! The signal is given, and every man goes to destruction as swift as a bat out of hell. That's what you are asking me to do--to play traitor to my cause. And you calmly tell me I must do it simply because you've got friends in town."

The man came to his feet with an excited gesture of anger.

"You know that in this business no man can trust his twin brother, and you ask me to trust you to the extent of laying in your hands everything I've worked for--the lives of an army!" His tones rose to a climax of vehemence: "And that's what you ask!"

"You know you can trust me," began Saxon, conscious of the feeble nature of his argument. "You didn't have to tell me. I didn't ask your confidence. I warned you not to tell me."

"Maybe I was a damned fool, and maybe you were pretty slick, playing me along with your bait of indifference," retorted Rodman, hotly. "How am I to know whom you really mean to warn? You insist that I shall harbor a childlike faith in you, yet you won't trust me enough to quit your damned play-acting. You call on me to believe in you, yet you lie to me, and cling to your smug alias. You won't confess who you are, though you know I know it. No, Mr. Carter, I must decline."

Saxon stood white and rigid. Every moment wasted in argument imperiled more deeply the girl and the friends he must save, for whose hazarded lives he was unwittingly responsible. Yet, he could do nothing except with Rodman's assistance. The only chance lay in convincing him, and that must be done at any cost. This was no time for selecting methods.

"I don't have to tell a syllable of your plans," he contended, desperately. "They will go with me without asking the reason. I have only to see them. You have my life in your hands: you can go with me. You can disarm me, and keep me in view every moment of the time. You can kill me at the first false move. You can----"

"Cut out the tommy-rot," interrupted Rodman, with fierce bluntness. "I can do better than that, and you know it. My word on this ship goes the same as if I were an admiral. I can say to the captain that you assaulted me, and it will be my testimony against yours. I can have you put in irons, and thrown down in the hold, and, by God, I'm going to do it!" The man moved toward the cabin bell, and halted with his finger near the button. "Now, damn you! my platform is *Vegas y Libertad*, and I'm not the sucker I may have seemed. If this is a trick of yours, you aren't going to have the chance to turn it."

"Give me a moment," pleaded Saxon. He realized with desperation that every word the other spoke was true, that he was helpless unless he could be convincing.

"Listen, Rodman," he hurried on, ready to surrender everything else if he could carry his own point. "For God's sake, listen to me! You trusted me in the first place. I could have left the boat at any point, and wired back!" He looked into the face of the other man so steadily and with such hypnotic intensity that his own eyes were the strongest argument of truth he could have put forward.

"You say I have distrusted you, that I have not admitted my identity as Carter. I don't care a rap for my life. I'm not fighting for that now. I have no designs on you or your designs. Let me put a hypothetical question: Suppose you had come to a point where your past life was nothing more to you than the life of another man--a man you hated as your deadliest enemy; suppose you lived in a world that was as different from the old one as though it had never existed; suppose a woman had guided you into that new world, would you, or would you not, turn your back on the old? Suppose you learned as suddenly as I learned, from you, on deck, that that woman was in danger, would you, or would you not, go to her?"

Men rarely find the most eloquent or convincing words when they stand at sudden crises, but usually men's voices and manners at such times can have a force of convincing veracity that means more. Possibly, it may have been the hypnotic quality of Saxon's eyes, but, whatever it was, Rodman found it impossible to disbelieve him when he spoke in this fashion. In the plaza, he had suddenly turned the scales and held power of life and death over Rodman, and his only emotion had been that of heart-broken misery. Carter had been, like Rodman himself, the intriguer, but he had always been trustworthy with his friends. He had been violent, bitter, avenging, but never mean in small ways. That had been one of the reasons why Rodman, once convinced that the danger of vengeance was ended, had remained almost passionately anxious to prove to the other that he himself had not been a traitor. Carter had been the Napoleonic adventurer, and Rodman only the pettier type. For Carter, he held a sort of hero-worship. Rodman's methods were those of chicane, but rightly or wrongly he believed that he could read the human document.

If this other man were telling the truth, and if love of a woman were his real motive, he could be stung into fury with a slur. If that were only a pretext, the other would not allow his resentment to imperil his plans--he would repress it, or simulate it awkwardly.

"So," he commented satirically, "it's the good-looking young female that's got you buffaloed, is it? The warrior has been taken into camp by the squaw." The tone held deliberate intent to insult.

Saxon's lips compressed themselves into a dangerously straight line, and his face whitened to the temples. As he took a step forward, the slighter man stepped quickly back, and raised a hand with a gesture of explanation. Saxon had evidently told the truth. The revolutionist had satisfied himself, and his somewhat erratic method of judging results had been to his own mind convincing. And, at the same moment, Saxon halted. He realized that he stood in a position where questions of life and death, not his own, were involved. His anger was driving him dangerously close to action that would send crashing to ruin the one chance of winning an effective ally. He half-turned with something like a groan.

He was called out of his stupor of anxiety by the voice of the other. Rodman had been thinking fast. He would take a chance, though not such a great chance as it would seem. Indeed, in effect, he would be taking the other prisoner. He would in part yield to the request, but in the method that occurred to him he would have an ample opportunity of studying the other man under conditions which the other man would not suspect. He would have Saxon at all times in his power and under his observation while he set traps for him. If his surmise of sincerity proved false, he could act at once as he chose, before Saxon would have the opportunity to make a dangerous move. He would seem to do a tremendously hazardous thing in the name of friendship, but all the while he would have the cards stacked. If at the proper moment he still believed in the other, he would permit the man, under supervision, to save these friends. If not, Rodman would still be master of the situation. Besides, he had been seriously disappointed in not meeting Miraflores. He had felt that there might yet be advantages in coming closer to the theater of the drama than this vessel going north, though he must still remain under the protection of a foreign flag.

"So, you are willing to admit that your proper name is Mr. Carter?" he demanded, coolly.

"I am willing to admit anything, if I can get to Puerto Frio and through the lines," responded Saxon, readily.

"If I take you back, you will go unarmed, under constant supervision," stipulated Rodman. "You will have to obey my orders, and devise some pretext for enticing your friends away, without telling them the true reason. I shall be running my neck into a noose perhaps. I have no right to run that of *Vegas y Libertad* into a noose as well. Are those terms satisfactory?"

"Absolutely!" Saxon let more eagerness burst from his lips than he had intended.

"Then, come with me to the captain." Suddenly, Rodman wheeled, and looked at the other man with a strange expression. "Do you know why I'm doing this? It's a fool reason, but I want to prove to you that I'm not the sort that would be apt to turn an ally over to his executioners. That's why."

Five minutes later, the two stood in the captain's cabin, and Saxon noted that the officer treated Rodman with a manner of marked deference.

"Is Cartwright's steam yacht still at Mollera?" demanded the soldier of fortune, incisively.

"It's held there for emergencies," replied the officer.

"It's our one chance! Mr. Saxon and myself must get to Puerto Frio at once. When do we strike Mollera?" Rodman consulted his watch.

"In an hour."

"Have us put off there. Send a wireless to the yacht to have steam up, and arrange for clearance. Put on all steam ahead for Mollera."

It was something, reflected Saxon, to have such toys to play with as this thin ally of his could, for the moment at least, command.

"Now, I fully realize," said Rodman, as they left the captain's cabin together, "that I'm embarking on the silliest enterprise of a singularly silly career. But I'm no quitter. Cartwright," he explained, "is one of the owners of the line. He's letting his yacht be used for a few things where it comes in handy."

There was time to discuss details on the way down the coast in the *Phyllis*. The yacht had outwardly all the idle ease of a craft designed merely for luxurious loafing over smooth seas, but Cartwright had built it with one or two other requisite qualities in mind. The *Phyllis* could show heels, if ever matters came to a chase, to anything less swift than a torpedo-boat destroyer. Her mastheads were strung with the parallel wires that gave her voice in the Marconi tongue, and Saxon had no sooner stepped over the side than he realized that the crew recognized in Mr. Rodman a person to be implicitly obeyed.

If Rodman had seemed to be won over with remarkable suddenness to Saxon's request that he undertake a dangerous rescue, it was now evident to the painter that the appearance had been in part deceiving. Here, he was more at Rodman's mercy than he had been on the steamer. If Rodman's word had indeed been as he boasted, that of an admiral on the *City of Rio*, it was, on the *Phyllis*, that of an admiral on his own flagship. By a thousand little, artful snares thrown into their discussions of ways and means, Rodman sought to betray the other into any utterance or action that might show underlying treachery, and, before the yacht had eaten up the route back to the strip of coast where the frontier stretched its invisible line, he had corroborated his belief that the artist was telling the truth. Had he not been convinced, Rodman had only to speak, and every man from the skipper to the Japanese cabin boy would have been obedient to his orders.

"We will not try to get to Puerto Frio harbor," explained Rodman. "It would hardly be safe. We shall steam past the city, and anchor at Bellavista, five miles beyond. Bellavista is a seaside resort, and there a boat like this will attract less attention. Also, the consulate is better suited to our needs as to the formalities of entering and leaving port. There, we will take horses, and ride to town. I'll read the signs, and, if things look safe, we can get in, collect your people, and get out again at once. They can go with us to the yacht, and, if you like fireworks, we can view them from a safe distance."

La Punta, as they passed, lay sleepy by her beach, her tattered palms scarcely stirring their fronds in the breathless air. Later, Puerto Frio went alongside, as quiet and untouched with any sense of impending disturbance as the smaller town. Behind the scattered outlying houses, the incline went up to the base of San Francisco, basking in the sun. The hill was a huge, inert barrier between the green and drab of the earth and the blue of the sky. Saxon drew a long breath as he watched it in the early morning when they passed. It was difficult to think of even an artificial volcano awakening from such profound slumber and indolence.

"You'd better go below, and get ready for the ride. We go horseback. Got any riding togs?" Rodman spoke rapidly, in crisp brevities. "No? Well, I guess we can rig you out. Cartwright has all sorts of things on board. Change into them quick. You won't need anything else. This is to be a quick dash."

When the anchor dropped off Bellavista, Saxon stood in a fever of haste on deck, garbed in riding-clothes that almost fitted him, though they belonged to Cartwright or some of the guests who had formerly been pleasuring on the yacht.

As their motor-boat was making its way shoreward over peacefully glinting water, the painter ran his hand into his coat-pocket for a handkerchief. He found that he had failed to provide himself. The other pockets were equally empty, save for what money had been loose in his trousers-pocket when he changed, and the old key he always carried there. These things he had unconsciously transferred by mere force of habit. Everything else he had left behind. He felt a mild sense of annoyance. He had wanted, on meeting her, to hand Duska the letter he had written on the night that their ships passed, but haste was the watchword, and one could not turn back for such trifles as pocket furnishings.

Rodman proved the best of guides. He knew a liveryman from whom Argentine ponies could be obtained, and led the

way at a brisk canter out the smooth road toward the capital.

For a time, the men rode in silence between the *haciendas*, between scarlet clustered vines, clinging with heavy fragrance to adobe walls, and the fringed spears of palms along the cactus-lined roadsides.

Hitherto, the man's painting sense had lain dormant. Now, despite his anxiety and the nervous prodding of his heels into the flanks of his vicious little mount, he felt that he was going toward Duska, and with the realization came satisfaction. For a time, his eyes ceased to be those of the man hurled into new surroundings and circumstances, and became again those of Frederick Marston's first disciple.

They rode before long into the country that borders the town. Rodman's eyes were fixed with a fascinated gaze on the quiet summit of San Francisco. He had himself no definite knowledge when the craters might open, and as yet he had seen no sign of war. The initial note must of course come drifting with the first wisp of smoke and the first detonation from the mouths of those guns.

At the outskirts of the town, they turned a sharp angle hidden behind high monastery walls, and found themselves confronted by a squad of native soldiery with fixed bayonets.

With an exclamation of surprise, Rodman drew his pony back on its flanks. For a moment, he leaned in his saddle, scrutinizing the men who had halted him. There was, of course, no distinction of uniforms, but he reasoned that no government troops would be guarding that road, because, as far as the government knew, there was no war. He leaned over and whispered:

"*Vegas y Libertad.*"

The sergeant in command saluted with a grave smile, and drew his men aside, as the two horsemen rode on.

"Looks like it's getting close," commented Rodman shortly. "We'd better hurry."

Where the old market-place stands at the junction of the *Calle Bolivar* with a lesser street, Rodman again drew down his pony, and his cheeks paled to the temples. From the center of the city came the sudden staccato rattle of musketry. The plotter threw his eyes up to the top of San Francisco, visible above the roofs, but the summit of San Francisco still slept the sleep of quiet centuries. Then, again, came the clatter from the center of the town, and again the sharp rattle of rifle fire ripped the air. There was heavy fighting somewhere on ahead.

"Good God!" breathed the thin man. "What does it mean?"

The two ponies stood in the narrow street, and the air began to grow heavier with the noise of volleys, yet the hill was silent.

Rodman rattled his reins on the pony's neck, and rode apathetically forward. Something had gone amiss! His dreams were crumbling. At the next corner, they drew to one side. A company of troops swept by on the double-quick. They had been in action. Their faces streamed with sweat, and many were bleeding. A few wounded men were being carried by their comrades. Rodman recognized *Capitan* Morino, and shouted desperately; but the officer shook his head wildly, and went on.

Then, they saw a group of officers at the door of a crude cafe. Among them, Rodman recognized Colonel Martinez, of Vegas' staff, and Colonel Murphy of the Foreign Legion, yet they stood here idle, and their faces told the story of defeat. The filibuster hurled himself from the saddle, and pushed his way to the group, followed by Saxon.

"What does it mean, Murphy?" he demanded, breathlessly. "What in all hell can it mean?"

Murphy looked up. He was wrapping his wrist with a handkerchief, one end of which he held between his teeth. Red spots were slowly spreading on the white of the bandage.

"Sure, it means hell's broke loose," replied the soldier of fortune, with promptness. Then, seeing Saxon, he shot him a quick glance of recognition. The eyes were weary, and showed out of a face pasted with sweat and dust.

"Hello, Carter," he found time to say. "Glad you're with us--but it's all up with our outfit."

This time, Saxon did not deny the title.

"What happened?" urged Rodman, in a frenzy of anxiety. The roaring of rifles did not seem to come nearer, except for detached sounds of sporadic skirmishing. The central plaza and its environs were holding the interest of the combatants.

"Sure, it means there was a leak. When the boys marched up to San Francisco, they were met with artillery fire. It had

been tipped off, and the government had changed the garrison." The Irish adventurer, who had led men under half a dozen tattered malion flags, smiled sarcastically. "Sure, it was quite simple!"

"And where is the fighting?" shouted Rodman, as though he would hold these men responsible for his shattered scheme of empire.

"Everywhere. Vegas was in too deep to pull out. The government couldn't shell its own capital, and so it's street to street scraffin' now. But we're licked unless--" He halted suddenly, with the gleam of an inspired idea in his eyes. The leader of the Foreign Legion was sitting on a table. Saxon noted for the first time that, besides the punctured wrist, he was disabled with a broken leg.

"Unless what?" questioned Colonel Martinez. That officer was pallid under his dark skin from loss of blood. One arm was bandaged tightly against his side.

"Unless we can hold them for a time, and get word to the diplomatic corps to arbitrate. A delay would give us a bit of time to pull ourselves together."

Martinez, shrugged his shoulders.

"Impossible," he said, drearily.

"Wait. Pendleton, the American minister, is dean of the corps. Carter here is practically a stranger in town these days, and he's got nerve. I know him. As an American, he might possibly make it to the legation. Carter, will you try to get through the streets to the American Legation? Will you?"

