



The Filibusters

The Filibusters

A Romance

By Cutcliffe/Hyne

Author of "The Adventures of Captain Kettle," *etc.*

This story deals with the participants in an expedition that successfully captures the presidency of a Central American republic. It is very exciting, the incidents being fresh and daring with not too much reliance placed on coincidence.

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THE FILIBUSTERS

CHAPTER I

THE FIRST ENLISTMENT

THROUGHOUT the event narrated in the following history there were two Influences at work, which, counting from start to finish, we regarded with a very different set of emotions.

At first, being ignorant of their bare existence, we ignored them with all completeness. We had confidence in our wit, and the strength of our own right hands, and felt fear for no man living.

Next, having the work of the Influences violently thrust against our wishes and our welfare, or, again, pulling in our favour, we considered them with awe and some fright, as men must do things which shoot mysterious arrows and boons out of nothingness.

But afterwards, when we saw their fingers gripped on all the Master-strings, and knew with precision what manner of creatures they were, then we came to look upon the Influences with the two extremes of sentiment this day known to men. When the Influence was adverse, we classed it with the worst of things diabolic; but when it aided us, an enthusiasm spirited up in us that was near akin to worship.

We did not act on precedent in this, as there was no such thing as precedent to draw from. Our minds worked as our natures drove them; human-wise, that is; and because the Influences themselves were intensely human in the least as in the greatest of their efforts, nothing happened which might not have been altogether expected. But it was only, after all, the ties which bound us to Sacaronduca had been woven, unravelled, and finally broken for always, that we thoroughly understood this. No man can judge calmly and without prejudice when he is acting as a hot partisan in a furnace of action.

Now, not counting Briggs, who was inscrutable, we five who considered ourselves in the know clearly understood that Holsteins were backing the revolution. Of course, there is nothing very peculiar in that. Holsteins are the greatest financial house in the world; have a headquarters in each capital of Europe (except St. Petersburg); and hold a say in every war which is fought

throughout the world. They carry no arms, being Israelites; but they command all things and all men concerned, by reason of holding the necessary purse. On the surface they do not appear; and the Kings and the Emperors and the Presidents blow the war-trumpet with their own lips. But it is virtually one of the Barons Holstein who says to the nations, "Ye have my leave to fly at one another's throats: here be stores of gold and silver," or, "Ye shall have no money with which to fight: wherefore keep ye the peace."

With Holsteins, the revolution was to be a matter of speculative business. Their reward in case of our success was to be concession of territory for a railway, and extensive mining rights; so that if the thing came off with a win, they would have the happiness of adding a few more paltry millions to their ponderous capital. If, on the other hand, the existing Government of Sacaronduca proved too strong for the revolutionary forces, then Holsteins would drop a considerable amount of hard cash.

Looking at the matter in the light of afterknowledge, of course I see now that one of our actuating Influences must have been very hard at work in getting Holsteins to meddle with the business at all; seeing that (from their point of view) it was so very like a gamble as to be scarcely worth the name of speculation in any degree whatever. But this did not strike us when we of the executive had our preliminary meetings in Briggs' room at the Metropole in London. We were most of us extremely sweet on the chances of revolution then, arid vented sarcasm on Hebraic hardness over driving bargains.

But at the same time we were not fools enough to go about feeling too disgustingly cocksure that we should bring about a win. In fact the excitement of all of us was kept bubbling by the volcanic uncertainty of the thing. Fluellen, in particular, though quite the keenest of us for going forward, took a gloomy view of the chances from the very beginning. As General Briggs clearly put it to us, we mercenaries would be the principal persons to pay the piper in the case of non-success. That part of the world does not produce the climate which nourishes half-measures. If we got defeated and did not happen to be comfortably killed beforehand, we should have small favour to expect from President Maxillo when he contrived to lay hands upon us. He was a man half-Spanish, half-Indian; reared amongst the crackle of Central American revolutions; merciless as a Thug. If we succeeded, we could dub ourselves by any name that pleased us in the dictionary; but in the event of failure, we should rank as filibusters, as land-pirates of the baser sort, and the Government of Great

Britain and all the other Governments on earth would thank the Dictator of Sacaronduca for stamping us out.

Briggs, who was our president designate Don Esteban Puentos, they called him in Sacaronduca Briggs, I say, made no disguise about the matter. He said on the day that we signed our formal agreements with him: "I warn you gentlemen clearly what there is to look forward to. The existing Government is nothing more nor less than a successful brigand's camp. This is no exaggeration: it is a notorious fact. If we upset the present rulers and bring about a state of things more in accordance with common honesty and healthy progress, there will be no words too good for us. The country is brimming with possibilities, but so far it has never had a chance ever since the first white man came to cumber the soil. If a Sacaronducan shows energy and enterprise, and puts money together, or founds a business, or starts a mine, all his neighbours promptly take a grab at the plunder, and the Government naggles for the biggest share. No man has a chance to exert his strength on legitimate lines. And so the strong man who means to go ahead, has only one opening before him. Circumstances will not let him be honest; and consequently he aspires to be as big a rogue as possible. As a result all the able men of the country adopt the harrying of their neighbours as their natural profession.

"Now, gentlemen, I am no propounder of a thousand niggling laws. I believe in men doing much as they please within reasonable limits. But there are limits, and Sacaronduca treads over them. If I get my grip on the country, I shall stop that little game without a vignette. I shall make no pretence of letting them down gently. That would be merely a confession of weak-mindedness. One cannot act there according to any European code of ethics: 'autre pays, autre mœurs.' So, gentlemen, I shall apply the only argument understood of the people, and shoot the worst cases out of hand.

"As a result, the country will leap at its chance, and improve with a rush. The Sacaronducans themselves will open it out much, and our fellows whom we bring with us will open it out still more. And the outside world will see that a Central American Republic need not of necessity be a helpless seething volcano of anarchy.

"There is risk about all this, of course, but I think that my friends out there, with your help, gentlemen, can bring it to pass. If we are successful, the natives who help will be called patriots, you will be high-minded military philanthropists,

and I shall be numbered amongst the world's great liberators. Only a few newspapers who do not understand or who are interested in the other party will yap. But if we are beaten, you must understand clearly what will happen. We shall be bloody-minded rebels and murderous filibusters. If once we step on to the planks of that pillory, there are not ten people in the world who will not join in the howl against us."

The head of the revolution paused, glancing his grey eyes keenly from one to the other of us. Most of us found plenty of occupation in digesting what he had said. It was Coffin who broke the silence.

"It's best so, General," he said cheerfully. "As things are, we're being ridden on the spur, and so we're likely either to get there or bust. I take it that's the way to handle this event. There's no consolation prize to look for except a platoon or a cable of hempen tow and a tree, or, perhaps, to be more local, 'el garrote.' And in that case it's mere foolishness to insure oneself so as to have something left for the next event. Once we start its 'vestigia nulla retrorsum,' fortunes or funerals, unlimited shooting, and a price on your head. General, you've offered me the first bit of excitement in all creation, and I'm just filled up with delight at the thought of it. I'll drink to it this minute. No, not champagne. It's too good a thing, this of yours, to wish luck to in the best champagne that was ever wired. By your leave I'll be true to my country, and mix myself a whisky and soda, and do proper justice to you in that."

He went to the sideboard and returned to the table with a hissing tumbler-load. He put one foot on a chair and thrust the glass of liquor high in the air. "Gentlemen," he cried, "I call upon you to drink in bumpers to General Briggs and a blazing revolution."

His enthusiasm set the match to ours. We, too, sprang up, with leaping glasses; and the face of the man we drank flushed with pride and pleasure. But he did not say anything. He nodded gravely, and lit a fresh cigar.

