

FICTION

Guy Boothby

The Kidnapped President

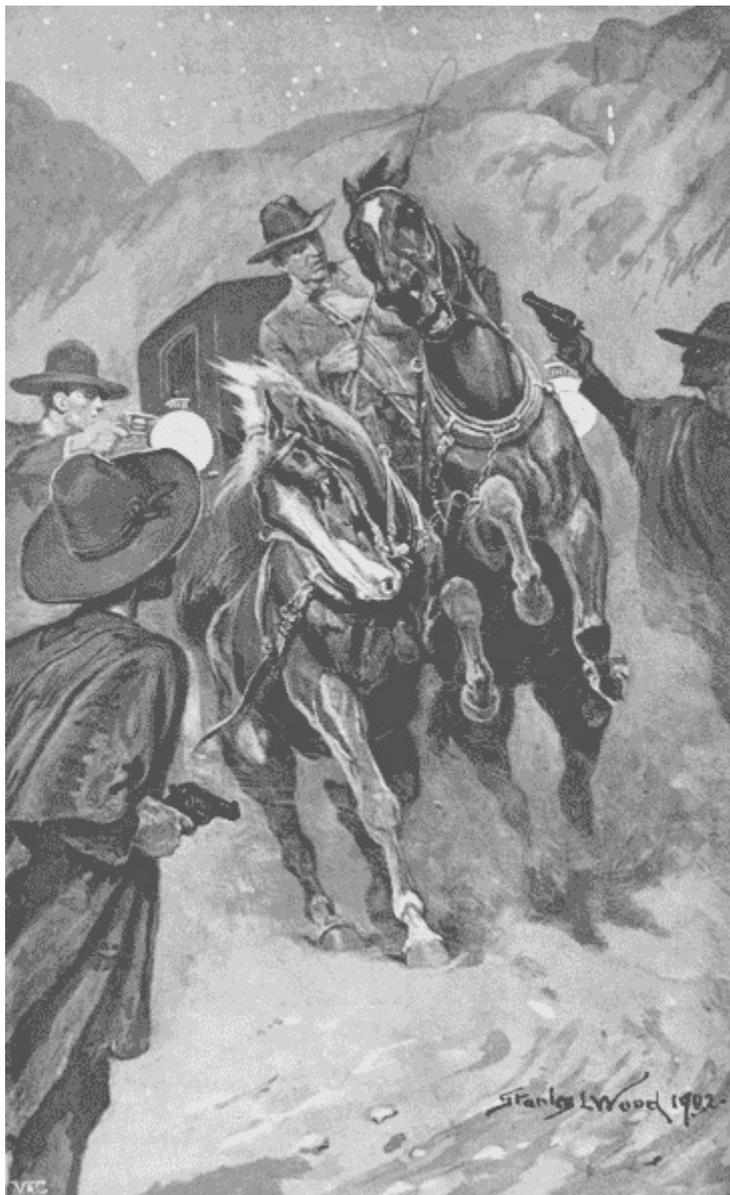
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FICTION



"STOP!"
(Page 162.)

THE KIDNAPPED PRESIDENT

BY
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'DR. NIKOLA,' 'A BID FOR FORTUNE,' 'THE BEAUTIFUL WHITE DEVIL,'
ETC.

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'THE KIDNAPPED PRESIDENT'



CHAPTER I

I suppose to every man, at some period in his life, there comes some adventure upon which, in after life, he is destined to look back with a feeling that is very near akin to astonishment. Somebody has said that adventures are to the adventurous. In my case I must confess that I do not see how the remark applies. I was certainly fourteen years at sea, but in all that time, beyond having once fallen overboard in Table Bay, and, of course, the great business of which it is the purpose of this book to tell you, I cannot remember any circumstance that I could dignify with the title of an adventure. The sailor's calling in these times of giant steamships is so vastly different from what it was in the old days of sailing ships and long voyages that, with the most ordinary luck, a man might work his way up the ratlines from apprentice to skipper with little less danger than would be met with in a London merchant's office. Though I was not aware of it, however, I was destined to have an adventure, stirring enough to satisfy the most daring, before my seafaring life came to an end.

How well I remember the day on which I was appointed fourth officer of the ocean liner *Pernambuco*, running from London to South America. I should here remark that I held a second officer's certificate, but I was, nevertheless, glad enough to take what I could get, in the hope of being able to work my way up to something better. It was not a bad rise, when all was said and done, to leave a ramshackle old tub of a tramp for the comparatively luxurious life of a mail boat; much jollier merely to run out to the Argentine and back, instead of dodging at a snail's pace from port to port all round the world. Then again there was the question of society. It was pleasanter in every respect to have pretty girls to flirt with on deck, and to sit beside one at meals, than to have no one to talk to save a captain who was in an intoxicated state five days out of seven, a grumpy old chief mate, and a Scotch engineer, who could recite anything Burns ever wrote, backwards or forwards, as you might choose to ask him for it. When I had been six months on board the *Pernambuco*, I was made third officer; at the end of the year I signed my name on the pay-sheet as second. Eventually I got my Master's Certificate, and became chief officer. Now everybody knows, or ought to know, that the duties of chief officer on board a big liner, and, for the matter of that, on any other boat, are as onerous as they are varied. In the first place, he is the chief executive officer of the ship, and is held responsible, not only for its appearance, but also for the proper working of the crew. It is a position that requires consummate tact. He must know when to see things and when not to see them, must be able to please the passengers, and yet protect the interests of his owners, must, and this is not the least important fact, be able to keep his men constantly employed, yet not earn for himself the reputation of being too hard a task-master. Finally, he has to see that all the credit for what he does is not appropriated by himself, but goes to increase the *kudos* of his commanding officer. If the latter is a gentleman, and can appreciate his officers' endeavours at their real value, matters will in all probability go smoothly; on the other hand, however, if the captain is a bully, then the chief officer is likely to wish himself elsewhere, or at least that he was the holder of some other rank. This was my case on my last and most memorable voyage in the service of a particular Company that every one knows, but which, for various reasons, shall be nameless.

I had never met Captain Harveston until he joined us in dock on the day previous to sailing, but I had heard some scarcely complimentary remarks about him from men who had sailed with him. I must confess, therefore, that I was prepared to dislike him. In appearance he was as unlike a sailor as a man could well be, was a great dandy in his dress, and evidently looked upon himself as an undoubted lady-killer. So far as I was concerned, he had hardly set foot on the vessel before he commenced finding fault. A ship in dock, before the passengers come aboard, and while the thousand and one preparations are being made for a voyage, is seldom an example of tidiness. Surely a skipper, who had been at sea for thirty years, must have realized this; for some reason, however, best known to himself, it pleased Captain Harveston to inaugurate our acquaintance by telling me that he liked a "spic and span ship," and that he judged his officers by what he saw of their work.

"You shall have nothing to complain of as soon as I get the workmen out, sir," I replied, a bit nettled at being called over the coals upon such a trumpery matter.

"I trust I shall not," he answered superciliously, and then strutted down the bridge to his own cabin, which was just abaft the chart-room.

As it turned out, the Isle of Wight was scarcely astern before the trouble began. Young Herberts, our second officer, was the first to get a wiggling, and Harrison, the fourth, quickly followed suit. I felt sure my time would not be long in coming, and I was not wrong. On the second day out, and during my watch below, I was talking to the purser in his cabin, when the fourth officer appeared to inform me that the captain wished to see me on the promenade deck. Thither I made my way, to find him seated there with a number of lady passengers round him.

"Surely he is not going to be nasty before these ladies," I said to myself as I approached him.

I discovered, however, that this was exactly what he was going to do.

"Mr. Helmsworth," he began, "I am told that you have refused the passengers the use of the bull-board."

"Indeed, sir, I have not," I replied. "I informed one of the gentlemen who spoke to me about it that I would have it brought up directly we were clear of the Channel. As a rule we never produce it until we're out of the Bay. I had Captain Pomeroy's instructions to that effect."

"I am captain of this vessel now," he returned. "Please see that the board is brought on deck at once. I must ask you for the future to do all that lies in your power to promote the pleasure of the passengers. It is a duty I have a right to expect of my officers."

"Very good, sir," I answered and walked away.

From that day forward I saw that my service under Captain Harveston was likely to be a short one, and, indeed, by the time we reached Buenos Ayres, I felt as if I could throw up my appointment altogether. He was never satisfied, never pleased, and did nothing but grumble and find fault from morning until night.

After the usual fortnight's stay at the capital of the Argentine, we commenced our homeward voyage. Our first port of call was Rio, where Harveston and the third officer came to loggerheads. By this time the whole ship's company had taken his measure, and I fancy he must have known it. Being of a petty disposition, he attributed this to me, and accordingly laid himself out to make my life aboard as disagreeable as it was possible for him to do. How bitterly I regretted the loss of my old skipper, who had been kindness and consideration itself, I must leave you to imagine.

And now I must turn from a narration of my own misfortunes during that miserable voyage to give you a description of a man, whose personality is destined to play such an important part in my narrative. He joined us at Rio, and was one of the last passengers to come aboard. He was a Spaniard, and, as could be seen at a glance, a well-bred one at that. He called himself Don Guzman de Silvestre. He was very tall; I should say some inches over six feet, with the darkest of dark eyes and hair, aquiline features, and a small pointed beard, that he had a habit of stroking when thinking. Taken altogether, a more romantic personality could scarcely be imagined, and as he came up the gangway, I told myself that he was the best figure of a man I had seen for some considerable time. When he asked me at what hour we should sail, I noticed that he spoke English perfectly, and in a musical voice that was very pleasant to listen to. Before we had been many days at sea, he and I had had several talks upon all sorts of subjects, considerably to Captain Harveston's annoyance, for the latter did not approve of his officers being on anything like friendly terms with the passengers. Having no desire to quarrel with my chief, I endeavoured, as far as possible, to keep out of his way, but for some reason this only had the effect of incensing him more against me.

We were a full ship on the homeward voyage, and, as we generally did a lot of painting between Barbadoes and Madeira, I found my time pretty well taken up. It was in connection with this painting that the climax came. We had left the West Indies behind us, and at the time were steering a straight course for Madeira. The men, when the incident I am about to describe happened, were at work on the port rails of the promenade deck. One of them, who had been outside the rail, climbed over, pot in hand, to obey an order I had given him. At the moment that he did so, the long Atlantic swell caused the vessel to give a big roll, and before he could save himself, he was flying across the deck towards a chair in which a lady was seated. They came into violent collision, with the result that the pot of white paint was deposited in her lap. I hastened to her assistance, and did all that was possible at the moment to remedy the mishap. Fortunately for the man, who was overcome by the magnitude of the catastrophe, she took the accident in excellent part.

"You must not blame the man," she said to me. "It was not his fault. I shall have to sue the ocean for damages."

Then with a laugh she went below to change her attire.

As ill luck would have it, just after she had disappeared, the skipper emerged from the companion, and saw the splashes of paint.

"What's the meaning of this, sir?" he asked, turning on me angrily.

"One of the men met with an accident, sir," I replied. "The roll of the ship caused him to upset the paint-pot."

"You should not put that class of fellow to do such work," he returned, oblivious to the fact that he was committing the unpardonable sin of admonishing an officer before the men. "You seem to have no discrimination at all, Mr. Helmsworth."

With that he walked away, leaving me to chew my cud of humiliation in silence. After luncheon I received an order to go to the captain's cabin. I could see that I was in for more trouble, but could not guess what. One thing was very evident; he was in a towering rage.

"How is it, Mr. Helmsworth," he began, when I had entered the cabin and had closed the door, "that you deliberately kept things from me this morning that it was your duty to tell me?"

"I am not aware that I have kept anything back from you, sir," I replied, as civilly as I knew how, for I had no desire to lose my temper. "If it is with regard to the tiller of the port quarter boat----"

"It has nothing whatever to do with the port quarter boat," he answered savagely. "I want to know how it was that you did not tell me about that lady's dress being spoilt this morning. You should have reported the matter to me. Had it not been for my steward, I should have known nothing whatsoever about it."

"I did not think it worth while to trouble you with it, sir," I replied. "It was a pure accident, and Miss Burgess forgave the man, and admitted that he was not to blame."

"Accident or no accident," he retorted, "you should have informed me of the circumstance. I consider you sadly wanting in your duty, Mr. Helmsworth. Of late, your manner has been most disrespectful to me, and I tell you to your face, sir, that your ship is a disgrace to any chief officer."

"I am sorry you should say that," I answered, endeavouring to keep my temper; "I have always had the reputation of turning my ship out well. If you will point out anything that is wrong, I will at once have it rectified."

"Don't bandy words with me, sir," he stormed. "I am not used to it from my officers. I repeat that your ship is a disgrace to any chief officer, and I shall take care that the matter is duly reported to the Board as soon as we reach London."

"Perhaps you will be good enough to tell me what you consider wrong, sir?"

"Everything," he answered. "I thought yesterday I pointed out to you a hole in the after awning."

"You did, sir, and it has been repaired. I put the sail-maker on to it at once."

He rose from his chair with a look of triumph on his face.

"Kindly step aft with me," he said, "and let us examine it for ourselves."

Feeling confident that what I had said was correct, I gladly accompanied him, but to my horror, when we reached the place in question, there was the rent gaping at us without a stitch in it.

"I regret exceedingly that you should consider it necessary to cover your negligence by telling me what is not true," he said in a voice so loud that some of the second-class passengers could hear it.

This was more than I could swallow.

"I'll not be called a liar by you, Captain Harveston, or by any man living," I retorted, feeling that I would have given something to have been able to have knocked him down. "If you will send for the sail-maker, he will inform you that I gave him orders to do it this morning. It is no fault of mine that he has neglected his duty."

"It is the fault of no one else, sir," returned the captain. "If you kept the men up to their work, this would not have been left undone. I shall be careful to enter this occurrence in the log-book."

So saying he stalked majestically away, and I went in search of the sail-maker. The man, it appeared, had intended doing the work, but had been called away to something else, and had forgotten it. After that, I returned to my own cabin, and sat down to think the matter over. There could be no sort of doubt that I was in an exceedingly unenviable position. I could quite see that if Harveston reported me, the Board would be likely to believe his version of the story, and even if they did not consider me quite as negligent as he was endeavouring to make me, they would probably argue that I was not all I might be, on the basis that there can be no smoke without fire. Whatever else might be said, a reputation for slovenliness and untruthfulness would be scarcely likely to help me in my career. From that day forward matters went from bad to worse. It seemed impossible for me to do right, however hard I might try. What was more annoying, I began to feel that, not content with disliking me himself, the captain was endeavouring to set the passengers against me also.

During the run across the Atlantic I had, as I have said, several long talks with Don Guzman de Silvestre. The man interested me immensely. What his profession was I could not ascertain, but from numberless little remarks he let fall, I gathered that he was the possessor of considerable wealth. Certainly he had seen a variety of strange life. Were it not that he narrated his adventures with an air of truth that left no room for doubt, it would have been impossible to have believed him. He had seen fighting in Mexico, in Nicaragua, in Brazil, and with Balmaceda in Chili.

"I suppose in South America there will be Revolutions until the end of Time," I remarked one evening, as we sat talking together in my cabin.

"I should say it is more than likely," he answered, taking his cigar from his mouth and holding it between his long, slim fingers. "If you take specimens of all the most excitable races in the world and graft them on stock even more excitable than themselves, what can you expect? In such countries Might must always be Right, and the weakest will go to the wall."

"I shouldn't care much about being President in that description of place," I returned. "It's a case of being in power and popular to-day, unpopular and assassinated to-morrow."

"There is certainly a large amount of risk in this," the Don replied meditatively. "And yet men are always to be found desirous of taking up the reins of government."

I could not help wondering whether he had ever felt the ambition he spoke of.

"I remember meeting a man in Paris some years ago," he continued after a few moments' silence, "who was what one might call a world's vagabond. He had been a soldier in French Africa, a shearer in Australia, a miner at the Cape, a stockbroker in New York, and several other things. When I met him, he was, as I have said, in Paris, and practically starving. He could speak half the languages of the world well enough to be thought a native, was absolutely fearless; indeed, taken altogether he was about as devil-may-care a sort of fellow as I had ever met in my life. Three years later he was Dictator of one of the South American Republics we have been speaking of."

"And where is he now?"

"At the end of six months another man came upon the scene, won the favour of the Standing Army, and began to make trouble for those in power, with the result that my friend had to vacate his office, also the country, at remarkably short notice. Some day he will go back and endeavour to unseat the individual who supplanted him. The latter gained his place by treachery, but if he is not careful he will lose it by something else."

"Your friend is a man who does not forget an injury then?" I remarked, with a well-defined suspicion that he was speaking of himself.

"I rather fancy he is," he replied. "At any rate, I am quite certain he is not one who forgives."

Then he changed the conversation by inquiring how long I had been at sea, and what countries I had visited. With some of them he professed to be acquainted.

"It is rather impertinent of me to say so," he said, looking round to see that there was no one near the door, "but I am afraid you and your captain are not on the best of terms."

"I am sorry to say that we are not," I answered, and stopped there, for I had no desire to discuss the matter with him.

"You hold a Master's Certificate, do you not?" he inquired.

I answered in the affirmative, and once more he was silent.

"I suppose you would have no objection to shipping as captain," he went on after a long pause, "if the opportunity ever presented itself?"

"Most certainly I should not," I replied, with a laugh. "I fear, however, it will be some time before I shall have such an opportunity."

"In this line, perhaps," he said, "but I suppose, if you had an offer from another firm, you would accept it?"

"I should feel very much inclined to do so," I said, wondering at the same time what he was driving at.

"Are you married?"

"No," I replied, "but I hope to be as soon as I can afford it. So far as I can see, however, that event, like the captainship, is a long way off. The good old days when skippers made money are past, and now-a-days, what with entertaining and one thing and another, it's as much as a man can do to make both ends meet. Sometimes I'm afraid they don't meet at all. I wish some kind friend would come along and offer me a comfortable shore billet on anything like pay--it would do him good to see me jump at it."

"That may come yet," he replied, and then he rose and bade me good-night.

A few evenings later, and as we were approaching the English Channel, he again spoke to me on the subject. His persistent recurrence to it gave me a feeling that there was something behind it all. But what that something was I had no sort of idea. I was destined to find out, however, even sooner than I imagined.

CHAPTER II

Four days later we reached England, and one of the most unpleasant voyages I have ever made was at an end. Having seen everything right on board, I left the ship. Captain Harveston had not said good-bye to me, and for this reason I did not consider it necessary that I should go out of my way to be civil to him. That the man intended doing me a mischief I felt certain, but what form his enmity would take I could only conjecture. The entry was in the log-book, and some action would be taken of it without a doubt.

From London I took the train to Salisbury, intending to walk out to my home at Falstead, one of the loveliest if not *the* loveliest of all the Wiltshire villages with which I am acquainted. It was delightful to think that in a few hours I should see Molly, my pretty sweetheart, again, and in her gentle company, and that of my dear old mother (my father had been dead many years), endeavour to forget for a fortnight the worries and troubles that had been my portion during the past two months. Molly, I must tell you, or Miss Mary Wharton, was a lady of much importance at Falstead. She was an orphan, and her father had been the Vicar of the hamlet for nearly fifty years. When her parents died she had received an offer of a home in London, but she could not find it in her heart to leave the place in which she had been born, so she remained on in the capacity of village schoolmistress and organist, loved by the children, consulted by the mothers, and respected by every one. My father had been the local medico, and I had known Molly all my life. We had played together as children, had received our first lessons together, had fallen in love later, and were engaged when I was twenty-three and she two years my junior.

It was nearly four o'clock when I reached Salisbury and started on my five miles' tramp to the village. My luggage I left to be brought on next day by the carrier, taking with me a small hand-bag containing sufficient for my immediate needs. I can remember the time when those five miles had seemed to me the longest walking in all the world; now, however, after so many weeks of sea, the green lanes, varied with open stretches of down, were beautiful beyond compare. Every turn of the road brought to light some spot of interest. I crossed the old stone bridge at the entrance to the village, and noted the place where I had caught my first trout, and further on, as I passed a certain stile, upon which hundreds of initials had been carved, recalled the fact that it was there I had fought Nathaniel Burse, the village bully, and, unlike the heroes of most romances, had received a sound drubbing for my pains.

About a quarter of a mile from my mother's cottage I overtook the worthy Vicar, who, as he informed me, had been to pay a visit to a farm on the Downs.

"Let me be the first to offer you a hearty welcome home," he said. "You seem to have been away for a shorter time than ever this voyage."

"It has certainly not seemed so to me," I answered, and with a considerable amount of truth. "I am the more glad to be back. How is the village?"

"By the village, I suppose you mean Miss Wharton, do you not?" said the old fellow with a chuckle. "She is wonderfully well, and I fancy is looking forward to your return. Your mother keeps well also, I saw her yesterday."

We walked on together until I could see ahead of us the little ivy-covered house in which I had been born. At the gate I bade the kindly old gentleman good-bye and entered, to be received on the threshold by Molly and my mother. For the next few minutes I had to submit, and I will leave you to imagine whether I did so willingly or not, to such a kissing and hugging as the average man seldom receives. Then I was escorted to the little drawing-room and given my favourite chair, while Molly made tea and my mother sat beside me and affectionately stroked my hand. Could you have seen Molly at that moment, you would have declared her to be the true picture of an English woman.

As you have probably observed by this time, I am not much of a hand at describing people, but I must endeavour to give you some idea of what my sweetheart was like. In the first place she was tall, possibly five feet nine inches. Her eyes were blue, and her hair a rich nut-brown. On the day of my arrival she was dressed in white, with a white belt round her shapely waist; while on the third finger of her left hand was the ring I had bought for her at Salisbury after our engagement was announced. Even now, though ten years have elapsed, I can feel the joy of that home-coming. I sat sipping my tea, and eating slice after slice of real Wiltshire bread-and-butter in a whirl of enchantment. Of course Molly remained to supper with us, and if afterwards we went for a stroll down the shadowy lanes as far as Bellam Woods, where you can stand on the hill and look down the valley to Salisbury, five miles away, who shall blame us?

The next three days were about as happy, so far as I am concerned, as a man could wish to spend. Fortunately it was holiday time with Molly, and in consequence she and I were inseparable from morning until night. We fished together, went for long walks together, and on the third day I borrowed the Vicar's pony-cart and drove her into Salisbury. Alas! however, that day was destined to end in very different fashion to what it had begun. Having returned the pony-cart to

the vicarage, we strolled home together. My mother's maid-of-all-work had brought in the letters that had arrived by evening mail, and on the little table in the hall was one addressed to me. I turned it over, to discover upon the back of the envelope the monogram of the Company--my employers. With a heart full of forebodings I opened it. It was very brief, and read as follows--

"DEAR SIR,

"I am desired by the Chairman to inform you that the Board will be glad if you will make it convenient to be present at their meeting on Friday next at three o'clock.

"I am,

"Yours very truly,

J. HOPKINSON, Secretary."

"What does it mean, Dick?" Molly asked. "Why do they want to see you? I think it is very unkind of them to spoil your holiday by taking you away when you only have such a short time at home."

"I am afraid it means trouble," I answered. "Captain Harveston and I did not get on very well together, and I expect he has been making complaints against me at head-quarters. He threatened to do so."

"Then he is a very unjust man," said my sweetheart, her eyes flashing. "And I should like to tell him so!"

That the letter worried me a good deal I am not going to deny. My bread-and-butter depended upon the Company's good opinion, and if I lost that I should certainly lose my position too. On the appointed day I bade my dear ones farewell, walked into Salisbury, and caught the train to London, reaching the Company's offices, which were in Leadenhall Street, about a quarter of an hour before the meeting was due to take place. A liveried porter showed me into the waiting-room, where I remained for something like twenty minutes, kicking my heels impatiently, and wondering what the end of the business would be. Then the door opened and the Secretary entered.

"The Board will see you now, Mr. Helmsworth," he said, and I accordingly followed him to the room in which the meetings of the Company took place. There I discovered a full Meeting. The Chairman was seated at the head of the table--a dignified, portly personage--while on either side of him were ranged the Directors, who I could see regarded me with some curiosity as I entered.

"Mr. Helmsworth," said the Chairman, after the Secretary had returned to his place, "we have requested your presence to-day in order to inform you that Captain Harveston has felt it his duty to make a serious complaint to us of your conduct during the voyage which has just ended. To be candid, he charges you with general neglect of duty, of insulting conduct towards himself, and, I regret to add, of untruthfulness. We thought it better that you should have an opportunity of hearing these charges, and giving you a chance of defending yourself, should you care to do so. It is needless for me to add how much the Board regrets that such a report should have been made against you. What have you to say?"

"All I can say, sir," I replied, advancing to the bottom of the table, and taking up my position there, "is that the report has not a word of truth in it. It is a malicious invention on the part of Captain Harveston, and, if he were here, I should tell him so."

"Come, come, Mr. Helmsworth, you must not talk like that," said the Chairman; "Captain Harveston has been a long time in our service, and we have never known him act unjustly to any one. Would it not be better to admit that there is *some* truth in what he says, and then to leave it to the clemency of the Board, to deal with as they may consider fair?"

"I am afraid, sir," I replied, "with all due respect to yourself and the Board, that I cannot submit to being declared neglectful of my duties, or allow myself to be called untruthful when I know the charge to be unjust. For some reason, I cannot say what, Captain Harveston took a dislike to me before the voyage commenced, and this report is the outcome of that dislike."

I then proceeded to explain what had happened; pointed out that while the dock workmen were engaged upon the ship, and she was of necessity in an untidy condition, Captain Harveston had complained of her lack of orderliness. I referred to the paint incident, and commented upon the fact that he had charged me with concealing what had happened from him. With regard to the ship being in an untidy state throughout the voyage, I stated that I was prepared to bring witnesses to prove that she was as perfect as it was possible for a ship to be. If a little of the gloss had worn off by the time we reached the Thames, I explained that it was due to the fact that we had experienced very rough weather in the Bay and also coming up Channel. The charge of untruthfulness I dismissed as being both petty and absurd. Towards the end of my remarks I had some difficulty in restraining my temper, for I could see that the Board was still inclined to side with the captain against me. Perhaps my manner was not submissive enough to please them. At any rate when they asked me to withdraw for a few minutes while they discussed the matter, I began to feel that my case was, so far as they were concerned, a hopeless one. After ten minutes' absence I was recalled.

"Mr. Helmsworth," the Chairman began in his dignified way, polishing his glasses with his pocket-handkerchief as he spoke, "we have most carefully gone into the matter, and have arrived at the conclusion that, taking into consideration the length of time you have been in the Company's service, and the fact that there have never been any complaints against you hitherto, we should be justified in permitting you an opportunity of retrieving any little error you may have committed. If, therefore, you will agree to apologize to Captain Harveston, and will promise to do your best in the future, I may say on behalf of the Board, that we are prepared to allow this most painful matter to drop."

This was more than I had bargained for. I had at least hoped that they would have given orders that I should be confronted with my accuser, and that I should be allowed to call witnesses in my own defence.

"With all due respect, gentlemen," I said, with perhaps more freedom than I should have used, "I cannot submit to such a thing. Captain Harveston has brought these charges against me for some reason best known to himself. It seems to me, if only in common fairness, that he should be called upon to prove them, and if he is unable to do so, to apologize to me for the wrong he has done me. I declare most emphatically that I am innocent, and, if you will allow me, I will prove it. I am sure my brother officers will be able to convince you as to my ability, and to the state of the ship. The Dock Superintendent should also be able to do the same."

"Unfortunately the Dock Superintendent has confirmed the captain's opinion," said the Chairman.

To my chagrin, I remembered then that the Dock Superintendent and I had had a quarrel some years before, and also that he was a great friend of the captain's. It was not likely, therefore, that he would side with me.

"If the Dock Superintendent says that, I suppose I must submit," I answered. "Nevertheless, I contend that neither he nor Captain Harveston is speaking the truth."

"Dear me, dear me," said one of the Directors, "this is really not the sort of behaviour to which we are accustomed. Why not take the Chairman's advice, Mr. Helmsworth, and apologize to your captain? I am quite sure that he would bear no malice to you, and the matter could then be amicably settled."

This had the same effect upon me as the waving of a red flag is said to have upon an angry bull.

"I shall certainly not apologize," I answered. "Captain Harveston is in the wrong, and I refuse to have anything more to do with him."

"In that case, I am afraid the consequences will be serious," said the Chairman. "We should be loath to lose your services, Mr. Helmsworth, particularly after your long service, but unless you apologize to Captain Harveston, we have no other course open to us."

"I shall not do that," I returned, "and in case of my dismissal I assure you I shall immediately take what proceedings the law allows me, in order to prove that I have been slandered most grossly."

The Board stared at me in amazement. Was it possible, they were doubtless asking themselves, that a miserable chief officer dared to beard them in this fashion?

"What proceedings you take against Captain Harveston are no concern of ours, after you have quitted our employment," said the Chairman, "but if you will be well advised, you will think twice before you invoke the assistance of the law."

"I am to understand, therefore," I said, "that I am dismissed."

"No, no," the Chairman replied; "we will not go as far as that, we will call it a resignation."

"Allow me then to wish you good-day, gentlemen," I said, and bowing I walked out of the room. "You will, doubtless, hear from me later."

"A pretty market I have brought my pigs to," I said to myself, as I walked down Leadenhall Street, after leaving the offices of the Company. "Poor little Molly, this will be a sad blow to her. It looks as if my marriage is now further off than ever."

How little I guessed then that the interview I had just had, had brought it closer than if the trouble with Harveston had never occurred. Acting on the resolve I had made while waiting for the Board's decision, I made my way in the direction of High Holborn. The old lawyer who had conducted what little legal business my father had required, and who had arranged my mother's affairs after his death, had an office in one of the curious old Inns of Court in that neighbourhood. I determined to lay the case before him and to act according to the advice he gave me. On reaching the office I had the satisfaction of finding him at home. The clerk, who received me, was as old as his employer, and I

believe had served him for upwards of forty years. His memory for faces must have been a good one, for he recognized me at once, although several years had elapsed since I had last called upon him.

"Mr. Winzor is in his office, Mr. Helmsworth," he said, "and, if you will be good enough to wait for a moment, I will place your name before him." He disappeared, and presently returned and requested me to follow him.

The old lawyer received me most cordially and invited me to take a seat. He asked after my mother's health, then took a pinch of snuff, looked at me fixedly, and then took another. After this he inquired in what way he could serve me. I thereupon placed the case before him.

"This is a matter," he said, after a pause of about a minute, "that will require very careful consideration. It is plain that the captain in question is a vindictive man. His reason for being so bitter against you is difficult to understand, but we have the best of evidence before us that it does exist. It's one thing, however, to be unjustly treated, and quite another to go to law about it. In a somewhat lengthy career, it has always been my endeavour to impress one thing upon my clients--Don't go to law if you can possibly avoid it. Doubtless were you to take the case into court we could produce sufficient evidence from your brother officers and the petty officers of the ship to prove that you did your duty, and also that you were a conscientious officer. But, even supposing you won the day, how would you stand?"

"I should have reinstated my character," I replied somewhat sharply, for the old man's manner grated upon me.

"And apart from the question of character, how much better off would you be?" he asked. "The fact of your calling the officers of the ship would put the Company to a considerable amount of inconvenience and expense, which they would naturally resent. It would also have the effect of putting them in an antagonistic attitude towards yourself, which, at present, they do not appear anxious to take up. The case would attract some attention, the various shipping companies would read it, and, should you apply to them for a position, I fear you would find them averse to taking an officer who, you must forgive my plain speaking, was ready to invoke the aid of the law to settle his disputes with his captain and his employers. Do you see my contention?"

"Yes, I see it," I replied; "but, surely, you don't mean to say that I am to have this injustice done me and say nothing about it?"

"I am afraid I do not see what else to advise you to do," he replied. "I think you have been badly treated, but, upon my word, though if I were in your place I should doubtless feel as you do, I should drop the matter, and, to quote a familiar Stock Exchange expression, 'cut the losses.'"

This was not at all what I had expected, and boiling over as I was, the advice he gave me was most unpalatable. He must have seen this, for he tapped me gently on the arm.

"Master Richard," he said, as if he were talking to a school-boy, "I am an old man and you are a young one. Youth is proverbially hot-headed, while Age is apt to stand off, and looks at things from afar. I pledge you my word that, in giving you this advice, I am acting as I deem best for your welfare. There is an old saying to the effect that 'there are as good fish in the sea as ever came out of it,' and I fancy the same remark can be made to apply to the vessels sailing upon that sea. Now will you leave the matter in my hands?"

"Most willingly," I replied, "provided I am not going to continue to be suspected of being a malingerer and a liar."

"Sir Alexander Godfrey, the Chairman of the Company," he went on, "is a personal friend of my own, and if you will allow me, I will make a point of calling upon him to-morrow in order to have a chat with him upon the subject. I cannot promise, but I think I shall be able to induce him to persuade his brother Directors to either look over the matter, or at any rate to make sure that you leave the Company's service without any stain upon your character."

"But to do that I must be proved innocent."

The old man smiled a crafty smile.

"When you are as old as I am," he said, "you will have discovered that there are ways and ways of doing things. Leave it to me to arrange and I fancy you will be satisfied with the result."

"Let it be so, then," I replied.

"I am not a vain man," he said, "but I will say that I do not think you could do better. Now tell me how the pretty Miss Molly is."

"She is very well indeed," I replied, "but I fancy this news will be a disappointment to her."

"Not a bit of it," he answered. "It's just at such times as these that the real woman comes out. Egad! you youngsters

think you understand women, but, bless my heart, you don't! And now you just trot back to Wiltshire, and give my kindest remembrances to your mother, and, well, if you like, you can give a kiss to Miss Molly for me. Tell her not to bother herself; that I will see you out of this affair all right. I am very glad, my lad, that you came to me. When you are in trouble I hope you will always do so. Your father and I were old friends, and--well, I am not going to say anything further, but I'll tell you this; if I had met your mother before your father did----

He stopped suddenly and tapped his snuff-box upon the table, then he rose from his chair, shook me by the hand, and told me he would write me immediately he had anything of importance to tell me.

I took this as a signal for dismissal, and thanking him for his advice, left him. Twenty minutes later I caught the three o'clock express at Waterloo, and in something under two hours was back in Wiltshire once more.

Molly met me half-way out of Salisbury, and her loving sympathy cheered me more than anything else could have done.

"Don't be miserable about it," she said, when I had told her everything; "there are plenty of ships in the world, and lots of owners who will value your services more than this Company seems to have done. Remember, I believe in you with my whole heart, dear, and if it is decreed that we are not to be married for some time to come, then we must wait with all patience until that happy day shall dawn. When you've had a little more holiday, you can begin to look about you for something else."

Could any man have wished for a braver sweetheart? Alas! however, matters were not destined at first to turn out as happily as she had prophesied. I applied to firm after firm, but my efforts in every case were entirely unsuccessful. At last I began to think that if my luck did not mend very soon, I should have to pocket my pride and ship as second or third officer, hoping by perseverance and hard work to get back to my old position later on. This eventually I decided to do, but even then I was not successful. The only line which could offer me anything was in the Russian grain trade, and the best berth they had vacant was that of third officer. As may be supposed, this was a bit of a come-down for my pride, and before accepting it, for I had run up to London to interview the firm in question, I returned to Falstead to talk it over with my sweetheart. On my reaching home my mother greeted me with an air of importance.

"A gentleman has been to see you this afternoon," she said, "a tall, handsome man. He did not leave his name, but he said you would probably remember him, as he had met you on board the *Pernambuco*. He is staying at the George, and is most anxious to see you."

"I met a good many people on board the *Pernambuco*," I said a little bitterly. "A lot of them were tall and handsome. I wonder who he can be?"

She shook her head.

"You say that he is staying at the George," I continued. "Very well, when I have had my tea, I will go down and find out who he is."

In due course I reached the little inn at the end of the village street. The proprietress, old Mrs. Newman, had known me since I was so high, and upon my entering her carefully-sanded parlour, she bustled out of her little room at the back to greet me. I inquired whether she had a strange gentleman staying in the house, and she answered in the affirmative.