Saxon had leaped forward. He liked the direct manner of this man, and the legation was his destination.

"It's a hundred to one shot, Carter, that ye can't do it." Murphy's voice, in its excitement, dropped into brogue. "Will ye try? Will ye tell him to git th' diplomats together, and ask an armistice? Ye know our countersign, '*Vegas y Libertad*.'"

But Saxon had already started off in the general direction of the main plaza. For two squares, he met no interference. For two more, he needed no other passport than the countersign, then, as he turned a corner, it seemed to him that he plunged at a step into a reek of burnt powder and burning houses. There was a confused vista of men in retreat, a roar that deafened him, and a sudden numbness. He dropped to his knees, attempted to rise to his feet, then seemed to sink into a welcome sleep, as he stretched comfortably at length on the pavement close to a wall, a detachment of routed *insurrectos* sweeping by him in full flight.





## CHAPTER XIII

The passing of the fugitive *insurrectos*; their mad turning at bay for one savage rally; their wavering and breaking; their disorganized stampede spurred on by a decimating fire and the bayonet's point: these were all incidents of a sudden squall that swept violently through the narrow street, to leave it again empty and quiet. It was empty except for the grotesque shapes that stretched in all the undignified awkwardness of violent death and helplessness, feeding thin lines of red that trickled between the cobblestones. It was silent except for echoes of the stubborn fighting coming from the freer spaces of the plazas and *alamedas*, where the remnants of the invading force clung to their positions behind improvised barricades with the doggedness of men for whom surrender holds no element of hope or mercy.

Into the canyon-like street where the frenzy of combat had blazed up with such a sudden spurt and burned itself out so quickly, Saxon had walked around the angle of a wall, just in time to find himself precipitated into one of the fiercest incidents of the bloody forenoon.

Vegas and Miraflores had not surrendered. Everywhere, the insistent noise told that the opposing forces were still debating every block of the street, but in many outlying places, as in this *calle*, the revolutionists were already giving back. The attacking army had counted on launching a blow, paralyzing in its surprise, and had itself encountered surprise and partial preparedness. It had set its hope upon a hill, and the hill had failed. A prophet might already read that *Vegas y Libertad* was the watchword of a lost cause, and that its place in history belonged on a page to be turned down.

But the narrow street in which Saxon lay remained quiet. An occasional balcony window would open cautiously, and an occasional head would be thrust out to look up and down its length. An occasional shape on the cobbles would moan painfully, and shift its position with the return of consciousness, or grow more grotesque in the stiffness of death as the hours wore into late afternoon, but the great iron-studded street-doors of the houses remained barred, and no one ventured along the sidewalks.

Late in the day, when the city still echoed to the snapping of musketry, and deeper notes rumbled through the din, as small field-pieces were brought to bear upon opposing barricades, the thing that Saxon had undertaken to bring about occurred of its own initiative. Word reached the two leaders that the representatives of the foreign powers requested an armistice for the removal of the wounded and a conference at the American Legation, looking toward possible adjustment. Both the government and the *insurrecto* commanders grasped at the opportunity to let their men, exhausted with close-fighting, catch a breathing space, and to remove from the zone of fire those who lay disabled in the streets.

Then, as the firing subsided, some of the bolder civilians ventured forth in search for such acquaintances as had been caught in the streets between the impact of forces in the unwarned battle. For this hour, at least, all men were safe, and there were some with matters to arrange, who might not long enjoy immunity.

Among them was Howard Rodman, who followed up the path he fancied Saxon must have taken. Rodman was haggard and distraught. His plans were all in ruins, and, unless an amnesty were declared, he must be once more the refugee. His belief that Saxon was really Carter led him into two false conclusions. First, he inferred from this premise that Saxon's life would be as greatly imperiled as his own, and it followed that he, being in his own words "no quitter," must see Saxon out of the city, if the man were alive. He presumed that in the effort to reach the legation Saxon had taken, as would anyone familiar with the streets, a circuitous course which would bring him to the "*Club Nacional*," from which point he could reach the house he sought over the roofs. He had no doubt that the American had failed in his mission, because, by any route, he must make his way through streets where he would encounter fighting.

Rodman's search became feverish. There was little time to lose. The conference might be brief--and, after that, chaos! But fortune favored him. Chance led him into the right street, and he found the body. Being alone, he stood for a moment indecisive. He was too light a man to carry bodily the wounded friend who lay at his feet. He could certainly not leave the man, for his ear at the chest, his finger on the pulse, assured him that Saxon was alive. He had been struck by a falling timber from a balcony above, and the skull seemed badly hurt, probably fractured.

As Rodman stood debating the dilemma, a shadow fell across the pavement. He turned with a nervous start to recognize at his back a newcomer, palpably a foreigner and presumably a Frenchman, though his excellent English, when he spoke, was only slightly touched with accent. The stranger dropped to his knee, and made a rapid examination, as Rodman had done. It did not occur to him at the moment that the man standing near him was an acquaintance of the other who lay unconscious at their feet.

"The gentleman is evidently a non-combatant--and he is badly hurt, monsieur," he volunteered. "We most assuredly

cannot leave him here to die."

Rodman answered with some eagerness:

"Will you help me to carry him to a place where he'll be safe?"

"Gladly." The Frenchman looked about. "Surely, he can be cared for near here."

But Rodman laid a persuasive hand on the other's arm.

"He must be taken to the water front," he declared, earnestly. "After the conference, he would not be safe here."

The stranger drew back, and stood for a moment twisting his dark mustache, while his eyes frowned inquiringly. He was disinclined to take part in proceedings that might have political after-effects. He had volunteered to assist an injured civilian, not a participant, or refugee. There were many such in the streets.

"This is a matter of life and death," urged Rodman, rapidly. "This man is Mr. Robert Saxon. He had left this coast with a clean bill of health. I explain all this because I need your help. When he had made a part of his return journey, he learned by chance that the city was threatened, and that a lady who was very important to him was in danger. He hastened back. In order to reach her, he became involved, and used the *insurrecto* countersign. Mr. Saxon is a famous artist." Rodman was giving the version of the story he knew the wounded man would wish to have told. He said nothing of Carter.

At the last words, the stranger started forward.

"A famous painter!" His voice was full of incredulous interest. "Monsieur, you can not by any possibility mean that this is Robert A. Saxon, the first disciple of Frederick Marston!" The man's manner became enthused and eager. "You must know, monsieur," he went on, "that I am Louis Herve, myself a poor copyist of the great Marston. At one time, I had the honor to be his pupil. To me, it is a pleasure to be of any service to Mr. Saxon. What are we to do?"

"There is a small sailors' tavern near the mole," directed Rodman; "we must take him there. I shall find a way to have him cared for on a vessel going seaward. I have a yacht five miles away, but we can hardly reach it in time."

"But medical attention!" demurred Monsieur Herve. "He must have that."

Rodman was goaded into impatience by the necessity for haste. He was in no mood for debate.

"Yes, and a trained nurse!" he retorted, hotly. "We must do the best we can. If we don't hurry, he will need an undertaker and a coroner. Medical attention isn't very good in Puerto Frio prisons!"

The two men lifted Saxon between them, and carried the unconscious man toward the mole.

Their task was like that of many others. They passed a sorry procession of litters, stretchers, and bodies hanging limply in the arms of bearers. No one paid the slightest attention to them, except an occasional sentry who gazed on in stolid indifference.

At the tavern kept by the Chinaman, Juan, and frequented by the roughest elements that drift against a coast such as this, Rodman exchanged greetings with many acquaintances. There were several wounded officers of the Végas contingent, taking advantage of the armistice to have their wounds dressed and discuss affairs over a bottle of wine. Evidently, they had come here instead of to more central and less squalid places, with the same idea that had driven Rodman. They were the rats about to leave the sinking ship--if they could find a way to leave.

The tavern was an adobe building with a corrugated-iron roof and a large open *patio*, where a dismal fountain tinkled feebly, and one or two frayed palms stood dusty and disconsolate in the tightly trodden earth. About the walls were flamboyant portraits of saints. From a small perch in one corner, a yellow and green parrot squawked incessantly.

But it was the life about the rough tables of the area that gave the picture its color and variety. Some had been pressed into service to support the wounded. About others gathered men in tattered uniforms; men with bandaged heads and arms in slings. Occasionally, one saw an alien, a sailor whose clothes declared him to have no place in the drama of the scene. These latter were usually bolstering up their bravado with *aguardiente* against the sense of impending uncertainty that freighted the atmosphere.

The Frenchman, sharing with Rodman the burden of the unconscious painter, instinctively halted as the place with its wavering shadows and flickering lights met his gaze at the door. It was a picture of color and dramatic intensity. He seemed to see these varied faces, upon which sat defeat and suffering, sketched on a broad canvas, as Marston or Saxon might have sketched them.

Then, he laid Saxon down on a corner table, and stood watching his chance companion who recognized brother intriguers. Suddenly, Rodman's eyes brightened, and he beckoned his lean hand toward two men who stood apart. Both of them had faces that were in strong contrast to the swarthy Latin-American countenances about them. One was thin and blond, the other dark and heavy. The two came across the *patio* together, and after a hasty glance the slender man bent at once over the prostrate figure on the table. His deft fingers and manner proclaimed him the surgeon. His uniform was nondescript; hardly more a uniform than the riding clothes worn by Saxon himself, but on his shoulders he had pinned a major's straps. This was Dr. Cornish, of the Foreign Legion, but for the moment he was absorbed in his work and forgetful of his disastrously adopted profession of arms.

He called for water and bandages, and, while he worked, Rodman was talking with the other man. Herve stood silently looking on. He recognized that the dark man was a ship-captain--probably commanding a tramp freighter.

"When did you come?" inquired Rodman.

"Called at this port for coal," responded the other. "I've been down to Rio with flour, and I have to call at La Guayra. I sail in two hours."

"Where do you go from Venezuela?"

"I sailed out of Havre, and I'm going back with fruit. The Doc's had about enough. I'm goin' to take him with me."

For a moment, Rodman stood speculating, then he bent eagerly forward.

"Paul," he whispered, "you know me. I've done you a turn or two in the past."

The sailor nodded.

"Now, I want you to do me a turn. I want you to take this man with you. He must get out of here, and he can't care for himself. He'll be all right--either all right or dead--before you land on the other side. The Doc here will look after him. He's got money. Whatever you do for him, he'll pay handsomely. He's a rich man." The filibuster was talking rapidly and earnestly.

"Where do I take him?" asked the captain, with evident reluctance.

"Wherever you're going; anywhere away from here. He'll make it all right with you."

The captain caught the surgeon's eyes, and the surgeon nodded.

Rodman suddenly remembered Saxon's story, the story of the old past that was nothing more to him than another life, and the other man upon whom he had turned his back. Possibly, there might even be efforts at locating the conspirators. He leaned over, and, though he sunk his voice low, Herve heard him say:

"This gentleman doesn't want to be found just now. If people ask about him, you don't know who he is, *comprende?*"

"That's no lie, either," growled the ship-master. "I ain't got an idea who he is. I ain't sure I want him on my hands."

A sudden quiet came on the place. An officer had entered the door, his face pale, and, as though with an instantaneous prescience that he bore bad tidings, the noises dropped away. The officer raised his hand, and his words fell on absolute silence as he said in Spanish:

"The conference is ended. Vegas surrenders--without terms."

"You see!" exclaimed Rodman, excitedly. "You see, it's the last chance! Paul, you've got to take him! In a half-hour, the armistice will be over. For God's sake, man!" He ended with a gesture of appeal.

The place began to empty.

"Get him to my boat, then," acceded the captain. "Here, you fellows, lend a hand. Come on, Doc." The man who had a ship at anchor was in a hurry. "Don't whisper that I'm sailing; I can't carry all the people that want to leave this town to-night. I've got to slip away. Hurry up."

A quarter of an hour later, Herve stood at the mole with Rodman, watching the row-boat that took the other trio out to the tramp steamer, bound ultimately for France. Rodman seized his watch, and studied its face under a street-lamp with something akin to frantic anxiety.

"Where do you go, monsieur?" inquired the Frenchman.

"Go? God knows!" replied Rodman, as he gazed about in perplexity. "But I've got to beat it, and beat it quick."

A moment later, he was lost in the shadows.



## CHAPTER XIV

When Duska Filson had gone out into the woods that day to read Saxon's runaway letter, she had at once decided to follow, with regal disdain of half-way methods. To her own straight-thinking mind, unhampered with petty conventional intricacies, it was all perfectly clear. The ordinary woman would have waited, perhaps in deep distress and tearful anxiety, for some news of the man she loved, because he had gone away, and it is not customary for the woman to follow her wandering lover over a quadrant of the earth's circumference. Duska Filson was not of the type that sheds tears or remains inactive. To one man in the world, she had said, "I love you," and to her that settled everything. He had gone to the place where his life was imperiled in the effort to bring back to her a clear record. If he were fortunate, her congratulation, direct from her own heart and lips, should be the first he heard. If he were to be plunged into misery, then above all other times she should be there. Otherwise, what was the use of loving him?

But, when the steamer was under way, crawling slowly down the world by the same route he had taken, the days between quick sunrise and sudden sunset seemed interminable.

Outwardly, she was the blithest passenger on the steamer, and daily she held a sort of *salon* for the few other passengers who were doomed to the heat and the weariness of such a voyage.

But, when she was alone with Steele in the evening, looking off at the moonlit sea, or in her own cabin, her brow would furrow, and her hands would clench with the tensivity of her anxiety. And, when at last Puerto Frio showed across the purple water with a glow of brief sunset behind the brown shoulder of San Francisco, she stood by the rail, almost holding her breath in suspense, while the anchor chains ran out.

As soon as Steele had ensconced Mrs. Horton and Duska at the *Frances y Ingles*, he hurried to the American Legation for news of Saxon. When he left Duska in the hotel *patio*, he knew, from the anxious little smile she threw after him, that for her the jury deciding the supreme question was going out, leaving her as a defendant is left when the panel files into the room where they ballot on his fate. He rushed over to the legation with sickening fear that, when he came back, it might have to be like the juryman whose verdict is adverse.

As it happened, he caught Mr. Pendleton without delay, and before he had finished his question the envoy was looking about for his Panama hat. Mr. Pendleton wanted to do several things at once. He wanted to tell the story of Saxon's coming and going, and he wanted to go in person, and have the party moved over to the legation, where they must be his guests while they remained in Puerto Frio. It would be several days before another steamer sailed north. They had missed by a day the vessel on which Saxon had gone. Meanwhile, there were sights in the town that might beguile the intervening time. Saxon had interested the envoy, and Saxon's friends were welcome. Hospitality is simplified in places where faces from God's country are things to greet with the fervor of delight.

At dinner that evening, sitting at the right of the minister, Duska heard the full narrative of Saxon's brief stay and return home. Mr. Pendleton was at his best. There was no diplomatic formality, and the girl, under the reaction and relief of her dispelled anxiety, though still disappointed at the hapless coincidence of missing Saxon, was as gay and childlike as though she had not just emerged from an overshadowing uncertainty.

"I'm sorry that he couldn't accept my hospitality here at the legation," said the minister at the end of his story, with much mock solemnity, "but etiquette in diplomatic circles is quite rigid, and he had an appointment to sleep at the palace."

"So, they jugged him!" chuckled Steele, with a grin that threatened his ears. "I always suspected he'd wind up in the Bastile."

"He was," corrected the girl, her chin high, though her eyes sparkled, "a guest of the President, and, as became his dignity, was supplied with a military escort."

"He needn't permit himself any vaunting pride about that," Steele assured her. "It's just difference of method. In our country, a similar honor would have been accorded with a patrol wagon and a couple of policemen."