It was Davis who put in the next word. "May I inquire, sir," he said, "a little more about the social aspect of this business? In cases of success, shall we find an assured position in Sacaronducan society?"

I saw Coffin cock his eye at Carew, and understood the grin which passed between them. The question was very typical of Davis. He was desperately bent

on bettering himself socially.

Briggs, of course, took the man quite earnestly. He had a faculty of doing this when he chose, and it gave him much of his power. He appreciated the fact that anyone may resent ridicule, but that many people are willing to pay in service for sympathy and appreciation; and being a wise man, he neglected no means which might tend to further his ends.

“You may rest assured, Mr. Davis,” he said, “that I shall not be forgetful in that respect. Hitherto the presidents of Sacaronduca have acted with the instincts of brigands, and their manners have been formed so as not to spoil the completeness of the part. They have been vulgar assassins and even more vulgar housekeepers. To my way of thinking these are both criminal errors in a ruler especially the latter of the two. The pomp and formalities of a court lend dignity to a State, and to neglect them is a piece of commercial fatuousness. More is done for a Government in the drawing-rooms of society than with all the rifles that were ever put into the field; and it is to help me in this respect that I have selected my officers, quite as much as for their other abilities.”

“I suppose, sir,” said Davis tentatively, “you would hardly think it worth while to institute titles of nobility? At present, that is?”

“Why, to tell you the truth, Mr. Davis, the idea had not struck me before. But I admit that it has its good points. What do you say, Sir William?”

Carew was filling his pipe. He continued the operation as he spoke: “Oh, as far as I’m concerned, damn titles. They don’t bring in half as much money as they help you to pay out, and they often make people stare at the precise moments when you don’t want to be looked at. But I believe some varieties of flats like wearing ‘em, and I don’t see they do any particular harm to anybody else. But I say, General, the prospect of never-ending afternoon teas isn’t quite what I look forward to for the balance of my declining years. And I don’t think I should find a succession of levees and State balls exhilarating even in Sacaronduca. I’ve got much more material ambitions. What I want to know is, where does the plunder come in? Hugh, I say, chuck me the matches. I’ve been in a state of stoney-broke ever since I couldn’t pay my tuck-shop bill at dame-school, and I don’t mind telling you (without the least ornamental trimming to the statement) that what I’m joining your racket for, is what I can make out of it. The titles, Davis may collect to his heart’s content; the honour and glory you may split amongst you;

so long as I can get my cargo of dollars, I shall be entirely content. I'm not fastidious, 'mon General.' I'm the least careful man about my skin in all England, Fluellen not excepted; I'm not in the smallest bit squeamish about dirtying my fingers over the operation; but if I'm to turn soldier of fortune under your aegis, it is in return for a clear opportunity to loot."

"Here," said Coffin, "are the matches. Light your pipe, Billy, and shut your mouth round the end of it. You are a most abominable pirate if one could believe what you say. General, don't mind him: the creature isn't half such a blackguard as he tries to make out."

Briggs laughed. "If we were entirely honest," he said, "wouldn't we most of us have to confess that we were going into the business because we want to make something out of it? Some of us desire power; some excitement. Others aspire for position; others again for a money competency." He glanced at Fluellen, and then turned his gaze rather ostentatiously away from him. "And," he added, "I can imagine, gentlemen, that more than one man will throw himself heart and soul into all the risks and strivings of our enterprise from no other motive than to make a series of entirely new interests, and to cut himself away from memories of unpleasant things which have gone before. So you can say we are none of us disinterested. Indeed, a man who came into an affair of this sort without some definite personal motive would be nothing short of an idiot. And," the General concluded with a dry smile, "I am not an idiot myself, neither do I offer employment to idiots."

"By Jove," said Coffin, "if this is to be a declared game, I suppose I shall have to save myself from being classed as an idiot by saying what I'm after, though on my soul I'd never thought of such a small trifle before. Better put me down for loot, too, General. My family's too old to take up a brand new title with a decent grace, and as for making me Governor-General of a province, or Prime Minister, or Master of the Horse, I'm afraid the regular hours wouldn't suit at all. I like to take my occupations pretty highly spiced, and I like to take them in doses when the fancy comes upon me. So, General, dear, we'll write it down that I'm after money. I'm not so broke as Billy here, and I seem to have worried along pretty comfortably on just double my income since I was twenty-one, and that's eight years ago now; but if I could double what I have, why, then, I could quadruple what I spend, and have six times as high a time of it."

The General laughed and nodded, and said he would remember, and I, sitting

near him, marvelled within myself as to why he had made this cheery, irresponsible, whisky-drinking, sportadoring little Irishman into one of his principal officers. To my limited vision then, the man seemed a mere piece of laughing incompetence, possessed of a delicious untrustworthiness, and nothing else. But afterwards, when the fighting came, he turned out to be as clever and cunning and desperately brave an officer as any commander might wish to have, besides being a diplomatist of no mean order, and the best compounder of devilled anchovies inside the tropic of Cancer.

CHAPTER II

A SCHEME OF REVOLUTION

FLUELLEN always breakfasted off cigarettes in bed, but when we others had finished our meal next morning he joined us in Briggs' room at the Metropole, and listened to the final discussion. He did not talk, but sat in a cane rocker, with a hundred box of cigarettes at his elbow, lighting each new one on the glowing stump of the last, and consuming exactly fifteen to the hour. But then his moustache was rather long, and he did not smoke the ends down very close. He was a big-boned, dark-faced fellow, with a great pucker of wrinkles, which perched between his eyebrows, and which only lifted when the risks of the expedition were touched upon. You could not say that he showed enthusiasm even then; he still looked ineffably bored and weary; but a glint lighted up in his black eyes (when in our talk at the table the chance of violent action was spread out before him) which hinted at a magazine of brazen recklessness stored up somewhere within his listless body, which would blaze out like lighted gunpowder when the time came to touch it off.

But I am afraid that in that last morning's palaver there was much which Fluellen must have found intensely wearisome. Carew wanted to know with precision where his particular share of the plunder was coming from, and on the financial profits of the revolution we talked for two solid hours. Then Davis harked back to social matters, and, finally, out of one thing and another, Briggs thought it best to lay before us a sketch of the entire scheme of policy which he had mapped out, and the reasons which had brought him to think it the best for Sacaronduca.

"As a youngster," the General began, "I was brought up in England (or rather in Yorkshire), and I commenced life with a strong inherited Toryism. I cannot say I kept to the creed very long. I began early to see that, do what they would, my party could not hinder their opponents from fettering every wish and every movement of the people by Act of Parliament. Your Radicals wished to prevent the Briton from working more than eight hours a day, from amassing wealth beyond a certain limit, from going to a theatre when he chose, or even from getting comfortably drunk when the whim so seized him. They wanted to make him moral under penalties, according to their own arbitrary code of morality, and if they ground all the pleasure out of his life during the process, that was a detail

which never worried them.

“I knew the Conservatives would always continue to fight against this narrow tyranny; but their chief strategy seemed to be in butting off each new and obnoxious measure by bringing in another which was only a trifle less noxious; so that laws were heaped upon laws till the wretched country groaned under the great burden which it had created out of nothingness to wear like a caugne upon its own shoulders.”

He paused and I looked up. His face was set and serious. Presently he went on again.

“I pictured circumstances which might arise for myself or other people, and every way the arm of some law would be thrust out which cramped one’s efforts. And every session other laws were being made. They sprouted up like some hideous paling all round one. Every day they grew closer in rank; every day more stifling. I could not breathe. I had no air; there was nothing around me but laws, laws, laws; and more laws; everywhere laws.