"He is smoking a cigar in the bower at the end of the garden," she answered. "If you want to see him you will find him there."

I knew the place in question, and, passing through the house, made my way down the garden towards the little summer-house in question. Seated in it, looking just the same as when I had last seen him, was the Spaniard, Don Guzman de Silvestre.



CHAPTER III

On seeing me Don Guzman sprang to his feet and held out his hand.

"My dear friend," he cried, "it is very good of you to come here. I called at your house this afternoon, to learn that you were in London, but that you were expected back this evening. Doubtless you are surprised at seeing me, but when I tell you everything, I fancy your wonderment will cease. Won't you sit down and let me offer you a cigar? A more delightful spot than your village I have never met with."

I accepted his cigar, and seated myself in the wicker chair he pushed forward for my accommodation. What he was doing in our quiet neighbourhood I could not for the life of me imagine. But when I remembered the questions he had put to me on board the *Pernambuco*, I began to feel my hopes rising. It would be a stroke of luck indeed if he were to offer me a good berth, just at the moment when I needed it so badly.

"And so our mutual acquaintance, Captain Harveston, played you a shabby trick after all?" he remarked after a short pause.

"He could not very well have done me a greater injury," I replied. "What is worse, I fear he has not only lost me my berth, but that he has prejudiced other owners against me. Did the ship strike you as being in a badly-kept condition when you were on board?"

"I never saw one better managed in my life," he answered. "At the same time I must confess that I am not sorry that Harveston has got you your discharge."

"As matters stand with me just now, that's not a particularly civil thing to say, is it?" I inquired with some asperity, for, if the truth must be confessed, I was not in a very good humour.

"My friend, I mean it in all kindness," he answered, "and presently I will tell you why. Do you remember that story I told you on board, about my acquaintance who had played the vagabond all over the world?"

"The man who was President of one of the Republics of South America?" I inquired.

"Exactly, the same man."

"I recollect the story perfectly," I replied. "But what makes you speak of that man?"

"Well, what I am going to say to you concerns that man. He has a very strong notion that if he could only get his rival out of the country in question, he might manage to win his way back to his old position."

"But will the other allow himself to be enticed out of the country? That seems to me to be the question. Besides, it's one of the rules of the game, is it not, that the President shall never cross the Border?"

"That is certainly so, but circumstances alter cases. In this affair, if the man cannot be induced to go out of his own free-will, others must make him do so."

"Rather a risky concern, I should fancy."

"Everything in this world possesses some element of risk," he replied, "whether it is a question of buying Mexican Rails or English Consols, backing a racehorse, or going a long railway journey. In this affair there is a little more than usual, perhaps; at the same time the reward is great."

"On the other hand, supposing you fail," I returned, "what then? You would probably find yourself, in a remarkably short space of time, standing against a wall, with your eyes bandaged, and half-a-dozen rifles preparing to pump lead into you. Have you taken that fact into your calculations?"

"I have not omitted to think of it," he replied gravely, as if it were a point worthy of consideration. "Still, that is not what I am concerned about just at present."

"But what have I to do with this?" I inquired, for, though it seems wonderful now that I should not have thought of it, I had not the very faintest notion of what he was driving at then.

"If you like, you can have a good deal to do with it," he answered, blowing a cloud of smoke into the air, and bestowing an approving glance at his exquisitely made boots. "I think when I had the pleasure of meeting you on board the *Pernambuco*, you told me that you were engaged to be married?"

"I certainly am *engaged*," I answered, "but when I shall be able to get married is another and a very different matter. I've

lost my position, and with it has gone my hope of soon being made a skipper. I can't very well risk matrimony on the pay of a third officer of a grain boat, can I?"

"I should say that it would hardly be prudent," he answered. "May I ask what capital you would require to start married life upon?"

"I should be perfectly happy if I had three hundred a year," I replied. "I'm not a man with big notions, and I fancy that sum would meet our wants."

"Capitalized at three per cent., shall we say ten thousand pounds? You are certainly not of a grasping nature, Mr. Helmsworth!"

"It would be all the same if I were," I answered. "At the present moment I stand as much chance of getting ten thousand pounds as I do of getting a million."

"I am not quite so sure of that," he said, speaking very slowly. Then he looked at me out of half-closed eyes, and eventually added: "What if I were in a position to put in your way the sum you want?"

I stared at him in surprise. Then I grew distrustful. Experience has taught me that our fellow-man does not pay away ten thousand pounds unless he is very certain of getting a good return for his generosity.

"I should be inclined to think that you were jesting with me," I replied, when I had recovered from the astonishment his remark had caused me.

"No, no; don't say that," he answered. "I assure you I am not jesting at all. I very rarely do so. I say definitely that it is in my power to put that sum of money in your way. That is, of course, provided you care to earn it."

"How am I to do that? That may make all the difference."

"Oh, you needn't look so scared," he returned; "the matter is a very simple one. All I require in exchange for the ten thousand pounds is your co-operation in a certain political act."

"Ah, I understand," I replied, as the truth dawned upon me. "The ex-President of the South American Republic, whom you call your friend, is in reality yourself, and you want me to help you get back your position. Is that not so?"

He nodded.

"Yes," he answered, "and I pay you the compliment of saying that I think you are just the man to bring that result about. I have not arrived at this decision haphazard. I watched you very closely on board the *Pernambuco*, and I have made inquiries about you since. It is a piece of my usual good fortune that you should happen to be disengaged at this particular time. Had you not been, I should have made you an offer, in the hope of having been able to induce you to leave the Company's service, and to join me. That would have been unfortunate, and it might very probably have given rise to suspicion, and suspicion is the one thing of all others I am naturally anxious to avoid. In England they do not appreciate the subtleties of South American politics, and in consequence they are apt to look at things in a wrong light. Would you have any objection to assisting me to regain my former position?"

"It all depends upon what you want me to do," I replied. "I have had no experience in such affairs, and am afraid I should make a poor conspirator."

"There is no need for you to be a conspirator at all," he said, with one of his quiet laughs, "that is to say, not in the sense you mean. All I am going to ask of you is the exercise of a little diplomacy, and some of that nautical skill which I am so well aware you possess."

"In other words, you want me to assist in the deportation of your rival from the country, whose chief he at present is."

"You've hit the mark exactly," he returned. "That is just what I *want* you to do, and it is for this that I am willing to pay the sum of ten thousand pounds, which will enable you to marry the girl of your heart. Now let me hear what you think."

"I scarcely know what answer to give you," I replied. "I have never dreamt that I should be asked such a question. It is all so unexpected."

"Is there not an English saying to the effect that it is the unexpected always happens?" he inquired. "I want to have your decision as quickly as possible, for the reason that, if you don't like the thought of taking on the work, I must find somebody else who does. I think I know your character as well as any man can do, and I am certain I can trust you."

I thanked him for the compliment he paid me, and then informed him that, before I could give him a definite answer, I

must hear more of his scheme.

"I am afraid it would take rather too long to tell you just now," he replied, when he had consulted his watch. "Won't you dine with me? We could talk the matter over more thoroughly afterwards. I suppose the landlady can give us some sort of a meal?"

As it was the evening on which Molly had her choir practice, and I knew that I should not see her until ten o'clock, I accepted his invitation, on the condition that I should be allowed to go home first in order to acquaint my mother of my intention. He agreed to this, and I thereupon left him and went off on my errand. As I walked down the quiet little street, I thought of the curious proposal the Don had made to me. It seemed almost impossible that I, quiet Dick Helmsworth, should be asked to undertake the abduction of a South American President. So far, I knew next to nothing of Don Guzman's scheme; but I had a very fair idea of the risk I should be called upon to run. Ten thousand pounds was a very large sum; but would it be large enough to compensate me for what I should have to undergo, should my attempt prove unsuccessful, and I find myself in captivity? Then there was another question. What would Molly say when she heard of it? Would she approve, or should I refrain from telling her anything about it? This was a point I felt that demanded most earnest consideration. Entering the house, I informed my mother of the invitation I had received to dine with Don Guzman.

"It will do you good, my boy," she said instantly. "You want a little cheering up after the troubles you have had lately. Who is the gentleman?"

I informed her that I had met him on my last voyage, that he was a Spaniard, and also that he was presumably very wealthy.

"I have only known one Spaniard in my life," the old lady continued, "and I cannot say that I liked him. Your father did not consider him trustworthy. But there, your gentleman may be quite a different sort of person."

On my way back to the inn I pondered over my mother's words. She had all an old Englishwoman's innate distrust of foreigners; but her innocent little remark had set my imagination working. What if Don Guzman should be hoodwinking me, and that there was more behind his offer than I imagined? I then and there made up my mind not to take a step forward until I should be thoroughly convinced as to his *bona fides*.

On reaching the inn, I was informed by Mrs. Newman that the Don, or the foreign gentleman, as she styled him, was awaiting me in the coffee-room. Thither I repaired, to discover the table laid and my host standing at the window looking out upon the garden. He received me with much politeness, and we presently sat down to our meal together. During its progress nothing was said regarding the scheme we had discussed an hour before. The Don did the honours of the table with the greatest courtesy, and in numerous little ways showed me that whatever else he might be, he was certainly a keen judge of Human Character. As I have already remarked, he had travelled in well-nigh every country, and if his own accounts were to be believed, he had met with some strange people, and some still stranger adventures.

Our meal at an end, he proposed that we should go for a stroll, and to this I assented. We accordingly left the inn, and walked down the main street past the ancient village church, until we came to the stone bridge that spans the river. It was a glorious evening; the sunset had been a brilliant one, and the last faint tints still lingered in the sky. Under the bridge the river stole noiselessly on its way to the sea; the swallows darted up and down its glassy surface as if they were resolved to make the most of the waning daylight; while, soft and low, from across the meadow came the music of the church organ, where Molly was instructing her boys in the music for the coming Sunday. It was an evening I shall remember as long as I can recollect anything, if only because of the strange events which might almost be said to have dated from it.

"I hope you have been favourably considering my scheme," said Don Guzman, when we had seated ourselves on the stone balustrading of the bridge, and I was idly dropping stones into the stream below.

"Yes, I've certainly given the matter my consideration," I replied, "but I want to hear something more of your plans, and to know exactly what will be required of me, before I shall be able to give you a definite decision. Remember, beyond the mere fact that you want to get this man out of the country, I know nothing whatsoever of the business."

"I promised you an explanation, and you shall have it," he said. "Of course, before I begin, I can rely upon your treating the matter as strictly confidential, can I not? You can see for yourself the position I should be placed in were you not to do so."

"Most assuredly," I replied. "I pledge you my word that whatever you may say to me regarding this matter shall go no further."

"In that case I will begin. First and foremost, let me inform you that the country in question is the Republic of Equinata.

As doubtless you are aware, it is a most prosperous and fruitful one; indeed, I know of no other that I like so well. I lived some of the most pleasant years of my life there, and should in all probability be residing there now if it were not for the treachery of the man whom I thought to be my friend, who became my adviser, and eventually ended in ousting me from my position and assuming the reins of Government himself. The name of that man is Manuel Fernandez; he is about fifty years of age, of iron physique, and I will do him the credit of saying, of indomitable courage. His subjects do not love him, but they fear him, which is much more to the point. Whether I was loved or not I am unable to state, but the fact remains that a large number of the population are most anxious that I should return to them to take up my former position. This I am very anxious to do, but I do not see how I am to accomplish it unless the present President is out of the way. Doubtless I could enter the country by stealth, and sow the seeds of another Revolution, which might, or might not, be successful. But there would always be the danger of Fernandez discovering my whereabouts and putting me out of the way. Now, my idea is this, if we could only manage to get him out of the country, I could return, rally my friends about me, prove his flight, and proclaim myself Dictator. That done, even should he return in the end, I should be prepared for him."

"But how do you propose to get him out of the country?"

"That's exactly what I want you to manage," he answered. "With the plan I have in my mind, and a little care, it should not be a difficult matter. This is my scheme. Lying at a certain port on the Florida coast is a large steam-yacht, of upwards of a thousand tons. She is the property of an old friend and sympathizer of mine in the United States. He has offered to lend her to me for the purpose in hand. Now, if you are willing to assist me, you might go out to the West Indies, join her at Barbadoes, and board her in the capacity of a rich Englishman. You steam away to Equinata, and go ashore, in order to study the customs of her people. Most naturally you would call upon the President to pay your respects. You are invited to call again, in the end you strike up a friendship, then one evening he dines with you on board, or perhaps you meet him somewhere, and then--well, I will leave the rest to your imagination."

Here he looked at me meaningly, and I gathered what his thoughts were.

"And what is to happen to him then?"

"After that you steam away to a certain small island the name of which I will give you, land him, and place him with some people who will take charge of him until such a time as shall be agreed upon. It should not be a difficult matter, should it?"

"No, as you put it, it is simplicity itself," I replied; "but what about the officers and men of the yacht? How will you prevent them from talking? And, what is more, will they assist in the scheme?"

"They will be most carefully chosen for the work," the other replied. "You need have no fear that they will give trouble. Now what do you say?"

"I do not know what answer to make. Supposing I am caught? What would happen then?"

"You will stand a very good chance of being shot offhand," he answered; "but that, of course, is your own risk. It will depend entirely upon how you go to work."

"It would be running a terrible risk," I answered. "I have the girl I am going to marry to think of."

"If you succeed, you will be able to marry her on your return to England," he replied. "Surely *that* counts for something."

"It counts for everything," I replied. "That's the temptation; if it were not for that, I'd have nothing to do with it. I must have time, however, to consider the matter."

"By all means," he answered, "but don't be any longer than you can help. As I said a few minutes ago, if you don't care about undertaking it, I must find some one else. Time presses."

"In case I do take it on, when will it be necessary for me to start?" I asked.

"The sooner the better," he replied. "If you can see your way to doing so, I should like you to leave by next week's mail boat for Barbadoes, where the yacht will meet you."

"Will it satisfy you if I give you my answer to-morrow morning?" I asked.

"Yes, to-morrow morning will suit me admirably," he answered. "And if you decide in the affirmative, my cheque for five thousand pounds shall be handed you at once, and the remainder on the day you deliver the President to the representative whom I shall appoint. Do you consider that proposition a fair one?"

"Very fair indeed," I replied. "I could not wish for anything more so."

Then we strolled back along the road until we reached the lych-gate of the churchyard. Here I bade him good-night, and he continued his walk. On my part, I made my way into the church, and seated myself in one of the pews until the practice should be finished. From where I sat I could catch a glimpse of my darling's pretty figure at the organ in the chancel, the light from the two candles on either side illumining her face. When the practice was at an end, she dismissed her boys and came down to join me. Then, bidding the old verger a good-night, we made our way home together. She inquired how I had enjoyed my dinner, and what my friend had had to say to me. This put me in rather a dilemma, for, of course, having given my word, I could say nothing to her regarding the subject of our conversation. I explained, however, that he had come down to consult me on some important business connected with Central America, and that he had proposed that I should go over and transact it for him.

"He, at least, must have great faith in your ability then, Dick," said my sweetheart. "I am prepared to like him, even though he does monopolize your society. I know you will transact the business beautifully, and then perhaps it may lead to something really good for you." She paused for a moment, and then added a little nervously, "When will you have to start?"

"Next week, if I go at all," I replied; "but I have not yet decided whether or not I shall accept his offer."

"You must act as your own judgment dictates," she continued. "I know that whatever you decide to do will be right."

All things considered, I was not quite so certain of this myself, and for a moment I was tempted to declare I would have nothing whatsoever to do with it. But the money and the knowledge that it would mean a wife and happiness for me, if I succeeded, was a temptation I could not resist.

As may be imagined, I did not sleep very much that night, but tumbled and tossed upon my bed, turning the momentous question over and over in my mind in maddening reiteration. There was one side of it that was unpleasantly suggestive. I had to remember that, if I were caught, no power on earth could save me. My own Government would certainly not interfere in such a matter, while Don Guzman would, far from taking any responsibility, in all probability, repudiate entirely any connection with me and the affair. Then, from this, back I came again in the circle of argument to the one absorbing question of the money. Five thousand down, and five thousand when I handed over the President. It would be a fortune to me. If I had it, I need never go to sea again, and Molly would be my---

"Yes, by Jove," I said to myself as I sprang from my bed, "I'll do it! Come what may, I'll do it, and chance the risk."

Having arrived at this resolve, I had my tub, ate my breakfast, and after I had smoked a meditative pipe in the garden, and had given the matter a bit more consideration, set off for the inn where Don Guzman was staying. He had only just risen, and was about to begin his breakfast when I entered the room.

"Well," he said, as we shook hands, "what news have you for me?"

"I have come *to accept your proposal*," I said.



CHAPTER IV

"I am indeed glad you have decided to help me," Don Guzman de Silvestre replied, when he heard my reply. "I felt certain you would accept, and I assure you I shall value your co-operation. Would it be possible for you to leave England on Wednesday next?"

"If it comes to that I must make it possible," I answered. "From what you said to me last night, I gather that there is no time to be lost."

"The sooner we get to work the better," he returned. "I will send a cipher message to the States this morning, to ask my friend to have the yacht in readiness. If you leave London on the sixteenth you should reach Barbadoes on the twenty-ninth. The yacht will meet you there, and from the moment you set foot on board her, you may regard her as your own private property to use as you will. You will find her captain a most reliable man, and he will receive orders to do his utmost to assist you. He will discharge all expenses, and will be held responsible for the working of the vessel and the crew. You will, of course, be known on board by another name, which we must arrange, and you will be supposed to be a young Englishman, of immense wealth, whose particular hobby is yachting. In order to sustain the fiction, it will be necessary for you to have a large and varied outfit, which I think you had better order to-day. I shall leave England a week after you do, and shall go direct to the island, where you are to hand the President over to me."

"But you have not told me the name of that island yet," I answered.

He took a map from his pocket and unfolded it upon the table. Then placing his finger on a small dot in the Caribbean Sea, some distance from the Republic of Equinata, he continued--

"There it is! It is called San Diaz, and is a picturesque little place. The man who owns it is monarch of all he surveys. If we can once get Fernandez there, all will be well. No vessels call at the island, and, unless he likes to attempt a long swim, which I should be the last to prevent, I fancy he will find some difficulty in returning to the mainland."

Another thought flashed through my mind.

"Before we go any further," I said, "there is one thing I should say to you. It is this. Before I take any hand in the business, I must have your positive assurance that no violence will be used towards the man you are so anxious to secure. I could not be a party to anything of that sort, nor could I possibly deliver him to you if I thought you meant to do him any ill."

"I will give you the assurance for which you ask most willingly," my companion replied without hesitation. "I merely desire to keep Fernandez out of Equinata for a time, that is to say, while I reinstate myself in my old position."

When I was satisfied on this point, we discussed various other details connected with the scheme, and the part I was to play in it. It was certainly a big business.

"So far as I am concerned," said Silvestre, "I'm going to be selfish enough to say that I think it is a pity you are going to be married. As President of the Republic, I could make your fortune for you in a very short time. You wouldn't care to bring your wife out to Equinata and settle down there, I suppose. I'd like to have a man beside me whom I felt sure I could trust."

"Many thanks for the compliment you pay me," I replied. "I fear, however, South American politics are a little too uncertain for my taste."

"Well, perhaps you are right," he answered meditatively, as if he were considering the matter; "but you must at least admit that, as compared with the House of Commons, there is some life in them."

"I should be inclined to substitute the word 'death' for 'life,'" I returned, thinking of the stories I had been told of the thousands who had perished during the last Revolution. "And now I must go. I have all my work cut out for me if I am to sail on Wednesday."

"Before you leave me," he remarked, "I had better give you this!"

So saying, he took from his pocket a Russian leather case. From it he produced a draft on a London banking firm, which he handed to me. It was for no less a sum than six thousand pounds. This was more than I had expected to receive. I therefore asked his reason for adding the extra amount.

"It is for your expenses," he replied. "For many reasons it would be better that I should not be brought into the business. You had, therefore, better book your passage yourself. You will also have to get the outfit of which I spoke

just now. That will cost a good deal. What is left should suffice for your other expenses, which, in your capacity of a rich young Englishman, you will probably find heavy."

This was generous treatment, and I said as much.

"Not at all," he answered. "Believe me, I am only too glad to do it. I count myself lucky in having secured your services, and I am willing to pay for that good fortune. Well, now that I have arranged matters with you, I shall return to London and set the ball rolling in the various directions. If you could make it convenient to meet me on Monday next, I could then tell you how matters progressed, and we could discuss future proceedings together. Here is my address."

With that he handed me his card, which I placed carefully in my pocket-book with the cheque. After that, having promised to call upon him on the day mentioned, I bade him good-bye, and returned to my own home.

Great indeed was my mother's consternation on learning that she was to lose me again so soon. She had counted, she declared, upon having me for another month at least. Molly tried to be brave, but the effort was not a conspicuous success.

"Never mind, darling," I said, "we must put the best face we can upon it. It is a fine chance for me. If I am successful, we shall be able to be married when I return, and I shall then be able to give up the sea. So we must cheer up and look forward to that."

"It should be very important business you are to be engaged upon if you will be able to do that," she answered, looking up at me with her trusting, loving eyes.

"It is most important," I answered. "The biggest thing I have ever had to do with. Some day, perhaps, I may be able to let you know more about it, but at present my lips are sealed."

"Tell me nothing but what you wish, dear," she answered, like the good little woman she was. "I am quite content to wait."

After lunch she walked into Salisbury with me, and did her shopping, while I visited the bank, where I paid in my cheque, and then went on to the tailor's to arrange about my outfit. It is doubtful whether the firm in question had ever had such an order before, and for once in my life I took rank as a person of importance in their eyes. They would have been more surprised, I fancy, had they known the reason of my wanting it all! The next thing to be done was to telegraph for a passage to Barbadoes. This I did in my own name, and, as the transaction was with my old firm, I could well imagine the surprise my communication would cause them. A letter I had already written followed the wire, and conveyed the passage money. After that the matter was settled. I had nothing to do now but to make the most of my time with my mother and Molly, before it should be necessary for me to leave for London.

When that day arrived I walked into Salisbury and took the train to Waterloo. Thence I made my way to the fashionable hotel at which Guzman de Silvestre was staying. He was in the act of going out as I entered, but on seeing me he led me back to his sitting-room and carefully closed the door.

"I am very glad indeed to see you," he said, placing a chair for me as he spoke. "I trust your preparations are progressing satisfactorily?"

"Everything is prepared," I answered. "I shall join the vessel on Wednesday morning in the docks. The receipt for my passage money arrived this morning."

"It does me good to meet so expeditious a person," he remarked, with a smile. "I, on my side, have not been idle. I have received a cable from the folk in Florida to the effect that the yacht will reach Barbadoes on the twenty-sixth, where she will await your arrival. After that I leave the conduct of affairs in your hands entirely."

"I trust I shall be able to carry it through," I answered. "I only wish I had a little more confidence in my ability to succeed."

"You'll manage it, never fear," Silvestre replied. "I am as certain that I shall one day see Fernandez coming ashore at San Diaz, as I am of eating my dinner to-night."

"And that reminds me," I hastened to remark, "that there is still one thing that puzzles me."

"And what may that be?" he inquired. "Don't hesitate to ask any questions you may think of. This is no time for half confidences."

"I want to know why, with all your experience, and the number of men you have met, you should have selected me for this business. Surely you could have discovered hundreds of others better fitted for the work."

"To be candid with you," he returned, "I chose you because I liked the look of you. You seemed to be just the sort of man I wanted. I won't deny that I know lots of men who might have been able to carry it through successfully had it come to a pinch, but the chances are that they might have failed in some little thing, and that would have given rise to suspicion. I wanted an Englishman, and one possessed of the manners and appearance of a gentleman. Allow me to pay you the compliment of saying that in my opinion you combine both these qualifications."

"It is very good of you to say so," I replied, "but I don't quite see what the appearance of a gentleman has to do with the question."

"I will explain," he said. "Fernandez, as I have already told you, is an adventurer himself. He knows the type, and, for that reason, would be quick to detect a brother hawk. One suspicion would give rise to another, and then, you may rest assured, the attempt to remove him would be frustrated. Now you can see why I want some one who can play the part and yet not rouse his suspicions."

"And so I am to be a gentleman in manners and appearances--and yet be a traitor in reality. I don't know that I consider it altogether a nice part to be called upon to play."

"You must settle that with your own conscience," he answered, with one of his peculiar smiles. "Call it an act of political expediency, and thus settle all qualms."

After that I put a few further questions to him concerning certain contingencies that might occur in the event of the President obtaining an inkling of what was toward. When all this was arranged, I left him, at the same time promising to call upon him on Wednesday for final instructions.

From the hotel I drove to Mr. Winzor's offices in High Holborn. He was not in at the moment, but when I returned, half-an-hour or so later, I found him ready to receive me.

"Well, young gentleman," he began, after we had greeted each other, "and what can I do for you to-day. No more legal troubles, I hope?"

"I have come to you on two errands," I replied. "In the first place I want to know what you have done concerning Harveston and the Company?"

"I have received a letter from the former gentleman this morning," he answered, turning over some papers on the table as he spoke. "Let me see, where is it? Ah! here it is! In it he states that, while he has not the least desire to damage your reputation, or to prejudice your career, he cannot retract what he has said, or withdraw what was entered in the ship's log. The charge of untruthfulness, he admits, might be reconsidered, and he is also willing to suppose that your neglect of the ship might be due to a certain slackness which was engendered by the easy-going habits of your late commander. In conclusion, he begs to assure me that he has never, at any time, entertained the least feeling of animosity for yourself, but that, in reporting the matter to the Company, he merely acted in the manner that he deemed to be consistent with his duty."

"A preposterous letter in every sense of the word," I cried angrily. "Not content with injuring me, he must endeavour to reflect on Captain Pomeroy, who is dead. Never mind, I'll be even with him yet--the hound."

The old gentleman permitted a dry smile to appear on his face.

"I am glad at least to observe," he said, "that you have abandoned your notion of taking immediate action against him."

"It would be impossible for me to do so, even if I had any desire that way," I replied. "The fact is, I am leaving England for South America on Wednesday next, and don't quite know when I shall be back. And that brings me to the second portion of the business upon which I desire to consult you."

"Am I to understand that you have obtained another situation?" he inquired. "And, pray, what line of steamships are you now going to serve?"

"I am not serving any line of steamships," I replied. "I am going out on private business, and I want you, if you will be so kind, to take charge of a certain letter I have written, and which I desire shall be opened by the person to whom it is addressed, in the event of my not returning within a year. One never knows what may happen in that part of the world to which I am now going. Here is the letter."

So saying I produced the epistle I had written on the previous evening, and which was addressed to my mother and Molly jointly. The old gentleman took it and turned it over and over in his hands.

"I hope you are not going to get into any mischief," he said. "I mistrust that part of the world. And now what else is there I can do for you?"

"I want you," I replied, "to draw up my will. I have some little property that I should like to leave to Molly and my mother. It is not very much, but it would doubtless prove useful, should anything befall me."

"We will hope that nothing will happen to you," said the lawyer. "At the same time I will draw up your will with pleasure. What have you to leave?"

When the old boy discovered the amount of my fortune his face betrayed his astonishment. Knowing that I had not been left anything by my father, I could see that he was anxious to question me concerning the manner in which I had accumulated this amount. Fortunately for my reputation for truthfulness, however, he repressed his inquisitiveness.

"It is a very creditable sum for a young man to have got together," he remarked. "Much may be done with five thousand pounds. It may interest you to know that I myself started with my articles and not a penny more than a hundred guineas to my name. To-day, however, I fancy--but there, I understand that you wish this amount, in the event of your death, to be divided equally between your mother and Miss Molly. And supposing that one survives the other?"

"In that case the whole amount must pass to the survivor!"

He promised me that the document should be drawn up and forwarded to me for my signature without delay, whereupon I shook him by the hand and bade him good-bye. My one thought now was to get back to Falstead as quickly as possible. I grudged every hour I spent away from it. Perhaps it was the dangerous nature of my enterprise that was accountable for it; at any rate, I know that I was dreading the leave-taking that was ahead of me more than I had ever done before. No one could say what the next few weeks would have in store for me, and, as it happened, that very night I was fated to have a dream that was scarcely calculated to add to my peace of mind.

It seemed to me that I was standing in a large yard, walled in on every side. Some tropical foliage was to be seen above the walls. At my feet was a large hole which I knew to be a grave. A squad of slovenly soldiers, clad in a uniform I had never before seen, were leaning on their rifles, some little distance away, watching me, while their officer consulted his watch. Then he shut it with a snap and nodded to me. I was about to throw down the handkerchief I held in my hand, when there was a cry and Molly appeared before me. Running towards me, she threw her arms about my neck. Knowing that at any moment the men might fire, I tried to put her aside. But she only clung the tighter. Every moment I expected to hear the rattle of rifles, but it seemed an age before it came. Then the soldiers fired, and Molly and I fell together, down, down, down, and I awoke with a start, to find myself sitting up in bed, my face bathed in perspiration. Never had I had such a dream before. More than twenty-four hours went by before I could get the effect it produced out of my mind. Molly noticed my condition after breakfast and asked what ailed me.

"Cannot you guess, darling?" I asked, having no intention of telling her the truth. "Is it likely that I could be anything but depressed, when I am leaving you for I cannot say how long?"

"But you will be in no danger, and you will come back to me before very long, will you not?" she said, looking at me seriously, as if she were afraid I was hiding something from her.

"Of course, dear," I replied. "Every man, however, has to take his chance of something befalling him when he puts to sea. I might go to the end of the world--risk my life in a thousand different ways--only to return to England to be knocked down in the Strand by a runaway cab. I might go to the North Pole and come back safely, to fall through the ice and be drowned in the Vicarage pond. You mustn't be angry with me, dear," I continued, "if I am a little downcast. Let us try to think of the day when I shall return to make you my bride. Oh, how happy we shall be then!"

"Happy indeed," she answered. "God grant that day may come soon. I shall pray for you always, Dick, and ask Him to send my darling back to me, safe and sound."

We walked as far as Welkam Bridge and then home again across the meadows to lunch. By the time we reached the house I had somewhat recovered my spirits--but they were destined to fall to zero again before the day was at an end. It was a sad little party that sat down to dinner that evening. My mother could scarcely restrain her tears--Molly tried to be cheerful and failed in the attempt; as for myself--though I joked on every conceivable subject, save that of foreign travel--my heart was heavy as lead, and my face, I'll be bound, was as solemn as that of an undertaker's mute. For the reason that I felt it would be too much for her to leave it until the last moment, Molly and I bade each other good-bye that evening.

Next morning I rose early, breakfasted at seven, very much in the same state of mind, I should say, as a man who is about to be led to execution, and at eight o'clock gave my dear old mother one last kiss, and left the house with a lump

in my throat that came near to choking me. I can see my mother's tear-stained face at the window even now, as I waved my hand to her before turning the corner of the village street. Little did I dream then how much I was to go through before I should see that beloved countenance again.

When the last house of the village was behind me, I mended my pace and struck out for Salisbury. It was a bright morning; the birds sang in the hedges, the cattle grazed peacefully in the meadows, indeed, all nature seemed happy but myself. I turned the corner of the Ridge Farm, and, passing through the chalk cutting, began the descent of the hill that, when you have left the cross roads and the gipsy's grave behind you, warns you that you are half-way into town. As everybody who knows the neighbourhood is aware, there is at the foot a picturesque cottage, once the residence of the turnpike keeper, and, a hundred yards or so on the other side again, a stile, which commences the footpath across the fields to Mellerton. I was thinking, as I approached it, of the last time I had walked that way with Molly, and was wondering how long it would be before I should do so again, when, as I drew near the stile, I became aware of a girlish figure leaning against the rail. My heart gave a leap within me, and I cried out, "Molly, can it be you?" Yet it was Molly sure enough.

"Oh, Dick, dear," she faltered, as I approached her, "do not be angry with me. I could not stay away. I felt that I must see the last of you!"

It was impossible for me to be angry with her, even though, as she told me later, she had breakfasted at six o'clock, and had been waiting at the stile for me since seven. However, I satisfied myself by promising her a good wiggling when I came home again, and then we set off together. How short the remainder of that walk seemed, I must leave you to imagine. It appeared scarcely to have commenced before we had left the country and were in the quaint old streets of Salisbury, making our way towards the railway station. We must have walked somewhat slowly, for, when we reached it, I found that I had only five minutes to spare. Over the parting that took place when the train put in an appearance I must draw a veil.

Punctually at half-past eleven the train steamed into Waterloo and disgorged its passengers upon the platform. I immediately engaged a cab and drove direct to Silvestre's hotel, where, for upwards of half-an-hour, I was closeted in close confabulation with him. Then I bade him good-bye, for it was part of our arrangement that he should not accompany me to the ship, and, having done so, returned to my cab and bade the man drive me to the railway station, where I was to take the train to the docks. By three o'clock I was on board, and endeavouring to convince myself that I was only a passenger, and not in any way connected with the working of the vessel. At a quarter to four we were steaming down the river, and my one and only adventure had commenced.

How was it destined to end? was the question I asked myself.



CHAPTER V

It was a new experience to me to find myself at sea as a passenger, to have no watches to keep, and no round of irksome duties to perform. It was a pleasant change to be able to turn into one's bunk at ten o'clock and to enjoy a good night's rest, after being used to leaving it at midnight in order to go up and pace a cold and cheerless bridge for four long hours at a time. I had a vague premonition that I should be recognized as soon as I arrived on board. Strangely enough this proved to be the case, for I had no sooner set foot on the promenade deck, before a well-known voice hailed me.

"Hulloa, Dick Helmsworth," it said. "What on earth brings you aboard this hooker?"

I turned and recognized the speaker as an old shipmate, who, like myself, had once sailed with Harveston. But, more fortunate than myself, he had managed to retain his billet after so doing. In reply to his question I informed him that I was proceeding to Barbadoes on private business, and that I profoundly hoped I had abandoned the sea as a profession. From him I learnt the names of the various officers of the boat. For more reasons than one I was glad to hear that they were unknown to me, and also that there was only one first-class passenger for Barbadoes. He proved to be an old French priest, and from what I saw of him, I gathered that he would not be likely to remember me, or, indeed, any one else, when once he had left the vessel.

A good passage down Channel and a smooth crossing of the Bay carried us well on our way. We reached Madeira in due course, and afterwards settled down for the voyage across the Atlantic. Among other things, I had to familiarize myself with the character I was about to portray. To be a rich young Englishman, with a passion for yachting, would not at first thought seem a difficult part to play. It was not as easy, however, as it would appear. In order that it might come the more naturally to me, I determined to cultivate a manner while on board. I accordingly spoke with a somewhat affected drawl, interlarded my speech with "Reallies," "Bah Joves," "Don't you know," and other exotic flowers of speech, until my old friend Kirby, the chief officer, found occasion to remonstrate with me.

"What on earth has come over you, Dick?" he cried. "You're as affected as a school-girl. You'll have to come back to sea, my lad, or you'll be developing into a masher of the worst type. It's very evident that lying in at night don't suit you. You ought to be back on the bridge again, standing your watch like a man."

"Not if I know it," I replied. "I've had enough of that sort of thing to last me a lifetime. Wait until you come into a bit of money, my boy, and then you'll see how nice it feels to watch others work."

"Egad! I wish I could," he answered. "I'd never trouble the briny again. Give me a cottage somewhere in the country, with a bit of garden, and some fowls to look after, and I wouldn't change places with the Czar of all the Russias."

Two days before we were due to reach Barbadoes, I made a resolve. This, in due course, took me along the alley-way to the barber's shop. As soon as the passenger whose hair he had been cutting departed, I seated myself in the vacated chair, and when the barber asked me what he could do for me, I put up my hand to my moustache.

"Take this off," I said.

The man gazed at me in astonishment. My moustache was a heavy one, and it was plain that he thought me mad to want to get rid of it.

"You don't mean to say, sir, that you want me to take it off," he remarked, as if he had not heard aright.