After dinner, Duska insisted on dispatching a cablegram which should intercept the *City of Rio* at some point below the Isthmus. It was not an original telegram, but, had Saxon received it, it would have delighted him immoderately. She said:

"I told you so. Sail by *Orinoco*."

The following morning, there were tours of discovery, personally conducted by the young Mr. Partridge. Duska had wanted to leave the carriage at the old cathedral, and stand flat against the blank wall, but she refrained, and satisfied herself with marching up very close and regarding it with hostility. As the carriage turned into the main plaza, a

regiment of infantry went by, the band marching ahead playing, with the usual blare, the national anthem. Then, as the coachman drew up his horses at the legation door, there was sudden confusion, followed by the noise of popping guns. It was the hour just preceding the noon *siesta*. The plaza was indolent with lounging figures, and droning in the sleeping sing-song chorus of lazy voices. At the sound, which for the moment impressed the girl like the exploding of a pack of giant crackers, a sudden stillness fell on the place, closely followed by a startled outcry of voices as the figures in the plaza broke wildly for cover, futilely attempting to shield their faces with their arms against possible bullets. Then, there came a deeper detonation, and somewhere the crumbling of an adobe wall. The first sound came just as Mrs. Horton was stepping to the sidewalk. Duska had already leaped lightly out, and stood looking on in surprise. But Mr. Partridge knew his Puerto Frio. He led them hastily through the huge street-doors, and they had no sooner passed than the porter, with many mumbled prayers to the Holy Mother, slammed the great barriers against the outside world. The final assault for *Vegas y Libertad* had at last begun.

Mr. Pendleton had insisted that the ladies remain at the rear of the house, but Duska, with her adventurous passion for seeing all there was to see, threatened insubordination. To her, the idea of leaving several perfectly good balconies vacant, and staying at the back of a house, when the only battle one would probably ever see was occurring in the street just outside, seemed far from sensible. But, after she had looked out for a few moments, had seen a belated fruit-vender crumple to the street, and had smelled the acrid stench of the burnt powder, she was willing to turn away.

Inasmuch as the stay of Duska and her aunt involved several days of waiting for the sailing of the next ship, Duska was somewhat surprised at hearing nothing from Saxon in the meanwhile. He had had time to reach the point to which the cablegram was addressed. She had told him she would sail by the *Orinoco*, since that was the first available steamer. At such a time, Saxon would certainly answer that message. She fancied he would even manage to join her steamer, either by coming down to meet it, or waiting to intercept it at the place where he had received her message. Consequently, when she reached that port and sailed again without either seeing Saxon or receiving a message from him, she was decidedly surprised, and, though she did not admit it even to herself, she was likewise alarmed.

It happened that one of her fellow passengers on the steamer *Orinoco* was a tall, grave gentleman, who wore his beard trimmed in the French fashion, and who in his bearing had a certain air of distinction.

On a coast vessel, it was unusual for a passenger to hold himself apart and reserved against the chance companionships of a voyage. Yet, this gentleman did so. He had been introduced by the captain as M. Herve, had bowed and smiled, but since that he had not sought to further the acquaintanceship, or to recognize it except by a polite bow or smile when he passed one of the party on his solitary deck promenades.

Possibly, this perfunctory greeting would have been the limit and confine of their associations, had he not chanced to be standing one day near enough to Duska and Steele to overhear their conversation. The voyage was almost ended, and New York was not far off. Long ago, the lush rankness of the tropics had given way to the more temperate beauty of the higher zones, and this beauty was the beauty of early autumn.

Steele was talking of Frederick Marston, and the girl was listening with interest. As long as Saxon insisted on remaining the first disciple, she must of course be interested in his demi-god. Just now, however, Saxon's name was not mentioned. Finally, the stranger turned, and came over with a smile.

"When I hear the name of Frederick Marston," he said, "I am challenged to interest. Would I be asking too much if I sought to join you in your talk of him?"

The girl looked up and welcomed him with her accustomed graciousness, while Steele drew up a camp-stool, and the Frenchman seated himself.

For a while, he listened sitting there, his fingers clasped about his somewhat stout knee, and his face gravely speculative, contributing to the conversation nothing except his attention.

"You see, I am interested in Marston," he at length began.

The girl hesitated. She had just been expressing the opinion, possibly absorbed from Saxon, that the personality of the artist was extremely disagreeable. As she glanced at M. Herve, the thought flashed through her mind that this might possibly be Marston himself. She knew that master's fondness for the incognito. But she dismissed the idea as highly fanciful, and even ventured frankly to repeat her criticism.

At last, Herve replied, with great gravity:

"Mademoiselle, I had the honor to know the great Frederick Marston once. It was some years ago. He keeps himself much as a hermit might in these days, but I am sure that the portion of the story I know is not that of the vain man or of the poseur. Possibly," he hesitated modestly, "it might interest mademoiselle?"

"I'm sure of it," declared the girl.

"Marston," he began, "drifted into the Paris *ateliers* from your country, callow, morbid, painfully young and totally inexperienced. He was a tall, gaunt boy with a beard that grew hardly as fast as his career, though finally it covered his face. Books and pictures he knew with passionate love. With life, he was unacquainted; at men, he looked distantly over the deep chasm of his bashfulness. Women he feared, and of them he knew no more than he knew of dragons.

"He was eighteen then. He was in the *Salon* at twenty-two, and at the height of fame at twenty-six. He is now only thirty-three. What he will be at forty, one can not surmise."

The Frenchman gazed for a moment at the spiraling smoke from his cigarette, and halted with the uncertainty of a bard who doubts his ability to do justice to his lay.

"I find the story difficult." He smiled with some diffidence, then continued: "Had I the art to tell it, it would be pathos. Marston was a generous fellow, beloved by those who knew him, but quarantined by his morbid reserve from wide acquaintanceship. Temperament--ah, that is a wonderful thing! It is to a man what clouds and mists are to a land! Without them, there is only arid desert--with too many, there are storm and endless rain and dreary winds. He had the storms and rain and winds in his life--but over all he had the genius! The masters knew that before they had criticized him six months. In a year, they stood abashed before him."

"Go on, please!" prompted Duska, in a soft voice of sympathetic interest.

"He dreaded notoriety, he feared fame. He never had a photograph taken, and, when it was his turn to pose in the sketch classes, where the students alternate as models for their fellows, his nervousness was actual suffering. To be looked at meant, for him, to drop his eyes and find his hands in his way--the hands that could paint the finest pictures in Europe!"

"To understand his half-mad conduct, one must understand his half-mad genius. To most men who can command fame, the plaudits of clapping hands are as the incense of triumph. To him, there was but the art itself--the praise meant only embarrassment. His ideal was that of the English poet--a land where

'--only the Master shall praise us, and only the Master shall blame:  
And no one shall work for money and no one shall work for fame.'

That was what he wished, and could not have in Paris.

"It was in painting only that he forgot himself, and became a disembodied magic behind a brush. When a picture called down unusual comment from critics and press, he would disappear--remain out of sight for months. No one knew where he went. Once, I remember, in my time, he stayed away almost a year.

"He knew one woman in Paris, besides the models, who were to him impersonal things. Of that one woman alone, he was not afraid. She was a pathetic sort of a girl. Her large eyes followed him with adoring hero-worship. She was the daughter of an English painter who could not paint, one Alfred St. John, who lodged in the rear of the floor above. She herself was a poet who could not write verse. To her, he talked without bashfulness, and for her he felt vast sorrow. Love! *Mon dieu*, no! If he had loved her, he would have fled from her in terror!

"But she loved him. Then, he fell ill. Typhoid it was, and for weeks he was in his bed, with the papers crying out each day what a disaster threatened France and the world, if he should die. And she nursed him, denying herself rest. Typhoid may be helped by a physician, but the patient owes his life to the nurse. When he recovered, his one obsessing thought was that his life really belonged to her rather than to himself. I have already said he was morbid half to the point of madness. Genius is sometimes so!

"By no means a constant *absintheur*, in his moods he liked to watch the opalescent gleams that flash in a glass of *Pernod*. One night, when he had taken more perhaps than was his custom, he returned to his lodgings, resolved to pay the debt, with an offer of marriage.

"I do not know how much was the morbidness of his own temperament, and how much was the absinthe. I know that after that it was all wormwood for them both.

"She was proud. She soon divined that he had asked her solely out of sympathy, and perhaps it was at her urging that he left Paris alone. Perhaps, it was because his fame was becoming too great to allow his remaining there longer a recluse. At all events, he went away without warning--fled precipitantly. No one was astonished. His friends only laughed. For a year they laughed, then they became a trifle uneasy. Finally, however, these fears abated. St. John, his father-in-law, admitted that he was in constant correspondence with the master, and knew where he was in hiding. He

refused to divulge his secret of place. He said that Marston exacted this promise--that he wanted to hide. Then came new pictures, which St. John handled as his son-in-law's agent. Paris delighted in them. Marston travels about now, and paints. Whether he is mildly mad, or only as mad as his exaggerated genius makes him, I have often wondered."

"What became of the poor girl?" Duska's voice put the question, very tenderly.

"She, also, left Paris. Whether she let her love conquer her pride and joined him, or whether she went elsewhere--also alone, no one knows but St. John, and he does not encourage questions."

"I hope," said the girl slowly, "she went back, and made him love her."

Herve caught the melting sympathy in Duska's eyes, and his own were responsive.

"If she did," he said with conviction, "it must have made the master happy. He gave her what he could. He did not withhold his heart from stint, but because it was so written." He paused, then in a lighter voice went on:

"And, speaking of Marston, one finds it impossible to refrain from reciting an extraordinary adventure that has just befallen his first disciple, Mr. Saxon, who is a countryman of yours."

The girl's eyes came suddenly away from the sea to the face of the speaker, as he continued:

"I happened to be on the streets, when wiser folk were in their homes, just after the battle in Puerto Frio. I found Mr. Robert Saxon--perhaps the second landscape painter in the world--lying wounded on a pavement among dead revolutionists, and I helped to carry him to an *insurrecto* haunt. He was smuggled unconscious on a ship sailing for some point in my own land--Havre, I think. *Allons!* Life plays pranks with men that make the fairy tales seem feeble!"

Steele had been so astounded that he had found no opportunity to stop the Frenchman. Now, as he made a sign, M. Herve looked at the girl. She was sitting quite rigid in her steamer chair, and her lips were white. Her eyes were on his own, and were entirely steady.

"Will you tell us the whole story, M. Herve?" she asked.

"*Mon dieu!* I have been indiscreet. I have made a *faux pas!*"

The Frenchman's distress was genuinely deep.

"No," answered the girl. "I must know all the story. I thank you for telling me."

As Herve told his story, he realized that the woman whom Saxon had turned back to warn, according to Rodman's sketching, was the woman sitting before him on the deck of the *Orinoco*.

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## CHAPTER XV

Captain Harris had been, like Rodman, one of the men who make up the world's flotsam and jetsam. He, too, had meddled in the affairs of that unstable belt which lies just above and below the "line." South and Central American politics and methods were familiar to him. He had not attained the command of the tramp freighter *Albatross* without learning one decisive lesson, that of eliminating curiosity from his plan of living. He argued that his passenger was an *insurrecto*, and, once seized in Puerto Frio, could hardly hope to shield himself behind American citizenship. There had been many men in Puerto Frio when the captain sailed who would have paid well for passage to any port beyond the frontier, but to have taken them might have brought complications. He had been able at some risk to slip two men at most to his vessel under the curtain of night, and to clear without interference. He had chosen the man who was his friend, Dr. Cornish, and the man who was his countryman and helpless. Of course, all the premises upon which both Rodman and this sea-going man acted were false premises. Had he been left, Saxon would have been in no danger. He had none the less been shanghaied for a voyage of great length, and he had been shanghaied out of sincere kindness.

It had not occurred to either the captain or the physician that the situation could outlast the voyage. The man had a fractured skull, and he might die, or he might recover; but one or the other he must do, and that presumably before the completion of the trip across the Atlantic. That he should remain in a comatose state for days proved mildly surprising and interesting to the physician, but that at the end of this time he should suffer a long attack of brain fever was an unexpected development. Saxon knew nothing of his journeying, and his only conversation was that of delirium. He owed his life to the skill and vigilance of the doctor, who had seen and treated human ills under many crude conditions, and who devoted himself with absorption to the case. Neither the physician nor the captain knew that the man had once been called Robert Saxon. There was nothing to identify him. He had come aboard in the riding clothes borrowed from the lockers of the *Phyllis*, and his pockets held only a rusty key, some American gold and a little South American silver. Without name or consciousness or baggage, he was slowly crossing the Atlantic.

Other clothing was provided, and into the newer pockets Captain Harris and Dr. Cornish scrupulously transferred these articles. That Carter, if he recovered, could reimburse the skipper was never questioned. If he died, the care given him would be charged to the account of humanity, together with other services this rough man had rendered in his diversified career.

Meanwhile, on the steamer *Orinoco*, the girl was finding her clear, unflinching courage subjected to the longest, fiercest siege of suspense, and Steele tried in every possible manner to comfort the afflicted girl in this time of her trial and to alleviate matters with optimistic suggestions. M. Herve was in great distress over having been the unwitting cause of fears which he hoped the future would clear away. His aloofness had ended, and, like Steele, he attached himself to her personal following, and sought with a hundred polite attentions to mitigate what he regarded as suffering of his authorship. Duska's impulse had been to leave the vessel at the first American port, but Steele had dissuaded her. His plan was to wire to Kentucky at the earliest possible moment, and learn whether there had been any message from Saxon. Failing in that, he advocated going on to New York. If by any chance Saxon had come back to the States; if, for example, he had recovered *en voyage* and been transferred, as was not impossible, to a west-bound vessel, his agent in New York might have some tidings.

Herve cursed himself for his failure to learn, in the confused half-hour at the Puerto Frio tavern, the name of the vessel that had taken Saxon on board, or at least the name of the fellow refugee who had befriended him.

When the ship came abreast of the fanglike skyline of Manhattan Island, and was shouldered against its pier at Brooklyn by swarming tugs, the girl, although outwardly calm, was not far from inward despair.

Steele's first step was the effort to learn what steamer it might have been that left Puerto Frio for Venezuela and thence for France. But, in the promiscuous fleets of rusty-hulled tramps that beat their way about the world, following a system hardly more fixed than the course of a night-hawk cab about a city's streets, the effort met only failure.

The girl would not consent to an interval of rest after her sea-voyage, but insisted on accompanying Steele at once to the establishment of the art dealer who had the handling of Saxon's pictures.

The dealer had seen Mr. Saxon some time before as the artist passed through New York, but since that time had received no word. He had held a successful exhibition, and had written several letters to the Kentucky address furnished him, but to none of them had there been a reply. The dealer was enthusiastic over the art of the painter, and showed the visitors a number of clippings and reviews that were rather adulation than criticism.

The girl glanced at them impatiently. The work was great, and she was proud of its praise, but just now she was feeling that it really meant nothing at all to her in comparison with the painter himself. To her, he would have been quite as

important, she realized, had no critic praised him; had his brush never forced a compliment from the world. Her brow gathered in perplexity over one paragraph that met her eye.

"The most notable piece of work that has yet come from this remarkable palette," said the critic, "is a canvas entitled, 'Portrait of a lady.' In this, Mr. Saxon has done something more than approximate the genius of Frederick Marston. He has seemed to carry it a point forward, and one is led to believe that such an effort may be the door through which the artist shall issue from the distinction of being 'Marston's first disciple' into a larger distinction more absolutely his own." There was more, but the feature which caught her eye was the fact stated that, "A gentleman bought this picture for his private collection, refusing to give his name."