“You may think this fanciful, gentlemen; in part I do myself, now looking back on those early days from this hill of afterknowledge; but I felt what I say to be very real then. I felt frightened; I lost my head; I adopted the principles of anarchy as the only chance of salvation.”

The General paused again and smiled.

“Of course it was a wild dive, and my friends in England laughed, and very rightly called me a maniac. But I was stubborn, and their ridicule galled me. I was not poor: I was not dependent upon my business; so I sold out, and went to South and Central America, where anarchy (under perhaps other names) has always held a multitude of courts.”

Again the General glanced round and delivered himself of a dry smile. His valet knocked at the door and brought in a letter. He glanced it through, frowned, and proceeded.

“I cannot say that practical rampart anarchy is without its drawbacks. In the first place it weeds the community too indiscriminately with bullets, and in the second, all men are so keenly on the lookout to get in their shot before the other man can fire, that they have no leisure for other interests, and various useful

kinds of business in consequence languish. In fact, the one extreme of no laws is rather worse than the other of too many.

“As an outcome of this experience, I propose to establish in Sacaronduca what may be described as a happy mean. I shall make it penal to kill, forge, steal, or conspire against the Government, and the man who observes these four primitive canons may do all other things entirely as he pleases. He may gamble, he may lie; he may open a public-house and keep it open till he is tired of selling; he may divorce his own wife and marry his neighbour’s, if the other parties concerned do not hinder him.

“Of course, there are fools who will take the advantage of a freedom like this to be debauched, and swindled, and ruined in every way. Some of these will die. Others will become hewers of wood and drawers of water. They will stand out a caste to themselves, and very highly coloured, and a grim example ‘pour encourager les autres.’ They will have their use: others will say to themselves, ‘My friend, you must never become a person like this. You must use your wits and your thews, and succeed as brilliantly as may be.’

“You see, gentlemen, I do not aspire to making a resting-place for weaklings. There will be no premium in Sacaronduca for incapacity; you must either work, and work well, or go under. I have no desire to offer the country as a common dump for all the pauper debris which other States want to be rid of. My idea is to establish a republic for strong men only, whose instincts are clean and healthy; for men with money, men with brains, and men with sinews; who intend to use what God has given them to the full of their power.

“From a moral point of view this may be wrong. A Socialist (I make no doubt) would call the scheme most hideously wicked. Well, an innovator must always brave a tornado of outside opinion; and if I gain the approval of the men I work for, the rest of the world may yap and howl to its heart’s content. I have spent my life in studying this Earth’s ruling machines, and I have pondered very deeply over the needs of Sacaronduca, and it seems to me that a Government built on a vulgar business footing gives the country a superlative chance. The natural resources are enormous. There are mines of gold, silver, platinum, and most of the baser metals. From the geological formation there should be diamonds. The forests are full of valuable timber. The soil, from an agricultural point of view, is the most fertile on earth. Excepting for a narrow fringe on the Pacific coast, the climate is entirely healthy. In fact, the possibilities of the country are unbounded.

Yet look at what has been done for it. The Indians were barbarians; the invaders, barbarians merely of a different manner. They have done nothing, any of them. The beautiful land, with its latent power, is a mere pig's wallow of barbarism still. There are no railways, there is scarcely a road. Excepting for the port of Los Angeles, Dolores, which calls itself the capital, is the only town worthy of the name; and it is merely a glorified gambling-hell, with a bull-fight on Sundays, and eight assassinations to the average week. The other towns are cheery robber villages, garnished with squalid children, and marked out with a halo of empty salmon tins.

“To reconstruct such a country by setting up any of the stereotyped kinds of rule would be the worst kind of foolishness. We should cause the usual revolutionary deluge of blood, and if we did upset the present governors, we ourselves would most surely be dethroned in turn when the novelty of our occupation wore away. But, gentlemen, if we institute a government of common-sense”

“Tempered with Martini bullets,” Coffin put in.

“Certainly: a government which can use the heavy hand when needful; and if at the same time we import British energy, and British regard for advancement; why, then, gentlemen, I am convinced that we shall make Sacaronduca arise as the most brilliant star of many eras. I can see the country,” the General went on, with a lighting face, “I can see the country under those new conditions bursting joyously like a child into a new and brilliant life. I can see roads cut, railways winding through the forests, pack trains carrying the wealth of mines to the sea. I can see new towns, built of comely houses, with boulevarded streets, and music in the plazas; new picture-galleries and operahouses; and above all a new peace and industry that was never known in Sacaronduca before. I can hear, too (in imagination), the rustle of movement and action coming up from every acre within the country's marches; and I can see (perhaps with a wicked pride), the envy of our neighbours of San Salvador, Nicaragua, Honduras, and Costa Rica. But they must confine themselves to envy. They shall not compel Sacaronduca to tax herself in order that she may maintain a standing army. We shall be slow to anger; but let them beware how they transgress beyond a fixed limit. Once they force me into war, I shall not spare my hand. I shall not conquer merely; I shall crush out of existence.”

The General ceased speaking, and for some minutes no one put in a word. Each, in our own proper way, we, too, were much wrapped up in the fate of

Sacaronduca; and what we had been told opened up a good many vistas. We knew that Briggs, suave though he might be with individuals, would never swerve an inch when he had once set down his course to any great matter. It did not require a very long acquaintance with the man to be satisfied over this. The stranger in the street could have read it in one casual glance at the clean-shaven face of him; a mobile face, that in some aspects was grim almost to cruelty, though softening wonderfully under gentler influences, and at times flashing with a delicious kindliness, but always essentially the face of a strong man.

He was going to juggle with the issues of life and death; we were to be on the stage with him, as confederates and assistants, knowing exactly what was expected of us; and now or never was the time to say if we wished to withdraw. Afterwards it would be too late. We were to sign ourselves into his service body and soul, without option of release, and we offered our heads in pledge for our words. He was at liberty any minute to shoot any one of us who in any degree whatever failed to do his bidding.

It was Carew who ended the silence. He suddenly looked at his watch, frowned, and stood up.

“By Jove! Two o’clock. Look here, I’ve got to be at Victoria by the three-thirty if I’m to catch the Brindisi boat train, and I have to go to the bank for money and do nine other things first. It will be ten days before there’s another Australian boat, so I mustn’t miss this. Your promises of loot might be clearer, but as it is I guess I must look after myself. Hand over the contract, General, if you don’t mind, and let me make my mark, and then I’ll be off.” He scribbled his name at the foot of a document, and threw the pen on the table-cloth. ” There you are, General. All’s fair in war, as you say, so I’m signing myself on without a blush as yours hilt and blade, just for what I can get out of it in solid plunder. It’s distinctly understood that I come for no higher motive. And now good-bye. I know my job by heart. I’ll scare up fifty neck-or-nothing Australians and make them toe the mark at your rendezvous by the right time. Ta ta, you fellows, and don’t bring out any fancy small-bore revolvers. Four-fifty’s the best by miles. That’s a reliable fact.”

He walked across the room, nodded again, and passed through the door. Coffin got up as he left.

“Well, if that’s all, General, I’ll just sign on and take myself off. I’ve a match to

shoot at Hurlingham this afternoon, which ought to bring me in a couple of hundred if the pigeons fly anything like kind. My boat sails from Southampton at some unearthly hour like eleven tomorrow morning, so I'll be rustling up Mr. Rhodes's young men at the Cape within a fortnight, and I don't think I'll have much trouble in bringing up my eighty. Good-bye all. I will be round at the club by twelve to-night if anyone wants a turn at poker."

He, too, signed the agreement and left the room, and then Fluellen and Davis followed his example, the one to take passage for and beat up recruits in British Columbia, the other to start about his task of collecting the armament in Britain and Europe, and getting hold of the other munitions of war.