"That's exactly what I *do* mean," I replied. "I want it out of the way."

He thereupon took up his scissors and began his work of destruction, but in a half-hearted fashion. When he had finished I sat up and looked at myself in the glass. You may believe me or not, when I tell you that I scarcely recognized the face I saw there.

"If I were to meet you in the street, my lad, I should pass you by," I said to myself. Then to the barber I added: "What a change it makes in my appearance."

"It makes you look a different man, sir," the barber replied. "There's not many gentlemen would have sacrificed a nice moustache like that."

I paid him, and, when I left the shop, went to my cabin. Once there, I unlocked my trunk, and took from it a smart yachting cap and a leather case, containing various articles I had purchased in London. One of these was an eye-glass, which, after several attempts, I managed to fix in my eye. Then, striking an attitude, I regarded myself in the mirror above the washstand.

"Good-day, Mr. George Trevelyan," I muttered. "I'm very pleased to make your acquaintance."

"Really, bah Jove, that's awfully good of you to say so," I answered in my assumed voice. "I hope, bah Jove, we shall be very good friends for the time that we're destined to spend together."

"That will only be until we get back to Barbadoes," Dick Helmsworth replied. "After that, Mr. George Trevelyan, you can clear out as soon as you please. From that day forward I shall hope never to set eyes on you again."

I thereupon placed the eye-glass in its case, put the cap back in the trunk, and relocked the latter. After that I went on deck to receive the chaff I knew would be showered upon me by my fellow-passengers.

Two days later, that is to say, on the twenty-ninth of the month, we reached the island of Barbadoes and came to anchor in the harbour of Bridgetown. When I had collected my baggage, I bade my friends on board good-bye and made my way ashore. I had already carefully searched the shipping, but I could see no sign of any yacht, such as I had been led to expect I should find awaiting me there. I did not worry myself very much about it, however, knowing that her captain had been furnished with my address, and feeling sure that he would communicate with me as soon as he arrived. On landing I drove to the Imperial Hotel and engaged rooms in my own name. I had intended adopting my assumed cognomen on quitting the ship, but to my dismay I learnt that some of the passengers had also come ashore and were due to lunch at my hotel. To have entered my name as Trevelyan upon the books, and have been addressed as Helmsworth in the hearing of the proprietor, might have sowed the seeds of suspicion in his mind. And this I was naturally anxious not to do. Later in the day the passengers returned to the steamer, and she continued her voyage. As I watched her pass out of the bay I wondered whether I should ever see her again. Before it would be possible for me to do so, many very strange adventures would in all probability have happened to me.

On my return to the hotel, I inquired for the proprietor, who presently came to me in the verandah.

"I expected to have met a friend here," I said, "a Mr. Trevelyan. I am given to understand, however, that he has not yet arrived?"

"There is no one staying in the hotel at present of that name," he replied. "There was a Mr. Trevelyan here last year, but, if my memory serves me, he was a clergyman."

"I'm afraid it cannot have been the same person," I said, with a smile. "By the way, should any one happen to call, and inquire for him, I should be glad if you would give instructions that he is to see me."

"I will do so with pleasure," the other replied. "At the same time perhaps I had better reserve a room for your friend?"

"You need not do that," I answered. "There is no knowing when he will be here. It is just possible I may pick him up in Jamaica."

Having thus put matters on a satisfactory footing I prepared to wait patiently until news should reach me from Captain Ferguson. Though I sat in the verandah of the hotel and carefully scrutinized every one who entered, I went to bed that night without seeing any person who at all answered the description I had been given of him. I spent the following morning partly in the verandah of the hotel, and partly searching the harbour for the yacht. I returned to lunch, however, without having discovered her. In the afternoon I went for a short stroll, leaving word at the hotel that, should any one call to see me, he or she had better wait, for I should be back in an hour. When I returned I questioned the head waiter, but he assured me that no one had called to see either Mr. Trevelyan or myself. Once more darkness fell, and once more after dinner I sat in the verandah smoking. The evening was far advanced, and once more I was beginning to contemplate turning in, feeling certain that Ferguson would not put in an appearance that night, when a short, stout individual came briskly up the steps and entered the building. He was dressed entirely in white, and had a broad-brimmed Panama hat upon his head. He might have passed for a merchant or a planter, but something, I cannot say what, instinctively told me that he belonged to the seafaring profession. After a few moments he reappeared again, this time accompanied by the head waiter.

"This gentleman," the latter began, addressing me, "wishes to see Mr. Trevelyan. I told him that we had no one of that name staying at the hotel, but that you were Mr. Trevelyan's friend."

"That is certainly so," I said. "I presume you are Captain Ferguson?"

"That is my name," the other replied, and when the servant had disappeared, he continued: "May I ask whom I am addressing?"

"My name is Helmsworth," I answered in a low voice, at the same time motioning him to be seated. "A certain gentleman of the name of Silvestre, however, thinks I had better be known by the name of the person whom the waiter informed you had not yet arrived in the island."

"In that case you are Mr. Trevelyan," he said in a whisper, drawing his chair a little closer to mine as he did so, and closely scrutinizing me. "Perhaps you have something for me?"

"I have a letter," I replied, thinking at the same time that I had seen his face somewhere before. "What have you for me?"

"This," he replied laconically, and in his turn produced a small silver coin, which he handed to me.

I rose from my chair and carried it down the verandah as far as the hall door. The light there enabled me to see that it was stamped with the name of Equinata. I thereupon returned to the captain, and handed him the letter Don Guzman had given me for him.

"And where is the yacht?" I inquired.

"In the harbour," he replied. "We got in at dark, and she is coaling now as fast as we can get the stuff aboard. When will you be ready to start?"

"Whenever you please," I replied. "The sooner we are out of this place the better for all people concerned."

"Would nine o'clock to-morrow morning be convenient to you?"

"It would suit me admirably. How am I to get my traps aboard?"

"If you will have them sent down to the wharf I will arrange the rest," he answered. "The boat for Santa Lucia will be in shortly after daylight, and the hotel folk will naturally suppose that you have gone aboard her. Of course you understand, Mr. Helms--Mr. Trevelyan, I mean, that in this matter I am acting under your orders, and that I shall endeavour to do all in my power to bring the business upon which we are engaged to a satisfactory conclusion."

"You quite understand what is required of me?" I asked.

"Perfectly," he answered. "My instructions have been most complete."

"And what do you think of it?"

"I think you will have all your work cut out for you," he replied. "Don Fernandez is as sharp as a weasel and as cunning as a fox. But perhaps it would be better for us to say no more upon the matter, at least at present. We can talk it over if we want to, with greater safety, on board. And now, if you don't mind, I'll bid you good-night. I've got a lot of work to get through before we leave to-morrow morning."

We shook hands, and after he had promised to have a boat ready for me at nine o'clock next morning, he bade me good-night and left me.

From the little I had seen of him, I liked the look of the man. He had a resolute air about him, and it struck me that in him I had found one who was likely to prove himself a useful ally. But where on earth had I seen him before? For the life of me I could not remember. Lighting another cigar, I seated myself, and once more pondered over the matter. When the cigar was finished I retired to my room to fall asleep directly I was in bed, and to dream that I was abducting the Chairman and Directors of my old Company, and that I was flying through the air with them in a balloon built on the principles of a motor-car.

Next morning I was astir early, had had my breakfast, had paid my bill, and had seen my trunks on their way to the wharf, before a quarter to nine. On my arrival at the water's side, however, there was no sign of any yacht's boat. Some distance out I could perceive the Inter-Colonial mail steamer with a crowd of boats about her, and a dozen cables or so distant from her a handsome white yacht, which, I gathered, was to be my home for the next few weeks. I had just rewarded the porters, who had brought my luggage down, and had sent them about their business, when a neat gig, pulled by four men and steered by a fifth, came into view round the end of the jetty. Pulling up at the steps below me, the coxswain touched his hat and inquired whether he was addressing Mr. Trevelyan. Upon my answering in the affirmative, two of his men jumped ashore, and carried my baggage down to the boat. I thereupon took my place in the stern and we set off.

"That, I presume, is the *Cynthia*, lying astern of the mail-boat?" I said to the coxswain, as we pulled out into the harbour.

"Yes, sir, that's the *Cynthia*," he replied. "When you get a bit closer, sir, you'll say she's as fine a craft as you'd see in a long day's sail."

He certainly spoke the truth. The vessel in question could scarcely have been less than a thousand tons. (As a matter

of fact that was her tonnage.) To my thinking, however, she was somewhat heavily sparred for her size, but the coxswain hastened to assure me a better sea-boat could not be found.

Captain Ferguson met me at the gangway, and saluted me as if I were really owner of the vessel and not a make-believe, such as I really was.

"You will find your cabin prepared for you," he said. "If you will permit me I'll show you to it."

Then, going on ahead, he conducted me into the main companion, and through an elegant saloon to a large and most comfortable cabin, evidently built and intended for the owner. It was a gorgeous affair. Indeed, the luxury of the vessel, what I had seen of it, astonished me. I had overhauled many yachts in my time, but had never seen one like this before. She was as spic and span as if she had only just left the builder's hands.

When I had seen my baggage arranged, I ascended to the deck, where I found Captain Ferguson in the act of getting under weigh. Ten minutes or so later, our anchor was aboard and we were steaming slowly out of the harbour. In an hour the island lay like a black dot upon the horizon behind us, and a few minutes later had vanished altogether. I was seated in the cabin with Captain Ferguson at the time, and when he rang the bell and ordered the servant who answered it to bring up a bottle of champagne, we pledged each other in it, and drank to the success of our enterprise.

"It's a small world, sir," he said at last, as he set down his glass, "and few of us really understand *how* small it is. I wonder what you'll say when you hear what I've got to tell you. I remember once being in Hong Kong. It was in the wet season, and I was on my way out to Japan to meet a boat in Nagasaki, that I was to take over on behalf of the Company I was then serving. On the evening of my arrival in Hong Kong I went ashore to dine with some friends, and didn't start to come off to the mail-boat until pretty late. When I did I hired a sampan and told one of the crew where my ship was. Thinking that he understood, I took my place under the covered arrangement that those boats have, and away we went. Perhaps I may have been a bit drowsy after the festivities of the evening. I'll not say anything about that, either way. The fact, however, remains, that we had not gone very far before I became conscious that there was something wrong. It seemed to me as if the tilt, or cover, under which I was sitting, was coming down upon me. I sprang to my feet and endeavoured to push it up, giving a shout as I did so."

All this time I had been listening to him with ill-concealed impatience. As I have already remarked, it had struck me on the previous evening that I had seen the man's face somewhere before.

"I think I can tell you the rest," I interrupted. "A ship's boat happened to be passing at the moment, and, on hearing your shout, she came alongside and a couple of men in her sprang aboard the sampan. I was one of those men. We bowled over the owner of the craft, and pulled you out from under the cover, just as you were about done for. Good heavens! I thought I recognized you last night at the hall door, and now you bring that adventure back to my mind, I remember you perfectly."

"And I you," he answered. "I've been puzzling my brains about your face all night. You had a moustache then, but I should know you now again. I don't think, Mr. Trevelyan, you will find me go into this business any the less warmly for what you did for me that night."

"You were right when you declared it to be a small world," I said. "Fancy our meeting again and on such an errand as this."

I then proceeded to question him concerning the officers and men under his charge.

"My chief officer," he said, "is a man of the name of Burgin. He has seen a good deal of rough-and-tumble work in various parts of the world, and, as I have satisfactorily proved, can be thoroughly relied on when it comes to a pinch. The second is a young fellow of the name of Brownlow. He took part in the last Cuban expedition, and had a bit of fighting afterwards in the Philippines. The crew number thirty all told, and have been most carefully selected. I have tested them in every way, and feel sure they can be reckoned upon to do their duty. Now perhaps you'd like to have a look round the vessel? You've seen next to nothing of her yet."

He accordingly conducted me over the yacht from stem to stern, until I was familiar with every detail. If I were to pose as a young Englishman whose hobby was yachting, I could scarcely have had a finer craft wherewith to indulge my fancy. She was a Clyde-built vessel of, as I have already said, exactly a thousand tons; her length was not far short of two hundred and fifty feet. Her engine-room was amidships, and was as perfectly fitted as everything else. The drawing-room was a model of beauty, while the saloon was capable of seating at least fifty persons. The quarters of the officers and crew left nothing to be desired on the score of comfort. Only on one question was the captain at all reticent, and that was concerning the identity of the yacht's owner. Her papers, I discovered, were made out in my name, or rather, I should say, in my assumed name, but whether she was the property of Silvestre, or of somebody else,

I was never able to ascertain.

Though Silvestre had informed me that, from the moment I set foot on board, I should be considered the yacht's owner, I had not attached any great importance to the remark. I soon discovered, however, that there was more in it than I supposed. For instance, when I was told that evening that dinner was upon the table, I made my way to my cabin, prepared myself for it, and entered the saloon to find that I was expected to dine in solitary grandeur. Two men-servants were present to wait upon me, but there was no sign of the captain.

"Where is Captain Ferguson?" I inquired of one of the men when I had waited some two or three minutes for him to put in an appearance.

"He dines in the officers' mess, sir," the man replied.

Resolving to remedy this state of things on the morrow, and feeling that it was of no use my sending for him that night, I proceeded with my dinner without further remark. Accustomed as I was to good living on board a mail-boat, I can only say that, in all my experience, I had never met with anything like the meal that was served to me that evening. If Silvestre had given orders that my comfort was to be studied, he had certainly been carefully obeyed. When I rose from the table I went to my cabin, changed my coat, filled a pipe, and mounted with it to the bridge. Ferguson met me by the chart-room door, and expressed the hope that I had been made comfortable. I told him that the only fault I had to find was on the score of company, and went on to say that I expected him for the future to take his meals with me.

"It would be out of place for a captain to dine with his owner until he is invited to do so," he said, with a laugh. "However, if you wish it, I shall be very pleased to do so in the future."

I remember that it was a beautiful night; the sea was like glass, and the great stars overhead were reflected in the deep as in a mirror. As I smoked my pipe I thought of Molly, and wondered what she was doing at that moment. That I was a trifle homesick I will not deny. At ten o'clock Ferguson invited me to his cabin, and for about an hour we sat there discussing the business that lay before us. He had never visited Equinata before, but he was conversant with the character of the country. Having procured a chart from a locker, he made me aware of the whereabouts of the President's palace; showed me where he thought it would be best for the yacht to lie, and various other details that had struck him as being applicable to the case in hand.

"And now one other question: What do you know of Fernandez himself?" I inquired, when he had rolled up the chart and replaced it in the locker.

"Only what I have heard," he replied. "He is an exceedingly clever man, and as unscrupulous as any president who has ruled in South America, not excluding our friend Silvestre. It is quite certain that if he has the least suspicion of what we are after, ours is likely to be a short shrift. I presume you thought the whole business out well before you embarked upon it?"

I answered to the effect that I had given it all due consideration, and that whatever chances there might be I was prepared to take them. There was one question, however, that I had been desirous of putting to him ever since I had been on board, and now that we were alone together I resolved to ask it, and to risk his refusal to reply.

"With regard to Don Guzman de Silvestre," I said, "what do you know of him?"

Somewhat to my surprise he was quite frank with me.

"I know very little of him," he answered, "except that I owe my present position to him. Of one thing, however, I am aware, and that is the fact that he is not a man to be trifled with."

After a while I bade him good-night, and left him to go below to my cabin. Before entering the companion, however, I leant upon the bulwarks and gazed across the sea. Scarcely a sound broke the stillness of the night; the monotonous pacing of the officer of the watch, the look-out's cry, "All's well," and the throbbing of the engines, were all that broke the silence. I went over my talk with Ferguson again. After what he had said it appeared to me that the task I had undertaken was an almost hopeless one. One little mistake and my life would pay the forfeit. Failure seemed certain, and in that case what would happen to Molly and my mother? They would hope against hope, waiting for the man who would never return. I told myself that I was a fool ever to have had anything to do with the business. What was Don Guzman de Silvestre and his ambition to me? Why should I risk my life and my dear one's happiness for the sake of a paltry ten thousand pounds? In sheer disgust I turned on my heel and went to my cabin. Whatever my thoughts may have been on deck, they certainly did not trouble me very much below. I slept like a top all night, and when I came on deck next morning I had well-nigh forgotten my melancholy musings of the previous evening.

For the next four days our life scarcely varied. I read and smoked on deck, chatted with Ferguson, improved my

acquaintance with the other officers, and counted the days until we should reach our destination. As you may suppose, it was a welcome moment when the skipper announced that we were only a matter of ten hours' steaming from the Republic of Equinata. Next morning a faint smudge was discernible on the horizon straight ahead of us; by breakfast-time this had taken to itself the appearance of land, and when I returned to the bridge after my meal, a range of mountain peaks were plainly to be seen. By ten o'clock we were near enough to discern the entrance to the harbour, and by half-past we were steaming in between the heads, to drop our anchor in the bay.



CHAPTER VI

La Gloria, the chief port and capital of the Republic of Equinata, is charmingly situated on the west side of an admirably shaped bay, and is land-locked, save for a distance of about half-a-mile. It boasts a population numbering upwards of thirty thousand, of which only some ten or twelve thousand are white, the remainder being half-castes, quadroons, mulattoes, and negroes unadulterated. The city possesses some fine buildings, notable among which is the Cathedral of San Pedro, a handsome edifice, though somewhat damaged by the earthquake of '83. The Houses of Parliament are also imposing structures, as befits a land where every man is a politician, and no boy knows what may be in store for him. There is also the President's palace, and, of course, an opera house, and equally of course a long stretch of barracks, where the soldiers would seem to spend their time smoking cigarettes and hatching plots against their superiors.

As we passed through the Heads and entered the harbour, it struck me I had never looked upon a fairer scene. The blue waters of the bay, the white houses peeping out from amid the wealth of foliage, and the mountains rising tier upon tier behind, made up as pretty a picture as the eye of man could desire to dwell upon. We had scarcely come to anchor before a boat put off to us, pulled by four stalwart niggers, and carrying a much-uniformed official, who sat beside the coxswain. He proved to be the health officer--a voluble little Spaniard, with a magnificent idea of his own importance. As soon as his boat was alongside he ran up the ladder to the gangway with the agility of a monkey, and made his way to the place where Captain Ferguson was waiting to receive him. During the years I had been in the South American trade, I had managed to pick up a considerable smattering of Spanish, enough at any rate to make myself understood by the Dons. I was not nearly so fluent with it, however, as was Ferguson, who, I soon discovered, could talk the lingo as well as any swell of Aragon. As soon as they had transacted their business, the latter brought the health officer along to the saloon whither I had descended, and where I was introduced to him as the owner of the yacht.

"You possess a most beautiful vessel, señor," he said, bowing before me as if he would never be able to straighten his back again.

"And you a most beautiful harbour and city," I replied, resolved not to be outdone in the matter of compliments.

"Am I to believe that this can be your first visit to Equinata, señor?" he asked as if in astonishment.

"Yes, my first," I replied in my best Trevelyan manner. "I can assure you, however, that I am charmed with it, most charmed."

"Ah, you must wait until you have been ashore," he continued, "then you will indeed be surprised. The Plaza, the Almeda, the Opera House, and the President's palace. Ah!" Here he paused and gave an airy wave of his hand as if to signify that, when I should come to view these wonders, I might indeed describe the city as being beautiful; until then, however, I could not pretend to any real notion of its glories.

"I shall be delighted to make its acquaintance," I returned, "and also to pay my respects to your most illustrious President, who, I hear, is beloved by all his people."

"Ah, the good President," said the little man, but without any great enthusiasm. "And his niece--the beautiful Senorita Dolores. I raise my glass to the most beautiful woman in Equinata." Thereupon, with his eyes turned to the deck above, he drank solemnly to the health of the lady of whose existence I then heard for the first time.

A little more desultory conversation followed, in the course of which I managed to extract from him, in a roundabout way, a quantity of information of which I stood in need. Then the little man hoisted himself out of his chair, and with a regret born of a bottle and a half of excellent champagne, stated his intention of returning to the shore once more. Having fired another salvo of compliments at me, he carried this plan into effect, and we saw no more of him. Half-an-hour later the Harbour Master and the Chief Customs official arrived, drank more champagne, with which you may be sure I liberally plied them, smoked a number of cigars, praised their city, their country, and their excellent selves, but did nothing in the way of performing their business, and in their turn departed for the shore. Then I lunched, spent an hour in meditation in an easy-chair under the awning, and then, having ordered a boat, prepared to set off on a tour of inspection of the capital.

The landing-place at La Gloria is, or was, very similar to that of most other South American seaports. That is to say, at some distant date, harbour works on a very large scale had been commenced, but for some reason had never been completed. Possibly a Revolution may have been accountable for the stoppage of the work, or the President, or Minister of Public Works, may have decamped with the funds. At any rate all there was to show for the money voted was one substantially built wharf, the commencement of a pier, and a quantity of uncut stone, which still remained, moss-covered and weather-worn, just where the contractors had dumped it down.

I landed at the wharf, and immediately dispatched the boat back to the yacht. Trustworthy though the crew might be, I had no desire that they should hang about the sea front and talk to the inhabitants. Then, leaving the wharf, I made my way into the town.

It was a picturesque place of the true Central American type. The Calle de San Pedro, which cuts the town proper in half, is a handsome thoroughfare, and contains numerous fine shops, warehouses, and merchants' offices. Indeed, the scene in the street on that particular afternoon was a most bright and animated one, and would not have discredited Rio or Buenos Ayres. Half-a-mile or so further on the street in question enters the Great Square, in which stand the Cathedral, the Houses of Parliament, the Law Courts, and, more important than all, so far as I was concerned, the President's palace. The centre is laid out as a public garden, and possesses a band-stand and many fine statues of the heroes of Equinata in impossible garbs and more impossible attitudes. Seating myself on a bench in this garden, I took careful stock of my surroundings. Opposite me was the President's palace, with a sentry lounging on either side of the gates. While I watched the latter were opened, and a handsome carriage drove in and pulled up before the massive portico of the palace. After that the gates were closed once more.

I do not mind confessing that at this point in my adventure I was at a loss to know how to proceed. I might visit the palace and inscribe my name in the visitors' book, but, so far as I could see, that would not do very much to help me. I consulted the card I had brought with me, and on which was written the name and address of the man to whom, so Silvestre had informed me at our last meeting, I was to look for assistance. His name was Don Jose de Hermanos, and his address was No. 13 in the Calle de San Juan. Before leaving the yacht I had taken the precaution to make myself familiar with the quarter in which the street was situated, and had ascertained that it commenced at the Houses of Parliament and ran straight through the western portion of the city, towards the foot of the mountains. I accordingly made my way thither, and having discovered it, proceeded in search of the house in which the mysterious Don Jose resided, or had his place of business. Greatly to my surprise it proved to be a wine merchant's shop, and I accordingly entered the little square *patio* and looked about me. On the left was what was evidently the office, and in it an old man, engaged on some mysterious manipulation of an empty cask. I addressed him in my best Spanish, but he took no sort of notice of me. I called to him again with the same result. Then having satisfied myself that the old fellow was deaf, I touched him on the shoulder with my stick. This had the desired effect, for he jumped quickly round and stared at me in amazement.

A more comical countenance than he possessed I don't remember ever to have seen. He was a mulatto, and, if one might judge from his appearance, some sixty years of age. He asked me in Spanish who I desired to see, and I replied to the best of my ability that I was in search of a gentleman named Hermanos. From the signs the other made I gathered that the latter was not at home. I endeavoured to question him concerning him, but the old fellow was either naturally dense, or, for some reason best known to himself, pretended not to understand. In another moment I should have left the place in despair, but, just as I was making up my mind to do so, the sound of a footstep in the *patio* outside attracted my attention. I turned to find myself face to face with a tall, well-proportioned stranger, with a black beard and a pair of bristling moustaches. The old mulatto forsook his task and handed the other the card I had given him. He glanced at it, then looked up from it to me, after which he politely returned it to me, saying as he did so--

"You desire to see Don Hermanos, *senor*?"

"That is what has brought me here," I answered.

"You come from our neighbours across the frontier, perhaps?" he continued, still eyeing me critically.

"On the contrary, I have come by sea," I replied. "I am an Englishman, as you have doubtless already observed, and my yacht is anchored in the harbour."

"In that case permit me to welcome you most heartily to Equinata," he returned, but without any great show of enthusiasm. "Perhaps you will accompany me to my private office, where I shall be pleased indeed to be of any service I can to you."

I followed him across the *patio* to a door on the further side. This he opened, and when I had passed into the room, he followed my example and closed it carefully after him.

"How am I to know that you are the gentleman whom I have been led to expect?" he began, when I had seated myself and he had offered me a cigar. "As wine of that particular vintage is very difficult to obtain, you must see yourself that I have to be most careful that I do not make the mistake of giving information concerning it to the wrong person."

I thereupon took my watch from my pocket, opened the case, and took a small piece of paper--which Silvestre had also given me at our last meeting--from it. This I handed to the man before me, who read what was written upon it very carefully, and then tore it up into tiny fragments.

"I am quite satisfied," he said, "and now to arrange the matter you desire." Then, dropping his voice almost to a whisper, he continued, "Of course I recognize the fact that you would not have been chosen for the work had you not been considered a person most likely to accomplish it. Nevertheless, I feel sure that you can have but a very small notion how dangerous it is likely to prove. The man in question mistrusts everybody, and should but a breath of suspicion attach itself to you, you would be in the cartel to-night, and most probably in your grave to-morrow morning. Though my opinions have not changed in a single particular, I am not at all certain that it is wise of me to mix myself up in it. However, I don't see exactly in what way I am to get out of it."

It struck me that the latter portion of his speech was spoken more to himself than to me.

"Before we go any further, it would perhaps be as well that I should convince myself that you are Don Hermanos," I said, for so far I had had no proof of his identity.

He did not answer me, but crossed to a writing-table on the other side of the room, and, unlocking a drawer, took from it a book. Turning to a certain page, he showed me a series of portraits of the prominent politicians of Equinata. One was a likeness of himself, and underneath was printed his name in full--Don Jose de Hermanos, Minister of Mines. I expressed myself as being quite satisfied.

"And now," I continued, "will you be good enough to tell me how you propose to introduce me to the Pres----"--here he held up his hand as if in expostulation--"to the individual whose acquaintance I am so anxious to make?"

"As you may suppose, I have been thinking of that," he replied, "and I have come to the conclusion that it would be better for me not to be personally concerned in it. As it is, I am not at all certain in my own mind that he looks upon me with a favourable eye. I have a friend, however, with whom he is on terms of the greatest friendship. Through this friend I will have you presented. It would be better in the meantime if you will call at the palace and inscribe your name in the visitors' book, according to custom. After that I will make it my business to see my friend, and to arrange the matter with him. From that moment, if you will permit me, I will retire from the business altogether."

"You do not care about taking the responsibility of my endeavours, I suppose?" I said.

"Exactly, senor," he answered. "You have guessed correctly. To be quite frank with you, I am afraid of being shot. I have seen the gentleman we are discussing deal with his enemies on various occasions, and his behaviour impressed me with a desire to keep my head out of the lion's mouth."

"May I ask in what capacity you intend introducing me to your friend?" I went on. "Is it quite wise, do you think, to import a third party into the transaction?"

"There will be no third party," he answered. "There will only be my friend and yourself. As I understand the situation, you are a rich Englishman, travelling in our country. You have given me an order for some wine for your yacht, and as the leading wine merchant of the city, and having the reputation of our country at stake, I am anxious to do my best for you. I also desire, for the same reason, that you should enjoy your stay. What could be more natural than that I should introduce you to a friend who is also one of our most prominent citizens? You need not fear, senor, that I shall be foolish enough to compromise either you or myself."

From what I had so far seen of him I could quite believe the latter portion of his remark. If all Silvestre's supporters were of the same calibre, it struck me that he would experience some little difficulty in regaining his lost position. Hermanos was certainly as rank a coward as I had met for many a long day.

"In that case, I will make my way to the palace now, and write my name in the visitors' book. But how, and when, shall I hear from you?"

"I will communicate with you to-night," he said. "I shall be sending you some wine and cigars on board, which I hope you will accept, and I will word the note that accompanies them, so that you will be able to read between the lines. It would be as well, I imagine, that we should not meet again."

From the way he said this I could see he was as anxious to get rid of me as he was to preserve his incognito. I accordingly thanked him for his assistance, and bade him farewell.

Recrossing the little *patio*, I passed into the street once more, and retraced my steps to the Great Square. Having reached it, I made my way through the garden to the President's palace. The sentries still slouched beside the gate as I had first seen them. So far as I could tell, their only object in life was to see how near sleep they could go without actually dozing off. Then I entered the palace grounds, and walked up the drive to the marble portico, where I entered my name in the book placed there for that purpose. I had already practised the new Trevelyan signature, and was by this time able to write it with something of a flourish. This momentous act accomplished, I left the palace and returned

to the yacht, feeling that, although I had not so far made any very important headway in the conduct of my enterprise, I had at least set the machinery in motion.

Summoning Ferguson to the smoking-room, I gave him an account of all that had transpired, furnishing him at the same time with my opinion of Don Jose de Hermanos.

"It only bears out what I said to you the other night," he observed. "When a man dabbles in Revolutions he is apt to burn his fingers. It is very plain that this man Hermanos, to use a popular saying, has taken the length of the President's foot, and as a natural consequence he is most anxious to keep out of its way, lest he should be crushed by it. I don't know that I altogether blame him. He has calculated exactly how much he has to gain, which may not be very much, and he is also aware that if he fails, he has everything to lose."

He then proceeded to inform me that the yacht had been an object of considerable interest to many of the inhabitants of La Gloria that afternoon. It is doubtful whether such a handsome craft had ever been seen in those waters before.

"If only we can get things into proper trim ashore, they shall have an opportunity of admiring her even more than they do now, and for other reasons," I said. "We must have an At Home on board, and invite the polite society of the capital."

An hour or so before sundown, the same curious individual whom I had seen manipulating the cask in Hermanos' office, made his appearance alongside in a boat. He brought with him a case of wine and a small box wrapped in paper. I rewarded him, and dispatched him to the shore once more. Then returning to the smoking-room with the smaller parcel in my hand, I opened it to discover what I had expected I should find there, a box of cigars and a note carefully placed inside. It was not a very long epistle, and informed me that it gave the wine merchant the greatest pleasure to comply with my esteemed instructions, and to forward me a sample box of the cigars, concerning which his good friend, General Sagana, had spoken so highly. Should more be required, his agent would do himself the honour of waiting upon me on the following morning to learn my wishes. That was all!

"That means, of course, that General Sagana is the agent," I said to myself. "Well, let him come as soon as he pleases. He will find me quite ready to receive him."

Next morning I was enjoying the cool breeze under the bridge awning, when the second mate came up to inform me that a shore boat was approaching the accommodation ladder. Rising from my chair I glanced over the side to discover that what he had said was correct. A large boat pulled by six men was approaching the yacht. In the stern, seated beside the coxswain, was one of the most curious little specimens of a soldier one would be likely to find in a day's march. His height could not have exceeded five feet, but what he lacked in stature he made up in self-importance. He was attired in full uniform, even to the extent of spurs and a sword. A helmet with plumes was perched upon his head, while upwards of a dozen crosses decorated his breast. His face was small and puckered into a thousand wrinkles; his eyebrows were large, bushy, and snow-white; while a fierce moustache of the same colour curled up in corkscrew twists until it nearly touched his eyes. As soon as the boat was alongside, he ascended the ladder to the deck.

"Have I the honour of addressing the most illustrious Senor *Travillion*?" he inquired, after a wrestle with the name, from which he imagined he had emerged victorious. Upon my answering in the affirmative, he made me a sweeping bow that was so irresistibly comic that I had some difficulty in restraining a smile. Then he continued--"Senor, I have the honour to salute you, and to offer you a hearty welcome to our beautiful country. Permit me to introduce myself to you. I am General Sagana, of the army of the Republic of Equinata."

He said this with as much pride as if his name would rank in history with those of Napoleon and Wellington.

"I am deeply honoured by your visit," I replied. "Allow me to conduct you to a cool spot under the awning."

An hour later, when he left the yacht, we were on the best of terms. Moreover, I had arranged that that selfsame afternoon I should pay a visit of respect to Madame Sagana and her daughters, who, as I gathered from his words, existed only until they should have the extreme felicity of making my acquaintance.

"You must be prepared to stay with us for a long time," he cried, with a cordiality born of the best part of two bottles of Perrier-Jouet. "Ah! believe me, we shall not let you go so easily. We are hospitable, we of Equinata. Farewell, then, senor, until we meet this afternoon."

Then he bowed once more in his best style, descended to his boat, seated himself in the stern, and bade his men row him ashore with all speed, as there was business of importance toward.

That afternoon, bearing in mind the importance of the occasion, I once more made a most careful toilet, and having done so, returned to the city. Hiring a vehicle of the cab description, I bade the driver convey me to the residence of the

most illustrious General Sagana. In a whirl of dust, and accompanied by a swarm of beggar boys, we set off, and in something less than a quarter of an hour found ourselves drawn up before an elegant residence in what might have been described as the suburbs of the town. After I had paid and dismissed my charioteer, I rang the curious old bell I found hanging on the wall before me, and when it was answered, followed the servant into a charming *patio*, in which a fountain played, and from thence into a large and lofty room, where, to my dismay, a considerable number of people were assembled. It was fortunate for me that I am not easily abashed. Had this been the case, I should most probably have furnished the fashionable world of Equinata with a poor idea of the behaviour of an Englishman of wealth and position. At the moment of my entrance, the little General was paying considerable attention to a matronly lady who was so tightly squeezed into her chair that it seemed she would never be able to move from it again. Observing me, however, he left her, and hastened forward to greet me, after which he led me across the room to present me to his wife and daughters. The former was a small, though more wizened, edition of her husband; the latter, however, were handsome girls of the true Spanish type. Half-a-dozen other presentations followed, after which I was at liberty to make myself as agreeable as circumstances permitted and my knowledge of the Spanish language would allow. Had only the General's daughters been present, this would not have been such a very difficult matter, for the very few minutes I spent in their company were sufficient to show me that they were both past mistresses of the art of flirting. We were progressing famously, when the door opened, and the ancient man-servant who had admitted me, and who was older and even more wizened than his master or mistress, said something in a low voice to the General, who immediately hurried out of the room. A whisper ran through the company, but what its purport was I could not discover. All doubt, however, was presently set at rest when the General returned, escorting with great pomp a tall, handsome man, the possessor of a fine head and a singularly clever face. He saluted my hostess and her daughters with considerable ceremony, bowed gravely to the remainder of the company, and then looked at me, as if wondering who I could be.

"Permit me, your Excellency," said the General with one of his flourishes, "to have the honour of presenting to you Senor Travillion from England, who, like so many others, has heard of the glories of Equinata, and has now come to our country in order that he may see them for himself."

Long before he had finished his harangue, I had realized that the man standing before me was none other than the famous President Fernandez--Silvestre's mortal enemy, and the man I was being paid to abduct.



CHAPTER VII

As soon as I realized the identity of the man before me, you may be sure I did my utmost to appear at my best to him. So much, I knew, depended on his first impression.

"I am exceedingly pleased to make your acquaintance, Mr. Trevelyan," said the President, in a voice that struck me as being distinctly pleasant. "I fancy I saw your yacht from a distance this afternoon. She is a handsome craft, and, if I am not mistaken, was built on the Clyde. Am I right in my conjecture?"

For a moment I felt inclined to ask myself how it was this man was able to discriminate between a boat built on the Thames and another built on the Clyde. I subdued the inclination, however, and fell back upon my Trevelyan manner.

"Quite right," I answered. "She hails from the Clyde, and, like most boats launched on that river, she is a credit to her builders. I don't know that I have ever met with a better. I hope I may be able to induce your Excellency to pay her a visit, in order that you may inspect her for yourself."