"What does it mean?" demanded Duska, handing the clipping to Steele. "That picture and the landscape from the Knob were not for sale."

The dealer was puzzled.

"Mr. Saxon," he explained, "directed that from this assignment two pictures were to be reserved. They were designated by marks on the back of the cases and the canvases. Neither the portrait nor the landscape was so marked."

"He must have made a mistake, in the hurry of packing," exclaimed the girl, in deep distress. "He must have marked them wrong!"

"Who bought them?" demanded Steele.

The dealer shook his head.

"It was a gentleman, evidently an Englishman, though he said he lived in Paris. He declined to give his name, and paid cash. He took the pictures with him in a cab to his hotel. He did not even state where he was stopping." The dealer paused, then added: "He explained to me that he collected for the love of pictures, and that he found the notoriety attaching to the purchase of famous paintings extremely distasteful."

"Have you ever seen this gentleman before?" urged Steele.

"Yes," the art agent answered reflectively, "he has from time to time picked up several of Mr. Saxon's pictures, and his conversation indicated that he was equally familiar with the work of Marston himself. He said he knew the Paris agent of Mr. Saxon quite well, and it is possible that through that source you might be able to locate him. I am very sorry the mistake occurred, and, while I am positive that you will find the letters 'N. F. S.' (not for sale) on the two pictures I have held, I shall do all in my power to trace the lost ones."

In one of the packing rooms, the suspicions of Duska were corroborated. Two canvases were found about the same shape and size as the two that had been bought by the foreign art-lover. Palpably, Saxon, in his hurry of boxing, had wrongly labeled them.

In the flood of her despair, the girl found room for a new pang. It was not only because these pictures were the fulfillment of Saxon's most mature genius that their loss became a little tragedy; not even merely because in them she felt that she had in a measure triumphed over Marston's hold on the man she loved, but because by every association that was important to her and to him they were canonized.

That evening, Steele made his announcement. He was going to Havre and Paris. If anything could be learned at that end, he would find it out, and while there he would trace the pictures.

"You see," he assured her, with a cheery confidence he by no means felt, "it's really much simpler than it looks. He was hurt, and he did not recover at once. By the time he reaches France, the sea-voyage will have restored him, and he will cable. Those tramp steamers are slow, and he hasn't yet had time. If he takes a little longer to get well, I'll be there to look after him, and bring him home."

The girl shook her head.

"You haven't thought about the main thing," she said quickly, leaning forward and resting her fingers lightly on his arm, "or perhaps you thought of it, George dear, and were too kind to speak of it. After this, he may wake up--he may wake up the other man. I must go to him myself. I must be with him." Her voice became eager and vibrant: "I want to be the first living being he will greet."

Steele found a thousand objections rising up for utterance, but, as he looked at the steady blue of her eyes, he left them all unsaid. She had gone to South America, of course she would go to France.

It would be imaginative flattery to call the lodgings of Alfred St. John and his daughter commodious, even with the added comforts that the late years had brought to the alleviation of their barrenness. The windows still looked out over the dismal roofs of the *Quartier Latin* and the frowning gray chimney pots where the sparrows quarreled.

St. John might have moved to more commodious quarters, for the days were no longer as pinched as had been those of the past, yet he remained in the house where he had lived before his own ambition died.

His stock-in-trade was his agency in handling the paintings of Frederick Marston, the half-mad painter who, since he had left Paris shortly after his marriage, had not returned to his ancient haunts, or had any parcel in the life of the art world that idolized him, except as he was represented by this ambassador.

St. John sold the pictures that the painter, traveling about, presumably concealing himself under assumed names, sent back to the waiting market and the eager critics.

And St. John knew that, inasmuch as he had been poor, in the half-starved, hungry way of being poor, now his commissions clothed him and paid for his claret, and, above all, made it possible for him to indulge the one soul he loved with the simple comforts that softened her suffering.

The daughter of St. John required some small luxuries which it delighted the Englishman to give her. He had been proud when she married Frederick Marston, he had been distressed when the marriage proved a thing of bitterness, and during the past years he had watched her grow thin, and had feared at first, and known later, that she had fallen prey to the tubercular troubles which had caused her mother's death.

St. John had been a petty sort, and had not withstood the whisperings of dishonest motives. Paradoxically his admiration for Frederick Marston was, seemingly at least, wholly sincere.

In this hero-worship for the painter, who had failed as a husband to make his daughter happy, there was no disloyalty for the daughter. He knew that Marston had given all but the love he had not been able to give and that he had simulated this until her own insight pierced the deception, refusing compassion where she demanded love.

The men who rendered unto Marston their enthusiastic admiration were men of a cult, and tinged with a sort of cult fanaticism. St. John, as father-in-law, agent and correspondent, was enabled to pose along the Boulevard St. Michel as something of a high priest, and in this small vanity he gloried. So, when the questioners of the cafes bombarded him with inquiries as to when Marston would tire of his pose of hermit and return to Paris, the British father-in-law would throw out his shallow chest, and allow an enigmatical smile to play in his pale eyes, and a faint uplift to come to the corners of his thin lips, but he never told.

"I have a letter here," he would say, tapping the pocket of his coat. "The master is well, and says that he feels his art to be broadening."

Between the man and his daughter, the subject of the painter was never mentioned. After her return from England, where she had spent the first year after Marston dropped out of her life, she had exacted from her father a promise that his name should not be spoken between them, and the one law St. John never transgressed was that of devotion to her.

Her life was spent in the lodgings, to which St. John clung because they were in the building where Marston had painted. She never suggested a removal to more commodious quarters. Possibly, into her pallid life had crept a sentimental fondness for the place for the same reason. Her weakness was growing into feebleness. Less, each day, she felt like going down the steep flights of stairs for a walk in the Boulevard of St. Michael, and climbing them again on her return. More heavily each day, she leaned on his supporting arm. All these things St. John noted, and day by day the traces of sandy red in his mustache and beard faded more and more into gray, and the furrow between his pale blue eyes deepened more perceptibly.

St. John had gone one afternoon to a neighboring *atelier*, and the girl, wandering into his room, saw a portrait standing on the easel which St. John had formerly used for his own canvases. Most of the pictures that came here were Marston's. This one, like the rest, was unsigned. She sank into the deeply cushioned chair that St. John kept for her in his own apartment, and gazed fixedly at the portrait.

It was a picture of a woman, and the woman in the chair smiled at the woman on the canvas.

"You are very beautiful--my successor!" she murmured. For a time, she studied the warm, vivid tones of the painted features, then, with the same smile, devoid of bitterness, she went on talking to the other face.

"I know you are my successor," she said, "because the enthusiasm painted into your face is not the enthusiasm of art alone--nor," she added slowly, "is it pity!"

Then, she noticed that one corner of the canvas caught the light with the shimmer of wet paint. It was the corner where ordinarily an artist affixes his name. She rose and went to the heavy studio-easel, and looked again with her eyes close to the stretchers. The paint was evidently freshly applied to that corner of the canvas. To her peering gaze, it almost seemed that through the new coating of the background she could catch a faint underlying line of red, as though it had been a stroke in the letter of a name. Then, she noticed her father's palette lying on a chair near the easel, and the brushes were damp. The lake and Van Dyke brown and neutral-tint that had been squeezed from their tubes were mixed into a rich tone on the palette, which matched the background of the portrait. Sinking back in the chair, fatigued even by such a slight exertion, she heard her father's returning tread on the stairs.

From the door, he saw her eyes on the picture, but true to his promise he remained silent, though, as he caught her gaze on the palette, his own eyes took on something of anxiety and foreboding.

"Does he sign his pictures now?" she asked abruptly.

"No. Why?"

"It looked--almost," she said wearily, "as though the signature had been painted out there at the corner."

For an instant, St. John eyed his daughter with keen intentness.

"The canvas was scraped in shipping," he said, at last. "I touched up the spot where the paint was rubbed."

For a time, both were silent. The father saw that two hectic spots glowed on the girl's bloodless cheeks, and that her eyes, fixed on the picture, wore a deeply wistful longing.

He, too, knew that this picture was a declaration of love, that in her silence she was torturing herself with the thought that these other eyes had stirred the heart that had remained closed to her. He did not want to admit to her that this was not a genuine Marston; yet, he faltered a moment, and resolved that he could not, even for so necessary a deception, let her suffer.

"That portrait, my child," he confessed slowly, "was not painted by--by him. It's by another artist, a lesser man, named Saxon."

Into the deep-set eyes surged a look of incredulous, but vast, relief. The frail shoulders drew back from their shallow-chested sag, and the thin lips smiled.

"Doesn't he sign his pictures, either?" she demanded, finally.

For an instant, St. John hesitated awkwardly for an explanation.

"Yes," he said at last, a little lamely. "This canvas was cut down for framing, and the signature was thrown so close to the edge that the frame conceals the name." He paused, then added, quietly: "I have kept my promise of silence, but now--do you want to hear of *him*?"

She looked up--then shook her head, resolutely.

"No," she said.

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## CHAPTER XVI

Late one evening in the cafe beneath the Elysee Palace Hotel, a tall man of something like thirty-five, though aged to the seeming of a bit more, sat over his brandy and soda and the perusal of a packet of letters. He wore traveling dress, and, though the weather had hardly the bitterness to warrant it, a fur-trimmed great-coat fell across the empty chair at his side. It was not yet late enough for the gayety that begins with midnight, and the place was consequently uncrowded. The stranger had left a taxicab at the door a few minutes before, and, without following his luggage into the office, he had gone directly to the cafe, to glance over his mail before being assigned to a room.

The man was tall and almost lean. Had Steele entered the cafe at that moment, he would have rushed over to the seated figure, and grasped a hand with a feeling that his quest had ended, then, on second sight, he would have drawn back, incredulous and mystified. This guest lacked no feature that Robert Saxon possessed. His eyes held the same trace of the dreamer, though a close scrutiny showed also a hard glitter--his dreams were different. The hand that held the letter was marked front and back, though a narrow inspection would have shown the scar to be a bit more aggravated, more marked with streaked wrinkles about the palm. He and the American painter were as identical as models struck from one die in the lines and angles that make face and figure. Yet, in this man, there was something foreign and alien to Saxon, a difference of soul-texture. Saxon was a being of flesh, this man a statue of chilled steel.

The envelope he had just cast upon the table fell face upward, and the waiting *garçon* could hardly help observing that it was addressed to Senor George Carter, care of a steamship agency in the *Rue Scribe*.

As Carter read the letter it had contained, his brows gathered first in great interest, then in surprise, then in greater interest and greater surprise.

"There has been a most strange occurrence here," said the writer, who dated his communication from Puerto Frio, and wrote in Spanish. "Just before the revolution broke, a man arrived who was called Robert A. Saxon. He was obviously mistaken for you by the government and was taken into custody, but released on the interference of his minister. The likeness was so remarkable that I was myself deceived and consequently astounded you should make so bold as to return. He, however, established a clean bill of health and that very fact has suggested to me an idea which I think will likewise commend itself to you, *amigo mio*. That I am speaking only from my sincere interest in you, you need not question when you consider that I have kept you advised through these years of matters here and have divulged to no soul your whereabouts. This man left at once, but the talk spread rapidly in confidential circles than an *Americano* had come who was the double of yourself. Some men even contended that it was really you, and that it was you also who betrayed the plans of Vegas to the government, but that scandal is not credited. Most of those who are well informed know that the traitor was one whom we trusted, a man who in your day was on the side of the established government. That man is now in high influence by reason of playing the Judas, and it may be that he will make an effort to secure your extradition. Embezzlement, you know, is not a political offense, and he still holds a score against you. You know to whom I refer. That is why I warn you. You have a double and your double has a clean record. For a time if there is no danger of crossing tracks with him, I should advise that you be Senor Saxon instead of Senor Carter. This should be safe enough since Senor Saxon sailed on the day after his arrival for North America. I have the felicity to inscribe myself," etc., etc. --- A dash served as a signature, but Carter knew the writing, and was satisfied. For a time, he sat in deep reverie, then, rising, took up his coat, and went to the door. His stride was precisely the stride of Robert Saxon.

At the desk above, he discussed apartments. Having found one that suited his taste, he signed the guest-card with the name of Robert Saxon, and inquired as to the hour of departure of trains for Calais on the following morning. He volunteered the information that he was leaving then for London. True to his word, on the next day he left the hotel in a taximeter cab which turned down the *Champs Elysees*.

When it was definitely settled that Duska and her aunt were to go to Europe, Steele conceived a modification of the plans, to which only after much argument and persuasion and even a touch of deception he won the girl's consent. The object of his amendment was secretly to give him a chance to arrive first on the scene, accomplish what he could of search, and be prepared with fore-knowledge to stand as a buffer between Duska and the first shock of any ill tidings. Despite his persistent optimism of argument, the man was far from confident. The plan was that the two ladies should embark for Genoa, and go from there to Paris by rail, while he should economize days by hurrying over the northern ocean track. Duska chafed at the delay involved, but Steele found ingenious arguments. The tramp steamer, he declared, with its roundabout course, would be slow, and it would be better for him to be armed against their coming with such facts as he could gather, in order that he might be a more effective guide.

Possibly, he argued, the tramp ship had gone by way of the Madeiras, and might soon be in the harbor of Funchal. If

she took the southerly track, she could go at once by a steamer that would give her a day there, and, armed with letters he would send to the consulate, this contingency could be probed, leaving him free to work at the other end. If he learned anything first, she would learn of it at once by wireless.

So, at last, he stood on a North River pier, and saw the girl waving her good-by across the rail, until the gap of churning water had widened and blurred the faces on the deck. Then, he turned and hastened to make his own final arrangements for sailing by the *Mauretania* on the following day.

In Havre, he found himself utterly baffled. He haunted the water-front, and browbeat the agents, all to no successful end.

In Paris, matters seemed to bode no better results. He first exhausted the more probable points. Saxon's agent, the *commissaire de police*, the consulate, the hospitals—he even made a melancholy visit to the grewsome building where the morgue squats behind *Notre Dame*. Then he began the almost endless round of hotels. His "taxi" sped about through the swift, seemingly fluid currents of traffic, as a man in a hurry can go only in Paris, the frictionless. The town was familiar to him in most of its aspects, and he was able to work with the readiness and certainty of one operating in accustomed haunts, commanding the tongue and the methods. At last, he learned of the registry at the Elysee Palace Hotel. He questioned the clerk, and that functionary readily enough gave him the description of the gentleman who had so inscribed himself. It was a description of the man he sought. Steele fell into one grave error. He did not ask to see the signature itself. "Where had Monsieur Saxon gone? To London. *Certainment*, he had taken all his luggage with him. No, he had not spoken of returning to Paris. Yes, monsieur seemed in excellent health."

So, Steele turned his search to London, and in London found himself even more hopelessly mixed in baffling perplexity. He had learned only one thing, and that one thing filled him with vague alarm. Saxon had apparently been here. He had been to all seeming sane and well, and had given his own name. His conduct was inexplicable. It was inconceivable that he should have failed to communicate with Duska. Steele cabled to America, thinking Saxon might have done so since their departure. Nothing had been heard at home.

Late in the afternoon on the day of his arrival in London, Steele went for a walk, hoping that before he returned some clew would occur to him, upon which he could concentrate his efforts. His steps wandered aimlessly along Pall Mall, and, after the usage of former habit, carried him to a club, where past experience told him he would meet old friends. But, at the club door, he halted, realizing that he did not want to meet men. He could think better alone. So, with his foot on the stone stairs, he wheeled abruptly, and went on to Trafalgar Square, where once more he halted, under the lions of the Nelson Column, and racked his brain for any thought or hint that might be followed to a definite end.