The General and I were alone, and when the door shut for the last time, we leaned back in our chairs with a simultaneous stretching of the arms and treated ourselves to sighs of relief. Each noticed the other's movement, and each smiled, though rather wearily. We had gone through a good deal to bring about the little scene which had just been completed.

"It's been an anxious time, hasn't it, Birch, up to now?"

"It has, General," said I, "and for relief we shall have a spell during the next five months which will make us ten times as anxious. If any of those four men who have just gone out let slip a word too much the news will travel, and we shall have not only Sacaronduca but ten other governments on the lookout for us. And, moreover, the British, with the memory of the Alabama case still biting on them, will lay an embargo on any vessel we try to get a clearance for, and will flaunt the Foreign Enlistment Act in the ears of all their dutiful subjects. They may very conveniently wreck us yet."

"They may contrive to upset many links of the scheme as it is mapped out at present, my dear Birch, but you pay me a very poor compliment if you suppose I haven't got a relay of others up my sleeve. However, we will tackle those when the time comes. For the present I have another little worry to occupy me. You saw Louis hand me in that letter just now? It was from Sacaronduca, and from what it told me I have grave doubts as to the advisability of taking Fluellen as one of my officers."

I stared. I did not understand, and said so.

"You know Fluellen's object in joining us at all?"

“Vaguely. He’s got into some trouble over a woman, hasn’t he?”

“That is a bald way of putting it,” said the General, ” and perhaps hardly does justice to the man. He is more sinned against than anything else, and his good qualities are acting as a curse against him. He was engaged to an Irish girl called Julia Armitage, whom he had known half his life. He is not a man of small ideas, but in the matter of liking he concentrated himself. He was devoted to this girl, and when he lost her (by her marriage to another man) he got a knock which he does not seem able to rise up from. This happened now four years ago, and most men would by this time have consoled themselves in another way. But Fluellen seems to be one of those inconvenient people who cannot forget, and the dull, hopeless longing for this woman has given life for him such an ache that he is pretty tired of it. I met him (as you will recollect) in a house in Scotland, and took his measure, and thought that he would serve my purpose. So I went with him out for a walk one morning and sounded him cautiously. There was no mistake; so soon as he grasped what I was proposing he leaped like a despairing man at the chance of joining us. ‘ My God,’ he said, ‘ give me the opening for excitement, for quick, anxious movement which will make me forget things, and I will thank you as few men have been thanked before. And I’ll work for you well too. I was in the service once lancer regiment and went through two or three little affairs in India. They said I did my work pretty efficiently; gave me some medal things, don’t you know, and put my name in despatches. Of course one doesn’t talk about that sort of matter usually, but you don’t know me, and I just want to show you I’m up to the work. Look here, General, if you don’t give me a billet and I don’t care much what it is I’m hanged if I don’t run out to this republic of yours and chip in on the other side.’

“Well,” the General concluded, ” after that it did not take us long to come to terms. He was the man I wanted, and mine was just the employ, ment to cure his morbid turn of mind. You know how he has thrown himself heart and soul into the cause already. You have seen for yourself what brilliant promise there is in him.”

“If you ask me, General, I should say Fluellen is about the pick of your lot.”

“I believe he is, Birch, I believe he is. And now at the last moment I have grave doubts as to whether it is wise to take him out with us. I have just discovered that the man whom this Miss Julia Armitage married is no other a person than Don Juan Carmoy.”

I whistled. "The second biggest man in Sacaronduca this minute. And it is a toss-up whether he throws in his lot with us or with the existing government. Does Fluellen know he's out there?"

"He does not. I am certain of that. But he cannot fail to know it sooner or later, and then" the General completed his sentence with a suggestive shrug.

Knowing Fluellen, and knowing Don Juan I should say they are by no means likely to fight in friendly fashion side by side. If you do get Don Juan (which is problematical) and you turn Fluellen away, it is a certain thing that he will go over to the enemy, and on your own showing he will add a considerable weight to their fighting strength. If on the other hand you keep Fluellen and let Don Juan go to the deuce (which he is likely to do anyway) you will give your man an additional spur to make our side win, and make him almost diabolic in his usefulness."

"Yes," said the General thoughtfully, "I believe you are right on the whole. We have got to have Fluellen in the broil, one side or the other, and with every ounce of his wit and energy on the strain. I believe he would go far to wreck us if he was in the opposition, and Juan is a slippery rascal anyway. But there is one other thing," the General added (it seemed to me) almost shyly, "the Sefiora Carmoy is, I know, a dear friend of Delicia's. That may complicate matters in a way you will not understand."

I looked up in surprise. "Who is Delicia?" I asked; "you have never spoken of her before that I know of."

The General got up and began putting on his hat and great coat. "I must go out now to see Holsteins. Expect me back to dinner at eight. Delicia? Donna Delicia, that is? Oh, well, I expect you'll hear plenty about her later. She's a very remarkable woman."

CHAPTER III

THE SECOND ENLISTMENT

IT has never been my way to thrust myself forward, and perhaps owing to that cause I was what I was when Briggs first met me to wit, purser on a transatlantic liner. If I had cared to truckle more to captains and owners probably by the time I was two and forty I should have found myself in a snug berth at the Liverpool office instead of knocking backwards and across over the Western Ocean, worrying over a ship's accounts and domestic economy, and acting as master of the ceremonies to an always changing crew of passengers.

I had a mind at the beginning of this history to have kept myself entirely in the background; to have appeared only as the nameless scribe who wrote it out; and held my small identity in the private locker of a publisher's office. But it occurs to me, as the ink runs out upon the paper, that what took place in Sacaronduca cannot be explained with full accuracy unless my own name appears here and there upon the pages, because the Fates and General Briggs decreed that certain small actions of my own should have their trivial bearing upon the history which was made. And so under this impression the introduction is made.

It was on my own steamer, coming out of New York, eastward, that I saw Briggs for the first time. We had a devil of a passage of it: heavy easterly gales with a terror of a sea running, and he was one of the very few passengers who were not knocked over with it. I met him in the smokeroom during the first two or three days out, where we chummed easily, and rather took to one another; and then I asked him down to my own room, to which he afterwards found his way most days till we made Queenstown Harbour.

By that time we had come to a rather curious agreement. I was to throw up the work I had been at all my life (a thing I could never have fancied myself doing) and accept service under him as private secretary; at a slightly increased salary to my purser's pay; with prospect of a high position if Briggs ascended the presidential throne. Moreover I was to commence my duties on that day week; which, after a small tornado at the office (where I dirtied my ticket most finally), was done punctually. It is a curious thing, and perhaps worthy of comment, that the General declined to look through my testimonials. I remember at the time I

felt rather badly annoyed, because some handsome things were said of me in the papers, which, of course, I could not in decency repeat by word of mouth. But as I had ample means of learning afterwards, the omission was the man's common habit. He never trusted the opinion of anyone else about anybody; always preferring the judgment of his own eyes and his own ears from half an hour's talk; and I must say (on the whole) profiting largely by the method.

Now I think I will omit the full account of what happened after Fluellen, Coffin, and Sir William Carew went off to the corners of the empire to recruit soldiers of fortune. That time was filled in with the dry detail of office work (carried on secretly at the Hotel Metropole, in London); and with seeing Davis between his round of visits to arms factories, and the host of other places where the multitude of his duties called him.