"It will give me great pleasure to do so," he answered, and when he had conversed with me for a few moments longer, he left me in order to pay his respects to a lady at the further end of the room. I was not sorry for this, as it gave me an opportunity of observing him a little more closely. He was certainly a remarkable-looking man, and each time I glanced at him the conclusion was more forcibly borne upon me that he was one with whom it would be better to be on friendly terms than anything else. Although there was an apparent kindness in his manner, one could not help feeling that it was only the velvet glove masking the iron hand concealed below.

He remained in the room for upwards of half-an-hour and then took his departure, not, however, until he had crossed to me once more and had repeated his desire to visit the yacht, in order that he might inspect her more closely.

"As I said just now, I shall be delighted to show her to you," I hastened to reply, and thereupon suggested that he should breakfast with me on board the next day, and that with his permission I would include General Sagana and his family in the invitation.

"You are most hospitable, Senor Trevelyan," he answered, "and if you will allow me I will also bring my niece, the Senorita Dolores de Perera. I am sure she will be most pleased to make your acquaintance."

"I shall be more than honoured," I replied, in my best manner, feeling that at last I was making real headway. "Would eleven o'clock suit your Excellency's convenience?"

"Admirably," he returned. "Let us then say *au revoir* until eleven o'clock to-morrow."

I promised that a boat should meet them at the wharf, and then bowing to the ladies, and accompanied by General Sagana, he left the room. When the General returned he complimented me warmly upon the success I had made with the President.

"A most remarkable man, Senor Travillion," he continued, twirling his enormous moustaches, "the most remarkable man Equinata has yet produced. His career has, indeed, been an extraordinary one in every way."

"Indeed?" I answered, with an endeavour to conceal the interest I was taking in what he said. "May I ask whom he succeeded?"

For a moment the situation possessed a flavour of embarrassment. I was not aware that the General had been one of Silvestre's principal adherents, and that it was only when he discovered the fact that affairs were not as they should be with his master that he had transferred his allegiance to the stronger party.

"His predecessor was a certain Don Guzman de Silvestre," the old gentleman replied, but in a tone that suggested two things to me; first, that he was not aware of my connection with the man in question, and secondly, that the subject was a decidedly distasteful one to him. Realizing this I did not attempt to pursue it further.

Having formally invited my hostess and host and their daughters to my little *dejeuner* on the following day, I bade them farewell and took my departure. It was evident that my visit had been appreciated, and that some importance was attached to it, for I found the General's private carriage waiting outside to convey me back to the wharf. I was careful to thank him for the courtesy he had extended to me, and then drove off.

When I retired to rest that night, it was with the feeling that my day had not been altogether wasted. Behind it, however, was a decided impression that President Fernandez was by no means the sort of man to be caught napping, and that, if I wished to trap him, it would be necessary for me to have all my wits about me. Moreover, I fancied that

when I *did* catch him, I should find him a somewhat difficult captive to tame. As is very often the case in such matters, one apparently inconsequent remark of his haunted me more than anything else that had fallen from his lips. Why had he declared the yacht to be a Clyde-built boat? Was it only a statement made haphazard, or had he some previous knowledge of the craft in question? The mere thought that he might know anything of her past made me anxious beyond measure. The possibilities were that he did not, but the fact that he might have an inkling of my intention was sufficient to prevent me from sleeping and to cause me to tumble and toss in my bed, hour after hour, endeavouring to find some satisfactory solution to the problem. "I have seen what he can do to those who offend him," Hermanos had said to me, "and I confess the picture did not please me." At the same time I could not believe that it was possible that the President had any idea of the real reason of my presence in Equinata. The secret had been so jealously guarded that it could not have leaked out. These thoughts, however, did not prevent me from looking forward with the greatest possible interest to the festivity of the morrow. Immediately on my arrival on board, I called Ferguson to a consultation. He forthwith interviewed the chief cook, and the result was the preparation of a repast that promised to equal anything ever seen in Equinata before.

As you may suppose, the following morning was a busy one with us. The arrangements were most elaborate. Flowers were procured from the shore, and with them the saloons were decorated. A string band was engaged to play on the bridge during the repast, and in the President's honour the yacht was hung with bunting.

Half-an-hour before my guests were due to arrive, I descended to my cabin and made my toilet. I had scarcely returned to the deck before I was informed by the chief mate, who was on the look-out, that the boats we expected were putting off from the shore. Ferguson stood beside me and watched them come alongside. Out of compliment to the President he had caused the flag of Equinata to be hoisted, and had drawn up a Guard of Honour from the crew on either side of the gangway. The first boat to come alongside contained the President, his *aide-de-camp*, and a lady, whom I argued must be none other than his niece, the Senorita Dolores de Perera. The President was the first to set foot upon the deck, and, as he did so, the band struck up the National Air of Equinata. His Excellency shook me warmly by the hand, and then, turning to the lady who accompanied him, presented me to her. I have met some very beautiful women in my time, but I am doubtful whether I have ever seen one who could compare with the lady I then had before me. She was slightly above the middle height, with raven hair and dark flashing eyes, and carried herself with the grace that is so characteristic of her nationality. Her manner towards me was distinctly cordial, and under its influence I began to think that our luncheon was not destined to be as dull an affair as I had feared it might be. I escorted them to a cool spot under the awning, and then prepared to receive my other guests. Upon their arrival, we proceeded to the saloon for lunch. That the President was impressed, I could plainly see. He paid me many compliments upon the beauty of the yacht, and vowed that, when times improved in Equinata, he would have just such another built for his own private use.

"How I envy you your lot, Senor Trevelyan!" remarked the Senorita Dolores, when we had seated ourselves at the table, and as she said it, she threw a beaming glance at me. "How beautiful it must be to skim over the seas like a bird, to be always seeing new countries, and receiving new impressions. Yours must be an ideal life, if ever there were one."

"I fear you have omitted to take into your calculations the existence of Custom House officials, the engagement of crews, and the fact that a yacht, however beautiful, needs coaling, in order to be able to properly perform her functions. There are also storms to mar one's pleasure, Port Dues, Harbour Regulations, Quarantine, and a thousand and one other little matters that, though not important in themselves, are, nevertheless, sufficient to play the part of crumpled rose-leaves in your bed of happiness."

"But in these seas you have all smooth sailing. You came here from---?"

She asked the question so innocently that I felt sure it was without any sinister intention.

"From Havana to Key West, and thence to Jamaica, Barbadoes, and so to Equinata!"

"And your plans after leaving here?"

"I have scarcely formed any plans yet," I answered, and then I added with a fair amount of truth, "You see, Senorita, it all depends upon circumstances. I may go on to Rio, thence to Buenos Ayres, and perhaps round the Horn to the Pacific Islands, or I may return to England at once."

"While we remain on here leading our humdrum life," said the President, toying with his champagne glass as he spoke, "and ending the year almost as we began it, seeing few strangers and interested only in our own little mediocre affairs."

"I fear your Excellency must speak ironically," I said. "What grander or more interesting occupation can there be in the world, than the work of building up a new country, a country which may ultimately take its place among the greatest of the earth? While I am fluttering like a butterfly from place to place, you are guiding, helping, and benefiting your fellow-

man, and through him the entire human race."

"You are an idealist, I perceive, Senor Trevelyan," the President returned, with one of his peculiar smiles. "Unfortunately for your theory, my fellow-man does not always wish to be benefited, as your words would lead one to suppose. To my thinking he is very like that noble animal, the horse, who, while being capable of great things, must first learn the principles of subjection. What say you, General Sagana?"

"I agree with your Excellency," replied the General with some little embarrassment, though why he should have felt it I could not at the time understand.

I turned to the Senorita Dolores.

"You are deeply interested in politics, of course, Senorita?" I said, as innocently as I knew how.

"No, I do not mind admitting that I take no sort of interest in politics," she answered. "I find it better for many reasons not to do so. So long as I am not publicly insulted in the streets, and the mob do not attempt to shoot my uncle, or to come to the palace and break our windows, I am content to let whichever party pleases hold the reins of power. But there, I feel sure, Senor Trevelyan, you did not come to Equinata to talk politics. We must discover a way of amusing you, and of making your time pass pleasantly while you are with us, without that!"

As she said this, she glanced down the table at the two daughters of General Sagana, who returned her smile with a look that said as plainly as any words could speak, that if they were given the opportunity, they would take care that my time was spent as pleasantly as possible.

All things taken into consideration, my little *dejeuner* was a decided success, and the affability of the President, when the ladies had withdrawn, helped to confirm me in this opinion. Nothing could have exceeded his geniality. He narrated several amusing incidents connected with his past life, and once even unbent so far as to comment on a certain act connected with the reign of his predecessor.

"Silvestre was a clever man; a very clever man," he said; "but, as events proved, entirely wanting in a proper appreciation of his position. Had he used his opportunities as he might have done, he would, in all probability, be occupying the position he held then and which I hold to-day."

"And may I ask what has become of him?" I inquired, not without some curiosity as to what his answer would be.

The President, however, shook his head.

"No one seems to have any idea where he is," he said. "After the last crisis he disappeared from Equinata, but where he went I cannot tell you. Very probably he is dead. Men of his calibre do not, as a rule, make old bones."

His manner was so open, his speech so frank, that my suspicions that he was aware of my errand in his capital were fast dying away.

Later on we left the saloon and joined the ladies on deck. A cool wind was blowing, and it was very pleasant under the awnings. After half-an-hour's conversation, followed by an inspection of the yacht, the President declared his intention of returning to the shore. The boats were accordingly ordered alongside, whereupon, having thanked me for my hospitality, the President and the Senorita, attended by their *aide-de-camp*, the latter a great lady-killer, took their departure. General Sagana and his party followed suit a little later, and then I was free to discuss the success of our entertainment with Ferguson.

"If all goes on as it is doing now," I said, lighting a fresh cigar, and handing my case to him, "it should not prove a very difficult matter to inveigle him on board to dinner some night, when we might settle the affair once and for all."

"Unfortunately, the chances are a hundred to one that, if he came, he would bring an *aide* with him, as he did to-day. What should we do then?"

"Take the *aide* to the island with us," I replied promptly. "One more prisoner would make little or no difference to Silvestre."

Next morning I was the recipient of an invitation from the President to dine at the palace on the Thursday following. Needless to say, I hastened to accept, and in due course presented myself at his Excellency's magnificent abode. I was met in the hall by the *aide-de-camp* who had breakfasted with us on board the yacht, and by him was conducted to the great drawing-room where the President and his niece were receiving their guests. Some thirty or forty people were present, among the number being General Sagana and Madame, and their two fair daughters, who welcomed me like old friends. The President took the General's wife in to dinner, while, for some reason best known to them, I was permitted

the honour of escorting the Senorita.

"So you have not grown tired of Equinata yet, Senor Trevelyan?" said my fair companion, as we made our way in our turn along the stately hall in the direction of the dining-room.

"On the contrary, I grow more charmed with it every day," I replied. "Who could help liking it, when its citizens are so hospitable to strangers?"

"Before you praise us, remember that you set us a charming example," she continued. "It will be long before I forget the pleasant morning we spent on board your yacht. I can assure you that my uncle also looks back on it with the greatest pleasure."

"I trust it may not be the last time he will visit her," I answered, with more truth than is usually attachable to an idle compliment.

The room in which we dined was a magnificent apartment, furnished with a grandeur that gave it an almost regal dignity. The President's *chef* was evidently a treasure, for the dinner could scarcely have been excelled. During its progress the President addressed himself on several occasions to me, and invited me to accompany him on a visit to some celebrated copper mines in the neighbourhood, also to a review of the troops which was to take place in the Great Square in a week's time. As may be supposed, I was quick to accept both invitations.

"And at the end of the week there is to be a grand ball at the Opera House," the Senorita continued, when her uncle had finished speaking. "It is in aid of the convent of the Little Sisters of the Poor, and is one of our recognized gaieties of the year. I wonder if we shall be able to persuade you to be present?"

"I shall be more than delighted," I replied. "That is, of course, provided I am not compelled to leave Equinata in the meantime."

"You must not leave us too soon," she said, and then paused and examined her plate attentively. I was about to answer her, when her attention was attracted by her neighbour on her right, and I was accordingly left to my own thoughts.

I looked down the long table, glittering with glass and plate, and as I did so, I endeavoured to apprise the value of my extraordinary position. Who at that board could have guessed the errand in Equinata of the man whom, doubtless, so many of them envied for his wealth and for his magnificent floating home? I could not help wondering what my own feelings would have been had I known only three months or so before, when I was standing watch as a mail-boat officer, that in a few short weeks I should be the honoured guest of the President of the Republic of Equinata, and the presumptive owner of a yacht valued at upwards of a hundred thousand pounds.

I looked across the room and examined the pictures hanging upon the walls. That exactly opposite me riveted my attention. I felt that I could not be mistaken as to the likeness. It was the portrait of Don Guzman de Silvestre, and the artist had managed to depict him to the life. How it called me back to other days! As I looked at it, I seemed to be sitting in the old inn garden at Falstead, listening to his instructions for the campaign, and wondering how long Molly would be at the choir practice.

"You have suddenly become very silent, Senor Trevelyan," said the Senorita, rousing me from my reverie.

"I was thinking that I shall often look back with pleasure upon this evening," I replied.

The look she gave me would probably have encouraged many men to embark on a course of the maddest flirtation. I, however, was adamant.

"In reality," she said, "I suppose you are like all the other visitors we have, and, as soon as you are away from Equinata, you will forget us altogether."

"I assure you I shall never forget your beautiful city as long as I live," I answered, and with more truth than she imagined.

She threw a quick glance at me and then, looking down the dinner-table, gave the signal to the ladies to rise. I must confess here that the Senorita interested me very strangely. At first I had thought her merely a very beautiful woman, well fitted by nature to perform the difficult task asked of her; it was not long, however, before I came to have a somewhat better understanding of her real abilities. In what light I regard her now, you will be able to realize for yourself when you have read my story.

As had been arranged, three days after the dinner I have just described, I accompanied the President and a considerable party to the famous copper mines in the mountain range that began behind the city and extended well-

nigh to the further limit of the Republic. We were only absent three days, yet in that short space of time I was permitted an opportunity of studying the real character and personality of Equinata's ruler more closely than I had yet done. At first I must confess I had been prepared to dislike him, but little by little, so gradually indeed that I scarcely noticed the change, I found that he was managing to overcome my prejudices. Under the influence of these new impressions I also began to see my own part of the business in a new light. From what Silvestre had said to me, I had up to that time regarded him as a traitor to his friends, and as a tyrant and enemy to his country. I now discovered that he was neither the one nor the other. He ruled according to his lights, and if he held his people in an iron grip, it was for the good and sufficient reason that he knew their character, and the sort of government they required. My own position, when I came to overhaul it properly, I discovered to be by no means edifying. I accepted his hospitality and his kindnesses, yet I was only waiting my chance to prove myself a traitor of the worst kind. I was posing as his friend, yet at the same time was preparing to prove myself his worst enemy. Such thoughts as these kept me company by day and night, and made me regard myself with a contempt such as I had never dreamed of before. And yet I knew that, at any hazard, I must go through with it. Had I not taken Silvestre's money and pledged myself to serve him? Therefore I could not draw back.

On our return to the city from the mountains, I was present at the review of the troops in the Great Square, and witnessed the redoubtable army of Equinata, headed by General Sagana, as you may suppose in the fullest of full uniforms, march by and salute its chief. That ceremony over, I returned to the yacht to while away the hours as best I could until it should be time to dress for the great ball that was to take place at the Opera House that evening.

Having rigged myself out for the occasion, I was rowed ashore, and, as I had plenty of time to spare, I determined to walk to the Great Square in preference to taking a cab. To do this it was necessary for me to pass a certain fashionable *cafe*, whose little tables decorated the broad pavement outside. At one of these tables two men were seated, playing dominoes as they sipped their coffee. One of them looked up at me as I passed. As my eyes fell on his face I gave a start, for I recognized him instantly as a well-known Rio merchant, who had made several voyages with me in the old *Pernambuco*, and with whom I had been on the most friendly terms. He stared at me as if he thought he ought to know my face, but, I suppose on account of the absence of my moustache, could not quite remember where he had seen it last.

I hurried on, with my heart in my mouth, as the saying has it, but I had not gone very far ere I heard some one bustling after me. A few seconds later a hand was laid upon my arm, and I turned to find the individual I had seen seated at the table standing before me.

"Ten t'ousand pardons, senor," he began in English, "but am I mistaken if I say your name is 'Elmsworth?'"

I had to make up my mind.

"I'm afraid you're making some little mistake," I replied, and then added what was worse than a lie, that is to say, a half-truth, "I know no one of the name of 'Elmsworth.'"

"Den I must beg of you ten t'ousand more bardons," he continued. "I t'ought you vas one of mine old vriends dot I vas at sea mit. Forgive me dat I interrupt you in your valk."

I willingly forgave him and passed on.

The question that kept me company for the rest of the evening was--Had my assurance satisfied him? If not, what would he be likely to do?



CHAPTER VIII

So long as I may live I shall never forget the ball at which I was present that night. The scene was gay beyond description. All the Rank and Fashion of La Gloria, and one might almost say of Equinata, were assembled there. When the dancing had been in progress for some time, the President and the Senorita Dolores put in an appearance and were received by the committee to the strains of the National Air. I must confess that Fernandez made a most imposing figure, with his broad ribbon of the Order of La Gloria, and his wealth of foreign decorations. As for his companion, it would be difficult for a mere male mortal to find words in which to describe the picture she presented. As soon as it was permissible I crossed the room to her and humbly asked her for a dance. She was graciously pleased to give me one, and presently we found ourselves circling round the room together to the music of a long swinging waltz, excellently played. Afterwards I escorted her from the ball-room into the balcony. It was a lovely night, and so still, that in the pauses of the music the sound of the waves upon the beach could be distinctly heard, though more than a mile away. I procured my companion's mantilla for her, with which she draped her head and neck, with characteristic grace. Never, I am inclined to believe, had she looked lovelier than she did at that moment, and when she leant upon the balustrading of the balcony, and looked across the city towards the mountains, behind which the moon was rising, I vowed that I had never beheld a fairer picture. Few men could have stood beside her then and not have felt the fascination of her presence.

"Senor Trevelyan," she said meditatively, in a voice that was as low and musical as the deep notes of a guitar, "what a strange thing is life! You and I stand here together now. Out of the infinite you hold my attention for minutes that never can be recalled. Later we shall separate, and then you will go your way, and I shall go mine. In all probability we shall never meet again--yet through Eternity our destinies will be linked, like the strands of a rope, by the remembrance of a few minutes' conversation on a certain moonlight night in Equinata."

I must confess that this sudden seriousness on her part puzzled me considerably. A moment before she had been all gaiety, a few seconds later she was gravity personified. The change was so instantaneous that I found it difficult to follow her.

"I am afraid I must be very obtuse," I stammered, "but I cannot say that I have quite caught your meaning."

"I am not sure that I know it myself," she replied. "The beauty of the night has taken hold of me. The rising of the moon always has a curious effect upon me. I am afraid you will think me very absurd, but people say I have a strange way of looking at things. I was thinking of our life. Consider for a moment how much we are governed by Chance. We meet some one we like, some one whom we believe might prove a good friend if ever occasion should arise. He, or she, crosses our path, tarries perhaps for a moment with us, and then vanishes, never to be seen by us again."

"But we have the consolation of recollection left us," I replied, more impressed than ever by her curious mood. "Every day we put away impressions in memory's store-house--mental photographs, may I call them--which will conjure up the Past for us in fifty years' time if need be. Think of the impression I am receiving at this moment. It will never be effaced. The scent of the orange blossoms, the glorious moonlight, the music of the ball-room yonder, and you leaning upon the balustrading looking down upon the sleeping city. The picture will still be with me even though I have the misfortune to be many thousand miles from La Gloria. In fifty years' time I may be in an English village, in a Chinese seaport, or on the South African Karroo; then the shimmer of the moonlight on a leaf--a chance strain of music--even a piece of black lace, like that of your mantilla--will be sufficient to bring the whole scene before my mind's eye. In a flash I shall be transported to this balcony, and you will be standing beside me once more."

It seemed to me that she gave a little shiver as I said this.

"If your mental photographs are to be so vivid," she continued, "what a sorry figure I shall cut in them, if through all time I continue to talk as I have been doing to-night." Then changing her manner, she went on, "I fear you will soon grow tired of Equinata."

"That could never be," I replied. "I only wish it were in my power to stay longer."

"When do you think it will be necessary for you to leave?" she inquired, as if the question were one of the utmost importance.

"It is difficult to say," I answered. "I am afraid, however, it will not be many more days. I have received information concerning some rather important business that may possibly necessitate my leaving for Europe almost immediately."

"I am sorry to hear that," she said meditatively. "We had looked forward to enjoying the pleasure of your society for some time to come."

She spoke as if I were an old friend whom she feared to lose. Had a stranger been present, he or she would have found it difficult to believe that a fortnight before we had never set eyes on each other. There are many men in the world who, had they been in my place, would doubtless have been charmed, and perhaps more than charmed, by the interest she displayed in my doings. She was a vastly pretty woman, dangerously pretty in fact, but even her tender interest in my affairs was not sufficient to shake my equilibrium. Ten minutes or so later we returned to the ball-room, and I surrendered her to the partner who came to claim her. Having done so, I was walking towards the further end of the room, when the President accosted me. He was in a most affable mood, and was evidently disposed for a chat.

"You do not appear to be dancing very much, Senor Trevelyan," he said, dropping into English, as was his wont when we were alone together. "Is it possible you feel inclined for a cigar?"

"I am more than inclined," I replied, "I am pining for one. I never was much of a dancing man. The hard sort of life I have been compelled to lead has not permitted me much opportunity for practising that graceful art."

The words had no sooner escaped my lips than I realized what a slip I had made. So far as he was aware, I was, to all intents and purposes, a rich young Englishman, and should be without a care in the world. It would therefore seem to him strange that I should not have had much chance of perfecting my knowledge of the terpsichorean art.

"I mean to say," I went on, as we made our way across the grand lobby to the smoking-room, "that after I left school, I was for some time abroad, and--well, the fact of the matter is, I never laid myself out very much for ladies' society."

"I think I understand," he replied gravely. "Like myself, you prefer to look for your amusements in other directions. Your passion for the sea I can quite appreciate, but I think, were I in your place, I should prefer a somewhat larger craft than your yacht. A mail-boat, for instance, such as the *Pernambuco*--or the *Amantillado* would come somewhat nearer the mark."

There was nothing remarkable in what he said, and his voice never for a second rose above its customary pitch. Nevertheless, I looked at him in overwhelming astonishment. It seemed to me his words were spoken with a deliberate intent, and were meant to have a definite value placed upon them. It was not the first time I had had the impression forced upon me, and it was not a pleasant one, I can assure you, that he had become aware of the real reason for my presence in Equinata. I hastened to abandon the subject of the sea, and directed the conversation into another channel. The result, however, was very much the same. We thereupon discussed the possibilities of a European war, which at that moment seemed not improbable.

"Power," he returned, *a propos* of a remark of mine, "is in my opinion precisely a question of temperament. Your London crowd is well trained and will stand what would drive a Neapolitan or a French mob to violence. Such speeches are delivered in your parks on Sundays as would prove in these latitudes as intoxicating as brandy. I have known a Revolution started by an ill-timed jest, a city wrecked, and a thousand lives lost in consequence. Talking of Revolutions, have you ever had the misfortune to be called upon to take part in one?"

Once more my suspicions were aroused.

"Good gracious, no!" I cried. "What makes you ask me such a question? Do I look like the sort of person who would be likely to have to do with such affairs?"

He glanced at me for a moment over the top of the cigar which he had taken from his mouth and was holding between his long slim fingers, as if to enjoy the beautiful aroma.

"I was merely venturing an inquiry," he continued, in the same quiet fashion as before. "If you have not, you should try the experiment. Believe me, there is a very fair amount of excitement to be got out of it, particularly if you have not the good fortune to be on the winning side. You have met Don Guzman de Silvestre, of course?"

"Don Guzman de who?" I asked, as if I had not quite caught the name.

"My predecessor," the President replied. "I thought that probably you might have come across him in your travels. He knocks about the Continent a good deal, and I am told he is well known at the various ports at which the mail-boats touch."

The situation was momentarily getting beyond me. I felt that I could not stand much more of it. He had referred to the *Pernambuco*, and had recommended me to try my hand at a Revolution; he had mentioned Don Guzman de Silvestre, and now he was speaking of the ports at which the South American mail-boats call, and implying that I was familiar with them. What did it all mean? Was it only a matter of chance, or was he aware of my identity, and only biding his time to rise and upset all my calculations? I think you will agree with me in saying that it was not a pleasant position for a man to be placed in!

"I remember," he went on, "on one occasion smoking a cigar with Don Guzman de Silvestre in this very balcony--he was sitting exactly where you are now. Though he thought I was not aware of it, I happened to know that he was at that time hatching a plot that he hoped would upset my calculations, turn me out of my palace, and make him President in my stead. He had been laying his plans for months, and was quite sure that they would succeed!"

"And the result?"

"The result was that it failed. If he had not managed to escape when he did, I am afraid his life would have paid the forfeit. In spite of the advice I gave you just now, interference in Revolutions in Equinata is not an amusement I should recommend to every one."

"I trust I may never be called upon to try it," I replied fervently.

"I hope you will not," he returned, without looking at me. "It's an unprofitable speculation unless you are certain of your cards. The strongest, of course, wins, and the loser generally goes to the wall."

I thought I understood to what wall he referred.

A few moments' silence followed his last speech. The President was the first to break it by referring to what he hoped would be the future of his country. It was evident that he firmly believed in it and its capabilities. Then, rising from his chair, he bade me "good-night" with an abruptness that was almost disconcerting.

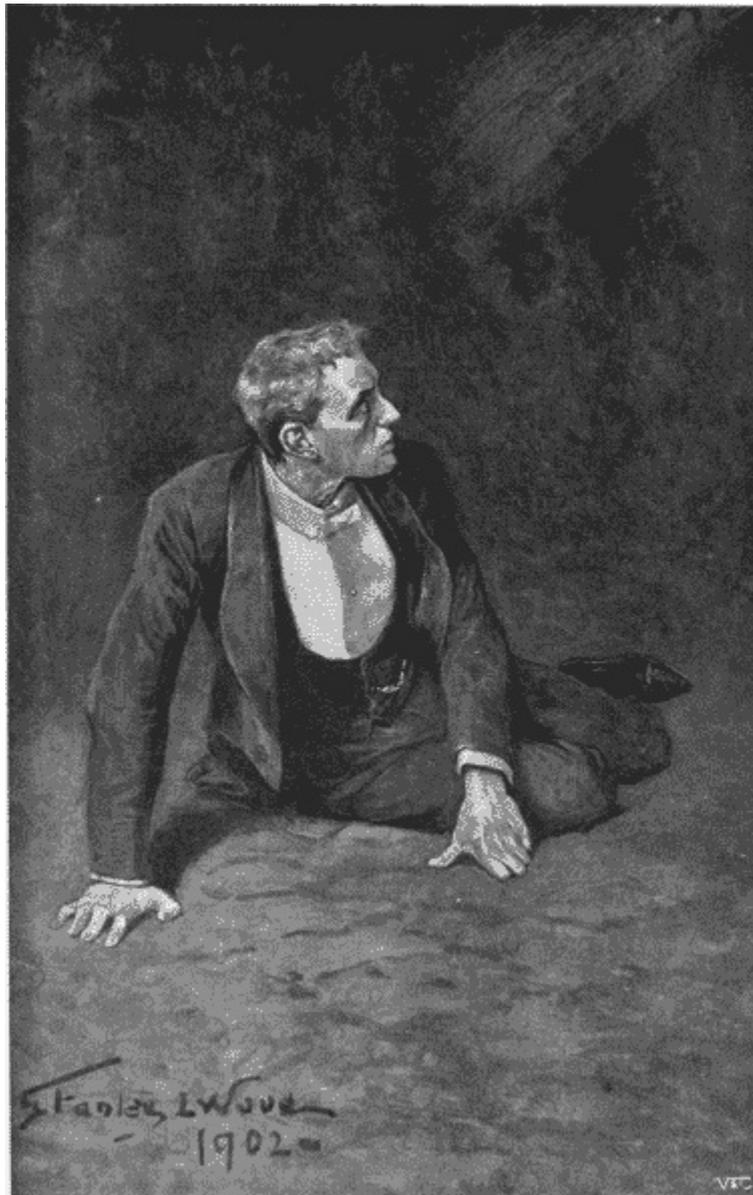
When he had gone, and I had finished my cigar, I returned to the ball-room in time to meet the Presidential party as they were leaving.

"Good-night, Senor Trevelyan," said the senorita. "The Little Sisters are indebted to you for your most generous contribution. In their name I thank you."

"And I am equally indebted to them for the pleasure I have been permitted to enjoy this evening," I replied.

She bowed to me, and passed on, on her uncle's arm, towards the entrance. When they had departed I obtained my hat and cloak, and in my turn left the building. During the last ten minutes my spirits had been dropping down and down until they reached zero. Never since I had consented to Don Guzman's plan had my business in Equinata seemed so hazardous or indeed so despicable to me. I felt that I would have given anything never to have set eyes on my tempter, or to have listened to his invidious proposal. However, I am not going to moralize. I've my story to tell, and tell it I must, and in as few words as possible.

When I left the Opera House, the moon was sailing in a cloudless sky, and, in consequence, the streets were almost as light as day. It was a little after midnight, and I had not ordered the boat to meet me at the wharf until one o'clock. I had therefore plenty of time at my disposal. As I passed out of the Great Square and entered the Calle de San Pedro, the cathedral clock chimed the quarter past the hour. I strolled leisurely along, so that it was half-past by the time I reached the wharf. Then I lighted another cigar, and, seating myself on a stone block, prepared to await the arrival of the boat. I had perhaps been seated there ten minutes, when, suddenly, and before I could do anything to protect myself, a bag or cloth, I could not tell which, was thrown over my head, and my arms were pinioned from behind. Then a voice said in Spanish, "Lift him up, and bring him along. There's not a moment to lose." Thereupon a man took hold of my shoulders and another my legs, and I felt myself being carried along, though in what direction I could not of course tell. A few seconds later, however, I was dumped down on the wooden floor of what was evidently a cart. The crack of a whip followed, and we were off at a brisk pace somewhere--but where? The bag by this time was coming near to stifling me. It had been pulled so tight round my head that it was only with the greatest difficulty I could breathe. Eventually, I suppose, I must have lost consciousness, for I have no recollection of anything that happened until I opened my eyes to find myself lying on the floor of a small, bare room, through the grated windows of which the moonlight was streaming in. Thank goodness, the bag was gone, but my head ached consumedly, and I felt about as sick and wretched as a man could well be.



"I felt about as sick and wretched as a man could well be."

After a while I sat up, and endeavoured to puzzle out my position. Where was I? Who was it had made me prisoner? Was it a simple act of brigandage, having plunder for its motive, or had the President discovered the plot against him and ordered my arrest? Not one of the questions could I answer. In the hope of being able to solve the problem of my whereabouts, however, I got on to my feet and endeavoured to look out of the window, only to discover that it was out of my reach, and that I was too weak to draw myself up to it. I therefore seated myself on the floor once more, for the room or cell, whichever I cared to call it, was destitute of furniture, and resigned myself to my miserable thoughts.

To use a stage expression, it was a pretty market I had brought my pigs to! I had felt so confident that my errand was not known, and that I should succeed in getting safely out of the country, that I had neglected the most simple precautions, and in consequence here I was a prisoner, with the pleasing possibility ahead of me of either having my throat cut by a common murderer before the night was past, or, what was more probable, of being propped against a wall and shot by President Fernandez' soldiers at daybreak. The mere knowledge that I was still alive, and that my watch, chain, and money had not been taken from me, pointed to the fact that I was a prisoner of the State, and not of a private individual. All things considered, it would be difficult to say which would prove the worse fate.

Putting aside for the moment the question as to whose captive I was, I examined my watch, and discovered that it was just half-past one. Only an hour had elapsed since the episode on the wharf--to me, however, it seemed an Eternity. After a while, feeling stronger, I got on to my feet again, and began to pace the room. I also tried the door, only to find it locked. They had got me fast enough. So much was certain. The next time, I told myself, I crossed the threshold, it would in all probability be to be haled to a place of execution. For upwards of an hour I paced the room, calling myself a

fool and idiot, and every other name I could think of, for having allowed myself to be drawn into such an affair. I recalled that quiet evening at Falstead, when the idea of the adventure had appeared so attractive to me, and, as I did so, it seemed to me I could hear Molly's gentle voice saying: "Act as you think best, dear! I know that it will be all right then." I had certainly acted on my own judgment, and here I was in consequence!

I was still thinking of Falstead when a sharp cry reached me from the yard outside, followed by a prolonged scuffling noise. Then there was a heavy fall, another, and yet another. After that all was silence once more.

"What on earth is the matter?" I asked myself. "It sounded like a struggle of some sort. Can they by any chance have captured Ferguson, and have brought him here to be my fellow-prisoner?"

A few moments later some one approached my door. A key was placed in the lock and turned, then the door opened, and a man, carrying a lantern, entered quickly, closing the door behind him. The upper half of his face was hidden by a black mask. My astonishment may be imagined when, after he had removed it, I discovered that he was none other than Don Jose de Hermanos.

"Hush!" he began, holding up his hand as a sign to me not to speak. "I want you to listen to what I have to say, and not to interrupt me until I have finished. In the first place, let me inform you that the President has discovered everything! While you were talking to him to-night at the ball, he knew why you were in Equinata, and, what is more, had already laid his plans to effect your arrest. The reason why he did it so secretly, and why you were not taken to the regular cartel, is because he does not want, for reasons of his own, to attract public attention just at present. I was warned in time, but was unable to communicate with you. Now, by a stratagem, we have overpowered your gaolers, and you are free!"

"But where am I?" I asked, in the same low voice.

"In the old cartel on the outskirts of the town," Hermanos replied. "Now I want you to pay attention to what I am about to say to you. There is still time to retrieve matters, if we go the proper way to work about it. The President, when he left the ball to-night--and now you will be able to understand his reasons for leaving so early--drove out to consult with General Mopaxus, who is lying ill at his house six miles distant on the road to Sarbassa. The road in question is hilly, and it will take him at least an hour to get there. We will say that he remains with the General an hour. In that case, he should not reach the Capital until four o'clock at the earliest. Word must be sent to the captain of the yacht to shift his moorings and to have a boat ashore at the little bay of Horejos at three o'clock. Horejos is three miles outside the city, and Fernandez will have to pass through the village on his way home. We must catch him at any hazard."

"How many men have you with you?"

"Seven," he replied.

"Can they be relied upon?"

"To the death! They know that their own safety depends upon getting Fernandez out of the way. Four of them he has suspected for some time past. They would prefer to shoot him, and so make sure of him, but as there are definite orders against that, they feel that the next best thing they can do is to get him out of the country. And between ourselves, that is exactly my own case."

"And what about the Guards here?"

"They are safe for the present," he answered. "But no time must be lost, for it is more than likely that at daybreak others will come to take their places."

"And how am I to communicate with Ferguson?"

He fumbled in his pocket for a moment.

"Here is a sheet of paper, an envelope, and a pencil. He knows your writing, of course. When you have written it, one of my men shall take it aboard. If he has to get steam up, there is not any too much time for him to do so. Every moment is of the utmost importance."

I forthwith pencilled a hasty note to the captain, bidding him get up steam, weigh anchor, and have a boat ashore in Horejos Bay at three o'clock, and stand by to leave Equinata at latest by four o'clock. This note I handed to Hermanos, and when I had done so, followed him from the cell.

Once outside, I found myself in a large yard, illuminated by the bright moonlight. I looked about me for the bodies of my captors, but was informed by my companion that they had been securely bound and placed in an adjoining cell. On

hearing our steps, six figures appeared from the shadow of the wall. They did not speak, but at a sign from Hermanos, one went on ahead and opened the gates, whereupon two of them passed out. After an interval of some thirty seconds, two more disappeared in the same mysterious fashion, the remaining pair making themselves scarce when the same duration of time had elapsed.