He stood with the perplexed air of a man without definite objective. The square was well-nigh empty except for a few loiterers about the basins, and the view was clear to the elevation on the side where, at the cab-stand, waited a row of motor "taxis" and hansoms. The afternoon was bleak, and the solemn monotone of London was graver and more forbidding than usual.

Suddenly, his heart pounded with a violence that made his chest feel like a drum. With a sudden start, he called loudly, "Saxon! Hold on, Saxon!" then went at a run toward the cab-stand.

He had caught a fleeting and astounding vision. A man, with the poise and face that he sought, had just stepped into one of the waiting vehicles, and given an order to the driver. Even in his haste, Steele was too late to do anything more than take a second cab, and shout to the man on the box to follow the vehicle that had just left the curb. As his "taxi" turned into the Strand, and slurred through the mud past the Cecil and the Savoy, he kept his eyes strained on the cab ahead, threading its way through the congested traffic, disappearing, dodging, reappearing, and taxing his gaze to the utmost. For a moment after they had both crowded into Fleet Street, he lost it, and, as he leaned forward, searching the jumble of traffic, his own vehicle came to a halt just opposite the Law Courts. He looked hastily out, to see the familiar shoulders of the man he followed disappearing beyond a street-door, under the swinging "Sign of the Cock."

Tossing a half-crown to the cabman, he followed up the stairs, and entered the room, where the tables were almost deserted. A group of men was sitting in one of the stalls, deep in converse, and, though two were hidden by the dividing partitions, Steele saw the one figure he sought at the head of the table. The figure bent forward in conversation, and, while his voice was low and his words inaudible, the Kentuckian saw that the eyes were glittering with a hard, almost malevolent keenness. As he came hastily forward, he caught the voice: it was Saxon's voice, yet infinitely harder. The two companions were strangers of foreign aspect, and they were listening attentively, though one face wore a sullen scowl.

Steele came over, and dropped his hand on the shoulder of the man he had pursued.

"Bob!" he exclaimed, then halted.

The three faces looked up simultaneously, and in all was displeasure for the abrupt interruption of a conversation evidently intended for no outside ears. Each expression was blank and devoid of recognition, and, as the tall man rose to his feet, his face was blanker than the others.

Then, with the greater leisure for scrutiny, Steele realized his mistake. For a time, he stood dumfounded at the marvelous resemblance. He knew without asking that this man was the double who had brought such a tangle into his friend's life. He bowed coldly.

"I apologize," he explained, shortly. "I mistook this gentleman for someone else."

The three men inclined their heads stiffly, and the Kentuckian, dejected by his sudden reverse from apparent success to failure, turned on his heel, and left the place. It had not, of course, occurred to him to connect the appearance of his snarler of Saxon's affairs with the name on the Paris hotel-list, and he was left more baffled than if he had known only the truth, in that he had been thrown upon a false trail.

The Kentuckian joined Mrs. Horton and her niece in Genoa on their arrival. As he met the hunger in the girl's questioning eyes, his heart sickened at the meagerness of his news. He could only say that Paris had divulged nothing, and that a trip to London had been equally fruitless of result. He did not mention the fact that Saxon had registered at the hotel. That detail he wished to spare her.

She listened to his report, and at its end said only, "Thank you," but he knew that something must be done. A woman who could let herself be storm-tossed by grief might ride safely out of such an affair when the tempest had beaten itself out, but she, who merely smiled more sadly, would not have even the relief that comes of surrender to tears.

At Milan, there was a wait of several hours. Steele insisted on the girl's going with him for a drive. At a picture-exhibition, they stopped.

"Somehow," said Steele, "I feel that where there are paintings there may be clews. Shall we go in?"

The girl listlessly assented, and they entered a gallery, which they found already well filled. Steele was the artist, and, once in the presence of great pictures, he must gnaw his way along a gallery wall as a rat gnaws its way through cheese, devouring as he went, seeing only that which was directly before him. The girl's eyes ranged more restlessly.

Suddenly, Steele felt her clutch his arm.

"George!" she breathed in a tense whisper. "George!"

He followed her impulsively pointed finger, and further along, as the crowd of spectators opened, he saw, smiling from a frame on the wall, the eyes and lips of the girl herself. Under the well-arranged lights, the figure stood out as though it would leave its fixed place on the canvas and mingle with the human beings below, hardly more lifelike than itself.

"The portrait!" exclaimed Steele, breathlessly. "Come, Duska; that may develop something."

As they anxiously approached, they saw above the portrait another familiar canvas; a landscape presenting a stretch of valley and checkered flat, with hills beyond, and a sky tuneful with the spirit of a Kentucky June.

Then, as they came near enough to read the labels, Steele drew back, startled, and his brows darkened with anger.

"My God!" he breathed.

The girl standing at his elbow read on a brass tablet under each frame, "Frederick Marston, pnx."

"What does it mean?" she indignantly demanded, looking at the man whose face had become rigid and unreadable.

"It means they have stolen his pictures!" he replied, shortly. "It means infamous thievery at least, and I'm afraid--" In his anger and surprise, he had almost forgotten to whom he was speaking. Now, with realization, he bit off his utterance.

She was standing very straight.

"You needn't be afraid to tell me," she said quietly; "I want to know."

"I'm afraid," said Steele, "it means foul play. Of course," he added in a moment, "Marston himself is not a party to the fraud. It's conceivable that his agent, this man St. John, has done this in Marston's absence. I must get to Paris and see."

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## CHAPTER XVII

In the compartment of the railway carriage, Steele was gazing fixedly at the lace "tidy" on the cushioned back of the opposite seat. His brows were closely knit in thought. He was evolving a plan.

Duska sat with her elbow on the sill of the compartment window, her chin on her gloved hand, her eyes gazing out, vague and unseeing. Yet, she loved beauty, and just outside the panes there was beauty drawn to a scale of grandeur.

They were climbing, behind the double-header of engines, up where it seemed that one could reach out and touch the close-hanging clouds, into tunnels and out of tunnels, through St. Gothard's Pass and on where the Swiss Alps reached up into the fog that veiled the summits. The mountain torrents came roaring down, to beat their green water into swirling foam, and dash over the lower rocks like frenzied mill-races. Her eyes did not wake to a sparkle at sight of the quaint chalets which seemed to stagger under huge roof slabs of rugged slate. She did not even notice how they perched high on seemingly unattainable crags like stranded arks on Helvetian Ararats.

Each tunnel was the darkness between changed tableaux, and the mouth of each offered a new and more wonderful picture. The car-windows framed glimpses of Lake Como, Lake Lugano, and valleys far beneath where villages were only a jumble of toy blocks; yet, all these things did not change the utter weariness of Duska's eyes where enthusiasm usually dwelt, or tempt Steele's fixity of gaze from the lace "tidy."

At Lucerne, his thinking found expression in a lengthy telegram to Paris. The Milan exhibit had opened up a new channel for speculation. If Saxon's pictures were being pirated and sold as Marston's, there was no one upon whom suspicion would fall more naturally than the unscrupulous St. John, Marston's factor in Paris. Steele vaguely remembered the Englishman with his petty pride for his stewardship, though his own art life had lain in circles that rarely intercepted that of the Marston cult even at its outer rim. If this fraud were being practiced, its author was probably swindling both artists, and the appearance of either of them in Paris might drive St. John to desperate means of self-protection.

The conversion of the rooms formerly occupied by Marston into a school had been St. John's doing. This *atelier* was in the house where St. John himself lived, and the Kentuckian knew that, unless he had moved his lodgings, he could still be found there, as could the very minor "academy" of Marston-idolizers, with their none-too-exalted instructor, Jean Hautecoeur.

At all events, it was to this address that Steele directed his message. Its purport was to inform St. John that Americans, who had only a short stay in Paris, were anxious to procure a Marston of late date, and to summon him to the Hotel Palais d'Orsay for the day of their arrival there.

When they reached the hotel, he told the girl of his plan, suggesting that it might be best for him to have this interview with the agent alone, but admitting that, if she insisted on being present, it was her right. She elected to hear the conversation, and, when St. John arrived, he was conducted to the sitting-room of Mrs. Horton's suite.

Pleased with the prospect of remunerative sales, Marston's agent made his entrance jauntily. The shabbiness of the old days had been put by. He was now sprucely clothed, and in his lapel he wore a bunch of violets.

His thin, dissipated face was adorned with a rakishly trimmed mustache and Vandyke of gray which still held a fading trace of its erstwhile sandy red. His eyes were pale and restless as he stood bowing at the door. The afternoon was waning, and the lights had not yet been turned on.

"Mr. Steele?" he inquired.

Steele nodded.

St. John looked expectantly toward the girl in the shadow, as though awaiting an introduction, which was not forthcoming. As he looked, he seemed to grow suddenly nervous and ill-at-ease.

"You are Mr. Marston's agent, I believe?" Steele spoke crisply.

"I have had that honor since Mr. Marston left Paris some years ago. You know, doubtless, that the master spends his time in foreign travel." The agent spoke with a touch of self-importance.

"I want you to deliver to me here the portrait and the landscape now on exhibition at Milan," ordered the American.

"It will be difficult--perhaps expensive--but I think it may be possible." St. John spoke dubiously.



Steele's eyes narrowed.

"I am not requesting," he announced, "I am ordering."

"But those canvases, my dear sir, represent the highest note of a master's work!" began St. John, almost indignantly. "They are the perfection of the art of the greatest living painter, and you direct me to procure them as though they were a grocer's staple on a shelf! Already, they are as good as sold. One does not have to peddle Marston's canvases!"

Steele walked over to the door, and, planting his back against its panels, folded his arms. His voice was deliberate and dangerous:

"It's not worth while to bandy lies with you. We both know that those pictures are from the brush of Robert Saxon. We both know that you have bought them at the price of a pupil's work, and mean to sell them at the price of the master's. I shall be in a position to prove the swindle, and to hand you over to the courts."

St. John had at the first words stiffened with a sudden flaring of British wrath under his gray brows. As he listened, the red flush of anger faded to the coward's pallor.

"That is not all," went on Steele. "We both know that Mr. Saxon came to Paris a short while ago. For him to learn the truth meant your unmasking. He disappeared. We both know whose interests were served by that disappearance. You will produce those canvases, and you will produce Mr. Saxon within twenty-four hours, or you will face not only exposure for art-piracy, but prosecution for what is more serious."

As he listened, St. John's face betrayed not only fear, but also a slowly dawning wonder that dilated his vague pupils. Steele, keenly reading the face, as he talked, knew that the surprise was genuine.

"As God is my witness," avowed the Englishman, earnestly, "if Mr. Saxon is in Paris, or in Europe, I know nothing of it."

"That," observed Steele dryly, "will be a matter for you to prove."

"No, no!" The Englishman's voice was charged with genuine terror, and the hand that he raised in pleading protest trembled. His carefully counterfeited sprightliness of guise dropped away, and left him an old man, much broken.

"I will tell you the whole story," he went on. "It's a miserable enough tale without imputing such evil motives as you suggest. It's a shameful confession, and I shall hold back nothing. The pictures you saw are Saxon's pictures. Of course, I knew that. Of course, I bought them at what his canvases would bring with the intention of selling them at the greater price commanded by the greater painter. I knew that the copyist had surpassed the master, but the world did not know. I knew that Europe would never admit that possible. I knew that, if once I palmed off this imitation as genuine, all the art-world would laugh to scorn the man who announced the fraud. Mr. Saxon himself could not hope to persuade the critics that he had done those pictures, once they were accepted as Marston's. The art-world is led like sheep. It believes there is one Marston, and that no other can counterfeit him. And I knew that Marston himself could not expose me, because I know that Marston is dead." The man was ripping out his story in labored, detached sentences.

Steele looked up with astonished eyes. The girl sat listening, with her lips parted.

"You see--" the Englishman's voice was impassioned in its bitterness--"I am not shielding myself. I am giving you the unrelieved truth. When I determined the fact of his death, I devised a scheme. I did not at that time know that this American would be able to paint pictures that could be mistaken for Marston's. Had I known it, I should have endeavored to ascertain if he would share the scheme with me. Collaborating in the fraud, we could have levied fortunes from the art world, whereas in his own name he must have painted a decade more to win the verdict of his true greatness. I was Marston's agent. I am Marston's father-in-law. When I speak, it is as his ambassador. Men believe me. My daughter--" the man's voice broke--"my daughter lies on her death-bed. For her, there are a few months, perhaps only a few weeks, left of life. I have provided for her by trading on the name and greatness of her husband. If you turn me over to the police, you will kill her. For myself, it would be just, but I am not guilty of harming Mr. Saxon, and she is guilty of nothing." The narrator halted in his story, and covered his face with his talon-like fingers. St. John was not a strong man. The metal of his soul was soft and without temper. He dropped into a chair, and for a while, as his auditors waited in silence, gave way to his emotion.

"I tell you," he groaned, "I have at least been true to one thing in life. I have loved my child. I don't want her punished for my offenses."

Suddenly, he rose and faced the girl.

"I don't know you," he said passionately, "but I am an old man. I am an outcast--a derelict! I was not held fit for an

introduction, but I appeal to you. Life can drive a man to anything. Life has driven me to most things, but not to all. I knew that any day might bring my exposure. If it had come after my daughter's death, I would have been satisfied. I have for months been watching her die--wanting her to live, yet knowing that her death and my disgrace were racing together." He paused, then added in a quaking voice: "There were days when I might have been introduced to a woman like you, many years ago."

Duska was not fitted by nature to officiate at "third degree" proceedings. As she looked back into the beseeching face, she saw only that it was the face of an old man, broken and terrified, and that even through its gray terror it showed the love of which he talked.

Her hand fell gently on his shoulder.

"I am sorry--about your daughter," she said, softly.

St. John straightened, and spoke more steadily.

"The story is not ended. In those days, it was almost starvation. No one would buy my pictures. No one would buy her verse. The one source of revenue we might have had was what Marston sought to give us, but that she would not accept. She said she had not married him for alimony. He tried often and in many ways, but she refused. Then, he left. He had done that before. No one wondered. After his absence had run to two years, I was in Spain, and stumbled on a house, a sort of *pension*, near Granada, where he had been painting under an assumed name, as was his custom. Then, he had gone again--no one knew where. But he had left behind him a great stack of finished canvases. *Mon dieu*, how feverishly the man must have worked during those months--for he had then been away from the place almost a year. The woman who owned the house did not know the value of the pictures. She only knew that he had ordered his rooms reserved, and had not returned, and that rental and storage were due her. I paid the charges, and took the pictures. Then, I investigated. My investigations proved that my surmise as to his death was correct. I was cautious in disposing of the pictures. They were like the diamonds of Kimberley, too precious to throw upon the market in sufficient numbers to glut the art-appetite of the world. I hoarded them. I let them go one or two at a time, or in small consignments. He had always sold his pictures cheaply. I was afraid to raise the price too suddenly. From time to time, I pretended to receive letters from the painter. I had then no definite plan. When they had reached the highest point of fame and value, I would announce his death. But, meanwhile, I discovered the work young Saxon was doing in America. I followed his development, and I hesitated to announce the death of Marston. An idea began to dawn on me in a nebulous sort of way, that somehow this man's work might be profitably utilized by substitution. At first, it was very foggy--my idea--but I felt that in it was a possibility, at all events enough to be thought over--and so I did not announce the death of Marston. Then, I realized that I could supplement the Marston supply with these canvases. I was timid. Such sales must be cautiously made, and solely to private individuals who would remove the pictures from public view. At last, I found these two which you saw at Milan. I felt that Mr. Saxon could never improve them. I would take the chance, even though I had to exhibit them publicly. The last of the Marstons, save a few, had been sold. I could realize enough from these to take my daughter to Cairo, where she might have a chance to live. I bought the canvases in New York in person. They have never been publicly shown save in Milan; they were there but for a day only, and were not to be photographed. When you sent for me, I thought it was an American Croesus, and that I had succeeded." St. John had talked rapidly and with agitation. Now, as he paused, he wiped the moisture from his forehead with his pocket-handkerchief.