But at this point it is my duty to record that much of the initial success of the expedition was due to that same fellow Davis's shrewd-headedness and business tact. As a personal matter I must candidly confess to have never liked the man. If he had been contented to remain what God made him, a clever, honest, diligent fellow, a worker by birth, and an engineer by rating, he would have been palatable enough; moreover he would have succeeded far better in a worldly degree. But when he tried to pose as what he was not and never would be, and that is a gentleman; and when he persisted in quoting from that most poisonous thing, a Book of Etiquette, then my stomach would rise at the man, and I could barely refrain from insulting him to his face.

Still, it is only just to own that he was popular enough with the others. Fluellen, perhaps, took little notice of him, in the same way that he more or less ignored everybody, not being a man of much speech; but the General appreciated him much for his undoubted usefulness; and the other two seemed really to like him for himself. It is true they used openly to laugh at him; but they only did it before his teeth, and defended him when he was away, as though he had been fianceVs brother to each of them.

Davis's work was a matter requiring a perilous amount of commercial delicacy. If he had gone to a gunmaker and said, "I want so many stand of rifles to arm a filibustering expedition to Sacaronduca," we should have failed at the outset. True, the weapons might have been delivered at the door of the factory, on substantial prepayment; but Birmingham is not a port on the Mexican Gulf, and buying and transporting are two very different matters. Everything had to be

gone about with the most profound caution and secrecy, and, of course, paid for accordingly.

To give the British arms-maker his due, he is always ready to supply contraband of war to anyone who will give him money for it, even though he knows for a certainty that the material will be used against his own countrymen. He is amply devoid of scruples in this respect, having, of course, his business and the profits thereof to look after first before such a trivial matter of ethics could come into play. But he is not above salving his conscience with a revised price-list, and puts each item of secrecy required as so much per cent, on the bill.

It was the same way too with the wholesale clothiers in Leeds who turned out our uniforms: they must have made a good thing out of it for the consideration of holding their tongues over the transaction. And (most crucial place of all) it was the method adopted by the small shipowner who ferried out our dangerous cargo. He alone of all the people we dealt with I saw myself; a small stuffy creature with a stutter and a perpetual perspiration; who owned two little old steamers, and had a few sixty-fourths in others; but who had lately purchased what was the apple of his eye, a ten-knot cargo boat of nine-hundred tons. By an effort of weak sentiment he had named her the *Clarindella*.

How that man bullied, and whined, and trembled I shall never forget; nor how his collar melted to a formless rag as he recounted the risks; nor how he niggled at sixpences whilst he swore to being robbed of hundreds of pounds. In reality he had little to stake, seeing that one can underwrite any sea-risk if one only pays the insurers sufficient guineas per cent. But this blessed *Clarindella* was the triumph of a lifetime of sordid scraping: in his poor struggling little mind she was the cream of all cargo boats rendered down into one perfect craft; and he could not have been more jealous of her movements if she had been his daughter. He could not allow this to be done with her, that, t'other; on no account could he leave down the carpet in the chart-house (which had cost 2s. gd. a yard) or the new dodgers he had got for the upper bridge. Indeed, if he had been let go on, I believe he would have insisted on having the engines brought ashore and laid in tallow, for fear that they would rust if sent to sea in such evil company.

But an ultimatum was put before him at last which he had to accept or refuse, and he produced a sixpenny charterparty stamp and signed himself into a small competence with a few trembling strokes of the pen.

The thing was over and settled, but he promptly broke out again. Would we not change our minds; and have one of his other steamers beautiful boats, splendid boats; at a far smaller price? He had another stamp in his pocket. And when he heard decisively that we would not, but were bent on taking his Clarindella, the tears welled up in his eyes as he entreated us for the hundredth time to treat her decorously. "Gentlemen," he pleaded, "take the advice of a man who has seen much of those blasted foreigners from Mexico way, and just you come back to an English port if they begin to play their hanky panky tricks. Just think how I'll feel, if you get knocked over by them beastly fevers, or get caught by a Spanish gunboat. I'd be more sorry for you than I can rightly tell. And if my Clarindella was taken off into a foreign port and held there, you'd have demurrage to pay me, even if she was not confiscated."

"Look here," I cut in, "our bargain's made. Any way you draw large profits out of us, and if we come to any sort of grief you get your full dividends out of Lloyds. You have made us insure fully against every possible risk; and it has cost us seventy guineas per cent.; and you have got a Jew's bargain out of it. You never had such a haul before, and most probably never will again. And now, my friend, go, or possibly someone here will do you a personal injury."

The fellow went away, whining and grumbling, and I did not anticipate seeing him again. The Fates, however, saw good to throw him in our way afterwards in a rather peculiar manner. But that will be touched upon when the time comes. But let me drop these mean beklings now, and pass on to the period of brisker movement.

The Clarindella put to sea on her appointed day, loaded down to within a foot of her marks with our war material. Davis was in practical command (though nominally rated as purser), and splendidly he managed. From what port he sailed, how he got his cargo on board and under hatches, how he procured his clearance papers, are matters which must not be told of even now, as to do so would implicate as accomplices many respectable gentlemen who have since in public expended much hard language upon our doings. But sail he did, and that without being suspected, though at the last moment there seemed so much chance (from hints which were given us) of the Clarindella being overhauled on the high seas, that at Davis's earnest entreaty Briggs and I got over the first portion of the journey on another vessel. He put his plea on the ancient principle of there always being danger in carrying the whole of one's eggs in a single basket.

In consequence the chief and I ran down to Southampton and took passage across to the West Indies in one of the Royal Mail boats; and then by other means of conveyance, which it would do no particular good to specify, made our way to a certain very lonely rendezvous which had been agreed upon.

The Clarindella arrived a day after her time. She had been sighted off Eastern Cuba, and ordered to heave to by a Spanish gunboat; but not being exactly anxious for an overhaul, had taken to her heels. She had the advantage of nearly three-quarters of a knot in speed, and ran the Don's masttrucks out of sight in eleven hours.

The scurry had taken her off her course, but she swung back on to it when the night closed down. In consequence she arrived (as I have said) behind her time at the rendezvous, and we had worked up a considerable anxiety. But we were on the keen lookout still, and when the glass showed her climbing up over the further rim of the Caribbean Sea, we slipped down from the mountain perch where we had been standing watch, and made the best of our way to the creek below. An hour later a fisher's boat took us out to where the steamer was showing the red of her bottom as she lifted over the swells. We boarded her before she had lost her way, exchanged half-a-dozen words with Davis, who had a bag ready packed, and went down into the fisher-boat to go ashore and pick up a mail steamer; and then the telegraph on the upper bridge clanged its message down to the engine-room for once more full steam ahead.

We went into the chart-house, and the master showed us a track chart of the Mexican Gulf, marked with a pencil line from where we then were to a tiny dot which lay off the further coast.

"I don't fancy this white Tortuga Key of yours, sir," he said. "The water's very shoal all round there."

"You have the detailed chart I gave you?" the General asked.

The captain produced it, a large piece of stiff paper printed in tiny squares, with an inked outline of an island which curled itself round a protected anchorage, and a series of close soundings for the course of the channel which led into it.

"You may take that as absolutely reliable," the General said. "There is (as you see) good water in the fairway, and the leading marks stand out black against white coral sand. If you do not fancy the job, I will take the ship in myself."

“I am master here,” said the captain sourly, “and give up charge to no one except an authorised pilot who can show me a certificate. I have got my ticket to think about.”

The fellow’s owner had evidently been rubbing the fear of I don’t know what into him; he was nervousness personified; he had barely taken off his clothes since leaving England. Well, it was certainly uncomfortable for him, poor wretch, but it did not matter to us so long as he did not get over-frightened and refuse to go on to the proper destination. We are quite as anxious to land there safely as ever he could be.