"Now it is our turn," Hermanos whispered. "With the exception of the man who has gone to the yacht, each company will proceed to the rendezvous by different routes through the city. Fernandez has spies everywhere, and we must be careful that our behaviour does not attract their attention. To that end I have brought this poncho and hat for you."

I had noticed a bundle upon the ground, and had wondered what it might be. My own hat had disappeared, goodness only knows where. So placing the sombrero on my head, I pulled the poncho over my shoulders, and then we, in our turn, left the cartel.

As Hermanos had said, the lock-up was on the outskirts of the city, and the locality through which he led me was quite unknown to me.

What was the end of our adventure to be?



CHAPTER IX

It was evident to me that Hermanos had laid his plans most carefully, for some hundred and fifty to two hundred yards from the gate, we found a vehicle of the *volante* description awaiting our coming. We entered it, and the driver, without asking for instructions, set off at a sharp pace. We had proceeded some distance before Don Jose spoke.

"I hope you understand, Senor Trevelyan," he said at last, "what a serious risk I am running on your account?"

"Many thanks," I replied. "I am afraid, however, you do me too much honour. I fancy if it had only been a question of my safety, I should have had to appeal to you for some time before I should have had your assistance."

I spoke out of the bitterness of my heart, half expecting that my words would offend him. To my surprise, however, they did not do so. He only laughed in a quiet way, and then lapsed into silence once more. The carriage rattled through the silent streets, and at length passed out into the open country on the other side. So far we had not attracted attention. Eventually we pulled up at the foot of a steep hill, one side of which was formed by the mountain, the other looking down upon a stretch of plain, beyond which again was the open sea.

"We must climb this hill," said Hermanos, "and when we have descended it again we shall be at the rendezvous. Let us hope Fernandez has not made his appearance yet."

We accordingly alighted from the vehicle, and, when we had seen it return citywards, began to climb the steep ascent. At the summit, and just before the hill begins to descend on the other side, were three palms. When we reached these my companion uttered a low and peculiar whistle. It was answered from the shadow, and a moment later a figure emerged from the darkness and stood before us. Hermanos went to him and said something in an undertone which I did not hear.

"It's all right," he remarked when he returned to me. "Fernandez has not returned yet. They are watching for him in the valley below, and we had better join them."

"With all my heart," I replied, for, as you may suppose, I was eager to have the business over and done with.

We accordingly descended the hill in the direction indicated. The road here was little better than a cart-track, and one that I should have been very sorry to drive along on a dark night. In the moonlit valley below could be seen the little fishing village of Horejos. I examined my watch and discovered that it wanted twenty minutes to three o'clock. Needless to say, I profoundly hoped that Ferguson had received my message, and that we should find the boat awaiting us.

When we reached the foot of the hill, it was to discover that the road ran between two walls of rock. Blasting operations were accountable at this point for the existence of the track, which would otherwise have been impassable. On the top of the rock on the right, and continuing up the hill-side, was a thick wood, in which it would have been possible for some hundreds of men to have lain concealed. Behind the rock on the other side was a gentle slope continuing to within a few dozen yards of the shore. All things considered, a better place for the work we had in hand could scarcely have been imagined. It would have been out of the question for two carriages to have passed abreast, owing to the width of the road; and one glance was sufficient to show me that it would be quite possible for a determined man to bring a vehicle to a standstill at such a spot. That Hermanos was in a state of considerable trepidation regarding his share in the business I could see. From what he had already said to me I gathered that, had he not advanced so far in the business, he would even at the eleventh hour have drawn back. Had he been left to himself, he would doubtless have allowed General Fernandez' rule to continue without bothering himself about Silvestre. Unfortunately, however, Silvestre had obtained too great a hold upon him, and, in consequence, in order to cover the shortcomings of his own past, he had been compelled to take up arms at the very juncture when he was most desirous of remaining quietly in the background. Who the men with him were I had no sort of idea, nor did he inform me. That they were desperate like himself I could very well imagine.

When we reached the spot just described, Hermanos again gave utterance to the low and peculiar whistle I have already mentioned. This whistle was answered by another, and then a voice from the darkness said in Spanish, "All is well! He has not passed yet!"

A moment later a man scrambled down the bank and stood before us. He wore a poncho, and had a broad-brimmed sombrero.

"No sign of him yet, Luiz?" Hermanos said.

"No, there is no sign yet, senor," the other replied. "But he can't be long now. In another hour it will begin to grow light,

and if he does not come before daybreak, then our opportunity will be gone."

"When he comes, what do you propose to do?" I inquired.

"I thought that when the carriage arrives here some of us would appear in the road and stop the horses, while you go to the door and cover the President with your revolver."

I should here remark that when Hermanos had handed me the hat and poncho, he had also given me a heavy Colt's revolver.

"And having done that?" I asked, more for the sake of seeing what he would say than for any other reason.

"March him down by the path yonder to the sea, put him into the boat, and take him out to the yacht," he answered. "After that you can do with him as you please."

"I trust the boat has arrived," I said. "Is there no way of finding out? We ought to make sure of that!"

"I will send a man to see," he replied, and then ordered the individual named Luiz to go to the beach and discover whether the boat was there.

The fellow made off; and after he had left us we walked a little further down the road and seated ourselves upon the bank. A quarter of an hour passed, during which time we discussed everything but the business before us. Then the messenger returned with the information that the boat was waiting for us, a couple of hundred yards or so away, in charge of the chief officer.

"So far, all is well," I said, and as I spoke the sound of wheels reached us from the distance.

"He is coming," Hermanos exclaimed, springing to his feet; then, turning to the man who had just returned from the beach, he cried: "Call the others, Luiz!"

His voice shook with excitement. The words had scarcely left his lips before Luiz gave a loud whistle. In response to it three other men made their appearance from the wood.

"Hermanos," I said, taking control of affairs, as the party began to don their masks, "you and two of your men had better stand here to stop the horses." Then turning to the others, I continued: "You two, follow me; and, if you don't want to be recognized, let me do whatever talking there is to be done."

The noise made by the approaching carriage could now be distinctly heard. At most it could not be more than a quarter of a mile away. My heart was beating like a sledge-hammer. Closer and closer came the vehicle, then it turned the corner, and we could plainly see its lights. In a very few minutes it would be upon us. Without exception we had all drawn back into the shadow of the cliff, so that they could have no idea of our presence. Descending the little decline, the carriage entered the cleft between the rocks. The lights from the vehicle flashed like angry eyes upon us.

"Stop!" I cried in Spanish, and as I did so Hermanos and his two companions sprang into the centre of the road. The driver of the carriage, seeing the revolvers pointed at him, pulled up his horses so suddenly that they fell back upon their haunches. Meanwhile I had sprung to the carriage-door and had opened it. "General Fernandez," I cried, "you are my prisoner. I am armed, and if you move hand or foot, I give you warning, I shall shoot you."

Meanwhile one of my companions had taken a lamp from the socket and had turned it upon the interior of the carriage. By its light I was enabled to convince myself that we had made no mistake. Fernandez was seated in the corner nearest me, and, to my great astonishment, the Senorita was beside him. I will do the President the justice of saying that, at such a trying moment, he comported himself like a brave man. His voice was as calm as ever I had heard it when he addressed me.

"Ah! so it's you, Senor Trevelyan, is it?" he said. "I thought I had stopped your little game! What's the meaning of this?"

"It means that the scheme you did your best to frustrate has succeeded after all," I answered. "But I have no time to spare. I must therefore ask you to alight without further parley. Let me assure you it would be no use your attempting to resist. There are six of us here, and we are all armed."

"It is evident, then, that you have the advantage of me," he continued, still with the same imperturbable good-humour. "Well, what must be must, I suppose," and with that he descended from the carriage and stepped into the road.

Before I could stop her the Senorita had done the same.

"Where you go I follow," she said, addressing the President. "I am sure we can rely upon Senor Trevelyan's doing us

no harm."

"If you do as I ask you not a hair of your head shall be harmed, *Senorita*," I replied. Then turning to the President once more, I added: "Before we proceed further it would, perhaps, be as well to make sure that you are not armed, General! We cannot afford to run any risk."

Fernandez gave a short laugh as he took a revolver from his pocket and handed it to me.

"I was going to use this upon you as soon as I had an opportunity," he said. "I see, however, that I am not to be permitted to do so!"

I turned to the coachman.

"Now, off you go!" I cried. "If you stop anywhere between here and the palace I'll take care that you hear about it later. You can tell them, when you get there, that the President and the *Senorita* have gone into the country for a change of air, and that you don't quite know when they will be back."

The man did not answer, but looked at Fernandez as if for instructions. Seeing that the other did not speak, he whipped up his horses and drove off without another word, leaving his master and mistress prisoners with us.

"Now we in our turn will be off," I said, as he disappeared over the brow of the hill. "I must ask you, *Senor President*, to be good enough to walk ahead. The *Senorita* and I will follow you."

It was a silent little party that made its way down the hill-side towards the beach. First walked the President with an armed man on either side of him, his niece and myself followed next, whilst *Hermanos* and two of his fellow-conspirators brought up the rear. No one would have imagined that, only a few hours before, the *Senorita* and I had been waltzing round the ball-room at *La Gloria* as partners, or that the President and I had been seated amicably together discussing the politics of *Equinata* in all apparent friendliness. I must say in common fairness that, even under these trying circumstances, the *Senorita* behaved herself with as much coolness as did her fellow-prisoner. Not once did she flinch or show the least sign of fear.

The path from the road to the shore was an exceedingly rough one, little better in fact than a goat-track, and as the *Senorita* was still wearing her light dancing-shoes, it must have been an unenviable experience for her. Once her dress was caught by a cactus leaf, and I stopped to extricate it for her. I hoped that my action might break the silence that had so far characterized our march.

"Thank you, *senor*," she said gravely, and, without another word, continued her walk.

"*Senorita*," I said at last, "I can quite understand how angry you must feel with me. I suppose it is only natural that you should be. Yet, strange though it may appear, I cannot help feeling ashamed."

"I am not angry, *senor*," she replied. "My only regret is that we should have been so weak as to have made such a miscalculation. I thought my uncle had caused you to be arrested?"

"He certainly did have me arrested, but I managed to escape," I answered. "Doubtless, if your uncle had had his way, he would have had me shot at daybreak."

"It is more than likely," she replied, still with the same gravity. "And all things considered, I am not at all sure it would not have been better for the happiness of *Equinata* could this event have taken place."

After such a speech there was not much to be said, so we continued our walk in silence. Ten minutes later we reached the beach, walked along it for a hundred yards or so, and then found ourselves beside the yacht's gig, which had been pulled up on the shore to await our coming. As soon as they saw us the boat's crew, led by the chief officer, made their appearance from a hollow in the sand-hills where they had been concealed.

"Permit me to help you into the boat," I said to the *Senorita*, moving towards it as I spoke. "When you are on board we can push her out into deeper water."

She accordingly took my hand and stepped into the boat, after which the men ran it into the water.

"Now, *Mr. President*," I continued, "if you will be so kind as to get in, I think we had better be moving."

He hesitated for a moment.

"Before we do so, might I have a word with you in private, *Senor Trevelyan*?" he said. "I will not detain you more than a few moments."

I answered in the affirmative, and we moved a few paces away together. To make sure that he played no trick upon me, I took my revolver from my pocket and carried it somewhat ostentatiously in my hand. He noticed the precaution and gave utterance to one of his peculiar laughs.

"You need have no fear," he said. "I shall not run away. My heart, as you may have heard, is a little weak, and I am afraid a sharp run on this sand would not tend to improve it. Let us talk here. Now, Senor Trevelyan, I am going to put a very simple question to you. I very naturally presume that you have been well paid by my rival, Don Guzman de Silvestre, to effect my capture and deportation?"

"It is scarcely necessary for me to admit that fact," I answered. "Yes! All things considered, I am *very* well paid."

"Needless to remark," he continued, "I have no desire to leave Equinata. Nor am I anxious to find myself in my old enemy's hands. The question I wish to put to you, therefore, is this: What would your price be to let me go?"

"I cannot answer that question," I replied, "and for the simple reason that I am unable to let you go at all."

"I should be willing to pay a large sum in cash, and, what is more, I would give you a substantial guarantee that, if you would leave La Gloria to-morrow, I would let you depart in peace."

"I am very sorry, General Fernandez," I said, "but I am afraid you have made some little mistake in your estimation of my character. I will be perfectly candid with you, and will admit that, if I could live the past few weeks over again, I should not be treating you as I am doing to-night. However, I have accepted Don Guzman's offer, and I have taken his money. For that reason I cannot take yours, nor can I let you go, glad as I should be to do so. I wonder what you would have done with me, had I not had the good fortune to escape from the cartel to-night?"

"I can tell you exactly," he answered. "You would have shared your quarters with some of your fellow-conspirators, and I should have shot you in the morning. Experience has taught me that there is nothing like dispatch in these matters. Strike home, and strike hard, is my motto."

"So I have been given to understand," I replied dryly. "And now let us return to the boat."

"You are still determined not to let me go?" he said. "What do you say to an offer of twenty thousand pounds, in English money?"

"I could not do it for fifty thousand," I replied. "Come along, sir, the dawn will soon be here, and I am anxious to be out of Equinata before it comes."

He gave a little shrug of the shoulders as I spoke, and then moved towards the boat.

"One more question," he said before we joined the others. "Where are you going to take me?"

"I shall hope to be able to show you that in a very short time," I answered. "For the present, however, it must remain a secret. Now, sir, into the boat, if you please."

Before he got in he turned to Don Jose de Hermanos, who was standing with his friends by the water's edge.

"Farewell, Don Jose," he said, as genially as if he were addressing a valued acquaintance. "I wonder whether you and I are destined to meet again? As you are aware, I have a good memory for both friends and enemies! I once imagined that you and I would have been able to work together. I believe we should have done so, had not you committed yourself too deeply to my rival before I was able to bring my influence to bear upon you. I should put that mask in my pocket if I were you. You forget that you have a mole upon your chin."

The man he addressed stepped back a pace as if he had been struck. He had disguised himself so carefully that he thought detection was impossible. Nevertheless, he had omitted to conceal a disfigurement on the lower portion of his countenance that was sufficient to reveal his identity to any one at all acquainted with him. His astonishment may have accounted for his failure to reply to the other's speech.

The President having taken his place beside the Senorita, I prepared to follow him, but before doing so I held out my hand to Hermanos.

"Good-bye, my friend," I said. "I owe you something for what you have done for me to-night. I don't suppose we shall ever meet again, but, if we do, I trust it may be under happier auspices."

"I never want to see your face again," he replied, with a candour that was somewhat remarkable. Then, lowering his voice to a whisper, he continued: "For your own safety's sake, take care that you never come back to Equinata. I cannot help thinking that it would have been better if we had shot him out of hand. I fancy you will agree with me before you

have done."

His voice must have travelled further than he intended, for the President heard it and uttered a quiet laugh.

"Always the same, always the same," he said mockingly. "You know what ought to be done, but you don't do it. As somebody has said, you let 'I would' wait upon 'I dare!'"

At the same moment a sob escaped the Senorita. This decided me, and springing into the boat I gave the order to shove off. The crew stood up and pushed with their oars, and a moment later we were afloat. When the men sat down and bent to their work I glanced back at the little group of dark figures on the beach watching us. After a few minutes they were lost against the dark background, and I turned my head to search for the yacht. Already the sky was paling preparatory to the dawn, and I knew that, if we did not hasten, we should scarcely be clear of the coast by daylight. At last we reached the yacht, and pulled up at the accommodation ladder.

"Allow me to help you, Senorita," I said, springing out and giving her my hand.

Presently we stood together on the deck. Ferguson raised his cap, and I could see that he was more than surprised at seeing a lady standing before him.

"We will get away from here as soon as possible, Mr. Ferguson, if you please," I said. "I want to be clear of La Gloria before daylight."

"Everything is ready, sir," he replied, "and as soon as we have got the boat aboard I'll give the order for full steam ahead."

"In the meantime," I said, turning to the Senorita, "permit me to escort you to the saloon. Doubtless you are ready for some supper after your long drive."

I was determined that my coolness should equal hers. Nothing was to be gained by acting the part of the stern gaoler. We accordingly passed along the deck to the saloon. The electric bell summoned the attentive chief steward, to whom I gave orders that a meal should be prepared for us immediately.

I cannot attempt to make you understand how beautiful the Senorita looked as she divested herself of her cloak and seated herself on the luxurious divan that ran round the saloon. It must be remembered that she had driven out from the city dressed just as she had been at the ball, and as this thought crossed my mind I was struck with wonderment as to what she would do for wearing apparel on board. She could not spend the day in a low-necked dress, and with no stronger footgear than a pair of white satin dancing-shoes. However, I postponed consideration of the subject for the moment. Presently the steward reappeared, the cloth was laid, and a meal placed upon the table. My message from the cartel had given them time to prepare it, I suppose; at any rate, it was as delightful a little supper as any one could wish to partake of. We sat down to it, as strange a trio as you would discover in a very long day's sail.

Fernandez still wore his ribbon and orders; the Senorita, as I have already observed, was in evening dress with a *collet* of diamonds round her neck. I also was attired just as I had been at the ball, though my raiment was somewhat dishevelled by my encounter with the Presidential Forces on the wharf. We had scarcely sat down at the table before the throbbing of the propellor announced the fact that we were under way. Almost involuntarily I looked at the President.

"Our voyage has commenced," he said. "I drink to your health, Senor Trevelyan!"

I drew a long deep breath of relief. It was something to know that we were leaving Equinata at last, and that I had got the President aboard. Since his treatment of me that evening, I felt no remorse for having captured him. He had admitted that he would have shot me without compunction had I remained in his power. He could scarcely blame me, therefore, if I experienced a feeling of delight in having turned the tables upon him.

"I must say your employer is by no means niggardly to you," remarked Fernandez, when the servants had withdrawn. "As you do not provide it, I suppose it is not a breach of good manners to observe that this wine is excellent, while the cooking is all that can be desired." Then, with a little sigh, whether real or assumed, he continued: "My own *chef* will now, I suppose, be obliged to seek another situation. And in some respects he was unrivalled. Well, well, it's the fortune of war!"

"Senor Trevelyan, is there no way of arranging for our return to Equinata?" asked the Senorita, leaning a little forward and placing one dainty hand upon my coat-sleeve, while she looked pleadingly into my face.

"I am afraid not," I replied. "Don Fernandez and I have already discussed that matter together, and have come to the conclusion that it is impossible."

She rose from her chair. I thought she was going to break down, but she managed to retain her composure.

"If you will allow me, I think I will retire to my cabin," she said.

I rang the bell for the steward and inquired what state-room had been set aside for the lady. He informed me, and I immediately begged permission to conduct her thither. She bade her uncle good-night and we set off together. When she reached the door she turned to me.

"I feel sure you will be sorry some day for the part you have played to-night," she remarked. "Why should you wish to take us away from the country in which we were so happy, and for which we have done so much?"

"For the simple reason that I am not my own master," I replied. "I am a paid servant, and must do as I am ordered."

She heaved a heavy sigh, and then, without another word, turned and entered the cabin. I thereupon returned to the saloon to find that Fernandez had left it and had gone on deck. I discovered him upon the bulwarks opposite the smoking-room entrance. He had just lit a cigar, and was doubtless meditating on his position. The yacht was cleaving her way through the water, and already the lights of La Gloria lay far behind us.

"What are you thinking of, General?" I inquired as I took my position alongside him.

"I was thinking how I could manage to outwit you," he replied.



CHAPTER X

It was with a feeling of profound thankfulness that I turned into my bunk that morning. The clattering of feet on deck, and the slapping of the water against the sides, greeted my ears like the sweetest music. Only a few hours before I had deemed myself as good as a dead man. I had been the prisoner of a man without the bowels of compassion, and, what was worse, I knew that I had proved myself a traitor, and had not the ghost of a chance of effecting my escape. Now, however, I was free once more, and in a few days my mission to Equinata would be accomplished; after which I should be at liberty to return to England, to marry Molly, and to settle down to a very different life to that which I had been leading for the past few weeks. When I fell asleep, it was to dream that I was back at Falstead once more. I was smoking a pipe in the front garden, and Molly, seated in the shade of our favourite tree, was reading me an account of a terrible revolution that had taken place in the Republic of Equinata.

"The President, Jose de Hermanos is his name," she said, "has been assassinated. It appears that he married the niece of his predecessor, General Fernandez!"

That would have been strange enough in all conscience!

Owing, I suppose, to the lateness of my retiring, I was not very early astir, and when I reached the deck I made my way up to the bridge. It was the second mate's watch, but I had not been there very long before Captain Ferguson left his cabin and joined us. Thereupon the mate, with a knowledge of what was correct under such circumstances, crossed to the other side of the bridge, leaving us free to talk together concerning the events of the previous night.

"You don't know what a fright I had, Mr. Trevelyan," said the captain. "I sent a boat ashore as directed, and after waiting an hour and a half it returned to report that you had not put in an appearance. I had quite made up my mind that you had been captured."

"As a matter of fact, I was," I replied, and proceeded to give him an outline of my adventures during the evening.

"This will be the last of this sort of business for me," he said, when he heard me out. "The game is far from being worth the candle. I wonder what the end of it all will be? From what I gathered when ashore, and also from what you have told me, I have come to the conclusion that whatever Don Silvestre's ambition may be, he has lost his hold upon Equinata. If he is fool enough to return, I fancy he will find that the other's party is still too strong for him. The part of a President of a South American Republic is not an easy one to play."

"The wonder to me is that they ever get any one to play it at all," I answered. "Thank goodness, however, we have fulfilled our portion of the contract; we have got Fernandez, and that's all that can be expected of us."

"I think I understood you to say that the lady who accompanies him is a relative?"

"She is his niece, and a very beautiful woman."

"If you were to ask me, I should say that I was more afraid of her than of him. Stand by and keep your eye open for squalls, would be my motto if I had to deal with her."

"You may be very sure that I will do that," I replied. "I think I know the length of her ladyship's foot."

I thought of the time we had spent together in the balcony of the Opera House, and how strangely her seriousness had affected me. It was difficult to believe that it had all been a mere piece of acting.

Half-an-hour or so later, when I had left the bridge and had walked aft, Fernandez made his appearance on deck.

"Good-morning, senor," I said, with a bow to him. "In compliment to you we are favoured with a delightful morning."

"Delightful indeed," he replied, throwing a glance over the stern. "We are well on our way, I suppose, and steering due north, I observe. Let me see, if I am not mistaken, that should be in the direction of----" Here he looked at me interrogatively, as if he expected me to answer his question.

"In the direction of New York, shall we say?" I answered. "If we continue as we are going long enough, I have no doubt we shall see the Goddess of Liberty holding her torch aloft."

"The illustration is scarcely a pleasing one," he returned, "since I am a prisoner. The Goddess of Liberty has not done very much for me. But there, nothing is to be gained by repining! I have been in worse positions than this before to-day, and have always managed to get out of them with some sort of credit to myself."

"I hope you may do so in this instance," I answered, "but not while I have the charge of you."

He looked at me steadily for a few seconds.

"Do you know, Senor Trevelyan," he said at last, "I have come to the conclusion that I like you. I did not do so at first, but my opinion of you has changed."

"I am very glad to hear you say so," I replied; "but I confess I can scarcely see why you should have changed your mind regarding myself. If there is one man in the world whom I despise, it is myself."

"And I fancy I can understand why," he continued, still with the same grave look upon his face. "You must not, however, think badly of yourself, for I can assure you, you have managed this business remarkably well. The plot was excellently arranged. There is one thing, however, that puzzles me; that is, how Hermanos managed to overcome the Guards at the cartel? I quite imagined that the men were to be relied on."

"I cannot give you any information on that point," I replied, knowing that it was useless to endeavour to conceal the fact that Hermanos was present on that occasion. "I had no knowledge of the affair until the door was opened and I discovered that I was free."

"Some day I shall hope to be even with our friend Hermanos," Fernandez replied, more to himself than to me. "I have always had my suspicions about the man, but I never dreamt that he would rise to such a height as he has done in this affair. I deemed him a coward throughout."

"And a coward he is," I answered. "He is scheming now to save his own neck."

"The most dangerous conspirator you can have to deal with," Fernandez remarked. "Such a man lacks the saving grace of Ambition. He who risks his life for fame and fortune must have something good in him, but the individual who embarks upon a conspiracy, and who would throw over and denounce his friends on finding that his own participation in the plot is about to be discovered, is neither fish, flesh, nor fowl. There was a time when I could have had Hermanos for the holding up of a finger, but I wanted men of firmer metal, men like yourself, for instance."

"You pay me a great compliment," I answered. "Unfortunately, however, we met too late in the day. My services were already bespoken."

At that moment a steward approached him with a cup of chocolate and a roll.

"This is luxury in bondage," he remarked as he took it. Then, with a smile, he added: "If you had been breakfasting in the cartel this moment, I should probably have only allowed you bread and water."

"With a dozen bullets in my body to help me digest it," I thought to myself.

It was considerably past ten o'clock before the Senorita made her appearance on deck. The question of her attire had occurred to me earlier, and, in consequence, I had procured for her a cloth pilot-coat from the third mate, who, as fortune had it, was only a little fellow, and had placed it at her door. This she now wore, and though the garment was somewhat incongruous, when the rest of her attire was taken into consideration, the effect was by no means unbecoming. On leaving the companion she looked about her, and then ran her eye along the sky-line, as if in the hope of being able to discover her whereabouts. The yacht was pitching a little at the time, but I noticed that she balanced herself as cleverly as any old sailor could have done. She bade us good-morning, but did not take the chair I offered her.

"I wonder what they are doing at the palace," she said, more to her uncle than to myself. "I hope they will not forget to feed my poor little birds. I wonder if I shall ever see them again?"

"So long as there is life there is hope," replied the President. "Is that not so, Senor Trevelyan?"

"I believe so," I answered. "Who knows but that you may be back in La Gloria again before many months are past. Who is likely to be appointed President in your absence?"

"General Sagana," Fernandez returned; "and, by the way, he was the man who introduced you to me. I must endeavour to remember that fact when next he and I meet!"

The expression on his face as he said this was not altogether a pleasant one.

Hour after hour we steamed steadily on our course. The day was warm, the sea as smooth as glass, and the sky a perfect blue. We passed two vessels, but signalled neither. By midday our run totalled a hundred and twenty-five miles, a very fair record, all things considered. As for my passengers and myself we spent the greater part of the day under the foreward awning, where we amused ourselves and each other as best we could. Had any stranger looked in upon us, he or she would have found it difficult to realize our respective positions. I had not the appearance of a gaoler, and no

one would have guessed that the President, leaning back in his chair, cigar in mouth, was the head of an influential country and an abducted citizen.

The memory of our dinner that evening will never be effaced from my mind. It forms one of a number of strange mental pictures connected with that more than extraordinary time. The Senorita, who had discarded the pea-jacket I have already referred to, appeared in all the bravery of her previous evening's apparel. The President had perforce to follow her example, and though he had discarded his ribbon, he still wore his orders. I on my part, out of compliment to them, dressed myself with great care, while Captain Ferguson, who shared the meal with us, had also made an elaborate toilet. The beautiful saloon, the noiseless servants, the lavish table decorations, the excellent *menu*, and the rare wines, all combined to play their parts in a scene that must almost be without a parallel. After dinner we adjourned to the deck above, where we seated ourselves and smoked until bed-time.

It would have been instructive to have known what thoughts were passing in the minds of the various members of our party as we men lay in our chairs upon the deck. That the Senorita was really the President's niece I do not, and shall never believe. I have my own reasons for making this statement, and they are fairly conclusive. The President himself was an adventurer of the most determined description. Ferguson was a sea captain and but little better--(he was a married man, so I discovered later, and his wife kept a small girls' school in a village near Plymouth), while I--well, you know all there is to tell so far as I am concerned, so I need say no more on that subject. Taken altogether, however, we were a queer quartette.

At ten o'clock the Senorita declared herself sleepy and retired to her cabin, Ferguson went up to the bridge to see how things were there, while the President and I started to patrol the deck. In the hour that followed I learnt more of his past life than I had ever known before. I knew very well that his career had been an extraordinary one, but I had never dreamt that it had been so strange as his telling made it appear. He was born in a village near Madrid. His parents were poor but of noble birth. In due course he entered the army, but after a time the life of a private soldier disgusted him, and he exchanged the profession of arms for that of an assistant to a sugar planter on the island of St. Vincent. An unfortunate love affair with the planter's daughter threw him upon the world again, penniless. From the island he drifted to the mainland of South America, saw a good deal of Revolutionary fighting, and for the first time tried his hand at the fascinating game of politics. The result was by no means satisfactory, for he had the misfortune to throw in his lot with the losing side. After a certain particularly stubborn battle he was captured and condemned to be shot--a foretaste of the fate he had arranged for me. At the last moment, however, the sentence was commuted to penal servitude for life, and he was sent to the mines. Eventually he was liberated and took service with the man who, up to that time, had been his greatest enemy. He climbed the ladder of fame, and in time he managed to win a fair amount of power in the land; another Revolution, however, cast this power to the winds, and sent him flying post-haste to the islands of the Pacific. In one way and another he enlarged his experience there, saw life as a trader, a pearler, and an agent for the native labour traffic as he euphemistically termed it. At last he found himself on board a schooner returning to Valparaiso. It was then that he first met Silvestre, and for some considerable time the two men were on the most friendly terms. Fernandez, who had been warned as to what was shortly to happen, discovered a post for the time being as a clerk to an auctioneer. Then came the big Revolution--Fernandez chose the winning side, Silvestre the losing. The latter departed to Equinata--which country at that time was just coming into notice--while his friend remained in Chili to derive what profit he could for himself from his loyalty to the party he had assisted into Power.

"As soon as I had saved sufficient money, however," he continued, "I quitted the Republic and, after one or two other adventures with which I will not trouble you, found myself stranded in Equinata. To my astonishment I discovered that my old partner Silvestre had made the best use of his time there, and by an extraordinary manipulation of circumstances had managed to become a person of considerable importance in the Republic. So far as I was concerned, however, there was another *hegira*, and this time at a somewhat short notice. I next visited the United States, afterwards crossed the Atlantic to Europe, and, after an absence of some three years, found myself once more in La Gloria. When I reached that country I discovered that a strange change had taken place. Silvestre, who, though he had held a position of some importance when I was last in Equinata, had shown no sign of any great ability, was now President, and had even greater ambitions. Needless to say I threw in my lot with him and----"

"Eventually ousted him from his position?" I put in. "I have heard that part of the story from the man himself."

"Yes, I confess I did oust him," he answered, taking his cigar from his mouth and knocking the ash off against the rail. "The victory is to the strongest, and if Silvestre had been stronger than I--well--he would have won. As it was, he fled the country. Whereupon I picked up the reins of Government, played the game as I thought it should be played, and now find myself and all my plans upset, I trust you will forgive my plain speaking, by a man who only a few months ago was chief officer on board a South American mail-boat. Who can say what the next chapter of the story will be?"

"Well, you have had a very good innings, and I don't see that you have any right to complain."

"Perhaps not," he replied. "But don't run away with the idea that, because you've trapped me, I am beaten. I'm a long way off that! Believe me, I know exactly how far you are concerned in the business, and I tell you this, if you are wise, you will be advised by me, and drop out of it as soon as you can. The time will come when Don Guzman de Silvestre and I will have to settle accounts together, and if you are a prudent man you will have balanced your books with him and have departed long before that."

"I think I am very well able to take care of myself," I remarked.

"Ah! We all think that! Sometimes, however, we find we are wrong."

A few moments later he bade me good-night and retired to his cabin. I accompanied him so far as the saloon companion entrance and then returned to my chair on deck. I had not been there many minutes before Ferguson joined me.

"We shall have to keep a sharp look-out on our friend, Don Fernandez," he said, after he had lit a cigar. "I don't trust him a little bit."

"How so?" I inquired. "What has he been up to now?"

"Nothing very much that I know of," the captain replied, "but I have a sort of notion that he has been endeavouring to sound some of the men as to the chance of seizing the boat. He has said nothing outright, but Reston (the boatswain) tells me he dropped a hint to him that a large reward would be forthcoming if he and his niece were helped ashore again. He has a most persuasive manner, unlimited wealth, and there's not very much, I fancy, that he would stop at."

"I suppose you can place implicit trust in your officers and crew?" I said.

"Implicit trust," he answered. "But with a man like Fernandez aboard one cannot take too many precautions."

"You are right," I replied. "At the same time, I must admit that I like the man. More, perhaps, than I do--well, another gentleman with whom we are both acquainted."

Ferguson understood my meaning.

"I understand," he replied. "And what's more I agree with you."

When we had chatted for upwards of an hour I bade him good-night, and went below to my cabin to fall asleep and dream that Fernandez had seized the boat and was going to make me walk the plank at daylight.

In two days we were due to arrive at the island. From the progress we were making, and from the glimpse I had of the chart, it struck me that we should reach San Diaz between six and seven o'clock in the evening.

At four o'clock on the following afternoon I was standing at the taffrail, looking at the frothing wake astern, and thinking of something very far removed from Equinata and her President. As a matter of fact I was wondering how long it would be before I should see Falstead again, and what sort of welcome I should receive from Molly and my mother on my return, when I caught the sound of a light footstep behind me. I turned my head to discover the *Senorita*. She came and stood beside me resting her jewelled hands upon the rail. It did not take me long to become aware that she was in one of her curious moods. Her manner was most persuasive and seductive to a degree, and once or twice I found myself admiring her beauty, and for the moment forgetting how dangerous a woman she was.

"I am afraid, *Senorita*," I said, "that since we danced together in the Opera House I have fallen woefully in your estimation."

"Why should that be so?" she answered. "I admire your resource, and however much I may deplore it, cannot help but admire the cleverness with which you carried out your scheme, in spite of the opposition you received. Had you been working for us I should have offered you my heartiest congratulations, but since we are the victims of your skill, you can scarcely expect me to be so magnanimous. Oh! *Senor Trevelyan*, how I wish I could have persuaded you to side with us. But you had already cast in your lot with the enemy. At one time I had almost begun to think that I was deceived in you, but the other night when you refused my uncle's bribe I realized your real character. To a man of such enterprise as you possess anything is possible. Have you never experienced a longing for power yourself? If I were a man, my ambition would be limitless. As it is, I can only admire what I see of it in others!"

Recalling that conversation now, it seems as plain to me as daylight that she was doing her best to hoodwink me. I must confess, however, that at the time I failed entirely to see through her motive. As I have said before she was a beautiful woman, and she had the advantage of also being an extremely clever one. No one will ever know the temptations she placed before me that evening, and I think it says something for my love for Molly--not to mention my sense of duty to Silvestre, that I did not give way to her. By some mysterious means she had discovered the bond that

existed between Ferguson and myself; she knew also that I was all-powerful aboard the yacht, and if she did not prevail upon me to turn the boat's head about and convey them back to Equinata, well, it was certainly not for want of trying. I proved adamant, however, and when at last she left me and went below it must have been with the consciousness that she had not only failed in her scheme but had done herself harm into the bargain.

"You have had the pleasure of my niece's company for some considerable time," said Fernandez, when I joined him some minutes later. "I hope you have had a pleasant and instructive conversation!"

There was a scarcely-concealed sneer in his voice that I did not fail to notice.

"The Senorita has been endeavouring to undermine my loyalty to Silvestre," I said, blurting out the truth without fear of the consequences. "She has promised me, on your behalf, all sorts of rewards if I will turn traitor and run the boat back to La Gloria."

"And I gather from your tone that she was not successful," he replied. "You are a very pillar of rectitude, my friend."

"What is more," I continued, ignoring his sneer, and making up my mind to let him have it from the shoulder while I was about it, "I hear from Captain Ferguson that you have been endeavouring to tamper with the crew. I should be sorry, senor, to be compelled to confine you to your cabin for the rest of the voyage, but if this sort of thing continues I fear there will be no other course left open to me."