"I have planned the thing with the utmost care. I have had no confederates. I even collected a few of Mr. Saxon's earlier and less effective pictures, and exhibited them beside Marston's best, so the public might compare and be convinced in its idea that the boundary between the master and the follower was the boundary between the sublime and the merely meritorious. That is all. For a year I have hesitated. When I entered this room, I realized my danger. Even in the growing twilight, I recognized the lady as the original of the portrait."

"But didn't you know," questioned the girl, "that sooner or later the facts must become known--that at any time Mr. Saxon might come to Europe, and see one of his own pictures as I saw the portrait of myself in Milan?"

St. John bowed his head.

"I was desperate enough to take that chance," he answered, "though I safeguarded myself in many ways. My sales would invariably be to purchasers who would take their pictures to private galleries. I should only have to dispose of a few at a time. Mr. Saxon has sold many pictures in Paris under his own name, and does not know who bought them. Selling them as Marston's, though somewhat more complicated, might go on for some time--and my daughter's life can not last long. After that, nothing matters."

"Have you actually sold any Saxons as Marstons heretofore?" demanded Steele.

St. John hesitated for a moment, and then nodded his head.

"Possibly, a half-dozen," he acknowledged, "to private collectors, where I felt it was safe."

"I have no wish to be severe," Steele spoke quietly, "but those two pictures we must have. I will pay you a fair profit. For the time, at least, the matter shall go no further."

St. John bowed with deep gratitude.

"They shall be delivered," he said.

Steele stood watching St. John bow himself out, all the bravado turned to obsequiousness. Then, the Kentuckian shook his head.

"We have unearthed that conspiracy," he said, "but we have learned nothing. To-morrow, I shall visit the studio where the Marston enthusiasts work, and see if there is anything to be learned there."

"And I shall go with you," the girl promptly declared.



## CHAPTER XVIII

On an unimportant cross street which cuts at right angles the *Boulevard St. Michel*, that axis of art-student Paris, stands an old and somewhat dilapidated house, built, after the same fashion as all its neighbors, about a court, and entered by a door over which the *concierge* presides. This house has had other years in which it stood pretentious, with the pride of a mansion, among its peers. Now, its splendor is tarnished, its respectability is faded, and the face it presents to the street wears the gloom that comes of past glory, heightened, perhaps, by the dark-spiritedness of many tenants who have failed to enroll their names among the great.

Yet, for all its forbidding frown, its front bespeaks a certain consciousness of lingering dignity. A plate, set in the door-case, announces that the great Marston painted here a few scant years ago, and here still that more-or-less-distinguished instructor, Jean Hautecoeur, tells his pupils in the second-floor *atelier* how it was done.

He was telling them now. The model, who had been posed as, "Aphrodite Rising from the Foam," was resting. She sat on the dilapidated throne amid a circle of easels. A blanket was thrown about her, from the folds of which protruded a bare and shapely arm, the hand holding lightly between two fingers the cigarette with which she beguiled her recess.

The master, looking about on the many industrious, if not intellectual, faces, was discoursing on Marston's feeling for values.

"He did not learn it," declared M. Hautecoeur: "he was born with it. He did not acquire it: he evolved it. A faulty value caused him pain as a false note causes pain to the true musician." Then, realizing that this was dangerous doctrine from the lips of one who was endeavoring to instill the quality into others, born with less gifted natures, he hastened to amend. "Yet, other masters, less facile, have gained by study what they lacked by heritage."

The room was bare except for its accessories of art. A few well-chosen casts hung about the walls. Many unmounted canvases were stacked in the corners, the floors were chalk-marked where easel-positions had been recorded; charcoal fragments crunched underfoot when one walked across the boards. From the sky-light--for the right of the building had only two floors--fell a flood of afternoon light, filtering through accumulated dust and soot. The door upon the outer hall was latched. The students, bizarre and unkempt in the bohemianism of their cult, mixed colors on their palettes as they listened. In their little world of narrow horizons, the discourse was like a prophet's eulogy of a god.

As the master, his huge figure somewhat grotesque in its long, paint-smeared blouse and cap, stood delivering his lecture with much eloquence of gesture, he was interrupted by a rap on the door. Jacques du Bois, whose easel stood nearest the threshold, reluctantly took his pipe from his teeth, and turned the knob with a scowl for the interruption. For a moment, he stood talking through the slit with a gentleman in the hall-way, his eyes meanwhile studying with side-glances the lady who stood behind the gentleman. Then, he bowed and closed the door.

"Someone wishes a word with M. Hautecoeur," he announced.

The master stepped importantly into the hall, and Steele introduced himself. M. Hautecoeur declared that he quite well remembered monsieur and his excellent painting. He bowed to mademoiselle with unwieldy gallantry.

"Mr. Robert Saxon," began the American, "is, I believe, one of the most distinguished of the followers of Frederick Marston. Miss Filson and I are both friends of Mr. Saxon, and, while in Paris, we wished to visit the shrine of the Marston school. We have taken the liberty of coming here. Is it possible to admit us?"

The instructor looked cautiously into the *atelier*, satisfied himself that the model had not resumed her throne and nudity, then flung back the door with a ceremonious sweep. Steele, familiar with such surroundings, cast only a casual glance about the interior. It was like many of the smaller schools in which he had himself painted. To the girl, who had never seen a life-class at work, it was stepping into a new world. Her eyes wandered about the walls, and came back to the faces.

"I have never had the honor of meeting your friend, Monsieur Saxon," declared the instructor in English. "But his reputation has crossed the sea! I have had the pleasure of seeing several of his canvases. There is none of us following in the footsteps of Marston who would not feel his life crowned with high success, had he come as close as Saxon to grasping the secret that made Marston Marston. Your great country should be proud of him."

Steele smiled.

"Our country could also claim Marston. You forget that, monsieur."

The instructor spread his hands in a deprecating gesture.

"Ah, *mon ami*, that is debatable. True, your country gave him birth, but it was France that gave him his art."

"Did you know," suggested Steele, "that some of the unsigned Saxon pictures have passed competent critics as the work of Marston?"

Hautecoeur lifted his heavy brows.

"Impossible, monsieur," he protested; "quite impossible! It is the master's boast that any man who can pass a painting as a Marston has his invitation to do so. He never signs a canvas--it is unnecessary--his stroke--his treatment--these are sufficient signature. I do not belittle the art of your friend," he hastened to explain, "but there is a certain--what shall I say?--a certain individualism about the work of this greatest of moderns which is inimitable. One must indeed be much the novice to be misled. Yet, I grant you there was one quality the master himself did not formerly possess which the American grasped from the beginning."

"His virility of touch?" inquired Steele.

"Just so! Your man's art is broader, perhaps stronger. That difference is not merely one of feeling: it is more. The American's style was the outgrowth of the bigness of your vast spaces--of the broad spirit of your great country--of the pride that comes to a man in the consciousness of physical power and currents of red blood! Marston was the creature of a confined life, bounded by walls. He was self-absorbed, morbid, anemic. To be the perfect artist, he needed only to be the perfect animal! He did not understand that. He disliked physical effort. He felt that something eluded him, and he fought for it with brush and mahlstick. He should have used the Alpinstock or the snow-shoe." Hautecoeur was talking with an enthused fervor that swept him into metaphor.

"Yet--" Steele was secretly sounding his way toward the end he sought--"yet, the latter pictures of Marston have that same quality."

"Precisely. I would in a moment more have spoken of that. I have my theory. Since leaving Paris, I believe Marston has gone perhaps into the Alps, perhaps into other countries, and built into himself the thing we urged upon him--the robust vision."

The girl spoke for the first time, putting, after the fashion of the uninitiated, the question which, the more learned hesitate to propound:

"What is this thing you call the secret? What is it that makes the difference?"

"Ah, mademoiselle, if I knew that!" The instructor sighed as he smiled. "How says the English Fitzgerald? 'A hair perhaps divides the false and true.' Had Marston had the making of the famous epigram, he would not have said he mixed his paints with brains. Rather would he have confessed, he mixed them with ideals."

"But I fear we delay the posing," suggested Steele, moving, with sudden apprehension, toward the door.

"I assure you, no!" prevaricated the teacher, with instant readiness. "It is a wearying pose. The model will require a longer rest than the usual. Will not mademoiselle permit me to show her those Marston canvases we are fortunate enough to have here? Perhaps, she will then understand why I find it impossible to answer her question."

When Captain Paul Harris had set his course to France with a slow, long voyage ahead, his shanghaied passenger had gone from stunned unconsciousness into the longer and more complicated helplessness of brain-fever. There was a brushing of shoulders with death. There were fever and unconsciousness and delirium, and through each phase Dr. Cornish, late of the Foreign Legion, brought his patient with studious care--through all, that is, save the brain fog. Then, as the vessel drew to the end of the voyage, the physical illness appeared to be conquered, yet the awakening had been only that of nerves and bodily organs. The center of life, the mind, was as remote and incommunicable as though the thought nerves had been paralyzed. Saxon was like a country whose outer life is normal, but whose capital is cut off and whose government is supine. The physician, studying with absorbed interest, struggled to complete the awakening. Unless it should be complete, it were much better that the man had died, for, when the vessel dropped her anchor at Havre, the captain led ashore a man who in the parlance of the peasants was a poor "innocent," a human blank-book in a binding once handsome, now worn, with nothing inscribed on its pages.

For a time, the physician and skipper were puzzled as to the next step. The physician was confident that the eyes, which gazed blankly out from a face now bearded and emaciated, would eventually regain their former light of intelligence. He did not believe that this helpless creature--who had been, when he first saw him in Puerto Frio, despite blood-discolored face and limp unconsciousness, so perfect a figure of a man--had passed into permanent darkness. The light would again dawn, possibly at first in fitful waverings and flashes through the fog. If only there could be

some familiar scene or thing to suggest the past! But, unfortunately, all that lay across the world. So, they decided to take him to Paris, and ensconce him in Captain Harris' modest lodgings in the *Rue St. Jacques*, and, inasmuch as the captain's lodgings were shared by no one, and his landlady was a kindly soul, Dr. Cornish also resolved to go there. For a few weeks, the sailor was to be home from the sea, and meant to spend his holiday in the capital. As for the physician, he was just now unattached. He had hoped to be in charge of a government's work of health and sanitation. Instead, he was idle, and could afford to remain and study an unusual condition. He certainly could not abandon this anonymous creature whom fate had thrust upon his keeping. Now, six weeks after his accident, Saxon sat alone in the modest apartment of the lodgings in the *Rue St. Jacques*. Since his arrival in Paris, the walls of that room and the court in the center of the house had been the boundaries of his world. He had not seen beyond them. He had been physically weak and languid, mentally void. They had attempted to persuade him to move about, but his apathy had been insuperable. Sometimes, he wandered about the court like a small child. He had no speech. Often, he fingered a rusty key as a baby fingers a rattle. On the day that Steele and Duska had gone to the academy of M. Hautecoeur, Dr. Cornish and Paul Harris had left the lodgings for a time, and Saxon sat as usual at a window, looking absently out on the court.

In its center stood a stone *jardiniere*, now empty. About it was the flagged area, also empty. In front was the street-door--closed. Saxon looked out with the opaque stare of pupils that admit no images to the brain. They were as empty as the stone jar. Possibly, the sun, borrowing some of the warmth of the spent summer, made a vague appeal to animal instinct; possibly, the first ray of mental dawn was breaking. At all events, Saxon rose heavily, and made his way into the area.

At last, he wandered to the street-door. It happened to be closed, but the *concierge* stood near.

"*Cordon?*" inquired the porter, with a smile. It is the universal word with which lodgers in such abodes summon the guardian of the gate to let them in or out.

Saxon looked up, and across the hitherto unbroken vacancy of his pupils flickered a disturbed, puzzled tremor of mental groping.

He opened his thin lips, closed them again, then smiled, and said with perfect distinctness:

"*Cordon, s'il vous plait.*"

The *concierge* knew only that monsieur was an invalid. In his next question was nothing more than simple Gallic courtesy.

"*Est-ce que monsieur va mieux aujourd'hui?*"

Once more, Saxon's lips hesitated, then mechanically moved.

"*Oui, merci,*" he responded.

The man who found himself standing aimlessly on the sidewalk of the *Rue St. Jacques*, was a man clothed in an old and ill-fitting suit of Captain Harris' clothes. He was long-haired, hollow-cheeked and bearded like a pirate. At last, he hesitatingly turned and wandered away at random. About him lay Paris and the world, but Paris and the world were to him things without names or meaning.

His unguided steps carried him to the banks of the Seine, and finally he stood on the island, gazing without comprehension at the square towers of *Notre Dame*, his brows strangely puckered as his eyes picked out the carvings of the "Last Judgment" and the *Galerie des Rois*.

He shook his head dully, and, turning once more, went on without purpose until at the end of much wandering he again halted. This time, he had before him the *Pantheon's* entrance, and confronting him on its pedestal sat a human figure in bronze. It was Rodin's unspeakably melancholy conception, "*le Penseur*," and it might have stood for Saxon's self as it half-crouched with limbs tense and brows drawn in, in the agony of brooding thought-travail.

Then, Saxon's head came up, and into his eyes stole a confused groping, as though reason's tentacles were struggling out blindly for something upon which to lay hold. With such a motion perhaps, the prehistoric man-creature may have thrown up his chin at the bursting into being of thought's first coherent germ. But from "*le Penseur*" Saxon turned away with a futile shake of his head to resume his wanderings.

Finally, in a narrow cross street, he halted once more, and looked about him with a consciousness of vast weariness. He had traversed the length of many blocks in his aimlessness, crossing and recrossing his own course, and he was still feeble from long days of illness and inertia.

Suddenly, he raised his head, and his lips, which had been half-parted in the manner of lips not obeying a positive brain, closed in a firm line that seemed to make his chin and jaw take on a stronger contour. He drew his brows together as he stood studying the door before him, and his pupils were deeply vague and perplexed. But it was a different perplexity. The vacuity was gone.

Automatically, one thin hand went into the trousers-pocket, and came out clutching a rusty key. For another moment, he stood regarding the thing, turning it over in his fingers. Then, he laughed, and drew back his sagging shoulders. With the gesture, he threw away all imbecility, and followed the inexorable call of some impulse which he could not yet fully understand, but which was neither vague nor haphazard.

At that moment, Dr. Cornish, chancing to glance up from his course a block away, stopped dumfounded at the sight of his patient. When he had gathered his senses, and looked again, the patient had disappeared.

Saxon walked a few steps further, turned into an open street-door, passed the *concierge* without a word, and toilsomely, but with a purposeful tread, mounted the narrow, ill-lighted stairs. At the turning where strangers usually stumbled, he lifted his foot clear for the longer stride, yet he had not glanced down.

For just a moment, he paused for breath in the hall, upon which opened several doors identical in appearance. Without hesitation, he fitted the ancient key into an equally ancient lock, opened the door, and entered.

At the click of the thrown tumbler of the lock, some of the occupants of the place glanced up. They saw the door swing wide, and frame between its jambs a tall, thin man, who stood unsteadily supporting himself against the case. The black-bearded face was flushed with a burning fever, but the eyes that looked out from under the heavy brows were wide awake and intelligent.