Thirty hours later we were slipping along under half-steam, with a lead going continuously, trying to catch the loom of the land through an inky starless night. The soundings dodged about most amazingly, and the skipper on the upper bridge swore, and rang his engines off and off till at last we were reduced to a crawl which barely gave us steerage way. Then from the sky ahead a great cloud bank slid away as though it had been the lid of a box, and through the opening there showed up a plump oval of moon, yellow as brass, which hung low over a sleek black sea. Between us and it lay the island, a small patch of coral rock and sand, glittering like a jewel, and splashed by a pale brazen surf.

The captain gulped out a big sigh and crammed down the handles of the telegraph. The propeller rumbled and splashed astern. The *Clarindella* gathered way and headed for the channel.

What the Key may have been used for before I do not know to this day; but probably pirates once made rendezvous and re-fitted there; for certainly of the six leading marks two were artificial. Four were placed there by nature, outcrops of nigger-black stone bedded in a waste of milk-white sand. But the outermost mark which perched on the most westerly spit of the Key was a neat drybuilt cairn of purple black coral rock with an inscription on one of the heavier boulders to the effect that ” W Caine, he built it,” whilst the sixfoot obelisk on the beach in the middle of the narrow channel carried both in its pleasantness of structure and the words, ” The mate, his money,” the marks of human handiwork and the evidences of a very human wager.

The chart we had may either have been copied from one made by these former occupiers, or compiled from a fresh survey; which, I never asked, and have no one to tell me here now; but it was very complete and entirely accurate. With it

any man with a pair of eyes and a steam vessel that would steer could get into the anchorage with complete ease and certainty; a sailing vessel would have to tow or (even with a leading wind) be very smartly handled; but for a stranger the place was locked. The channel ran as a narrow canal of deep water winding in a quick zigzag between shoals of sand and a maze of reefs both sunk and just awash. There was always a heavy ground swell tumbling in from outside, and no one but a maniac would have tried to force the channel even with leadsmen and a steamer under full command.

This, of course gave us security, and the position of the Key added to it. The White Tortuga lay in the middle of an archipelago of other keys and reefs and shoals, which were highly dangerous to navigate. They were on no ship track; they lay between no two ports; and the Gulf Stream swilled through them in many places at a lusty eight knots. The Sailing Directions marked the neighbourhood as "highly dangerous," and shipmasters avoided it as they would a gallows.

For our purpose then the place was wholesome through its sheer loneliness. A year might pass without anything but sea fowl and sea creatures sighting it; and yet the chief entry port of Sacaronduca lay a bare hundred and twenty miles to the westward. There was no inducement for anyone to land on the Key for any ordinary purpose, even if they were blown into its direction. It yielded nothing either to eat or to sell or to make into a picture. The cruel barrenness of it made one sick. There was but one tree in the whole place, a stunted twisted black pine, which clawed with gnarled roots upon a slab of honeycombed rock beyond the head of the bay, and served as the further leading mark to the anchorage. A few hundred blades of grey-green grass peppered here and there over the low dunes made up all the rest of the vegetation. There were neither mangroves, palmettos, sawgrass, nor palms, though the Key was in a latitude where all of these flourish abundantly. Neither could we find the nests of sea fowl. Indeed the Key seemed so sour with brine and loneliness that every living organism, high and low, instinctively avoided it.

But I did not learn these things about the White Tortuga Key the night we steamed into its anchorage. The moon burned strong in the sky till we had made the narrows and passed through them to the bay beyond, and then it was eclipsed behind great rolls of cloud, and we saw it no more. The leadsmen sang his chant, and the water shoaled steadily from twelve fathoms into six. Then it was "let go there forrard," and the anchor left the hawse pipe with a roar and a splash.

“Well, Birch,” said the General, “ we seem to be prospering so far.”

“Yes,” I said, “ things couldn’t well have gone more smoothly.”

The skipper interrupted. “ I thought,” he said, “that according to you this Key was uninhabited.” The man put up his binoculars again, and once more peered at the beach.

“Do you see anyone?” the General asked sharply.

The captain of the Clarindella put down his glass. “ I wasn’t certain before, but I am now. There are people there as sure as you are here, and it strikes me, General, your little game’s been spotted and made ready for. Now you’ve thought pretty poor value of me because I’ve been a good deal frightened whilst I’ve been bringing this steamboat across to this fancy port of yours. Well, I tell you I have been scared. The old governor told me if I didn’t contrive to put her in this place where she is now, if I let myself be stopped on the road, or managed to pile her up in any way of these blasted reefs, he’d just see my ticket was dirtied so that I never got another ship as long as sea tracks were made.

““That’s all very well,’ I says to him, ‘ but how if these fellows out there come aboard and take possession after I’ve brought her into harbour? Seems to me no master can help himself out of that sort of pickle/

““That’s all right, captain,’ he says, * once you get into this harbour, your responsibility ends till you’ve discharged cargo. The General’s arranged to take complete charge, and you’re to hand it over to him, and not interfere in any way at all.’

“So now, sir, you’ve got the handling of the Clarindella to do with just as you choose, and I’m sure I wish you fun with her. There are people on this island of yours on the spot before us, and I can hear them talking plain as I can hear myself: and I guess they haven’t come there to catch butterflies. If I can be any use to you, General, I’ll help you as a volunteer. But only as a volunteer, mind, and just for the sport of the thing, and to show there’s nothing of the cowardsort about me when my ticket’s not got to be thought about. By the Lord, though, listen to that, sir; we’re in for a fight as sure as God allows mischief. Well, sir,” the captain concluded, rolling the words over in his mouth as though he relished them, “ give your orders if you have any. You may be no seaman, as I’ve heard you say; you may wear spurs to do the work in if you fancy them; but you’re

skipper here from this moment, and you'd better hump yourself if you don't want the billet filled by somebody else. Damn, listen to that! There goes my starboard side light."

A bullet from out of the darkness had hit the green lens and shattered it into a thousand pieces; two more knocked noisily on the iron of the steamer's flank. Then a heavy, ragged volley rang out, and with it shouts and yells and curses, and presently the air which came to us from off the island grew salt with the smoke of gunpowder.

The General stood on the upper bridge with a pair of binoculars against his eyes. "If they were firing at us," I heard him mutter, "that would be understandable enough. But they are not shooting this way, that's clear enough now."

The firing went on with snarling energy. The noise was one blurred roar; the spits of the rifles sprinkled the night with bewildering flashes. The moon stayed hid, but one could trace the drift of the fight as it swayed in and out of the sandhills, by the din, and by the streaks of yellow flame.

Through his glasses the General watched in earnest silence. The captain of the steamer stood on the other side of me with a laugh on his lips, drumming on the white rail with his fingers. Neither seemed inclined to speak, and I stuck between them, not knowing what to think, and feeling a bewildered fool. At last I could endure it no longer.

"General," I said, "there seems a pretty tidy skirmish going on. Is it in honour of our arrival?"

"My dear Birch," he replied, "no one is more surprised at this firework display than I am."

"But the fellows are not shooting at us," I said.

"If they were," he retorted, "I should feel a good deal easier. Then I could understand it. As it is, I am utterly at a loss to know who these good gentlemen can be who are so busy murdering one another."

CHAPTER IV

WHITE TORTUGA KEYS

THE fight on the beach soon lost its concentration, broke up into a dozen scattered skirmishes, and flitted about here and there over the mounds and hollows of the Key. It was an affair of individuals, where strategy was of little use, and the element of pluck told enormously. The man who fought, and fought, and in the end got frightened of the mysterious shape which battled against him in the gloom, and turned and ran, gained fresh tremors in his flight, till terror loosened all his joints. The pursuer, on the other hand (though an instant before being much minded to try and escape), gained comfort from the flying heels in front, till a courage bristled up within his ribs that was reckless as a ghezi's.