"You surely would not have me neglect an opportunity when it presents itself?" he returned, still with the same curious smile upon his face. "I have as much right to try to help myself out of this hole as you had to get me into it. However, as your men appear to be as immaculate and bribe-proof as their leaders, I will give you my assurance that I will not tamper with their honour again. Will that satisfy you?"

"As long as you stick to it," I replied. "But I warn you that I shall keep a strict watch upon you, and if you play me false you know what you may expect."

From that moment I had no more trouble with either of them. The Senorita adopted a haughty air towards me. The President, on the other hand, made himself even more agreeable to me than he had been before.

One day later, and, as I expected, a little before sun-down, a small speck appeared upon the horizon. This gradually increased in size until it developed into a small densely-wooded island.

"That," said Ferguson, who was standing beside me on the bridge, "is San Diaz!"

"And, thank goodness, our destination!"



CHAPTER XI

The island of San Diaz is some fifteen miles long by eight wide. From end to end it is densely wooded; in fact, a large proportion of its area is still primeval forest. The population numbers only a few hundreds, and the majority of the inhabitants are black. For the most part they are a retiring race. How they live, or what they live upon, would at first glance seem difficult to understand; but they appear to enjoy life in their harmless way, and, being cut off from certain doubtful blessings of our so-called Civilization, they generally manage to elude the clutches of old Boney for a longer space of time than do their brethren in better known and more popular climes.

As I observed at the close of the preceding chapter, I was on the bridge with Ferguson when we first sighted the island. After a close consultation of the chart that he held in his hand, he put his helm up, and hugged the shore for a distance of something like five miles. Then, finding himself at the entrance of a fair-sized bay, he turned in and prepared to seek an anchorage. The view from the deck at that moment was a very pleasing one. First the blue water of the bay, then a white beach, after which the ground began to ascend until it reached, in a somewhat precipitous slope, a plateau at an elevation of something like two hundred feet above sea-level. On this plateau, nestling among the trees, stood a long white house, with several smaller buildings clustered round it. As we watched, the report of a firearm reached us from the settlement, followed by another and yet another in quick succession. It was the signal I had arranged for with Silvestre, and it proclaimed the fact that he was aware of our arrival.

"I'm a bit distrustful about the soundings," said Ferguson, as we steamed slowly in. "This chart is no sort of good. However, I don't think we can do much harm here."

Then holding up his hand to the chief mate, who was in charge of the anchor on the fo'c'sle-head, he signalled to him to let go. The roar of the cable through the hawse-hole followed, and a few seconds later the yacht was at anchor. When the vessel was stationary I descended the ladder from the bridge to find the President and the Senorita leaning on the port-bulwarks attentively studying the shore. Still Fernandez showed no sign of any sort of trepidation. Yet he must have realized how dangerous was his position. He had admitted that he had done Silvestre a great wrong, and he could scarcely fail to be aware that the latter, having him at his mercy, would be certain to retaliate. Yet here he was chattering as coolly with the Senorita as if he were sitting on the terrace at his palace in La Gloria. The man was the possessor of an iron nerve which nothing could shake. Moreover, as he had informed me on another occasion, he was a fatalist.

"What is arranged will certainly happen," he had then remarked to me. "If I am to be assassinated in the street, it is quite certain I shall not be drowned at sea. If I am to die in my bed, it will not be on the battlefield. Why should I worry myself if the end is ordained for me?"

When he had seen everything secure, Ferguson left the bridge and joined us.

"Are you going ashore, Mr. Trevelyan," he inquired, "or will you wait on board until they send out to us?"

"I think it would be better to wait," I replied.

"If I am not mistaken, they are launching a boat now," Fernandez remarked.

What he said was correct. Several men had descended the steep path from the plateau already mentioned, and were even then running a boat across the sands towards the water. When she was afloat, they hung about her as if not certain what to do next. A few seconds later, however, a man, dressed in white, appeared from among the trees and joined them. He entered the boat, whereupon it began to move towards us. As she approached I noticed that she was pulled by four stalwart negroes, and that the man steering her was not Silvestre as I had expected, but a younger man, and a mulatto. As soon as the boat reached the ladder, he sprang nimbly on to the grating and ran up to us.

"Senor Trevelyan!" he said, looking from one to the other of us as if to discover whom he should address.

"That is my name," I answered. "Have you a message for me?" Before he replied, he took me on one side.

"Don Guzman de Silvestre is not well," he said. "He bids me say, however, that you had better bring your prisoner up to the house without delay."

"He is not aware, of course, that a lady has accompanied us?" I remarked.

The other shook his head, and then turned his eyes in the direction of the spot where the Senorita was standing.

"He will not be pleased," he said.

I felt that I would give something to know what preparations Silvestre had made for Fernandez' reception; but I did not

put any questions to the messenger, feeling that in all probability his master had given orders to him to be silent.

"Can you carry four people in the boat?" I inquired, going to the side and looking down at the craft in question.

"Half-a-dozen, if you wish," he answered; "she will not sink with us."

I thereupon went back to the President.

"If you are quite ready, I think we will land at once," I said. "It will be dark very soon."

He shrugged his shoulders, and remarked that he would go below and fetch his cloak. The Senorita suggested that she should follow his example. Fearing that there was a possible chance of their outwitting me at the last moment, I declared that I could not hear of their taking so much trouble, and thereupon despatched one of the stewards in search of the articles in question. When they were brought on deck, we descended to the boat alongside and started for the shore.

As soon as we reached it, I sprang from the boat and helped the Senorita to disembark. Then, guided by the half-caste, whose name I discovered was Manuel, we set to work to climb the steep ascent to the buildings I had seen from the yacht. If the descent at Horejos had been steep, this was ten times more so. The path, if path it could be called, was one long climb, and wound its way in and out through the thick undergrowth in a most disconcerting and leg-wearing fashion.

At last, when the whole party were out of breath, and the Senorita quite exhausted, we tottered on to the plateau on which the houses were situated. The principal building, that in the centre, was a long low affair surrounded, so far as I could see, by a broad verandah; that to the left was plainly the servants' quarters, while the ramshackle huts, still further away, were probably the dwellings of the native hands. Crossing the open space, Manuel led us towards the largest building. The place was much fallen to decay, but it was still quite habitable. French windows opened from the rooms into the verandah, and towards one of these we were conducted. Opening it, and standing in the entrance, he signed to the President and the Senorita to pass into the room. I followed them, and when he had entered, he carefully closed the windows after us. We found ourselves in a large room, having a polished floor, whitewashed walls, and a rafted roof, the latter without a ceiling. A large table stood in the centre of the room, there were half-a-dozen curious chairs scattered about, while in the corner beside the door was a wicker-couch, upon which a man was stretched out at full length. One glance was sufficient to tell me that he was Don Guzman de Silvestre, but so changed that, had I not expected to see him, I doubt if I should have recognized him. His face was pinched and haggard, his eyes shone with an unnatural brilliance, while his hands trembled as if with the palsy.

"Welcome, Trevelyan, I congratulate you," he cried, as I entered the room. "You have fulfilled your mission admirably." Then, turning to his old enemy, he continued: "And so, my dear Fernandez, we meet again, do we? It is long since we last saw each other. But, stay, who is the lady? What is she doing here?"

I gave him the necessary information, whereupon he raised himself upon his couch.

"I am more than honoured," he remarked. "I did not anticipate such a pleasure. I presume, Trevelyan, you could not catch one without the other? Was not that so?"

In reply, I admitted that it was, whereupon he bade Manuel move a chair forward for the Senorita, then, turning to Fernandez, he began once more.

"Yes, it is certainly a long time since we had the pleasure of meeting," he said. "Let me see, I wonder if I can recall the day. It was the anniversary of the battle of Pladova, was it not? I had arranged to preside at a banquet that evening in celebration of the great event. You called upon me in the morning, professing great friendship. Prior to that you had undermined all my officials, and had arranged that, at the conclusion of the banquet, I was to be arrested, whereupon you were to proclaim yourself Dictator."

"I am glad to observe that, however poor your health may be, your memory is as good as ever," Fernandez replied. "You have described the situation exactly."

"Yes," Silvestre continued, "I have an excellent memory! Unfortunately for your scheme, however, I happened to hear of it in time. At the last moment a sudden indisposition kept me at the palace, and prevented my being present at the dinner. So anxious were you concerning the state of my health that you called at the palace later to inquire after my welfare, only to find that I had taken time by the forelock and had effected my escape. It was a pity, for I fancy you would have found it more profitable to have shot me, and so have put me out of harm's way at once."

"It certainly was rather a pity we could not do so," said the President, "but you can have your revenge now. What are your intentions regarding myself?"

"I must take time to think that matter over," Silvestre replied. "The account I have to settle with you is a long one, and I am not the man, as you know, to do things in a hurry."

I saw the Senorita look at him with a light in her eyes like that of a beautiful trapped animal. She was trying to appear calm, but from the way in which she laced and interlaced her fingers, I could see the strain under which she was labouring.

"If there is likely to be anything disagreeable," said Fernandez, "I should be glad if you would get it over at once. Nothing is to be gained by delaying matters."

"As I said just now, I must have time to think it over," the other replied. "Upon one thing, however, you can make up your mind, you will never see Equinata again."

"At the present moment it certainly does not seem very probable that I shall," Fernandez answered, still with the same good-humour. "And now with regard to another matter! What are your intentions concerning this lady?"

He made a movement with his hands towards the Senorita as he spoke.

"She shall, of course, be treated with all due consideration and respect," Silvestre returned. "Let that content you!"

He turned to Manuel, who was standing at the window, and bade him call the guards into the room. The latter accordingly made his way into the verandah, and shouted something in a dialect with which I was not familiar. In response to his summons, four gigantic negroes, armed with rifles (they had evidently been waiting somewhere in the immediate vicinity) stalked into the room. Without waiting for instructions, they took their places on either side of Fernandez. My first fear was that they were going to dispatch the ex-President there and then. Silvestre must have realized what was passing in my mind, for he laughed and said:

"You need have no fear, my friend. I am not going to do him any violence. Let him be conveyed to the hut," he continued to Manuel, "and be sure that the door is locked when you come away. Place a sentry over him, and bring me the key. Allow me to wish you good-evening, Don Fernandez, and may pleasant dreams attend your slumbers."

The Senorita had risen, and had taken a step towards Silvestre. She tried to speak, but failed in the attempt. At last she sank back in her chair with an ashen face, and then Fernandez was led away.

"Trevelyan, my dear fellow, may I ask you to be so good as to go to that door and clap your hands twice," said Silvestre, when the other had disappeared.

I did so, and after a few moments had elapsed an elderly negress, whose curly hair was almost snow-white, put in an appearance. In all my experience of the African race I had never seen so hideous a creature.

"Palmyre," Silvestre began, "take this lady to a room and prepare it for her." Then to the Senorita he continued: "If there is anything I can do to promote your comfort, pray command me. I deeply regret that my health is not sufficiently good to permit of my attending to matters myself. Doubtless you will be gracious enough to take the will for the deed."

She did not answer, but followed Palmyre from the room. When they had disappeared Silvestre turned to me.

"You have managed the affair most excellently, friend Helmsworth," he said. "I congratulate you heartily. Now tell me exactly what happened. Remember I have no knowledge of your doings since we bade each other good-bye in London."

I thereupon set to work and gave him a description of my adventures.

"You certainly had a narrow escape of it in the cartel," he remarked when I had finished. "Had Hermanos not rescued you so opportunely, Fernandez would have shot you without remorse. I wish, however, that you had not been compelled to bring the Senorita with you. But perhaps it was for the best. If you had left her behind, she would have made mischief. You must have had a queer voyage with those two. I wonder what your sweetheart in England would have said, could she have looked in upon you?"

"We will leave her out of the question, if you don't mind," I said quietly.

There was a time when I had liked and even admired the man, but two or three things I had heard during my stay in Equinata, and the fiendish pleasure he had just taken in gibing at his fallen enemy, had produced in me a feeling that was very near akin to loathing.

"Don Guzman," I began, more seriously than I had yet spoken, "I trust you will bear in mind the promise you gave me in England!"

"And what promise was that?" he asked suspiciously.

"You gave me your most positive assurance that no violence of any sort should be used towards the man who is now in your power!"

"And I am not aware that I have said that any violence would be used," he answered angrily. "What makes you think that I want to harm him? Didn't I tell you that my only desire is to keep him out of harm's way until I have once more grasped the reins of government in Equinata? Your part of the business is finished, and to-morrow I will pay you the reward I promised you. Hand me up that quinine, there's a good fellow. I've suffered agonies from this cursed fever for the last three days. It's just my luck to be struck down just at the moment when it is necessary for me to be most active!"

I helped him to a dose of the medicine.

"Where will you live during the time you are here?" he asked at last. "Ashore or on board the yacht?"

"I should prefer the yacht if----"

"If you thought you could depend on my not knocking those miserable beggars on the head in the meantime, I suppose? Come, come," he continued with a laugh, "if you go on like this, I shall begin to think that the ex-President's niece has proved herself more dangerous than I at first imagined."

Then, doubtless seeing from my face that he was venturing on dangerous ground, he made haste to appease me.

"Don't take offence at a harmless jest, my dear fellow," he said. "You know very well I don't mean it."

Then, vowing that he was too ill to talk any more just then, he bade me good-bye, promising to see me on the morrow, if I would come up. Before I went, however, I had a proposition to make to him. I did not like to leave the Senorita in his hands, so I begged that he would allow her to return to the yacht, giving as an excuse the plea that she would enjoy greater comfort there.

"There is not the least necessity," he replied. "She will be very well taken care of here. Just for the present I prefer to have the lady under my own eye. Sailors are impressionable beings, and there is no telling what ideas she might put into their heads. Remember me to Ferguson and the others, and be sure to be up here by eleven in the morning. Good-night!"

I thereupon left him and returned by the path to the beach below. The niggers who had brought us ashore had departed, so taking my boat-call from my pocket I blew a shrill blast upon it. They must have heard me on the yacht, for a boat was immediately lowered and sent off to fetch me. Arriving on board I went in search of Ferguson, to whom I stated that I did not at all like the look of things ashore. I communicated to him my fear that Silvestre, in spite of the assurance he had given me to the contrary, contemplated doing some mischief to Fernandez.

"I should not be at all surprised if he did," my companion replied. "The two men have a lot to settle between them, and Silvestre is not the sort of man to forget or to forgive an injury."

"But he gave me his word of honour, when I undertook the task of getting the President out of the country, that he only meant to keep him locked up until all chance of his upsetting matters in Equinata was past and done with."

"They say that promises, like pie-crust," Ferguson returned, "are made to be broken. I wonder what Silvestre's promises are like? Heigho! I shall be thankful when I have done with the whole concern."

"And when do you think that will be?"

"When I have landed Don Guzman on the mainland," he replied. "Then I have to take this vessel back to a certain northern port, and to hand her over to a man who is to meet her there. After that, old England, and, if Allah wills, a life of an entirely different description."

Next morning I returned to the house on the hill, to find Silvestre's health much improved, and his prisoners, as he found early occasion to inform me, still alive.

"The lady," he said, "treated me to a pretty specimen of her temper last night. She wouldn't leave her room, and declined to eat her food. Realizing that it was not the least use arguing with her, I left her to her own devices. Her condition, I understand, has somewhat improved this morning."

Presently he produced from his pocket a bundle of bank-notes, which he handed to me.

"Here is the payment I promised you for your work in Bank of England notes," he said. "Just run your eye over them,

will you, and see that the amount is right?"

A few moments' investigation convinced me that the notes in question amounted to the value of five thousand pounds. As I dropped the bundle into the inside pocket of my coat, I reflected that it would be a big sum to carry about with me continually. As I had no safer place, however, I had to put up with it.

"And now there's a question I want to put to you," I said. "My work is at an end, so when will it be possible for me to leave for England?"

"You can go when you like," he answered. "You will find that I am prepared to stick to my side of the contract as faithfully as you have done to yours. Shall we say the day after to-morrow? If that will suit you, the yacht can take you across to Cuba, drop you on the coast after dark, and you can then find your way to Santiago, or elsewhere, as you please."

"The day after to-morrow will suit me admirably," I replied. "As you may suppose, I am all anxiety to get home. And when do *you* propose sailing for Equinata?"

"When the yacht returns," he answered. "I desire to get to business as soon as possible."

"And do you still think that you will be successful in your enterprise?"

"Why not?" he asked. "I have run the risk before, and I am going to do so again. I've got some powerful friends at my back, and with one or two of my worst enemies, Fernandez and his niece, for instance, out of the way, I am fairly confident I shall be able to manage it. I suppose it would be no use asking you to come with me? I could make it worth your while to do so."

"I would not go with you for all the money in the world," I answered. "I have had enough of Equinata to last me a lifetime. I never want to see the place again."

"Our tastes differ, I see; for I am as anxious to settle there for the remainder of my existence as you are to remain away from it."

That afternoon I went for a somewhat lengthy stroll through the island. I was ill at ease, and I wanted to make up my mind, if possible, as to how I should act with regard to Fernandez and the Senorita. Common humanity forbade that I should callously leave the island and abandon them to the fate I felt sure awaited them. Yet how could I remain, and what good could I do if I did so? I knew that in his heart Ferguson was well disposed towards me, but even if he were would he dare to interfere? And again, if he did would the others take sides with us or with Silvestre? By the time I reached the beach once more I had come to no sort of decision. For the time being I gave the matter up as a bad job. I was in the act of stepping into the boat that was to take me on board, when a shout from the wood behind attracted my attention. It emanated from Ferguson. When he reached the boat I noticed that he was deathly pale, and that there was a look in his eyes I had never seen there before.

"What is the matter?" I asked. "You look as if you had seen a ghost!"

"Hush! I'll tell you when we get on board," he replied. "It would be impossible to do so now."



CHAPTER XII

Of one thing you may be sure; that was the fact that I was more than anxious to hear what Ferguson had to tell me. That the man was very much upset I could see, while the hint he had given me in the boat, concerning certain tidings he had to tell me, frightened me beyond measure. Immediately on reaching the yacht I took him to the saloon and poured him out a stiff glass of grog. He drank it off, and when he had done so, seemed the better for it.

"Now come along to the chart-room," I said, "and let me hear what you have to say. We shall be alone there, and I gathered from your manner that what you have to tell me will not bear the presence of eavesdroppers."

"Come along then," he replied. "Let us go up there at once, I shall not rest happy until I have shared this with you."

We accordingly left the saloon and ascended to the bridge. Once in the chart-room, and when we had shut the door carefully behind us, I seated myself on the chart locker, while Ferguson took possession of the couch.

"Now then, go ahead," I said. "What have you discovered?"

"It's the most fiendish plot I ever heard of," he replied. "I would not have believed a man could have thought of anything so vile. If I had not chanced to stray where I did no one would have been the wiser. And then----" He stopped abruptly, as if the thought were too much for him.

"But you have not told me yet what it is you have heard," I continued, with some sort of impatience.

He rose and went to the door, opened it, looked outside, and then returned once more to his place on the couch.

"This afternoon, as you know," he began, leaning forward on his seat, as if he were desirous that no one but myself should hear, "I went ashore to see Silvestre. He was anxious, he said, to consult me concerning the business of taking you to Cuba, and also about the landing of himself and the others on the Equinata coast. I had a long talk with him, during which he was all graciousness and condescension. Butter wouldn't have melted in his mouth. He praised all the services we had rendered him. You can have no idea how pleasant he was. When he became President, I was to have command, if I wished it, of an Equinata man-o'-war, etc., and above all others I was to be his trusted naval adviser. No post could be too big for me."

"It sounds very nice, but he also endeavoured to advise me to return with him," I said.

"And what reply did you give him?" Ferguson inquired.

"I gave him to understand that I would not go back to Equinata for all the money in the world," I said. "I had had quite enough of the place to last me a lifetime."

"That was my reply exactly," Ferguson replied. "The next time they see me there of my own free will, they may treat me as they please."

"Well, never mind that, continue your story," I returned. "What is it you have discovered?"

"Well, after I left Silvestre, I had the misfortune--or the good fortune--as you may consider it, to miss my way. How I came to do so I am unable to say. It is sufficient that I did. You know how thick the jungle is up there! Well! instead of taking the track that brings one down to where we embark, I branched off to the left, and found myself stranded in as thick a bit of scrub as ever I have seen in my life. It was hot enough to roast the scalp on your head, and I was just beginning to think of turning back, when I heard a voice come from thick bushes on my right. 'Hulloa, what on earth is he doing there?' I said to myself, for I recognized it as belonging to Manuel, the half-caste. The words I heard him utter made me more than a bit suspicious."

"What was it he said?" I inquired.

"'You can do it easily, nobody will ever find out,'" Ferguson replied. "'But I can't, I can't,' a woman's voice answered. It was old Palmyre, the negress, who spoke. 'You'd better do it, or he'll cut your throat as he would a pig's,' Manuel continued. 'Why do you argue about the matter? You know very well that you are out here gathering the herbs yourself.' 'But their spirits will haunt me,' cried the old woman. That made me all attention, you may be sure. The half-caste uttered an oath in reply. The spirit that would haunt him would have to be a fairly potent one. 'What does it matter,' he went on; 'you will be well paid for it.' For a few seconds nothing more was said, but as I listened I heard something that sounded very like a sob. Whatever he was trying to persuade the old negress to do, it was very plain that she did not relish the job. Presently she whispered, 'When must it be done?' 'As soon as Silvestre leaves in the yacht,' the other replied. 'What difficulty is there in it? All you have to do is to stew the herbs and to slip them into their

food. You'll be a rich woman for the rest of your life.' After that they moved further away from me, and I came down to the boat."

"Good heavens!" I cried, the awful truth coming to me in a flash. "Silvestre intends to poison them."

"There is not much doubt about that," said Ferguson. "When you are out of the way and he has left for Equinata, the Senorita and President will never trouble him or any one else again. And as far as I can see nothing can save them!"

"It's too horrible! It's devilish," I cried, springing to my feet. "He took his oath to me that not a hair of their heads should be harmed."

"He wished you to take his words literally, you see," Ferguson returned. "He said nothing about giving each of them a dose of poison. Look at the matter from his point of view. As long as they live they are his enemies and he is not safe. He owes Fernandez a deadly grudge and he means to pay it."

"But what is to be done? We cannot let them be murdered in cold blood. Human nature couldn't stand that. And yet if he knows that we are aware of his plot, he will take means to prevent our interfering and kill them out of hand. For God's sake, Ferguson, advise me!"

"I don't see exactly what we can do," he replied sorrowfully. "Silvestre has got us in a cleft stick and we can't help ourselves."

"But surely you are not going to stand by and allow him to carry out his fiendish plot?" I returned hotly. "I can't believe that of you!"

"But you don't know what Silvestre is," said Ferguson, not daring to meet my eyes. "It would be madness to thwart him."

"If I don't know what he is," I retorted, "I at least know what I am. I brought these unfortunate people here. He shall not harm them, if it costs me all I have on earth, even life itself. And what is more, if you're a man you'll help me."

"But what can I do?" he answered helplessly. "I have always been considered a fairly plucky fellow. I must confess, however, that this business is too much for me. I've a wife and family to think of, you know!"

"Your wife would despise you above all living men if she knew that you were a party to the murder of that woman," I answered.

He scratched his chin and looked at me in a perplexed way. It was evident to me that I must not expect very much assistance from him.

"To my mind a man ought to think of his wife and children before anything else," he said at last, in a tone of apology. "If anything happens to me what is to become of them? I'm beginning to think I was a fool to have told you anything about it!"

"Not a bit of it," I answered. "There, at least, you did an honest action. Don't spoil it by drawing back."

This only elicited his old query.

"But what can we do?"

"We must get them out of the island before Silvestre can do them a mischief," I replied.

"And pray how is that to be done?"

"A way must be found," I answered. "Surely it should not be so very difficult. Remember, Ferguson, I did you a good turn once. Repay it now by helping me to save them. If they die, their deaths will be at our doors. For my part, if that happens I shall never know a moment's peace again, or be able to look an honest man or woman in the face. I worked for Silvestre because I had given him my promise to do so, and had taken his money; he has repaid it by breaking his oath to me. By jove! whether I am bound to him or not, I will prevent him from carrying out this terrible crime."

I could see that, and also realized, that whatever Ferguson's desire might be to help me, he was not willing to run any great risks himself.

"I must have time to think it over," he said. "In the meantime keep your own counsel. If a hint of this gets about we are done for."

I did not reply, but left him and went below to my cabin, where I threw myself down on my bunk and set to work to try

and think the question out. What a fool I had been to mix myself up in the matter at all. One moment's thought should have told me that Silvestre was not the sort of man to have any mercy upon his enemy. A dozen plans for effecting the escape of the President and Senorita formed themselves in my mind, only to be thrown aside at once as useless. Then the gong sounded for dinner and I made my way to the saloon. I had just set foot inside the companion, when a voice I knew so well, and had now learned to hate, greeted me.

"Good-evening, my friend," said Silvestre cheerily. "I have come aboard to be your guest this evening. As my fever has left me, I thought a little sea air and congenial society would do me no harm. Shall we go in to dinner?"

For a moment I was so surprised at seeing him that I could not answer. I followed him, however, to the saloon, where I found that three places had been laid. A few minutes later Ferguson made his appearance and we sat down to our meal. As we did so I shot a glance at the other's face. It was plain from the expression upon it that Silvestre's presence had alarmed him considerably.

"We should really have invited the Senorita to join us," said Silvestre, as he spread his serviette over his knees. "Senor Fernandez, I regret to say, is suffering from a slight attack of fever to-day. I have prescribed for him, however, and trust he will be himself shortly."

As he said this I glanced sharply at him. Was he commencing his awful crime already? The mere thought of it was sufficient to take my appetite away. Had I been able to follow my own inclinations, I should have laid down my knife and fork and have risen from the table without touching another morsel. Prudence, however, bade me remain where I was. I shot a glance at Ferguson, to find him wiping his face with his handkerchief. Silvestre was also watching him.

"The evening is very hot," said the captain, by way of excuse, "very hot indeed."

"I agree with you," Silvestre returned dryly. "If I am not mistaken, we shall have a thunderstorm later."

During the remainder of the repast Silvestre continued to converse in very much his usual fashion. He did not refer again, however, to the prisoners. At ten o'clock he left for the shore, but before he did so, he bade me be ready to start for Cuba on the following afternoon. I tried to invent an excuse for remaining longer, but one would not come to my hand.

"Needless to say I am anxious to get on to Equinata with all dispatch," said Silvestre. "I cannot do so until I have carried out my promise to you."

"Why not go first and let the yacht come back for me?" I suggested. "I am in no particular hurry."

"I could not dream of such a thing," he answered politely. "It would be better for you to go at once. Indeed, I have this evening given the necessary instructions to Ferguson."

After that there was nothing more to be said.

As he went down the accommodation ladder an idea occurred to me. His boat was not more than a dozen lengths from the yacht's side before I had made my way up the ladder to the bridge and had entered the chart-room. Above the chart-locker was a shelf on which were kept the books of reference needful for the navigation of the yacht. In a fever of impatience I ran my eye along them until I came upon the volume I wanted. To consult the index and discover a certain island was a question of a few moments. I read what the book had to say regarding it, but I was not greatly relieved by so doing. Communication with the island was evidently only a matter of chance. I thereupon took the chart of that particular part of the Carribean Sea and studied it attentively. The nearest island to San Diaz was that of Asturia, distant something like a day and a half's steam. It was comforting to learn that numerous trading boats touched there. Let me go at once, as Silvestre had proposed, and, instead of proceeding to Cuba, induce Ferguson to put into this island. If luck favoured me, I could charter a vessel there and return to San Diaz to rescue the President and the Senorita. Having once thought of this plan, I was eager to put it into execution. I determined, however, to say nothing to Ferguson until the morrow, and only then when we were well out at sea. Friendly though the little man was to me, I had seen enough of him to feel sure that it would need but little pressure from Silvestre to undermine that friendship.

Next morning I left the yacht and went ashore to bid Silvestre farewell. I could very well have dispensed with this ceremony, but I was afraid of arousing his suspicions. I found him seated in the verandah of his house when I arrived, a cigar in his mouth, and a book in his hand. He greeted me pleasantly enough. As I looked at him I could not help recalling the evening when I had seen him seated in the little summerhouse of the inn at Falstead. How many things had happened since that memorable afternoon!

He rose to receive me and held out his hand.

"I wonder whether we shall ever see each other again, Helmsworth?" he said, when I had seated myself. "You have

done me a great service, and in the name of the people of Equinata I thank you for it. You will return to Falstead at once, I suppose," he went on, after a short pause, "marry the girl of your heart, and settle down to shire life. I wonder what my fate will be?"

I thought that if Fernandez managed to escape, I could hazard a very good guess. Before leaving him I touched upon the old subject, in order to see what his reply would be.

"I presume you will not permit me to say farewell to your prisoners," I said.

"It would not be wise," he answered. "Fernandez, as I told you last night, is down with fever, and the Senorita is not in the best of tempers just now. However, I will convey all sorts of kind messages to them from you when next I see them."

I rose from my chair.

"Don Guzman," I began, trying to speak calmly, "you are not playing me false, are you? If any harm should befall Fernandez and his niece, remember you will have all Civilization against you."

At this he fairly lost his temper.

"*Madre de Dios*, man," he cried, "do you want to make me angry with you? Why do you harp so continually on this string? I have told you, and reiterated the fact, that I do not intend to harm them. If I did, don't you think I should have done so ere this? What's more, Mr. Helmsworth, let me just give you a word of advice. When you return to England, be sure you keep a silent tongue in your head. I can be a good friend, and a particularly bitter enemy. I've a long arm, and when I strike I strike deep. But there, my dear fellow, don't let us quarrel at the time we're about to say farewell to each other. We must part friends. Is it time for you to go? Then good-bye, and may good fortune go with you."

When I left him I made my way towards the path leading to the beach. As I crossed the open space in front of the house, I turned my eyes in the direction of the hut where Fernandez was confined. One of the gigantic negroes that I had seen on the day of our arrival at the island was standing on guard, rifle in hand, before it. Silvestre, I knew, was watching me from the verandah, so there was no chance of being able to communicate with the prisoner. I accordingly continued my walk down to the beach. Two hours later the yacht was steaming out of harbour, and so far as Silvestre knew, I was on my way to England *via* Cuba.

As I have already observed, it is a day and a half's steam from San Diaz to the nearest island--Asturia. The latter is, if anything, slightly bigger than its neighbour. It is certainly more prosperous. Lying in the track of ships it has a number of visitors, and trade is consequently fairly brisk--the principal exports being a peculiar species of hard wood, and a small quantity of sugar, for which product the soil is well adapted.

It was not until we had been several hours at sea that I broached the subject that was uppermost in my mind to Ferguson. For reasons already stated I was by no means certain how he would receive it. Would his friendship for myself be sufficiently strong to stand the test? However, the matter had to be decided, one way or the other, and what was more there was no time to be lost. I accordingly took advantage of the opportunity that presented itself, and came to business. He heard me out in silence, but there was an expression upon his face that told me he was not particularly in love with my proposal. Indeed, between ourselves, I don't see how he could have been.

"Look here, Mr. Helmsworth Trevelyan, or Trevelyan Helmsworth--whatever you please to call yourself--as I understand it you are asking me to do a thing I have never done before. In other words you are asking me to go back upon the man whose money I am taking."

"Oh! come, now----"

"Just one moment before you reply. Let me put it in my own way, and you can work it out as you like afterwards. I can't see for myself that there is any other construction to be placed upon your proposal. You'll admit, I suppose, that Silvestre is my employer? I am here to run this boat according to his orders, and my instructions are to take you to Cuba and to land you there. You want me to disregard them, and to drop you at Asturia."

"But surely----"

"Hold hard until I have finished. You know that I'm not a particular squeamish fellow. I've done a good many things that a number of people wouldn't even look at; but--and mark you this 'but' is fairly important, if I've got to choose between you and Silvestre--friendship steps in and Silvestre goes to the wall. At the same time I don't mind confessing that it's far from a nice position you have placed me in. The world won't be big enough for me to hide in when it comes to getting away from Silvestre. And when you come to think I've a wife and family at home all depending upon me, I'll leave you to figure out how much you value Fernandez' life at."

This was a way of looking at the question that I had not foreseen.

"But I cannot go away and leave the man there to be murdered," I began. "Flesh and blood wouldn't allow that."

"Very well, then let us say no more about it. It's settled that I run into Asturia and that you go ashore there."

"And after that?"

"I shall go on to Cuba!"

"Give me all the time you can," I said. "I've a big bit of work before me when I get back to the island."

"And I wish you joy of it."

Darkness had fallen when we reached the island. I was anxious, however, to lose no time, and determined to land at once. Immediately on dropping anchor, therefore, I asked Ferguson to put me ashore. This he willingly consented to do, and in due course I found myself with my baggage on the beach. When I had seen the boat depart, I made my way into the town. It was a queer little place, built on the side of a hill, and with, so far as I could see, a very sparse white population.

From a negro boy I inquired my way to the principal hotel, if there should happen to be more than one. He grinned expansively and offered to conduct me to it. It proved to be only a short distance away and faced the sea-front. I rewarded the boy, entered it, and made my way into the bar. The landlord was a Spaniard, and about as villainous a specimen of his race as I'd ever seen. I told him I had just arrived, and that I was anxious to charter a schooner at once, and inquired whether he could help me in the matter, promising to reward him liberally should he do so.

As it happened, he declared that he knew of exactly the sort of vessel I wanted. I inquired the owner's name and asked the landlord where she could be seen.

"She's anchored about a couple of cables from the pier, senor," he replied, "and she is the property of my good friend, Maxime Blonde. Maxime was lamenting to me only this evening that, having no cargo, he must return to Martinique empty."

"Where can I find him?"

"On board, senor." Then, scenting business, he continued: "If you wish it, I will escort you to him."

To this I willingly agreed, and then, when he had called his wife to take charge of the saloon, and a negro to accompany him, we made our way to the pier. A boat was soon discovered, and in her, rowed by the negro, we set off for the *Belle Josephine* of Martinique.

She proved to be a small fore-and-aft schooner of about fifty tons, natively built, so far as I was able to judge in the darkness, and very well suited to my purpose.

"Maxime, Maxime Blonde," screeched the hotel keeper, "a senor to see you on business. Come forth!"

"What now?" cried a voice from the cabin aft. "Who is it calls Maxime at this time of night?"

The hotel keeper went aft and explained matters. Presently he returned and invited me to follow him to the cabin. Of all the dirty holes it has been my misfortune to enter this was certainly the worst. Straw, paper, and banana peel littered the floor. On the right-hand side of the cabin was a narrow bunk, upon which a small, shrivelled-up mulatto was seated. He explained that he was Monsieur Maxime, and that he was owner and captain of the vessel. Being unable to bear the closeness of the cabin I suggested that we should do our business on deck, and thither the little man followed me. In something under a quarter of an hour my arrangements were made with him, and it was settled that we should sail for San Diaz at daybreak.



CHAPTER XIII

Of our voyage from the island of Asturia to San Diaz there is little to chronicle. *La Belle Josephine*, as far as her sailing capabilities were concerned, was all that her owner and captain had described her to be. On the other hand, her dirt and slovenliness were exactly what I had been led to expect it would be from my first inspection of the cabin. To sleep in it, or to eat my meals there, was out of the question. How the Senorita would manage, when she came aboard--provided I was able to get her away from the island--I could not imagine.

Monsieur Maxime's navigation, I soon discovered, was of the most elementary description. However, perhaps by luck, and perhaps by a measure of good judgment, he managed to pick up the island about noon on the third day after leaving Asturia.

Fearing that Silvestre might have some one on the look-out, I bade Maxime keep the schooner out of sight of land until nightfall. Then we put in, and brought up in a small bay some five miles from the settlement. Immediately it was dark I went ashore, bidding the hands take the boat back, and when they got there to keep a sharp ear for my whistle.

Fortunately for what I had in hand, it was a dark night, so dark indeed that I could scarcely see the boat when I had walked a dozen paces from it. What the jungle would be like I could not imagine.