"But Marston will one day return to us," Monsieur Hautecoeur was declaring to Steele and the girl, who, with backs to the door, were studying a picture on the wall. "He will return, and then----"



The instructor had caught the sound of the opening door, and he half-turned his head to cast a side glance in its direction. His words died suddenly on his lips. His pose became petrified; his features transfixed with astonishment.

His rigid fixity of face and figure froze the watching students into answering tenseness. Even the blanket-wrapped model held a freshly lighted cigarette poised half-way to her lips. Then, the man in the door took an unsteady step forward, and from his trembling fingers the key fell to the floor, where in the dead stillness it seemed to strike with a crash. The girl and Steele wheeled. At that moment, the lips of the bearded face moved, and from them came the announcement:

"*Me voici, je viens d'arriver.*"

The voice broke the hypnotic suspense of the silence as a pin-point snaps a toy balloon.

Hautecoeur sprang excitedly forward.

"Marston! Marston has returned!" he shouted, in a great voice that echoed against the sky-light.

As the man stepped forward, he staggered slightly, and would have fallen had he not been already folded in the giant embrace of the lesser master.

Duska stood as white as the fresh sheets of drawing-paper at her feet. Her fingers spasmodically clenched and opened at her sides, and from her teeth, biting into the lower lip, her breathing came in gasps. The walls seemed to race in circles, and it was with half-realization that she heard Steele calling the man, wildly demanding recognition.

The newcomer was leaning heavily on Hautecoeur's arm. He did not appear to notice Steele, but his gaze met and held the girl's pallid face and the intensely anguished eyes that looked into his. For an instant, they stood facing each other, neither speaking; then, in a voice of polite concern, the tall man said:

"Mademoiselle is ill!" There was no note of recognition--only, the solicitous tone of any man who sees a woman who is obviously suffering.

Duska raised her chin. Her throat gave a convulsive jerk, but she only caught her lip more tightly between her teeth, so that a moment later, when she spoke, there were purplish indentations on its almost bloodless line.

She half-turned to Steele. Her voice was an utterly hopeless whisper, but as steady as Marston's had been.

"For God's sake," she said, "take me home!"

At the door, they encountered the excited physician, who stumbled against them with a mumbled apology as he burst into the *atelier*.

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## CHAPTER XIX

Late that afternoon, in Mrs. Horton's drawing-room at the *Hotel Palais d'Orsay*, Steele stood at the window, his gaze almost sullen in the moodiness of his own ineffectual sympathy. The day had grown as cheerless as himself. Outside, across the *Quai d'Orsay*, a cold rain pelted desolately into the gray water of the Seine, and drew a wet veil across the opposite bank. Through the reeking mist, the remote gray branches in the Gardens of the *Tuileries* stood out starkly naked. Even the vague masses of the *Louvre* seemed as forbidding as the shadowy bulk of some buttressed prison. The "taxis" slurred by through wet streets, and those persons who were abroad went with streaming umbrellas and hurried steps. The raw chill of Continental hotels permeated the place. He knew that in the center of the room Duska sat, her elbows resting on the table top; her eyes, distressfully wide, fixed on the wet panes of the other window. He knew that, if he spoke to her, her lips would shape themselves into a pathetic smile, and her answer would be steady. He knew that she had given herself no luxury of outburst, but that she had remained there, in much the same attitude, all afternoon; sometimes, crushing her small handkerchief into a tight wad of lace and linen; sometimes, opening it out and smoothing it with infinite care into a tiny square upon the table. He knew that her feet, with their small shoes and high-arched, silk-stockinged insteps, twitched nervously from time to time; that the gallant shoulders drooped forward. These details were pictured in his mind, and he kept his eyes stolidly pointed toward the outer gloom so that he might not be forced to see it all again in actuality.

At last, he wheeled with a sudden gesture of desperation, and, going across to the table, dropped his hand over hers.

She looked up with the unchanged expression of wide-eyed suffering that has no outlet.

"Duska, dear," he asked, "can I do anything?"

She shook her head, and, as she answered, it was in a dead voice. "There is nothing to do."

"If I leave you, will you promise to cry? You must cry," he commanded.

"I can't cry," she answered, in the same expressionless flatness of tone.

"Duska, can you forgive me?" He had moved around, and stood leaning forward with his hands resting upon the table.

"Forgive you for what?"

"For being the author of all this hideous calamity," he burst out with self-accusation, "for bringing him there--for introducing you."

She reached out suddenly, and seized his hand.

"Don't!" she pleaded. "Do you suppose that I would give up a memory that I have? Why, all my world is memory now! Do you suppose I blame you--or him?"

"You might very well blame us both. We both knew of the possibilities, and let things go on."

She rose, and let her eyes rest on him with directness. Her voice was not angry, but very earnest.

"That is not true," she said. "It couldn't be helped. It was written. He told me everything. He asked me to forget, and I held him--because we loved each other. He could no more help it than he could help being himself, fulfilling his genius when he thought he was following another man. There are just some things--" she halted a moment, and shook her head--"some things," she went on quietly, "that are bigger than we are."

"But, now----" He stopped.

"But, now--" the quiet of her words hurt the man more than tears could have done--"now, his real life has claimed him--the life that only loaned him to me."

The telephone jangled suddenly, and Steele, whose nerves were all on edge, started violently at the sound. Mechanically, he took up the instrument from its table-rack, and listened.

"Yes, this is Mr. Steele. What? Mr. St. John? Tell him I'll see him down there--to wait for me." Steele was about to replace the receiver, when Duska's hand caught his wrist.

"No," she said quickly, "have him come here."

"Wait. Hold the wire." The man turned to the girl.

"Duska, you are only putting yourself on the rack," he pleaded. "Let me see him alone." She shook her head with the old determination. "Have him come here," she repeated.

"Send Mr. St. John up," ordered the Kentuckian.

One might have seen from his eyes that, when Mr. St. John arrived, his reception would be ungracious. The man felt all the stored-up savagery born of his helpless remonstrance. It must have some vent. Every one and everything that had contributed to her misery were alike hateful to him. Had he been able to talk to Saxon just then, his unreasoning wrath would have poured itself forth as readily and bitterly as on St. John. The sight of the agent standing in the door a few moments later, inoffensive, even humble, failed to mollify him.

"I shall have the two pictures delivered within the next day," ventured the Englishman.

Steele turned brutally on the visitor.

"Do you mean to risk remaining in Paris now?" he demanded.

At the tone, St. John stiffened. He was humble because these people had been kind. Now, meeting hostility, he threw off his lowly demeanor.

"Why, may I ask, should I leave Paris?" There was a touch of delicately shaded defiance in the questioning voice.

"Because, now, you must reckon with Mr. Saxon for pirating his work! Because he may choose to make you walk the plank."

Steele whipped out his answer in rapid, angry sentences.

St. John met the eyes of the Kentuckian insolently.

"Pardon the suggestion that you misstate the case," he said, softly. "I have never sold a picture as a Marston that was not a Marston--it would appear that unconsciously I was, after all, honest. As for Mr. Saxon, there is, it seems, no Mr. Saxon. That gentleman was entirely mythical. It was an alias, if you please."

It was Steele who winced now, but his retort was contemptuously cool:

"Do you fancy Mr. Marston will accept that explanation?"

"Mr. Steele--" the derelict drew back his thin shoulders, and faced the other with a glint in the pale pupils that was an echo of the days when he had been able to look men in the face. "Before I became a scoundrel, sir, I was a gentleman. My daughter is extremely ill. I must remain with her, and take the chance as to what Mr. Marston may choose to do. I shall hope that he will make some allowance for a father's desperate--if unscrupulous--effort to care for his daughter. I hope so particularly inasmuch as that daughter is also his wife."

Steele started forward, his eyes going involuntarily to the girl, but she sat unflinching, except that a sudden, spasm of pain crossed the hopelessness of her eyes. Somewhere among Duska Filson's ancestors, there had been a stoic. Instantly, Steele realized that it was he himself who had brought about the needless cruelty of that reminder. St. John had disarmed him, and put him in the wrong.

"I beg your pardon, sir," he said.

"I came here," said St. John slowly, "not only to notify you about your canvases. There was something else. You were both very considerate when I was here before. It is strange that a man who will do dishonest things still clings to the wish that his occasional honest motives shall not be misconstrued. I don't want you to think that I intentionally lied to you then. I told you Frederick Marston was dead. I believed it. Before I began this--this piracy, I investigated, and satisfied myself on the point. Time corroborated me. It is as though he had arisen from the grave. That is all."

The man paused; then, looking at the girl, he continued:

"And Mr. Saxon--" he hesitated a moment upon the name, but went resolutely on--"Mr. Saxon will recover. When he wakes next, the doctors believe, he will awake to everything. After his violent exertion and the shock of his partial realization, he became delirious. For several days perhaps, he must have absolute quiet, but he will take up a life in which there are no empty spaces."

The girl rose, and, as she spoke, there was a momentary break in her voice that led Steele to hope for the relief of tears, but her tone steadied itself, and her eyes remained dry.

"Mr. St. John," she said slowly, "may I go and see--your daughter?"

For a moment, the Englishman looked at her quietly, then tears flooded his eyes. He thought of the message of the portrait, and, with no information except that of his own observing eyes, he read a part at least of the situation.

"Miss Filson," he said with as simple a dignity as though his name had never been tarnished, as though the gentleman had never decayed into the derelict, "my daughter would be happy to receive you, but she is in no condition to hear startling news. By her own wish, we have not in seven years spoken of Mr. Marston. She does not know that I believed him dead, she does not know that he has reappeared. To tell her would endanger her life."

"I shall not go as a bearer of news," the girl assured him; "I shall go only as a friend of her father's, and--because I want to."

St. John hesitatingly put out his hand. When the girl gave him hers, he bent over it with a catch in his voice, but a remnant of the grand manner, and kissed her fingers in the fashion of the old days.

Driving with Steele the next morning to St. John's lodgings, the girl looked straight ahead steadfastly. The rain of the night had been forgotten, and the life of Paris glittered with sun and brilliant abandon. Pleasure-worship and vivacious delight seemed to lie like a spirit of the departed summer on the boulevards. Along the *Champs Elysees*, from the *Place de la Concorde* to the *Arc de Triomphe*, flowed a swift, continuous parade of motors, bearing in state gaily dressed women, until the nostrils were filled with a strangely blended odor of gasoline and flowers. The pavement cafes and sidewalks flashed color, and echoed laughter. Nowhere, from the spot where the guillotine had stood to the circle where Napoleon decreed his arch, did there seem a niche for sorrow.

"Will you wait here to see to what he awakens?" questioned Steele.

Duska shook her head.

"I have no right to wait. And yet--yet, I can't go home!" She leaned toward him, impulsively. "I couldn't bear going back to Kentucky now," she added, plaintively; "I couldn't bear it."

"You will go to Nice for a while," said Steele, firmly. He had fallen into the position, of arranging their affairs. Mrs. Horton, distressed in Duska's distress, found herself helpless to act except upon his direction.

The girl nodded, apathetically.

"It doesn't matter," she said.

Then, she looked up again.

"But I want you to stay. I want you to do everything you can for both of them." She paused, and her next words were spoken with an effort: "And I don't want--I don't want you to speak of me. I don't want you to try to remind him."

"He will question me," demurred Steele.

Duska's head was raised with a little gesture of pride.

"I am not afraid," she said, "that he will ask you anything he should not--anything that he has not the right to ask."

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## CHAPTER XX

When he turned back, a day later, from the turmoil of the station, from the strenuous labor of weighing trunks, locating the compartment in the train, subsidizing the guards, and, hardest of all, saying good-bye to Duska with a seeming or normal cheerfulness, Steele found himself irritably out of measure with the quick-step of Paris. Mrs. Horton and the girl were on their way to the Riviera. He was left behind to watch results; almost, it seemed to him, to sit by and observe the post-mortem on every hope in the lives of three people. Nice should still be quiet. The tidal wave of "trippers" would not for a little while sweep over its rose-covered slopes and white beaches and dazzling esplanades, and the place would afford the girl at least every soothing influence that nature could offer. That would not be much, but it would be something.

As for himself, he felt the isolation of Paris. On a desert, a man may become lonely; in deep forests and on high mountains, he may come to know and hate his own soul in solitude, but the last note of aloofness, of utter exile, is that which comes to him who looks vainly for one face in a sea of other faces, whose small cosmos lies in unwept and unnoticed ruin in the midst of a giant city that moves along its indifferent way to the time of dance-music. In the hotel, there was the chatter of tourists. His own tongue was prattled by men and women whose lives seemed to revolve around the shops of the *Rue de la Paix*, or whose literature was the information of the guide-books. He felt that everyone was invading his somberness of mood with trivialities, until, in revulsion against the whole stage-setting of things, he had himself and his luggage transported to the *Hotel Voltaire*, where the life about him was the simpler life of the less pretentious *quais* of the Seine.

After his *dejeuner*, he sat for a time attempting to readjust his ideas. He had told Saxon that he would never again speak of love to Duska. Now, he realized how barren of hope it would ever be for him to renew his plea. She had bankrupted his heart. He had buried his own hopes, and no one except himself had known at what cost to himself. He had taken his place in the niche dedicated to closest friend, just outside the inner shrine reserved for the one who could penetrate that far. Now, he was in a greater distress. Now, he wanted only her happiness, and as he had never wanted it before. Now, he realized that the only source through which this could come was the source that seemed hopelessly clogged. There was no doubt of his sincerity. Even his own intimate questioning acquitted him of self-consideration. Could he at that moment have had one wish fulfilled by some magic agency of miracle, that wish would have been that he might lead Robert Saxon, as Robert Saxon had been, to Duska, with all his memory and love intact, and free from any incumbrance that might divide them. That would have been the gift of all gifts, and the only gift that would drive the look of heart-hunger and despair from her eyes.

Steele was restless, and, taking up his hat, he strolled out along the quay, and turned at last into the *Boulevard St. Michel*, stretching off in a broad vista of cafe-lined sidewalks. The life of the "*Boule Mich*" held no attraction for him. In his earlier days, he had known it from the river to the *Boulevard Montparnasse*. He knew its tributary streets, its lodgings, its schools and the life which the spirit of the modern is so rapidly revolutionizing from Bohemia's shabby capital to a conventionalized district. None of these things held for him the piquant challenge of novelty.

As he passed a certain cafe, which he had once known as the informal club of the Marston cult, he realized that here the hilarity was more pronounced than elsewhere. The boulevard itself was for squares a thread, stringing cafes like beads in a necklace. Each had its crowd of revelers; its boisterous throng of frowsy, velvet-jacketed, long-haired students; its laughing models; its inevitable brooding and despondent *absintheurs* sitting apart in isolated melancholy. Yet, here at the "*Chat Noir*," the chorus was noisier. Although the evening was chill, the sidewalk tables were by no means deserted. The Parisian proves his patriotism by his adherence to the out-door table, even if he must turn up his collar, and shiver as he sips his wine.

Listlessly, Steele turned into the place. It was so crowded this evening that for a time it looked as though he would have difficulty in finding a seat. At last, a waiter led him to a corner where, dropping to the seat along the wall, he ordered his wine, and sat gloomily looking on.

The place was unchanged. There were still the habitués quarreling over their warring tenets of the brush; men drawn to the center of painting as moths are drawn to a candle; men of all nationalities and sorts, alike only in the general quality of their unkempt *grotesquerie*.