The heavy firing did not last for very long. The weapons were emptied, and few men found time to re-load. Only here and there a crack told of some man who had slipped a fresh cartridge into the breech of his rifle, or a sharper, whip-like noise as someone loosed a final shot left in a revolver. They were fighting with the butt and the cold iron, which never require other ammunition than hate and a lusty arm, and which in war have killed more men by twice than all the missiles which gunpowder has singed.

The moon stayed hid; the night was breezeless; the dark was thickened by the hanging smoke. We on the Clarindella's bridge could barely trace the outline of the beach, and could make out nothing beyond it. Never did men stand a more tantalising watch. A furious battle was going on within gunshot of us, in the outcome of which it was very probable we were vitally interested. And yet we could see not one of its movements. We did not even know what men were engaged, or how many, or why they fought. We had our ears alone to report to us, and they only told scraps of the tale.

All footsteps were muffled by the sand; all the lesser noises were blotted by the distance. But we could hear the rasping clashes when men engaged with the steel, and the scraanch of the gunbutt landing home; and from these, and from the louder cries of pain and death, of hate and triumph, we had to make up all our news.

For a long time only one thing could we be certain of, and that was that the

killing went on at a most murderous pace. But as to who were falling, we could form no accurate idea. At one period, from the multitude of the cries, it seemed as though the two parties were exterminating one another mutually. But the noises lessened as the men spread, and then by degrees rallying shouts came to us which told that one of the parties had taken to itself the upper hand.

Then the firing began to ring out again, in single cracks, as the men of the winning party took time and loaded, and shot down the others as they came up with them. This lasted as though a body of men were going systematically over all the Key, exterminating every living creature they came across; and then it dwindled and then stopped to the shrill call of a whistle.

The sound cut the black air like a knife, coming to us so clearly that one might have thought it started from the fore-castle head. It was repeated quickly by two other whistles from other parts of the island; and then we began to hear the shouts of men as they hailed one another to find the way, and gradually converged upon the beach.

Up till then we three on the Clarindella's upper bridge had listened almost in silence, drinking in the sounds, and giving what meaning to them we thought fit. But at that point Captain Evans gave us the advantage of his sharper trained hearing.

"Hark," he said in a thick whisper, "did you hear that noise just then from the little inlet on the starboard hand over yonder at the head of the bay? It was a boat being grounded; and listen, there's another; and by gum, that's a third.

They have been lying off the beach, I guess, with a boat-keeper in each, and now they're going to take those chaps off. That's what the whistles were for. Looks to me as if we were going to have our turn next. Well, I suppose they'll give us gruel when they do set about it.

"There, did you catch that? Hear them stumbling over the thwarts. That's all hands aboard. Oh Lord, yes, we're going to get it now, and no blessed error."

"If you please," said the General, "we will argue that point. I think, captain, you may remember my troubling your mate yesterday to get me up a couple of cases from Number 2 hold? Well, one of those contained Marlin rifles which happen to be 18-shot repeaters, and the other was a box of suitable ammunition."

“Now Mr. Birch and I are going to take each one side of the ship and make it extremely warm for anyone who attempts to board us uninvited. You have no accommodation ladder over the side, and if those gentry come in row-boats they’ve a twelve-foot climb before them up smooth iron plates before they can come to handgrips with us.”

“And you think you can keep them off?” inquired Evans.

“We shall try,” said the General calmly, ” and I hope we shall succeed. Of course, there is risk in such a defence, because whilst one party of them climb up, the rest, unless they are born fools, will cover the escalade with a rifle fire. But we shall take every advantage of the cover, and I hope that they will discover that they have had enough fighting for one night already, and will be content to sheer off. I say I hope this will take place, captain, because if they are the individuals I imagine them to be, this steamer contains a cargo which would be remarkably useful to them just now, and to get a clear title to it which could not be disputed in a government inquiry they would undoubtedly cut every throat on board.”

“There is a deal of simplicity in that, sir,” said the shipmaster. ” If you’ve got enough of those guns, wouldn’t it be a handsome idea to serve the spare ones out to the mates and the engineers and some of the crew, with a handful of cartridges apiece? They’ll be glad of the chance of a little sport, and if you tell them what it means if we don’t keep the ship to ourselves probably they’ll contrive to shoot pretty straight.”

“Nothing,” said the General, ” would suit me better. I may own to you, captain, that I have an intolerable dislike to being hanged within the next hour or so, as hanged I shall be if those good folks can lay hands on me. Perhaps, indeed, you would even go so far as to accept a weapon yourself?”

“Not one of yours, sir,” said the master. ” I never could hit a thing as small as a man ten yards off with a rifle. But I’ve a bird-gun do.wn in my room and some cartridges of svvanshot, and I fancy if they’re given room to scatter they’ll bring down more cold meat than your bullets will. I can just brown ‘em both sides nicely from the bridge here.”

“Better come under shelter, captain. There is no use in exposing oneself needlessly. And you would be in full view of everyone here.”

“That sir, is my affair,” said the master stiffly. “I guess my ticket can’t be meddled with now, whatever happens, and so I’m not wearing my nervousness this evening; and if I choose to stick here on my own upper bridge, yes, sir, or sit a-cock-stride of a boat davit, I should dam’ well like to see the man who will turn me off.”

“Captain Evans,” said the General, “I believe I have to apologise to you on several counts. I won’t begin now, because to do the thing properly requires time and champagne, and at present neither are handy. Besides, here comes Birch with an armful of rifles and a bucket-load of cartridges. Now, captain, may I trespass on your forbearance a little further? You know your crew; I do not. Might I ask you to deal out a Marlin to any man who has sufficient command over the weapon not to shoot one of ourselves?”

The captain grinned acidly. “Now,” he said, “that’s asking for what you won’t get. You mustn’t expect, sir, an old sailor to be a blooming marksman. I can find you let’s see yes, ten men who can load your guns and pull ‘em off. but if you want me to bet on what the fools will hit well, that’s a form of gambling which is too wild for me.”

“Thank you,” said the General, “that will do. The er the boats are coming off now, I fancy, captain.”

“That is so,” said Evans, and proceeded leisurely to call up ten of the ship’s company one by one, and deal out the weapons and parcels of cartridges. The men were all hanging about the decks in restless groups, many of them (I think) a good deal uneasy at the turn affairs were taking. The ten who had Marlins offered took them eagerly enough, and, on the whole, handled them like workmen. They ranged themselves along the bulwarks and the rail; and the rest of the crew, getting ready their sheath-knives or whatever other weapon they could lay grip upon, took up station between them.

The captain stood in the middle of the upper bridge, puffing at a “Colorado” cigar and scrubbing at the locks of his 12-bore with a piece of oily rag. Because he stayed, I suppose, the General saw fit to remain also; and because the General did not get under cover, I could not see my way to do so either, though I didn’t fancy setting myself up as a gratuitous cockshy with no advantage to be gained out of it.

By this time the boats were well under way; we could hear the "cheep" of oars in the rowlocks, coming through the night like the cry of sea fowl; and presently the outline of the boats themselves began to loom through the darkness. There were three of them in all, heavy ship's boats every one, rowing in a string, one behind the other.

Nearer they drew and nearer, and looking along our decks I saw the ragged figures of the merchant seamen and engineers lying down in wait for them, with the repeating rifles shouldered, and forefingers dallying with the triggers. The General must have been looking too, for that moment he gave his first command and asked them to be steady. "Keep your heads, boys," he said, "and don't let off a shot till I say the word."

"But give 'em hell," the skipper supplemented, "when you're told to shoot, and then pump in a fresh cartridge and give it to 'em again."