When the boat had disappeared I set off along the beach in the direction of the settlement. How I was going to reach the house without attracting the attention of its inmates, and what I was going to do when I got there, were two points about which I did not trouble myself very much at that time. My lucky star had so far been in the ascendant, that I was trusting to it to continue so. I knew very well that it was a desperate enterprise I was embarking upon, for should Silvestre discover me, my shrift was likely to be as short as that which Fernandez had so obligingly arranged for me in La Gloria. At last, when I reached the eastern side of the bay, that in which the yacht had anchored, I turned towards the jungle and prepared to enter it. I knew I was in for some hard work, but I did not imagine that it would prove so difficult as I found it to be. The dense mass of creeper that twined from tree to tree barred my progress at every step. I had to climb, to twist, to crawl, in places unable to see more than a few inches ahead, scratched by aloes and thorny bushes, buffeted by low branches, and more than once tripped up and thrown heavily to the ground by logs and other obstacles. How long it took me to reach the plateau I cannot say, but I could scarcely have been less than an hour upon the road. Yet the distance was certainly not more than a quarter of a mile. Somewhat to my astonishment the plateau was all darkness; not a light showed from the house, not a sound came from the huts. With a stealth that would have done credit to a Sioux or an Apache, I crept through the bushes towards the block-house in which Fernandez had been confined when I had left the island. A sudden fear had come over me that, during my absence, Silvestre might have done away with him. If no sentry stood at the door I should believe this to be the case. Closer and still closer I crept to it. At last I was only a few yards distant from it. I was about to move forward on my hands and knees in order to obtain a better view, when a guttural cough reached me, coming, so it seemed, from only a few yards away. So close was it, indeed, that I sprang back, fearing lest the man who uttered it would become aware of my presence. Then the grounding of a rifle-butt on the stones before the hut door reached me, and afforded me indisputable evidence that the general was still imprisoned there.

At first a wild notion came into my head that I might be able to overpower the negro sentry, and, having done so, to free Fernandez. A moment's reflection, however, told me that in all probability he would prove more than a match for me, while he might also have time to fire his rifle and so to give the alarm. More important still, even if I did have the good luck to overcome him, I should not be able to get into the hut, as Silvestre kept the key.

"No," I said to myself, "I must try again to-morrow night, and then I'll bring the two men with me."

Creeping back as carefully as I had come, I reached the beach once more as tired as if I had walked a dozen miles through heavy ground. Going to the water's edge, I gave a shrill whistle, and then sat myself down to await the boat's arrival. It was not long in coming, and in less than a quarter of an hour I was back on board the schooner. Calling up Monsieur Maxime, I bade him get sail on her and put to sea once more. He seemed a little surprised, I fancy, and was about to demur. A brief remonstrance on my part, however, sufficed to put him on good terms with me again.

The next day was spent out of sight of the island, but as soon as darkness fell we were back once more and anchored in the bay. By this time, as you may suppose, I had perfected my scheme as far as possible, and knew exactly what I was going to do.

To my delight the night proved as dark as its predecessor. When, after some difficulty, I reached the shore, with the two men who had volunteered to assist me, the wind was driving the sand upon the beach in clouds, and was howling most dismally among the trees of the jungle.

"We couldn't have chosen a better night," I said to my companions, as we hurried along. "With the elements in our favour, however, we shall have to be very careful how we act."

We made our way down the beach as I had done on the previous night, and climbed the hill as before. Neither of the men had had any previous experience of jungle-work, but they were to have some now which would be sufficient to last them all their lives. More than once they followed my example and went sprawling in the darkness, while once the taller of the pair managed to get his foot entangled in a mass of creeper, and it required all my efforts, and those of his companion, to release him.

"Lord bless us, sir," the other whispered in my ear, "I hope there are no snakes about. This seems just the sort of place to find them."

"You needn't be afraid," I replied. "I have been assured that there is not a snake on the island."

"I'm glad of that," I heard him mutter. "I don't cotton to snakes nohow."

At last we reached the plateau, whereupon I bade both men remain where they were while I went to reconnoitre. Then, dropping on to my hands and knees, I crept forward until I was on the edge of the jungle. It was the same place from which I had watched the sentry on the previous night. Either he or one of his comrades was there now, for I could just see his dark figure standing at the corner of the hut. Across the plateau streamed a bright light from the sitting-room of the house, while the faint tinkling of some native instrument reached my ears from the group of huts beyond. Having taken my observations, I crept back again to my companions.

As may be supposed, I had already instructed them in their duties. In consequence, each had brought with him a hank of thin rope, while I had placed two or three carefully made canvas gags in my pocket in case their services should be required. The idea I had in my mind was that we should creep up to the hut from behind. The two men would then take the right-hand side and make their way round the building with as little noise as possible, while I was to imitate them on the left. When I reached the sentry I was to saunter slowly up to him as if it were the most natural thing in the world for me to be there. Before he could recover from his astonishment at seeing me, they were to spring upon him and make him secure--I obtaining possession of his rifle before he could fire it.

"Come along," I whispered, "and don't make a sound as you love your lives."

Scarcely daring to breathe, I led them from the jungle and across the open space that separated us from the hut. Having gained its shelter, we paused to prepare for the struggle.

Since I had left England I had been in some tight places, but I had never felt so nervous as I did at that moment. There was so much to be thought of, so much to be provided for, and yet so much to be left to chance. What if the sentry did not prove as surprised as I hoped he would be? Suppose the men did not come up in time and gave him an opportunity of discharging his rifle, what would our fate be then? But it did not improve matters thinking of what might happen. I had to carry out my portion of the scheme and leave the rest to Fate. So, having seen the men ready with their ropes in their hands, I calmly strolled round the side of the hut towards the spot where the sentry was standing. It seemed to me that on the outcome of those few steps I was staking all that was worth having in the world--Molly's happiness, my mother's, Fernandez' and the Senorita Dolores' lives, and in all probability my own. Then I turned the corner and the giant figure of the negro was before me. He looked up and saw me, uttered an exclamation of surprise, and then took a step forward as if to make sure of my identity.

"Have you a light for my cigar, friend?" I inquired, as coolly as I could force myself to speak.

As I said it the two figures of my companions appeared round the further corner. Before the man could reply they had thrown themselves upon him; one had clutched him by the throat, while the other pinioned his hands behind him. Springing forward, I seized the rifle he had dropped. The man made a desperate struggle for his liberty, but we were too much for him, and almost before he could realize what had happened, we had got him on the other side of the hut, where we could make him secure and do with him as we might think best. In almost less time than it takes to tell, my two companions had lashed him so securely that it was impossible for him to move hand or foot or, what was more important still, to cry out.



"One had clutched him by the throat."

"So far so good," I said, rising from my knees, where I had been kneeling beside the prostrate man. "He will give us no more trouble. Now you, Williams, take his rifle and stand sentry in front of that door, while Matthews and I go across to the house and see what we can do with Silvestre. We've got to find that key somehow."

Williams took the rifle and proceeded to the front of the hut, where he stood in very much the same attitude as the negro had adopted. Then Matthews and I, in our turn, made our way quietly back to the jungle, and through it towards the spot where it approached nearest the house. The light was still streaming from Silvestre's window, and once, as we waited, I heard the sound of his laugh. It was evident from this that he was not alone.

"Now, Matthews," I said, "what we have to do is to get across to that verandah without any one seeing us. If we are caught, remember our lives will pay the penalty."

"I hope we shan't be caught then, sir," the man replied.

The night was as still as the grave; the music had ceased at the huts, and not a sound came from the house towards which we were making our way. At last we reached the verandah and ascended the two steps that led up to it. Silvestre's sitting-room was now only a few yards distant. Would it be possible for us to reach it without giving him warning of our approach? Fortunately for us, the floor of the verandah was of earth, beaten hard, and for this reason, unless we were more than usually careless, the odds were in our favour. Keeping as close to the wall of the house as possible, we approached the window, which was open. As we did so, Silvestre spoke again.

"Well, I have given you plenty of time to think it over," he remarked. "What have you to say?"

"Only that I refuse," the Senorita replied, for she was his companion. "You could not expect me to do anything else."

"Think well what you are doing," the other continued, and as he said it I advanced a couple of steps. "You know that when I say a thing I mean it. I tell you plainly Fernandez' life is not worth an hour's purchase. He chose to come between me and my ambition, and I have tossed him aside as I should have done a straw. When he is out of the way Equinata will listen to me, and when she has observed how I deal with such as oppose me, I don't think she will make any more mistakes. I know that you are dangerous, but I fancy I can manage you. Give me the information I require, and I'll spare you and perhaps do more. Why should you bother yourself about Fernandez?"

"Do you think I have no heart?"

"I suppose you have about as much as any other woman," was the sneering reply. "Come, Senorita, you must admit that my patience has held out pretty well. But you mustn't overstrain it. Give me the information I require and I, on my side, will pledge myself to send you to Europe, and also to allow Fernandez to remain here in safety, provided he passes his word never to return to Equinata or to molest me further. I cannot make you a fairer offer than that, and I am afraid I am foolish to do so much."

"And if I refuse to accept your terms?"

"Then I shoot Fernandez at daybreak, and when the yacht returns sail away, leaving you here in Palmyre's charge. I am afraid you would find the life a trifle lonely after La Gloria."

Knowing as I did what his real intentions were, I was able to form a very fair estimate of the man's villainy. What the information could be that he was so anxious to obtain from her I could not imagine. I had not much time, however, to think about it, for as the thought flashed through my brain I heard some one rise from a chair and cross the room, then Silvestre's voice continued, in a more persuasive tone than he had used before: "Senorita, you and I together could govern that country as it has never been ruled before. I know who are my friends there, and I am also acquainted with my enemies. The first I shall take care to render even more loyal than they were before, the others I shall deal with in such a fashion that they will give no more trouble. Come, make up your mind. Go home to Europe for a year until I have everything in order and then come out and join me. Who knows what happiness may be in store for us? What have you to say to my proposal?"

"I cannot," she answered in a heart-broken voice; "and yet, oh Heaven! I cannot let you kill him."

"You must decide one way or the other," he said remorselessly, "and you'd also better be quick about it. My patience is well nigh exhausted."

There was another interval of silence.

"Will you let me see Senor Fernandez for a moment before I give you my answer?" she pleaded.

"Not for an instant," he replied. "You must have known what answer I should give you when you put the question. I know Senor Fernandez too well to allow you two to meet. I see it is half-past ten! Now I will give you five minutes in which to make up your mind, and if you don't tell me what I want to know then, I will carry out my threat and Fernandez will finish his career at daybreak."

She uttered a piteous little cry, followed by an appeal for mercy.

"Don't talk to me of mercy," he answered. "What mercy did he show me? What mercy would he have for me if our positions were reversed? He would have shot me like a dog. Bear the fact in mind, Senorita, that if he comes to an untimely end you will be responsible for it!"

There was another pause.

"Time is flying. You have only four minutes left!"

It was impossible that I could listen to this sort of talk unmoved. He had the unfortunate woman at his mercy, and I knew him well enough by this time to feel convinced that as soon as he had extracted his information from her he would throw his promises to the wind, and carry out the infamous project of which Manuel had spoken to Palmyre. He knew well that even if he killed Fernandez and allowed her to go free she would begin to intrigue against him. His insinuation that she should return from Europe to him in Equinata was only a subterfuge to prevent her becoming suspicious as to his real intentions.

"Three minutes gone!"

The Senorita said nothing in reply, but although I could not see her I could very well imagine the agony she was suffering. The memory of the night we had spent together in the balcony of the Opera House at La Gloria came back to me. Then I took my revolver from my pocket, and gave the magazine a turn to see that it was in working order.

Once more Silvestre spoke.

"Time is up," he said. "I will call Palmyre and give the necessary orders about Fernandez."

"No, no," she cried in the expostulation of despair. "Take my life--kill me! But for the Blessed Virgin's sake, let him go free."

"Will you give me the information?" was Silvestre's reply.

The Senorita uttered a little cry as if she were suffering physical pain.

"And send them to their deaths? No, no, I should be less than human if I were to do that."

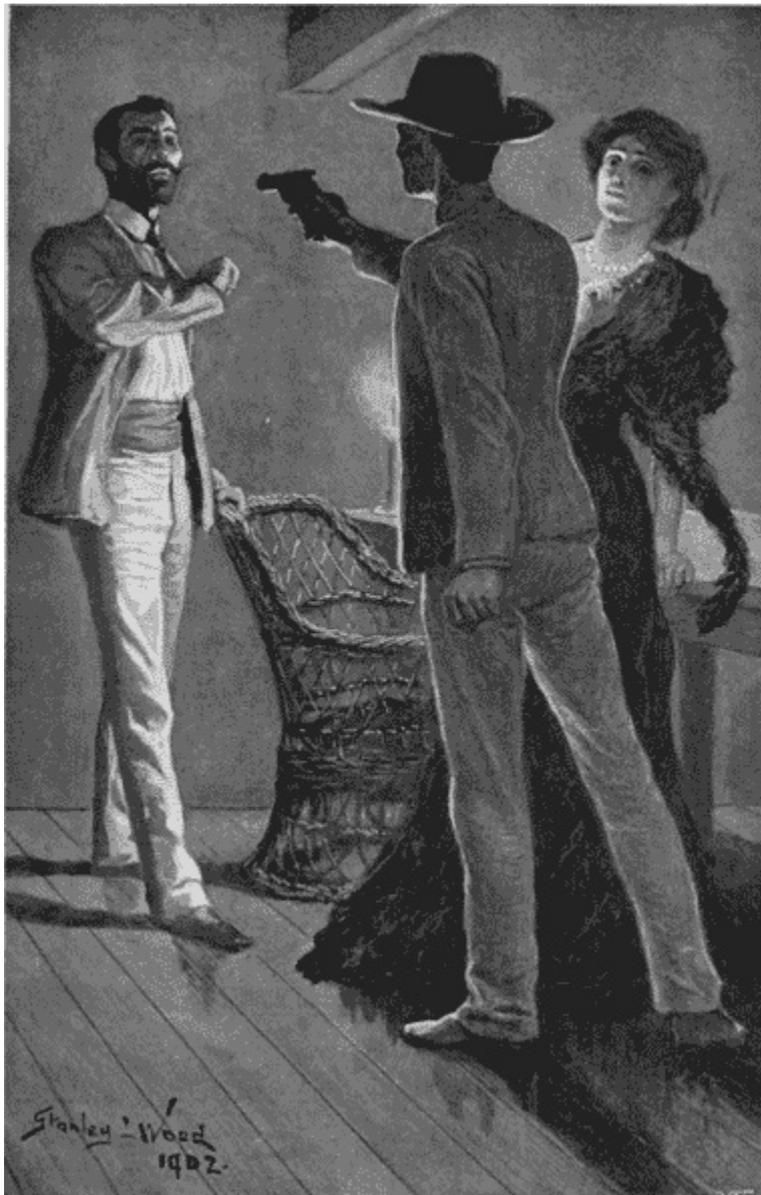
"Fernandez will be less than human if you do not," was the other's brutal response. "Permit me, and I will call Palmyre."

As he said this, I turned to the man behind me and signalled that I was about to enter the room. Then, revolver in hand, I strode in.

"That will do, Silvestre," I cried, covering him with the revolver as I approached him.

"Good heavens! you here?" he shouted, as if he found it difficult to believe the evidence of his own eyes. The Senorita was leaning against the table with a look of bewildered astonishment upon her face.

"As you see, I have returned," I answered. "But I have not time to discuss that matter with you now. I give you fair warning that if you speak again I shall shoot. Sit down in that chair and put your hands behind you!"



"I give you fair warning that if you speak again I shall shoot."

With an oath Silvestre complied with my request.

Turning to Matthews, I signed to him to carry out the work we had previously arranged. In less time than it takes to tell, Don Guzman de Silvestre was securely fastened in his chair, a gag had been placed in his mouth, and it was then out of his power to do any mischief. From the expression upon his face I could gather some notion of what his feelings were. It was very evident that if I should have the misfortune to fall into his hands again I should be likely to receive but little mercy from him. As soon as he was secure, and I had abstracted the key of the block-house from his pocket, I turned to the lady.

"Come, Senorita," I whispered, "you had better prepare for departure. If we are to release the President and to get away before daylight there is not much time to be lost."

"I am quite ready to leave," she replied.

"Then be good enough to accompany this man, and be very careful to keep in the shadow of the house," I returned. "Above all, see that you do not make a sound. I want to have a few words alone with Silvestre."

Matthews led the way from the room and, with one last look at the man in the chair, the Senorita followed him.

When I had seen her turn the corner of the verandah, I approached Silvestre, who glared at me as though he hoped the fire in his eyes might consume me.

"Don Guzman," I began, speaking in a low voice, "before I take leave of you, I want to let you know why I have played this trick upon you. You will remember that at Falstead you gave me your assurance that if I helped you to secure Fernandez you would do him no harm. And yet you have given orders that, as soon as you had left the island for Equinata, the Senorita and her uncle were to be poisoned. I distinctly heard you tell the former that the latter would die at daybreak. I am afraid you will find yourself mistaken in your prophecy. By daybreak Fernandez should be well on his way back to Equinata. There is one other matter before I go. Here is the last money you gave me." So saying, I threw upon the table the roll of notes he had handed to me before I left the island for Asturia.

A hideous scowl was the only response I received.

Then, when I had placed my revolver in my pocket, I made my way down the verandah in the direction of Fernandez' prison. To my delight I discovered that no change had taken place there. The giant negro still lay where we had placed him, while my own man stood sentry before the door.

Bidding the Senorita and Matthews remain concealed, I crept quietly forward. The plateau was as silent as the grave, while the only light to be seen was that which streamed from the window of the room we had just left.

I had passed through some momentous moments in the past six months, but I do not think that, in the whole course of this extraordinary affair, I experienced anything like the sensation that took possession of me as I made my way towards the door of the hut. I had begun by taking service under Silvestre; I had carried out his instructions to the best of my ability; I had found him a traitor, and now, here I was, throwing him over and rendering assistance to the other side. What was the end of it all to be? Should I escape with Fernandez, or would Silvestre catch us before we could reach the boat?

Signing to the sailor to stand aside, I placed the key in the lock. As I opened the door a voice, which I instantly recognized, said as calmly as though its owner were addressing me in the President's study at La Gloria:

"So it's you, Trevelyan, is it? I had an idea you'd come round to my way of thinking. I heard your scuffle with the sentry. I suppose you managed to overpower him?"

I answered him in a whisper that his conjecture was correct.

"You must get up at once," I continued hurriedly. "There is no time to spare. The Senorita is waiting for you in the jungle, and I have a schooner in the bay."

"But I can't get up," he replied. "Our worthy friend, Silvestre, has taken good care of that."

"The deuce, he has!" said I. "What do you mean by that?"

"I mean that I am chained to the leg of the bed," Fernandez returned. "Before you can release me you must have the key of the padlock."

In a flash I realized what a fool I had been. It had never struck me, when searching Silvestre's pockets, to find out whether he had any other key in his possession. Now we were in a pretty fix. It seemed as if I had defeated Silvestre only to give him a very fair opportunity of turning the tables upon me. At any other time I should have sworn at the contrariness of my luck; now, however, I had too much upon my mind to have time to seek relief in that direction. It was a problem that any man might have been excused for feeling diffident about. The Senorita was concealed in the scrub; the lives of Matthews and his companions depended upon my prompt and successful treatment of the difficulty, and the only possible way I could see of accomplishing that was to return to the room in which I had left Silvestre, and, once there, to overhaul him in the hopes of discovering the all-important key. This time, however, the risk would be increased a thousandfold. It was only too probable that the old negress Palmyre, or the half-caste Manuel, would have entered to find their master in the lamentable condition I had left him; in which case, for all the good I could do, I might just as well take my revolver, shoot myself and Fernandez, and so bring the whole desperate affair to a conclusion.

"You are quite sure, I suppose," I remarked, "that Silvestre has the key upon his person?"

"Quite," he answered. "He has been kind enough to dangle it before my eyes every time he has visited me. Only this afternoon he wittily described it as the isthmus connecting the continents of Equinata and Death!"

That was Fernandez all over. Even when my heart was beating like a wheat-flail in my breast with terror, and when every moment I expected to see Silvestre make his appearance in the doorway, he must have his joke.

"Well," I said at last, "I suppose there is nothing for it but for me to return to the house and to endeavour to obtain possession of the key. Heaven alone knows whether I shall be successful. In the meantime the Senorita had better make her way down to the shore. You will of course keep very quiet until I return."

"You may depend upon my doing that," he replied. "You will find me here when you return."

Without another word I left the hut and crept round it to the spot where the Senorita and the faithful Matthews were anxiously waiting for me. So dark was it in the jungle that I could see nothing of them, and it was not until I called to them that I could discover their whereabouts. Then, drawing the lady a little on one side, I hastened to explain the situation to her.

"You will find the key hanging round his neck," she said in a fierce whisper. "If you only knew what a miserable part it has played in my life of late, you would easily understand how familiar I am with its hiding-place."

I did not reply, but, turning to Matthews, bade him escort the Senorita down the hillside to the shore, where they were to await our coming. When they departed I began my journey to the house. The light still shone from Silvestre's window, though the remainder of the building was in complete darkness. Revolver in hand I crept carefully along until I reached the steps leading to the verandah. These I ascended, and eventually reached the room in question. Every creak of the boards brought my heart into my mouth; and yet, if Silvestre had been discovered and released by Manuel or Palmyre, why had he not come in search of us? That he was no coward I knew too well.

When I reached the open window I was able to obtain a glimpse of the room. It may be imagined with what delight I assured myself that Silvestre was still there and, what was more, lying just as I had left him. Softly I crept in and approached him. I could fancy the satisfaction he had felt when he had witnessed my departure before without the key of the padlock which fastened Fernandez' fetters to the bed. From the way he glared at me, when he became aware of my presence, it was evident that he realized that I had come to rectify my mistake. As quickly as I could do it, and without wasting any words upon him, I unfastened the collar of his shirt to discover, suspended on a string round his neck, that tiny talisman that, at that moment, was worth more to me than anything else in the world. To take possession of it was the work of a second, and then I once more tiptoed towards the verandah. I had barely reached it, however, when I heard the door, communicating with the central passage of the house open, and looking back I saw Palmyre enter the room.

As I arrived at the end of the verandah I heard a shrill scream, and as I heard it realized the fact that, unless I could succeed in releasing Fernandez within the next few minutes, all was lost, and that I should, in all human probability, never see old England again!



CHAPTER XIV

To say that I made my way from the house to the hut in which Fernandez was imprisoned with as much speed as I could command, would be to express my meaning very inadequately. As soon as I realized the fact that the trick I had played upon Silvestre was discovered, I threw prudence to the winds, and ran as I had not done for years across the plateau towards the building in question. The sailor was still on guard at the door, which was open, while the negro lay bound just where we had thrown him down.

"Stand by, they're after us!" I cried, regardless of who might hear.

With that I plunged headlong into the dark hut, shouting to Fernandez as I did so to prepare the padlock for the key. South American politics produce some curious incidents, but I am not sure that they could find another to equal that which I am now so inadequately attempting to describe.

Dropping on my knees beside the bed, I felt about for the chain and, running my hand along it, at length obtained possession of the padlock, inserted the key, and in a trice the President was free.

"By this time they must have released Silvestre," I whispered. "For heaven's sake let us get away from here!"

"Nobody could be more willing to do that than myself," the other answered, springing from the bed as he spoke, and coming in violent contact with myself, whom he could not see. "You are in command, so you had better lead the way."

Bidding him follow me, I hastened out of the hut, ordered the sailor to accompany us, and plunged into the jungle. As we did so a shout from the house proclaimed the fact that Silvestre was free once more and thirsting for vengeance. We had not stumbled forward many paces before other shouts followed, showing that he had called Manuel and his gang to his assistance.

A very small percentage of the readers of my story have, I trust, been called upon to run for their lives through a West Indian jungle in the dead of night. Those who have done so, however, will be able to understand the sufferings of the wretched trio who stumbled, reeled, scraped, and fought their way down from the plateau to the shore. The darkness was opaque, the obstacles so multifarious, that never for a moment did we seem to have a yard's clear going. Take a sack, a three-legged, and an obstacle race, throw in a game of blind-man's buff, in which you are the blind man, and you will have some faint idea of our difficulties.

Once, from the hill behind us, the sound of a shot reached us, though what its meaning was, I could not even conjecture. At last, wearied to the point of dropping, our faces streaming with perspiration, our flesh cut and bruised, we emerged from the forest and stood upon the seashore. Unfortunately, in our haste, we had not steered as true a course as we would have desired, and instead of coming out in the centre of the little bay where the schooner's boat had been ordered to await us, we found ourselves at the end of the small promontory which separated the bay from that in which the settlement was situated. This was unfortunate in more ways than one, but it could not be helped. The worst part of it was that we could not see the boat or the figures of the Senorita or Matthews.

"Look! what is that?" cried the President at last, pointing along the beach to the left. "Is it a man?"

I have fairly good eyes, but I must confess that I could see nothing that in any way resembled a human figure in the direction he indicated. He, however, seemed positive that he was right; so, realizing that we could do no good by remaining where we were, we hurried along the beach without further loss of time. We had not proceeded more than fifty yards, however, when the crack of a rifle came from the scrub on our left. If it were aimed at me, the man who fired it was certainly a very fair marksman, for the bullet whistled by within a few inches of my head. It was plain that Silvestre, or at least one of his myrmidons, were not very far behind us. We were destined soon to be convinced as to their numbers and also as to their identity. For the sound of the shot had scarcely died away before three men emerged from the jungle, and Silvestre's voice called upon us to throw up our arms, and then added that unless we did so we should be shot down without mercy. I could well believe this, and I also knew the sort of mercy we should be likely to receive should we allow ourselves to fall into his hands. The fate he had arranged for Fernandez and his niece would be nothing to the cruelty he would practise upon us.

"*Nombre de Dios!*" cried the President, "why haven't I a weapon of some sort!"

He was destined to have one somewhat sooner than he imagined, for as he finished speaking another rifle-shot rang out, and instantly my revolver fell from my hand and I realized that I had been shot through the forearm. The President coolly stooped and picked up the weapon.

"Look, sir, look, there's the boat!" cried the sailor a few seconds later.

Sure enough there it was, but unfortunately a considerable distance ahead.

"There's nothing left but to run for it," I cried. "Come on!"

With that we took to our heels and scurried along the beach. Silvestre, as soon as he became aware of our intentions, sent a volley after us, doubtless meant as an inducement to heave-to. We paid no attention, however. Though we did not look round we knew that they were after us; but we had a fair start, and if only they did not manage to hit us, there was the bare possibility of our reaching the boat in time. Already I could see Matthews standing knee-deep in the water in order to keep the little craft afloat. He shouted to encourage us. Then there came another shout from our left, and three other figures ran down between ourselves and the boat we were striving so hard to reach. All three were armed, and in the man in the middle, when he called upon us to surrender, I recognized the blackguardly half-caste Manuel. For the moment it looked as if our case were hopeless.

It is at such moments that all the inventive faculties in one's possession hasten to one's aid. Had I been permitted half a day to think the question out, I should probably never have hit upon a plan half as promising as that which then flashed through my mind. The men in front were little more than a couple of dozen paces away; Silvestre and his party were perhaps a hundred yards behind, and were every moment coming closer. The thought had scarcely occurred to me before the crack of rifles sounded from behind. Fortunately none of us were hit.

"Down! down!" I cried to my companions. "Let them suppose that they have winged us!"

As I spoke we all threw ourselves with one accord upon our faces on the sand. As I expected, the men in front immediately jumped to the conclusion that we had been shot by their friends behind. They accordingly rushed forward to make sure of us. My ruse must have dawned upon Fernandez, for, to this day, I am certain that I heard a chuckle escape him. Almost at the same moment Manuel ran up to us, his two companions being only a few yards distant.

"Shoot them," I whispered; and as I spoke I saw Fernandez roll over on his side and raise his right arm. His revolver gave three vicious little cracks, and one by one each man stopped, performed a curious spin, and then fell forward on the sand.

I don't know that I am a particularly imaginative man. As a matter of fact my friends have on several occasions informed me that I am a somewhat prosaic individual. All I know is that at that moment, though why I should have done so, no one, least of all myself, will ever be able to tell (for I have never participated in a hunt in my life), I let out a wild "yoicks" and sprang to my feet.

"Make for the boat!" cried Fernandez.

Without a word I did as I was directed. The boat was now only a matter of some fifty yards ahead. How I covered this distance I shall never be able to understand. All I do know is that when I reached the spot where Matthews was standing, I came an ignominious cropper at the water's edge. The fact was I was done for, wholly and completely done for. It may seem an absurd statement to make, but I will leave it to the charity of my readers to remember that I had been through a great deal that night, and also that a shattered arm does not add to one's strength.

At that moment Fernandez rose to a moral height, far above that I had expected to find in him. Turning to Matthews, who, as I have said, was standing knee-deep in the water, keeping the boat afloat, he cried: "Hold the boat steady while we get Senor Trevelyan in."

I was so far done for that he must have thought I was dead; nevertheless, and although Silvestre and his men were by this time little more than thirty yards behind us, he did not abandon me, but with the other man's assistance picked me up, then waded with me into the water and dropped me into the boat, where I lay like a log. I heard Fernandez order Matthews and the other man into the boat, and then wondered what was going to happen next. I saw the Senorita half rise from her seat in the stern. She uttered a little cry. Then I heard a swish of water alongside, as if the boat were being turned round.

"Take care, Silvestre," cried Fernandez, "there's Equinata at the end of my barrel, and a good deal more beside."

What Silvestre said in reply I do not pretend to know. All I can say is that I heard the sharp crack of his revolver, followed by a laugh from Fernandez, and a wild shriek that might have been anything, but which told me nothing. A moment later, and just as I was feeling as if nothing in the world mattered to me, I was conscious of some one saying: "Pull up, my lads, we'll get away yet!" At the same instant a soft hand touched my cheek, and a low voice whispered: "May the saints be merciful to you!" Then I lost consciousness.

When I recovered my senses I was lying off the top of the main hatch of the schooner. Fernandez was standing near me, but it was impossible to see his face.

Lying on my back I could not tell what was happening. I could, however, hear Monsieur Maxime arranging sundry nautical details with his crew, and with all his accustomed fluency. The little man had accepted the position from his own standpoint, which, as you may be sure, was theatrical to a degree. As I have since heard, he avers that, had it not been for his influence and exertions at that momentous time, the President of Equinata would never have returned to his country at all. For this reason he is looked upon as a hero in Martinique to this day.

"Heaven be praised you are not dead, senor," said a very soft voice, and, on turning my head, I found the Senorita seating herself beside me.

It was some few minutes after dawn, and in the dim light her face looked very wan and haggard. Allowing for the wear and tear of time and the exigencies of a most anxious and untoward experience, she was dressed very much the same as she had been when she left the ball-room at La Gloria on the night on which I had effected their capture. But the woman in her extraordinary beauty was still the same. She was certainly one female in a thousand, and he would have been a curious individual who could have shown himself insensible to her fascinations. Then Fernandez turned his head, saw her bending over me, and came over and also seated himself beside me.

"Dear friend," he began, in a voice that was full of kindness, "I am not going to attempt to thank you for all that you have done for me. For the present it is sufficient for me to do what I can to mitigate your sufferings. I won't deny that there have been people who have doubted my medical ability; I am about to prove to you, however, that I am more capable than they suppose."

So saying, he removed the wrappings from my arm and commenced operations. The bullet, it seemed, had shattered the bone, and was fortunately now lying quite close to the surface. To extract it was the work of a few painful minutes, after which the limb was set and bound up. That accomplished I was at liberty to rise from the hatch.

All this time our behaviour towards each other was as diffident as could well be imagined. For once the President had dropped his cynicism, while the Senorita regarded me with eyes that overflowed with gratitude.

The island had long since disappeared below the horizon, and now the little schooner was cleaving her way through the water under the influence of a capital breeze. Escorted by the Senorita I made my way aft.

Monsieur Maxime himself was at the wheel, presenting a curious figure as he hung upon the spokes. I found a shady spot for the Senorita, and then walked across to where the President was standing before the taffrail.

"I want you to tell me everything," I said. "How did you manage to effect our escape? Remember, I know nothing of what occurred after you placed me in the boat."

"There's not very much to tell," he answered. "I might mention, however, that Silvestre and the half-caste will give no further trouble."

"You shot Silvestre, then?"

"I did," he replied, "and I don't know that I ever enjoyed doing anything so much. It was a close thing between us. Look here!"

He pointed to his left ear, on the lobe of which was a small scar.

"It couldn't have been much closer, could it?" he remarked. "My luck, however, stood by me as usual." Then in a lower and more kindly tone, he added: "My luck and the luck of Equinata!"

For a few moments we stood side by side thinking our thoughts in silence. I recalled the day when I had first seen the dead man in Rio, and also that never-to-be-forgotten afternoon on which he had made the proposal to me that was destined to cost him his life on the beach of an island in the Carribean Sea and to return me to Equinata a wounded and ruined man.

At last Fernandez turned to me and, placing his hand upon my shoulder, looked me full and fair in the face.

"Trevelyan--Helmworth--Helmworth--Trevelyan--whatever your name may be, you have put upon me a debt of gratitude I shall never be able to repay. I must confess, however, that I cannot quite understand what it was that so suddenly made you change sides. I offered you excellent terms on the beach on the night that I fell into your hands, and I repeated it on board the yacht. You were a pillar of rectitude then. When, therefore, the game had been played and your employer had won, why did you so suddenly come to my rescue? I think I know you well enough by this time to feel sure that your conversion was due to no mercenary motive."

"You may make your mind easy on that score," I replied. "It was not a question of money."

"Then will you tell me why you did it? Silvestre, when his chance came, would doubtless have proved himself an excellent patron, of course providing it didn't suit his book to put you out of the way!"

"That's exactly it," I replied. "You have put the matter in a nutshell."

"I am afraid I am dense enough not to be able to grasp your meaning," he returned.

"You suggest that it might possibly have suited his book to have put me out of the way. Well, that is why I threw in my lot with you. It would make rather a long story, but I will endeavour to tell it to you as briefly as I can. When I agreed with Silvestre in England to effect your----"

I paused for a moment with a little embarrassment. Fernandez' eyes twinkled.

"Shall we say *deportation*?" he inquired.

"To effect your deportation! I did so upon his giving me his word of honour that no harm should happen to you. I had no objection to his keeping you a prisoner as long as he pleased----"

"Which he certainly did. Proceed!"

"I have already confessed to you that had I known you first I would not have undertaken the work; but I was out of employment----"

"The mail steamer *Pernambuco*--stormy interview with the Board of Directors in London--meeting with Silvestre in the garden of the Inn at Falstead--five thousand pounds down--and five thousand when I should be handed over to him----"

He laughed good-humouredly as he noticed my almost overwhelming surprise.

"My dear fellow, to rule a country like Equinata one must possess a faculty for obtaining information. Allow me to frankly admit that I was conversant with Mr. Trevelyan's history and of his acquaintance with ex-President Silvestre, when he made his appearance in his beautiful yacht in the harbour of La Gloria. But in telling you this I am interrupting your narrative. Pray proceed! You remarked, I think, that you were out of employment."

"I was; and the money offered me by Silvestre was too tempting to be refused. I came, I saw you, and as you know, I conquered. I handed you over to Silvestre, as I had contracted to do, and once more secured from him his promise that, with the exception of imprisonment, no harm should befall you. It was then agreed that I should leave the island at once in the yacht for Cuba, *en route* for England. The money promised me for the work I had done was handed to me, and I left Silvestre."

"But you could not have reached Cuba in the time?"

"I did not attempt to do so. A certain conversation I had with Captain Ferguson changed all my plans."

"And the purport of that conversation?"

"It appears that Ferguson had by chance overheard the half-caste, Manuel, discussing with the negress, Palmyre, certain instructions they had received from Silvestre. Immediately the yacht returned from conveying me from Cuba it would appear that Silvestre was to set sail for Equinata, and as soon as he was out of the way you and the Senorita were to be poisoned by Palmyre."