There was music of a sort; a plaintive chord long-drawn from the violin occasionally made its sweet wail heard above the babel and through the reeking smoke of the room. Evidently, it was some occasion beyond the ordinary, and Steele, leaning over to the student nearest him, inquired in French:

"Is there some celebration?"

The stranger was a short man, with hair that fell low on his neck and greased his collar. He had a double-pointed beard and deep-set black eyes, which he kept fixed on his absinthe as it dripped drop by drop from the nicked device attached to his *frappe* glass. At the question, he looked up, astonished.

"But is it possible monsieur does not know? We are all brothers here--brothers in the worship of the beautiful! Does not monsieur know?"

Steele did not know, and he told the stranger so without persiflage.

"It is that the great Marston has returned!" proclaimed the student, in a loud voice. "It is that the master has come back to us--to Paris!"

The sound of his voice had brought others about the table. "Does monsieur know that the Seine flows?" demanded a pearly pretty model, raising her glass and flashing from her dark eyes a challenging glance of ridicule.

Steele did not object to the good-humored baiting, but he looked about him, and was thankful that the girl on her way to Nice could not look in on this enthusiasm over the painter's home-coming; could not see to what Marston was returning; what character of devotees were pledging the promotion of the first disciple to the place of the worshiped master.

Some half-drunken student, his hand upon the shoulder of a model, lifted a tilting glass, and shouted thickly, "*Vive l'art! Vive Marston!*" The crowd took up the shout, and there was much clinking of glass.

Steele, with a feeling of deep disgust, rose to go. The other *quais* of the Seine were better after all. But, as he reached for his hat, he felt a hand on his shoulder, and, turning, recognized, with a glow of welcome, the face of M. Herve. Like himself, M. Herve seemed out of his element, or would have seemed so had he also not had, like Steele, that adaptability which makes some men fit into the picture wherever they may find themselves. The two shook hands, and dropped back on the cushions of the wall seat.

"I have heard the story," the Frenchman assured Steele. "Monsieur may spare himself the pain of repeating it. It is a miracle!"

Steele was looking into his glass.

"It is a most unhappy miracle," he replied.

"But, *mon dieu!*" M. Herve looked across the table, tapping the Kentuckian's sleeve with his outstretched fingers. "It makes one think, *mon ami*--it makes one think!"

His vis-a-vis only nodded, and Herve went on:

"It brings home to one the indestructibility of the true genius--the unquenchable fire of it! Destiny plays a strange game. She has here taken a man, and juggled with his life; battered his identity to unrecognizable fragments; set a seal on his past. Yet, his genius she could not efface. That burned through to the light--sounded on insistently through the confusion of wreck, even as that violin sounds through this hell of noises and disorder--the great unsilenced chord! The man thinks he copies another. Not so--he is merely groping to find himself. Never have I thought so deeply as since I have heard this story."

For a time, Steele did not reply. To him, the personal element drowned the purely academic interest of the psychological phase in this tragedy.

Suddenly, a new element of surprise struck him, and he leaned across the table, his voice full of questioning.

"But you," he demanded, "you had studied under Marston. You knew him, and yet, when you saw Saxon, you had no recognition."

M. Herve nodded his head with grave assent.

"That was my first incredulous thought when I heard of this miracle," he admitted; "yet, only for a moment. After all, that was inevitable. They were different. Now, bearded, ill, depleted, I fancy he may once more look the man I knew--that man whose hair was a mane, and whose morbid timidity gave to his eyes a haunted and uncertain fire. When I saw Saxon, it is true I saw a man wounded and unconscious; his face covered with blood and the dirt of the street, yet he was, even so, the man of splendid physique--the new man remade by the immensity of your Western prairies--having acquired all that the man I had known lacked. He was transformed. In that, his Destiny was kind--she gave it not only to his body, but to his brush. He was before a demi-god of the palette. Now, he is the god."

"Do you chance to know," asked Steele suddenly, "how his hand was pierced?"

"Have you not heard that story?" the Frenchman asked. "I am regrettably responsible for that. We sought to make him build the physical man. I persuaded him to fence, though he did it badly and without enthusiasm. One evening, we were toying with sharpened foils. Partly by his carelessness and partly by my own, the blade went through his palm. For a long period, he could not paint."

Frederick Marston was not at once removed from the lodgings in the *Rue St. Jacques*. Absolute rest was what he most required. When he awoke again, unless he awoke refreshed by sufficient rest, Dr. Cornish held out no hope. The strain upon enfeebled body and brain had been great, and for days he remained delirious or unconscious. Dr. Cornish was like adamant in his determination that he should be left undisturbed for a week or more.

Meanwhile, the episode had unexpected results. The physician who had come to Paris fleeing from a government he had failed to overturn, who had taken an emergency case because there was no one else at hand, found himself suddenly heralded by the Paris press as "that distinguished specialist, Dr. Cornish, who is effecting a miraculous recovery for the greatest of painters."

During these days, Steele was constantly at the lodgings, and with him, sharing his anxiety, was M. Herve. There were many callers to inquire--painters and students of the neighborhood, and the greater celebrities from the more distinguished schools.

But no one was more constantly in attendance than Alfred St. John. He divided his time between the bedside of his daughter and the lodgings where Marston lay. The talk that filled the Latin Quarter, and furiously excited the studio on the floor below, was studiously kept from the girl confined to her couch upstairs.

One day while St. John was in the *Rue St. Jacques*, pacing the small *cour* with Steele and Herve, Jean Hauteceur came in hurriedly. His manner was that of anxious embarrassment, and for a moment he paused, seeking words.

St. John's face turned white with a divination of his tidings.

"Does she need me?" he asked, almost breathlessly.

Hauteceur nodded, and St. John turned toward the door. Steele went with him, and, as they climbed the steep stairs, the old man leaned heavily on his support.

The Kentuckian waited in St. John's room most of that night. In the next apartment were the girl, her father and the physician. A little before dawn, the old man came out. His step was almost tottering, and he seemed to have aged a decade since he entered the door of the sick-room.

"My daughter is dead," he said very simply, as his guest paused at the threshold. "I am leaving Paris. My people except for me have borne a good name. I wanted to ask you to save that name from exposure. I wanted to bury with my daughter everything that might shadow her memory. For myself, nothing matters."

Steele took the hand the Englishman held tremblingly outstretched.

"Is there anything else I can do?" he asked.

St. John shook his head.

"That will be quite all," he answered.

Such things as had to be done, however, Steele did, and two days later, when Alfred St. John took the train for Calais and the Channel, it was with assurances that, while they could not at this time cheer him, at least fortified him against all fear of need.

It was a week later that Cornish sent for the Kentuckian, who was waiting in the court.

"I think you can see him now," said the physician briefly, "and I think you will see a man who has no gaps in his memory."

Steele went with some misgiving to the sick-room. He found Marston looking at him with eyes as clear and lucid as his own. As he came up, the other extended a hand with a trembling gesture of extreme weakness. Steele clasped it in silence.

For a time, neither spoke.

While Steele waited, the other's face became drawn. He was evidently struggling with himself in desperate distress.

There was something to be said which Marston found it bitterly difficult to say. At last, he spoke slowly, forcing his words and holding his features in masklike rigidity of control.

"I remember it all now, George." He hesitated as his friend nodded; then, with a drawing of his brows and a tremendous effort, he added, huskily:

"And I must go to my wife."

Steele hesitated before answering.

"You can't do that, Bob," he said, gently. "I was near her as long as could be. I think she is entirely happy now."

The man in the bed looked up. His eyes read the eyes of the other. If there was in his pulse a leaping sense of release, he gave it no expression.

"Dead?" he whispered.

Steele nodded.

For a time, Marston gazed up at the ceiling with a fixed stare. Then, his face clouded with black self-reproach.

"If I could blot out that injury from memory! God knows I meant it as kindness."

"There is time enough to forget," said Steele.

It was some days later that Marston went with Steele to the *Hotel Voltaire*. There was much to be explained and done. He learned for the first time the details of the expedition that Steele had made to South America, and then to Europe; of the matter of the pictures and St. John's connection with them, and of the mystifying circumstances of the name registered at the Elysee Palace Hotel. That incident they never fathomed.

St. John had buried his daughter in the *Cimetiere Montmartre*. After the first mention of the matter on his recovery to consciousness, Marston had not again alluded to his former wife, until he was able to go to the spot, and place a small tribute on her grave. Standing there, somewhat awestruck, his face became deeply grave, and, looking up at his friend, he spoke with deep agitation:

"There is one part of my life that was a tremendous mistake. I sought to act with regard for a misconceived duty and kindness, and I only inflicted infinite pain. I want you to know, and I tell you here at a spot that is to me very solemn, that I never abandoned her. When I left for America, it was at her command. It was with the avowal that I should remain subject to her recall as long as we both lived. I should have kept my word. It's not a thing that I can talk of again. You know all that has happened since, but for once I must tell you."

Steele felt that nothing he could say would make the recital easier, and he merely inclined his head.

"I shall have her removed to England, if St. John wishes it," Marston said. "God knows I'd like to have the account show some offsetting of the debit."

As they left the gates for the omnibus, Marston added:

"If St. John will continue to act as my agent, he can manage it from the other side of the Channel. I shall not be often in Paris."

Later, he turned suddenly to the Kentuckian, with a half-smile.

"We swindled St. John," he exclaimed. "We bought back the pictures at Saxon prices." His voice became unusually soft. "And Frederick Marston can never paint another so good as the portrait. We must set that right. Do you know--" the man laughed sheepishly--"it's rather disconcerting to find that one has spent seven years in self-worship?"

Steele smiled with relief at the change of subject.

"Is that the sensation of being deified?" he demanded. "Does one simply feel that Olympus is drawn down to sea level?"

Shortly after, Marston sent a brief note to Duska.

"I shall say little," he wrote. "I can't be sure you will give me a hearing, but also I can not go on until I have begged it. I can not bear that any report shall reach you until I have myself reported. My only comfort is that I concealed nothing that I had the knowledge to tell you. There is now no blank in my life, and yet it is all blank, and must remain blank unless I can come to you. I am free to speak, and, if you give it to me, no one else can deny me the right to speak. All

that I said on that night when a certain garden was bathed in the moon is more true now than then, and now I speak with full knowledge. Can you forgive everything?"

And the girl reading the letter let it drop in her lap, and looked out through her window across the dazzling whiteness of the *Promenade des Anglais* to the purple Mediterranean. Once more, her eyes lighted from deep cobalt to violet.

"But there was nothing to forgive," she softly told the sea.





## CHAPTER XXI

When, a month later, Frederick Marston went to the hotel on the *Promenade des Anglais* at Nice, it was a much improved and rejuvenated man as compared with the wasted creature who had opened the closed door of the "academy" in the *Quartier Latin*, and had dropped the key on the floor. Although still a trifle gaunt, he was much the same person who, almost a year before, had clung to the pickets at Churchill Downs, and halted in his view of a two-year-old finish. Just as the raw air of the north had given place to the wooing softness of the Riviera, and the wet blankets of haze over the gardens of the Tuileries to the golden sunlight of the flower-decked south, so he had come again out of winter into spring, and the final result of his life's equation was the man that had been Saxon, untouched by the old Marston.

Duska's stay at Nice had been begun in apathy. About her were all the influences of beauty and roses and soft breezes, but it was not until she had read this first letter from Marston that these things meant anything to her. Then, suddenly, she had awakened to a sense of its delight. She knew that he would not come at once, and she felt that this was best. She wanted him to come back to her when he could come as the man who had been in her life, and, since she knew he was coming, she could wait. Her eyes had become as brightly blue as the Mediterranean mirroring the sky, and her cheeks had again taken on their kinship to the roses of the Riviera. Once more, she was one with the nature of this favored spot, a country that some magical realist seems to have torn bodily from the enchanted Isles of Imagination, and transplanted in the world of Fact.

Now, she became eager to see everything, and it so happened that, when Marston, who had not notified her of the day of his arrival, reached her hotel, it was to find that she and her aunt had motored over to Monte Carlo, by the upper Corniche Road, that show-drive of the world which climbs along the heights with the sea below and the sky, it would seem, not far above.

The man turned out again to the *Promenade des Anglais*. The sun was shining on its whiteness, and it seemed that the city was a huge structure of solid marble, set between the sea and the color-spotted slopes of the villa-clad hills.

Marston was highly buoyant as he made his way to the garage where he could secure a car to give chase. He even paused with boyish and delighted interest to gaze into the glittering shop windows of the *Promenade* and the *Avenue Felix Faure*, where were temptingly displayed profound booklets guaranteeing the purchaser a sure system for conquering the chances of roulette "on a capital of PS9, playing red or black, manque or passe, pair or impair, and compiled by one with four years of experience."

He had soon negotiated for a car, and had gained the friendship of a chauffeur, who grinned happily and with contentment when he learned that monsieur's object was speed. Ahead of him stretched nine miles of perfect macadam, with enough beauty to fill the eye and heart with joy for every mile, and at the end of the journey--unless he could happily overtake her sooner--was Duska.

The car sped up between the villas, up to the white ribbon of road where the ships, lying at anchor in the purpled water beneath, were white toys no longer than pencils, where towns were only patches of roof tiles, and mountainsides mere rumpled blankets of green and color; where the road-houses were delights of picturesque rusticity and flower-covered walls.

Thanks to a punctured tire, Marston found a large dust-coated car standing at the roadside when he had covered only half of the journey. It was drawn up near a road-house that sat back of a rough stone wall, and was abandoned save for the chauffeur, who labored over his task of repair. But Marston stopped and ran up the stone stairs to the small terrace, where, between rose bushes that crowded the time-stained facade of the modest caravansery, were set two or three small tables under a trellis; and, at one of the tables, he recognized Mrs. Horton.

Mrs. Horton rose with a little gasp of delight to welcome him, and recognized how his eyes were ranging in search for an even more important personage while he greeted her. Off beyond the road, with its low guarding wall of stone, the mountainside fell away precipitously to the sea, stretching out below in a limitless expanse of the bluest blue that our eyes can endure. The slopes were thickly wooded.

"We blew out a tire," explained Mrs. Horton, "and Duska is exploring somewhere over the wall there. I was content to sit here and wait--but you are younger," she added with a smile. "I won't keep you here."

From inside the tavern came the tinkle of guitars, from everywhere in the clear crystalline air hung the perfume of roses. Marston, with quick apologies, hastened across the road, vaulted the wall, and began his search. It was a brief one, for, turning into a clearing, he saw her below him on a ledge. She stood as straight and slim and gracefully erect as the lancelike young trees.

He made his way swiftly down the slope, and she had not turned nor heard his approach. He went straight to her, and took her in his arms.

The girl wheeled with a little cry of recognition and delight; then, after a moment, she held him off at arms' length, and looked at him. Her eyes were deep, and needed no words. About them was all the world and all the beauty of it.

Finally, she laughed with the old, happy laugh.

"Once," she said very slowly, "you quoted poetry to me--a verse about the young queen's crowning. Do you remember?"

He nodded.

"But that doesn't apply now," he assured her. "You are going to crown me with an undeserved and unspeakable crown."

"Quote it to me now," she commanded, with reinstated autocracy.

For a moment, the man looked into her face as the sun struck down on its delicate color, under the softness of hat and filmy automobile veil; then, clasping her very close, he whispered the lines:

"Beautiful, bold and browned,  
Bright-eyed out of the battle,  
The young queen rode to be crowned."

"Do you remember some other lines in the same verse?" she questioned, in a voice that made his throbbing pulses bound faster; but, before he could answer, she went on:

"Then the young queen answered swift,  
"We hold it crown of our crowning, to take our crown for a gift.'"

They turned together, and started up the slope.