"Good heavens! The cowardly scoundrel!"

For the first time since I had known Fernandez I saw a look of fear pass over his face. It was not until later that I learnt that assassination by poisoning was the one thing in the world he dreaded.

"Well," he went on when he had regained his composure, "what happened after that?"

"I arranged with Ferguson that, instead of taking me on to Cuba, he should drop me at Asturia. I was fortunate enough to secure this schooner, and hurried back in her--in the hope of effecting your release. The rest you know!"

He nodded.

"Yes," he said, "the rest I know!"

He turned away from me almost abruptly, and stood for some moments looking down at the bubbling water under the counter. When he addressed me again it was in quite his old manner.

"We live in an extraordinary world," he remarked. "You plot to separate me from my country and end by restoring me to it. Silvestre agrees to make your fortune and finished by placing you in a worse position than you were before. Even the Senorita yonder has found things turn out contrary to her expectations. On the night of the now famous ball at La Gloria, she was by no means satisfied, so I was given to understand, with her ball dress; yet that strange taskmaster, Force of Circumstances, has decreed that she should wear it, without intermission, longer than any festive costume ever purchased?"

"And what of yourself?"

"Ah! My case is perhaps stranger still. I began by looking upon you as my enemy and end by finding you my staunchest friend. I imagined that I had you in my power, and a few hours later found myself in yours. Silvestre bought your services for ten thousand pounds--I get them for nothing."

If ever there was a strange voyage it was that one. The schooner herself was a very fair sea boat; that, however, was about all that could be said in her favour. It was her cabin accommodation that proved most trying. After the first attempt the Senorita declared emphatically that nothing could induce her to sleep in it again. Monsieur Maxime might say what he pleased, she declared, but her mind was made up. It was offered to the President, but he declined. As for myself, I had already tried it on the voyage from Asturia, and had no desire to repeat the experiment.

The living on board was but little better. Monsieur Maxime was wont to declare that the cook, Adolphe, was a past master of the culinary art. In this statement, I fear, he somewhat exaggerated; indeed, had I not laid in a stock of provisions before setting out, I dare not think how we should have fared.

On one occasion the Senorita had the temerity to explore his galley. She emerged with a white face and a settled determination to partake no more of his *ragouts*, *bouillons*, etc.

"Really," she observed to me, "one scarcely knows where to go on board this wretched vessel. The cabin is too terrible, and as for that kitchen----"

She made an expressive gesture with her hands as if to express her horror of the place in question.

The same evening I was destined to have a somewhat curious interview with the Senorita. We had partaken of our evening meal, such as it was, and had gone forward into the bows to enjoy the cooler air there. It was a perfect night, and surely no mortal man could have desired a fairer companion than I had then. We settled ourselves down comfortably, and, having obtained her permission, I lit a cigar. I do not know why I should have done so, but I could not help feeling that I was booked for a sentimental scene. Some men would doubtless have welcomed it. For myself, however, I must confess, that I dreaded it. The Senorita was dangerous always, and never more so than when inclined to be sentimental.

"Senor Trevelyan," she began, when we had been seated some minutes, and had talked of the beauty of the evening, the freshness of the breeze and a hundred different subjects, "you of course know that there was a time when I was your avowed enemy?"

"I am afraid I must say that I *do* know it," I answered, "and I should add that you were justified. No one could wonder at your distaste for me."

"Oh, I don't mean that," she cried, with a little protesting movement of her hands. "For see how nobly you have behaved since. No, do not interrupt me. I want to say what is in my mind, for I know that I owe you an apology. It was all my fault. I hoped to have won you to our side." She paused for a moment. "Unfortunately, I did not know that you were already in love!"

"Then the information the President gave her was not altogether complete," I said to myself. And on thinking it over since I have often been struck by the omission of this one, and probably the most important factor in the whole affair. For the fact cannot be denied that had it not been for my love for Molly, and the consequent desire to make money, I should, in all probability, not have embarked upon the matter at all.

"Senorita," I returned, "I fear I stand before you in an altogether despicable light, so far as my time in Equinata is concerned. The pitiful part of the whole business is that, had it to be gone over again, I should probably act as I have done. However, I have shot my bolt, and, though I managed to hit the bull's-eye, that is to say, I succeeded in capturing the President, I have failed to receive the prize. Let that be my punishment."

"But you mustn't talk of punishment," she cried. "You are mistaking my meaning. Do you think that I am here to reproach you? No, no, far from that! What I want to suggest is that you should permit us to show our gratitude. Had it not been for you Equinata would never have seen General Fernandez again, and I should not be here with you now."

How grateful the President is you can see for yourself. Why should you not stay in Equinata? It is destined to be a great country. There are always opportunities for the man who can seize them. You are that man. Why not try? Would *my* help count for nothing?"

As she said this she drew a little closer to me. The perfume of her hair was as intoxicating as the finest wine.

"Think! think!" she continued. "Fernandez cannot rule for ever. He might not last a year even. Then----"

She was so close to me that her lips almost touched my face.

"Don't you think we had better be walking aft?" I said. "Your *uncle* is probably wondering where we are!"



CHAPTER XV

Between ten and eleven o'clock on one never-to-be-forgotten evening, the *La Belle Josephine* sailed into the harbour of La Gloria, and dropped her anchor a short distance from the old coal hulk. Who that witnessed the arrival of that tiny craft imagined the important part she had played in the destiny of that small but exceedingly excitable Republic? For my part I know that as I stood on deck and watched Monsieur Maxime take her in between the heads, and scientifically bring her to her anchorage, I found myself experiencing a series of emotions, the like of which I have never before known. The President stood on my right, the Senorita on my left, and as we watched the twinkling lights ashore, I fancy all three of us recalled the eventful morning when we had said good-bye to the town under such very different circumstances. Our arrival had evidently been signalled from the forts, for we had scarcely dropped our anchor before a hail from the bows announced the fact that the harbour-master's boat was approaching.

Most men, I suppose, have at some time of their lives a touch of the theatrical. For myself at that moment I was distinctly desirous of giving a dramatic turn to the situation. The plot of my drama is an exciting one. The President of the Republic is missing; the supposed villain is believed to have abducted him. Time goes by. A mysterious vessel enters the harbour at the dead of night, when, to the amazement of every one, the missing President is found to be on board, and the man who has saved him, and has brought him back to the nation he loves so well, turns out to be the very individual who is supposed to have wrought his ruin. What situation could have been more thrilling? I had already walked a short distance along the deck, but as soon as I recognized in the boat coming alongside the pompous little official who had boarded the yacht with so much ceremony on the occasion of my first appearance in the country, I changed my mind, and hastened back to the President!

"What does your Excellency desire?" I inquired. "Would you prefer the news of your return to reach the city at once, or would you rather that it should be announced in the morning?"

"It is immaterial to me," he replied. Then he added quickly, "No! No! On the contrary, it is most material. There is a considerable amount of business to be transacted first!"

I could guess what was passing in his mind.

"Yes, to-morrow morning would certainly be better," he continued reflectively.

"In that case," I replied, "it would be as well for you to retire with the Senorita to the cabin. From what I know of our friends who are now coming aboard, the secret of your arrival would not be a secret many minutes after they got ashore."

"You are still in command, Senor Trevelyan," the President returned, with one of his short laughs. "Permit me, Dolores, to escort you to the saloon. I trust that you will not keep us there longer than you can help."

"If you will permit me I shall join you there myself as soon as I have given instructions to Monsieur Maxime," I replied. "For several reasons I have no desire to be recognized in Equinata at present."

Having seen them depart to the miserable little hole aft, I went forward to Monsieur Maxime, and gave him his orders in a low voice. After that I rejoined my friends. From what we could hear of the conversation that followed, the port officials were in by no means good tempers, and poor Maxime was roundly taken to task for putting in an appearance at such an hour, for giving them the trouble of boarding his vessel, and, it would appear, for his remissness in having no cases of infectious disease on board. After about a quarter of an hour the officials departed as they had come, that is to say, grumbling. When the sound of their oars had died away we left the cabin.

"Now the question to be decided is how to get ashore without attracting attention," said Fernandez. "If they recognize me in the streets, the news will be all over the city by breakfast-time."

"Maxime must put us ashore further down the bay," I replied. "If we are discovered we shall then only run the risk of being taken for smugglers."

I had heard Fernandez boast of the completeness and efficiency of his coastguard service. This was certainly a good opportunity of putting it to the test.

Fernandez agreed to the arrangement, and, as soon as all was quiet ashore, we began our preparations for leaving the schooner. A boat was lowered, and four of Monsieur Maxime's ebony crew took their places in her. Then we bade the owner good-night, ordered him to call at the palace on the morrow for his reward, and in our turn descended to the boat.

It was an exquisite night, and so still that we could distinctly hear the ripple of the waves upon the beach, more than half-a-mile away. Carrying out the plan we had arranged we did not make for the shore near the city, but steered a course more to the south, in the direction of the little fishing village where we had captured the President. At last the boat's nose touched the shore, and the men leapt out and pulled her out of the water on to the beach. I landed, and gave my hand to the Senorita, who sprang nimbly ashore; the President followed.

"Welcome back to Equinata, your Excellency," I said, with a bow.

For once his composure deserted him. He did not answer me, but turning his back upon us, walked for a short distance along the beach. When he rejoined us he was himself again. In the meantime I had ordered the men to take the boat back to the schooner, and had promised them that a liberal reward should be sent them in the morning. After that we took council together as to how we should reach the city. It would be impossible for the Senorita to walk so far in the shoes she was then wearing; there was also the risk of the President and Senorita being recognized to be considered. We were still discussing this momentous question when a noise behind us attracted our attention. We immediately turned to find three men hastening towards us. They wore the uniform of the Equinata Coastguard Service, and the individual in the centre was plainly an officer.

"Confound them," I muttered to myself, "they're smarter than I imagined. If I'm not mistaken, this will upset our plans, and the President's arrival will be known after all."

This was not the case, however. Their appearance was destined to prove a blessing in disguise.

"What brings you ashore, senors, at such an hour?" the officer inquired, addressing me. "And what boat was it that landed you?"

I was about to invent some story, but the President, with his customary quickness, had grasped the situation, and was prepared to make capital out of it.

"A word with you in private, senor," he said, addressing the officer before him. "I fancy I can satisfy you as to our honesty."

The other threw a glance at the Senorita, bowed, and acquiesced. They walked a few paces together, and though I could hear the President's voice, I could not catch anything of what he said. Their conversation lasted something like five minutes, after which they rejoined us.

"Our friend here," said Fernandez, "quite understands the situation, and has kindly offered to arrange matters for us."

The officer bowed with ceremonious respect to the Senorita. Then to me he said, with a pomposity that was almost ludicrous--

"Senor, Equinata thanks you for the service you have rendered her."

Then, having invited us to follow him, and bidding his men continue their patrol, he led us across the beach by a rough footpath to the high road above.

"If your Excellency will do me the honour to wait here," he said, "I will hasten to the house of my friend, Senor Rodriguez Cardaja, and obtain from him the loan of a carriage in which to convey you to the palace."

"We will await your return," answered the President. "I may, of course, rely upon your impressing the necessity of silence upon Senor Cardaja?"

"He will be as silent as the grave, Excellency," the other returned, and added somewhat inconsequently, "we are old friends!"

Then, begging us to excuse him, he hastened on his errand.

"I trust he will not be long obtaining the carriage," said Fernandez, offering me a cigar, and lighting one himself. "As I said a short time ago, I have a large amount of business to get through before daylight. Dolores, my dear, I fancy you will not be sorry to exchange that dress for another."

"If you knew how I hate it," she replied passionately, "and yet--" she stopped suddenly, and I fancied that she shivered. "Oh, how glad I am to be back!"

A long silence fell upon us, which was eventually broken by the sound of carriage-wheels. A few moments later a lumbering vehicle made its appearance round the side of the hill. To our surprise it was driven by the lieutenant himself. He explained that he had not brought his friend's coachman, having regard to the desire for secrecy expressed by the

President. He would himself drive us into the Capital, and return the carriage to his friend afterwards. Then we took our places in it and set off. During the journey the officer informed us of all that had transpired in the country during our absence. General Sagana, it appeared, had assumed the office of President--much against his will--while Hermanos and his band of patriots boldly announced the return of Silvestre to power.

"Hermanos and I must discuss the matter together," said the President quietly, and I fancied I could see the smile upon his face as he said it.

In something under half-an-hour we reached the palace. We descended from the vehicle at a side door, thanked the lieutenant for the services he had rendered us, and then watched him drive off on his return journey. So far matters had prospered excellently; but I am prepared to admit that I did not quite see what was going to happen next. Fernandez, however, seemed to have made up his mind. Taking a bunch of keys from his pocket, as calmly as if he were only returning after a short stroll, he approached the door and opened it. A small gas-jet illumined the vestibule. We entered and softly closed the door after us. From the vestibule we passed into a narrow passage, which in its turn communicated with the great hall and the State apartments. Surely never had the ruler of a country returned to his palace in a more unostentatious fashion. We made our way through the great glass doors into the magnificent entrance hall, between the lines of statuary, and finally entered the President's private study. So far our presence in the house had not been discovered. General Sagana, his wife and daughters, their *aides-de-camp* and secretaries, to say nothing of the household, were all in bed and doubtless asleep.

"I wonder if the Gas Company, which, by the way, my dear Trevelyan, is capitalized almost exclusively by Englishmen, realizes what an important part it is playing in the history of Equinata," Fernandez remarked, as he applied a match to one of the jets. "Now, if you have no objection, we will proceed to business. It would be a pity to disturb the family of Sagana; they will know everything in due course. Dolores, you may remember that there is an excellent sofa in your boudoir. Permit me to conduct you thither!"

Before replying she looked at me, and there was something in her glance that I was at a loss to understand. She was tired, draggled, and altogether different to her real self, and, strange to say, there was also a curious hunted look in her eyes for which I could not account. She seemed to be appealing to me, and yet I was not conscious of any reason why she should do so. However, she rose and went away with the President, leaving me alone in the room.

It was a fine apartment, hung with the portraits of many past Presidents. I looked from one to the other, as if in the hope of gathering information from them. But they only regarded me with stony indifference, as if the fate of Equinata was a thing in which they no longer took any interest.

It would be difficult to express in words my feelings at that moment. As a matter of fact, I knew that I was between two fires. I had gone out of my way to save Fernandez; at the same time, unless I allowed him to reward me, which I was determined not to do, I had lost all I possessed (for I was resolved not to keep the first five thousand pounds of Silvestre's money) in the world. I must begin life over again, in which case my marriage with Molly was as far off as ever. I was aware of Fernandez' friendship, so far as I was concerned, yet I knew him well enough to feel sure that he would repay old scores against Hermanos and his other enemies. That being so, could I stand by and let them be punished, when, but for me, they would have escaped scot-free. It was not a cheerful outlook for any of us.

A few minutes later Fernandez returned.

"Now to business," he said. "Do me the favour of seating yourself at that writing-table."

I did so, wondering, and he placed a sheet of notepaper before me.

"I want you to write to Senor Hermanos, asking him to come to the palace with all haste. Tell him that the rightful President has returned, and at the same time request him to bring his friends with him to welcome him!"

"One moment," I said. "Before I do that I must know your intentions. I am going to speak plainly, General Fernandez! You must remember that I have already had experience of the manner in which Presidents of Equinata deal with their rivals."

He was not in the least put out by my candour. On the contrary, he laughed good-humouredly.

"You need not be afraid," he said. "I am not going to harm them. As a matter of fact I intend making them very good friends--not for to-day, but for all time. What assurance can I give you?"

I could not see that there was any. What was more, I could not see how my refusal to write the letter could save Hermanos, if Fernandez were determined to be revenged on him. I accordingly took up my pen and did as he requested. When I had finished, he read the letter carefully, possibly to make sure that I had not said anything in it that might

serve as a warning to the conspirators. Would his ruse succeed? Would Hermanos fall into such a very simple trap? The mere fact that Silvestre had not written it himself would surely make him suspicious. Fernandez, however, evidently thought otherwise. When I had addressed the envelope he placed the letter inside, and then, begging me to excuse him once more, left the room. When he returned a quarter of an hour later, he informed me that he had dispatched the letter by a trustworthy messenger.

"You should have seen the worthy Antoine's face when I woke him," he said. "He thought he was looking at a ghost. In an hour or so our friends should be here."

To while away the time of waiting we made a raid upon the palace larder, carried the spoil we obtained there to the smaller dining-room, where presently the curious spectacle might have been observed of a lady in a sadly-dilapidated ball-dress, the President of the Republic of Equinata, and your humble servant, demolishing cold chicken with considerable gusto.

Our meal was barely finished before the door opened and a little grey-haired man entered the room. He was Antoine, the old major-domo of the household, who had served more Presidents than any other official in Equinata.

"Well, Antoine, what is it?" the President inquired.

"They are coming, your Excellency," said the little man.

"And they do not suspect?"

"No, Excellency," the other replied. "I told Senor Hermanos that if he desired to be the first to welcome President Silvestre, he must make haste."

"Excellent! Immediately they arrive, meet them yourself, and conduct them to the small audience chamber. I will receive them there!"

Half-an-hour or so later, and just as we had finished our second bottle of champagne, Antoine again made his appearance to inform us that Hermanos and his companions had arrived and were awaiting an interview in the room above mentioned. I saw Fernandez' mouth twitch and then set firm; there was also an ominous twinkle in his eyes as he said--

"Come with me, my friend, and we will interview them."

"You will remember the promise you have given me?" I said, laying my hand upon his arm.

"You will find that I shall keep it," he replied curtly.

I followed him from the room along the hall to a door on the right, at which Antoine was waiting.

"Have my instructions concerning the guard been obeyed?" he asked in a low voice before he turned the handle.

"They have, Excellency," Antoine replied.

Then we passed into the room.

If I live to be a hundred I shall not forget the scene that followed. Hermanos was standing on the opposite side of the room, and grouped about him were three men whom, to the best of my knowledge, I had never seen before. It is possible they might have been Hermanos' assistants on that memorable night when we had secured the President, but as they then wore masks I cannot speak on that point with any degree of certainty.

The light in the room was not particularly good, and for a moment I thought that Hermanos did not realize who it was that entered the room. Had he done so he would scarcely have taken those two or three quick steps forward. When he grasped the situation his surprise was overwhelming.

"Fernandez?" I heard him mutter, as if he were thunderstruck.

His companions also seemed taken aback.

"Ah, my dear Hermanos," said the President genially, "and so we meet again. Gentlemen, I am delighted to find you here to welcome me."

"We've been tricked," cried Hermanos hoarsely. Then fixing his eyes on me, he continued, "So you've turned traitor, after all, senor? I congratulate you on the facility with which you change sides."

"Pardon me," interposed the President, "but I cannot permit you to insult my friend. I owe more to Senor Trevelyan

than I can say, and when you have heard the story I have to tell, I fancy you, and Equinata with you, will regard his behaviour in the light that I do. But before we say anything about that, let us endeavour to come to an understanding of our relative positions."

He paused for a moment to allow his audience to appreciate his words.

Then he went on--

"I cannot forget that you, Hermanos, are one of the gentlemen to whom I owe my abduction. The complicity of your companions I have yet to discover. Now for such an offence what is the punishment to be? My only desire is to be just."

I felt really sorry for Hermanos at that moment. He was familiar with the form that Fernandez' justice usually took.

"Come, come, my friend, why do you not answer me?" said the President banteringly. "You know how Silvestre would have acted under similar circumstances. What am I to do? Shall I call in the guard, have you arrested, and shot at sunrise, or shall I let you go free? You know my reputation, I think, and surely even a President should live up to that?"

"We are in your power and cannot help ourselves," the unfortunate Hermanos replied.

"I am very much afraid you cannot," the President returned. "You should have thought of that, however, before you took to kidnapping the head of your country. You were never a man, Hermanos, who could make up his mind!"

Once more the President paused, and looked from one to the other of the wretched men before him.

"Don't play with us," cried one of the others. "If you have made up your mind to shoot us, do so, but don't keep us in suspense."

"Forgive me, it was remiss of me," Fernandez replied with dangerous politeness. "Antoine."

The door was opened immediately, and the major-domo appeared.

"Call up the Guards," said the President.

Antoine disappeared, to return a few moments later with the officer of the Guard and his men.

"Take these gentlemen to the cartel," said the President, "and stand guard over them until daylight. I will send you word within an hour as to what you are to do with them. In the meantime I hold you responsible for their safety."

I was altogether unprepared for this move. Was Fernandez about to break his promise to me? It certainly looked very much like it. I was on the point of expostulating, when the door opened and the Senorita entered hurriedly. She glanced from one to the other of us with a frightened expression upon her face. Then she turned to Fernandez.

"What is the meaning of this?" she asked, holding out her hands to him as if in supplication.

"Forgive me, my dear, but I think it would be better if you leave us," the President replied. "I shall be very happy to give you full particulars later."

"No, no," she cried. "Senor Hermanos, you helped to bring this trouble upon us, and--ah! I see it all. Why are you here at this hour, and what is the meaning of the Guard?" Then turning to the President she continued, "Oh, sir, are we never to be free from this sort of thing? Is it impossible for us all to be friends?"

"It certainly seems difficult," Fernandez replied. "Thanks to Senor Hermanos and his friends, I have passed through an extremely dangerous and unpleasant crisis. Had matters gone as they intended they should do, by this time I should have been in my grave. Fortune favoured me, however, and now I have returned to my own. Who can blame me if I repay those who would have worked my ruin?"

Turning to the captain of the Guard, he bade him remove his prisoners. On hearing this the Senorita completely broke down. She fell on her knees at the President's feet and implored him to forgive. Whether it was a mere matter of acting and had all been previously arranged, as I am sometimes tempted to believe, or whether it was genuine, I am not in a position to say. Whatever else it may have been, however, it was at least effective. Then I saw my opportunity and took advantage of it.

"Your Excellency must forgive me if I interfere," I said. "There seems one point, however, that has escaped your attention. If Senor Hermanos and his companions are to be held guilty for your abduction, it is only fit and proper that I, who was the leading spirit in it, should take my place with them. If they are to be shot then I must share their fate."

My decision seemed to stagger them. He looked from me to them and then back again. Then he laughed outright, but I could not help thinking that his merriment lacked sincerity.

"You are certainly an extraordinary man, my dear Trevelyan. You abduct me and then save my life. You rejoice at being friends with me again and then ask me to shoot you. It seems to me, Hermanos, that you are fortunate in your advocates. The Senorita, to whom I can deny nothing, pleads for you; Senor Trevelyan, to whom I owe my life, refuses to let you die unless he dies too. I should be more than human to resist!" Then, waving his hand to the captain of the Guard, who had been watching us with a puzzled expression upon his face, he continued, "Well, well, since it must be, let it be so! You can leave us."

The captain retired with his men, and a somewhat awkward silence fell upon us. There was still a look of pleading upon the Senorita's face. The President, however, seemed thoughtful. It was evident that he had no desire to forego his vengeance. He paced the room for a few minutes, while we watched him with anxious faces. Heaven alone knows what Hermanos and his friends were thinking of, but I know very well what I thought, and I can assure you, my dear reader, I was far from happy. At last he stopped, and, after a momentary pause, faced Hermanos.

"Hermanos," he said, "you threw in your lot with my enemies, and you could not blame me if I made you answer for so doing. I certainly intended to do so; but I suppose we are none of us infallible, and with such pleading in your favour, I have nothing left me but to surrender. From this moment you are free. I give you your lives, gentlemen! Is it possible, since Silvestre is dead, for you to give me your allegiance? Now, shall we shake hands, endeavour to forget the past, and live only to promote the happiness of the country, for which we have risked so much?"

One by one they advanced and solemnly shook Fernandez by the hand. Then, at a signal from the President, Antoine left the room, to appear a moment later with a tray of glasses and two bottles of champagne.

"Gentlemen," cried Fernandez, holding his glass aloft, "I give you the toast, 'Peace and prosperity to the fair State of Equinata.'"

When they had departed, Fernandez turned to me with a queer smile upon his face.

"I don't think they will trouble us again," he said.

I did not reply! What I was thinking was that I would have given something to have heard their conversation as they crossed the Square!



CHAPTER XVI

Strange to say, the populace of La Gloria did not appear to trouble themselves very much, either one way or the other, concerning their President's re-appearance. The officials, however, were, as behoved them, considerably more demonstrative. They were well acquainted with Fernandez' temper, and, like sagacious mortals, realized that it would be wiser for them to allow him to suppose that, whatever their own private opinions might be, they desired no better leader than himself. With Hermanos, and his fellow-conspirators, he was not likely, as he observed, to have very much trouble. They professed to have seen the error of their ways, and were as enthusiastic in Fernandez' praise as they had hitherto been in his detriment. As for my own part in this singular business I allowed Fernandez to tell the story in his own fashion. This he did, to such good purpose that in a very short time I found myself the hero of La Gloria, an honour with which I could very well have dispensed. Monsieur Maxime and his crew were most liberally rewarded by the President, as were Matthews and his fellow-sailor. They remained in Equinata for a short time, but what became of them later I cannot say.

"My dear Trevelyan," said Fernandez to me one morning, "I really intend that we should have a serious talk together. Now you know that whenever I have broached the subject of a recompense to you for the trouble you have taken, you have invariably put me off with some excuse or another, but I will be denied no longer. Forgive me if I say I am well acquainted with the state of your finances."

"It is not a fine prospect, is it?" I said, with a laugh.

"If you had stood by Silvestre and had left me to my fate, you would have been a comparatively rich man. And even if you did turn the tables upon Silvestre, why were you so quixotic as to hand him back the money?"

"I think you can guess," I answered. "If you can't, I am afraid I must leave you to work the problem out."

"And if you would not take *his* money, why should you be equally particular in my case? It is only fair that I should recompense you for the inestimable service you have rendered me."

"I am afraid that it is impossible," I answered, for, as I have already said, I had long since made up my mind upon this subject.

Fernandez endeavoured to press me, but I remained adamant. Nothing he could do or say would induce me to change my mind. I knew that it was only by adhering to my resolution that I could salve my conscience. I had still sufficient money of my own left to pay for my passage to England.

Important as the capital of Equinata may appear in the eyes of its inhabitants, it is, nevertheless, scarcely so prominent in the maritime world as certain other places I could mention on the South American coast. It was true I could wait for the monthly mail-steamer which would connect with a branch line at La Guayra, or I might take one of the small trading-boats and proceed along the coast until I could find a vessel bound for Europe. But having had sufficient of trading schooners in *La Belle Josephine* to last me a lifetime, I eventually made up my mind to await the coming of the mail-boat, which, if all went well, would put in an appearance in a fortnight's time.

During that fortnight I was permitted a further opportunity of studying the character of the Senorita under another aspect. Since her return to La Gloria she seemed to have undergone a complete change. Her temper was scarcely alike for two days at a time. She was capricious, wilful, easily made angry; then she would veer round, and be tender, repentant and so anxious to please, that it was impossible to be vexed with her.

"The President will miss you very much when you leave us," she said to me on the evening before my departure, as we stood together on the marble terrace overlooking the palace gardens.

It was a lovely night, and the air was filled with the scent of the orange blossom. I do not think my companion had ever looked more beautiful than she did at that moment. Indeed her beauty seemed to me to be almost unearthly.

"I fancy every one likes to feel that he or she will be missed," I answered. "You may be sure I shall often think of Equinata. Perhaps some day I may be able to return."

"Who knows where we shall be then?" she replied gloomily.

"What do you mean?" I asked in a tone of surprise. "You will, of course, be here, leading the Social Life of Equinata as you do now!"

"I am afraid that even now you do not realize how quickly affairs change in South America," she replied. "Some one else may manage to catch the Public Fancy, there will be a Revolution and we shall go out of power--perhaps to our

graves!"

"I cannot believe that. In any case your uncle would take care your safety is assured!"

She gave a little impatient tap with her foot upon the stones.

"Of course he would protect me if he could," she answered, "but he might not be able to do anything. Had you not come to our rescue on that island, what use would his protection have been to me? How do I know that we may not be situated like that again? Oh, I am tired of this life--tired--tired!"

Almost before I knew what had happened she was leaning on the balustrading, sobbing as if her heart would break. I was so taken by surprise, that for a moment I did not know what to say, or do, to comfort her. Then I went forward and placed my hand gently upon her shoulder.

"Senorita," I said, "is there anything I can do to help you?"

"No, no," she answered. "You can do nothing! Leave me to my misery. Does it matter to you, or to any one, what becomes of me?"

"It must matter a good deal to your friends," I replied.

"Friends?" she cried, facing me once more and speaking with a scorn impossible to describe. "I have no friends. The women hate and fear me, the men cringe to me because of my influence with the President. Even he may grow tired of me before long, and then----"

I allowed this speech to pass uncommented on. At the same time I wished the President would make his appearance and put an end to what was becoming a rather dangerous *tete-a-tete*. When she spoke again it was in a fierce whisper.

"Do you remember that night when we stood together in the balcony of the Opera House, and talked of ambition and of what a man might rise to? Senor Trevelyan, I tell you this, if I loved a man I could help him to rise to anything. Do you hear me? To anything!"

There was only one way to treat the matter, and before I answered her I knew perfectly well what the result would be.

"Enviably man!" was all I said.

She drew herself up to her full height. Then, turning on her heel, she made her way swiftly towards the house. My silly compliment had succeeded where expostulation or reserve would have failed.

Next morning the mail-boat which was to carry me away from Equinata made her appearance in the harbour. She was to sail at midday, and up to eleven o'clock I had seen nothing of the Senorita. About ten minutes before I left the palace, however, she made her appearance in the President's study. Her face was somewhat paler than usual, and though she endeavoured to lead me to suppose that she had forgotten our conversation on the previous evening, I could see that the memory of it still weighed heavily upon her. The President had declared his intention of personally escorting me on board the steamer, and at the last moment, not a little to my surprise, the Senorita decided to accompany him. We accordingly set off, and in due course reached the vessel, a miserable packet of some six hundred tons, whose captain, on hearing of our arrival, hastened forward to receive his distinguished guests. After he had paid his respects he offered to show the Senorita the saloon, and thus gave me a few minutes alone with the President.

"It is needless for me to say how sorry I am that you are going," said the latter. "I wish I could have persuaded you to stay with us. But I suppose you know your own business best. Remember this, however! Should you ever need a friend, there is one in La Gloria to whom you can always turn!"

I thanked him and promised that I would not forget, and then the Senorita rejoined us. We had only time to exchange a few words before the whistle sounded for strangers to leave the ship.

"Good-bye," said the President, giving me his hand. "Think sometimes of Equinata."

"You may be sure I shall do that," I answered, with a glance at the white town ashore.

Then the Senorita in her turn held out her little hand. I took it, and as I did so looked into her eyes.

"Good-bye," she said, and in a low voice added:--"May the Saints protect you."

Then she followed the President to the gangway. A quarter of an hour later we were steaming between the Heads, and in half-an-hour La Gloria was out of sight.

CHAPTER XVII

It was a cold and foggy day in November when the steamer which I had boarded in Barbadoes reached the Thames. I had been absent from England more than four months, and the veriest glutton for excitement could not have desired more than had fallen to my lot.

Having bade my fellow-passengers good-bye, I caught the first available train to town only to discover, when I reached Fenchurch Street, that I should have some considerable time to wait at Waterloo before I could get on to Salisbury. I accordingly cast about me for a way of employing my time. This resolved itself in a decision to call upon my old friend, Mr. Winzor, in order to obtain from him the letter I had entrusted to his charge. As I made my way along the crowded streets I could not help contrasting them to the sun-bathed thoroughfares of La Gloria. In my mind's eye I could see again the happy-go-lucky *cafés* on the tree-shaded pavement, the white houses with their green shutters; and, behind the city, the mountains towering up, peak after peak, into the azure sky.

At last I turned into the street I remembered so well, and approached the office of my old friend. I ascended the steps and pushed open the glass door. Somewhat to my surprise a strange clerk accosted me. When I inquired for Mr. Winzor, the surprised look upon the youth's face told me that something unusual had happened.

"Don't you know that he is dead?" he inquired.

"Dead?" I cried, in genuine consternation. "Good heavens! you don't mean that!"

"He died more than six weeks ago," the young man replied. "He had some papers to sign in that room, and when his chief clerk went in to get them he found the old gentleman stone dead."

I was more distressed than I could say at this news. The little lawyer had been a kindly friend to me, and also to my mother.

Thanking the clerk for his information I left the office and made my way to Waterloo. There I took the train to Salisbury, and, on arrival at the cathedral city, set out for Falstead.

At this last stage of my story I will not weary you with a long description of my home coming. Let it suffice that I at last reached the village and found myself approaching the house of my childhood. The tiny gate had scarcely closed behind me when the front-door opened and my mother hastened to greet me.

When we reached her little drawing-room I questioned her concerning Molly.

"I expect her every moment," said my mother.

As she spoke the click of the gate caused me to go to the window with all speed.

Shall I describe what followed? Would it interest you to know how Molly and I greeted each other? I think not. I will inform you, however, that I was more than repaid for all I had been through by the way in which I was received.

Later in the evening we went for a walk together.

"Dick, dear," said my sweetheart, "you have not told me how your venture prospered."

This was the question I had been dreading.

"It has not prospered at all," I said. "The fact is, I have made nothing out of it. I am ashamed to say so, but I am poorer than when I left England four months ago."

To my surprise she received my information with perfect equanimity.

"But I am afraid you don't understand what it means to me, darling," I said. "And, before we go any further, I am going to tell you the whole story. Though it may make you think differently of me, I feel that I should let you know all."

I thereupon set to work and told her everything, from the moment of my first meeting with Silvestre on board the *Pernambuco* to my return to Falstead that evening. I finished with the information that there was still upwards of five thousand pounds of Silvestre's money to my credit in the Salisbury bank. I told her that it was my intention not to keep a halfpenny of it, but to send it anonymously to a London hospital.

"And I think you would be right, Dick," the sweet girl answered. "Do not keep it. It would only bring us bad luck. And now, what about our marriage?"

I shook my head.

"I fear, dear, we shall have to go on waiting," I said. "I must try and get another berth, but whether or not I shall be able to do so Heaven only knows."

"Dick, dear," she said, slipping her arm through mine as she spoke, "I cannot keep the secret from you any longer. I ought to have told you before."

"And what is this wonderful secret?" I inquired.

"I doubt whether I look it, Dick, but I am a very rich woman."

"A rich woman!" I cried incredulously. "What do you mean by that?"

For the moment I thought she was joking, but one glance at her face showed me that she was serious.

"I mean what I say," she answered. "I am a very rich woman. When poor old Mr. Winzor died he left me all his fortune--nearly forty thousand pounds."

I could scarcely contain my astonishment.

"Was it not good of him?" she continued. "Forty thousand pounds at three per cent. is twelve hundred pounds a year, is it not?"

Even then I was too much surprised by her information to be able to realize the change that had taken place in Molly's position.

"Are you not glad, dear?" she said at last.

"Yes, yes," I replied, "but I cannot quite understand it yet. It seems too good to be true."

"We shall be able to do so much with it," she said, drawing closer to me and lifting her sweet face to mine.

"I am luckier than I deserve to be," I answered.

And doubtless, my dear reader, you will say it was the truth.



Molly and I have been married five years. We have a boy of three, and a baby girl who promises to be the manager of her mother. We lead a very quiet life in a house we have built for ourselves on the outskirts of Falstead. There is not a happier man in the world than I am, nor has any man a sweeter wife. So far I have not returned to Equinata. As a matter of fact I do not suppose that I shall ever do so, for grievous changes have occurred there. As all the world is aware, Fernandez was assassinated while reviewing his troops on the Grand Plaza, two years after I left, while Sagana met with the same untimely fate a year later. Immediately on hearing the news I made inquiries as to the whereabouts of the Senorita, only to hear that she had fled the country and had entered a convent in the neighbourhood of Rio.

Perhaps she is happier there!

THE END



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