For myself I was watching the boats, which, with their straddling oars, looked like some uncouth beetles crawling up out of the gloom. I could see them accurately. They were sticking to a direct line, steering to a hair. They were heading to pass the steamer twenty yards away along her starboard side, but I guessed they would port their helms when they got close and run us on board against the lower foredeck.

In the middle boat a man was groaning heavily, but except for this, and the noise of the oars, and the faint tinkle of water from their stems, they came on in silence. I pictured every man of their crew with a weapon resting ready on the thwart beside him, and wondered if they had lanyards made fast to their boat hooks.

Presently they came to the spot where I had told myself they would shift their helms and they passed it. "Fools!" I thought, "they are going to try and board further aft. Well, so much the better for us; they have missed their best chance."

But they swept twice the steamer's length further on; they drew abeam; they rowed stolidly on till they began to dissolve into filmy, nebulous shapes away astern; and never once did they swerve a tiller's breadth from that dead straight course. Finally they vanished down the narrows, and the sound of them died in the distance.

If I was puzzled myself, there were others more so. The men on the decks below,

after being wound up to the thought of a desperate engagement, were exhibiting a most lively ingratitude at the let-off, chiefly in the form of oaths. Captain Evans, beside me, was a strange figure of bewilderment, with the shotgun nursed in the crook of his left arm, and his bared teeth gleaming white in the gloom, with the cold stump of the cigar gripped between them.

But if the matter was strange to all of us, it was a perfect network of mystery to the General. He had a knowledge of the place; he had formed a definite idea of what might be expected from the boats; and when they passed us by all his theories went crash, and he was left to form an entirely new set.

“And the worst of it is,” he explained to me, with a worried laugh, “I’m at the end of my tether. Those people are clearly not the crew I took them for, or they certainly would have honoured me with a twenty-one guns salute at the very least; but who out of the whole rest of the universe they may be, I haven’t a notion.”

“Hullo,” I said, “they’re sending up a rocket. That’ll be from just past the entrance to the narrows. And, by Jove, there’s another rocket from the sea.”

The captain ordered up a quartermaster to the fore cross-trees, and the man reported a steamer lying-to a mile off the Key. “I can make out all three of her lights, sir,” he said.

“Well, that settles where the boats came from, any way,” said the captain, “and perhaps it explains why they didn’t meddle with us. They’ll come down on us, steamboat and all, when daylight shows. That’s their little game. And we shall have our ends knocked in. Wait a minute, though; there’s another tea-party to be gone through first. Listen to that.”

From the head of the bay there had suddenly sprung up the quick thudding of a propeller, and presently from out of the gloom the long, lean form of a slate-coloured naphtha launch slid out, making directly for us.

“Stand to your guns there, all hands!” the captain sung out (quite forgetting in his excitement that he had handed away the command). “Quartermaster!”

A quartermaster came trotting up the ladder.

“Blue light, quartermaster. We’ll see this beggar.”

The quartermaster took a blue light out of the chest beside the binnacle, and as he struck it, and the flame hissed out, making everything lurid and ghastly, the naphtha launch was just slowing down a score yards from our starboard bow.

Then we saw a strange thing happen. The man who was steering her (who wore a great white sombrero) had ported his helm with the evident wish to run alongside. But four other men from the floor of the launch sprang upon him, and in spite of his furious struggles wrenched him away from the tiller. A revolver cracked twice, and one of the men tossed up his arms and fell backwards; but the others seemed to bear the steersman down, and one of them, just as the launch was going to send her stem into our plates, shoved over the helm with his back, so that she swung clear a bare foot from the Clarindella's side.

For a moment we could see down clearly into the launch, every stain in her standing out plain in the glare of the firework, and we reckoned up four dead or wounded men on the floor of her, the one just shot, who was also hors de combat, and the trio struggling in the stern, and then, with a final "faff," the blue light died away, and the launch slid like a thin grey wraith astern of us.

"It wasn't the fault of that fellow who was steering that we are not fighting this moment," said the General thoughtfully. "He must be a pretty plucky sort of pirate to want to attack us with only four sound men at his heels. What do you say, captain?"

"These theatricals are not of my line," the master replied. "I don't seem to catch the plot of them. Appears to me we've come in at half-time, and the part of the show which explains the whole lot is just the bit we missed. The only thing I want to know now is, are we through, or are we going to have any more? There's two of these curious picnic parties passed us outwards; there's a big steamboat sprung up out of nowhere and hanging about outside; and the Lord knows how many more of the troupe's on the prow about the neighbourhood."

"The probabilities are," said the General thoughtfully, "that we've seen the last of them."

"I'm glad you think so," the master of the Clarindella retorted. "It's a comfortable way to feel. For myself, I'm not so sweet on probabilities just now, because this programme up to date seems to have been run with a high-minded contempt for men. What's likely to happen is just the very thing you don't

expect; and so, by way of being on the safe side, I'm going to keep my weather eye lifting for everything that's unpleasant."

"Quite right," said Briggs; " we will have all hands to lie upon their arms, at any rate till daybreak."

CHAPTER V

A DUET IN CANON

WE were not again disturbed. A man in the fore-cross trees watched the big steamer pick up the three boats, swing them up the davits, and then steam off to the W. N. W. The slate-coloured naphtha launch went out into the open without lights; but there the churning of her propeller stirred up a phosphorescent wake like the tail of a comet, and the lookout watched her head on a compass course for the northward till she dipped below the curve of the sea.

The night seemed most tediously long; the dew fell heavy and cold as rain, and drenched one to the bone; and when day came with a gleam of sulphur in the east we looked like men who had sat through a deep debauch. The Key lay spread out before us, with its one pine and the few black rocks sprouting from a sand of aching white.

We scanned it with our glasses. There were three men lying stiff and still upon the beach, the heels of another sprouting up over the ridge of a dune, and a handful of rifles, scattered about at random, stood out sharply against the sand.

A boat was put in the water, and four drowsy seamen rowed Captain Evans, the General, and myself ashore.

Along the beach the sand was hard as a deck beneath our feet, but it softened inland, so that one had to plough along laboriously, and it eddied to the smallest breeze and filled one's very soul with its irritating grittiness.

Of the glaring discomforts of the place we thought but little on that first landing; the sleep peeled out from our eyes, and we sweated over the crumbling slopes like excursionists turned from a train to see a spectacle. The relics of the mysterious battle of overnight were spread out (as the captain said) like surprise packets. The struggle, the flight, the pursuit, had trampled over every square fathom of the Key; and where a man fell, there he was given a savage coup de grace, and there he lay, an uncouth, twisted shape for the sand to drift mounds over. One never knew where one might meet the next.

Twenty and three bodies were found in the first unmethodical survey; and then,

by quartering the ground systematically, and leaving a scrap of paper on each, we brought the number up to twenty-nine, together with one poor wretch who was not entirely dead.

It was impossible to differentiate between the parties. The bodies wore no uniform; the arms were of twenty patterns. Both sides seemed to have been composed of the most irregular of irregular troops. Even in nationality there was no cohesion, for whilst most were sallow or swarthy Spaniards, there were three unmistakable Germans amongst them, two either British or Americans, one (in yellow gaiters and deer-stalker) English beyond every doubt, and (leaving out Mulattoes) seven thoroughbred negroes.

The wounded man was a Swiss, from a place of which I now forget the name, in the Canton Valais. He was hit through the lungs; lay in no particular pain, but was very near death. He was quite aware of his state, cool over it, and intensely anxious to make the most of the little span left him. "Have you paper, sir, and a bit of pencil?" were the first words he uttered on being found. "If you please, sir, write very quickly," he said, and then giving the name and address of a certain Gretchen at Saas, in Grundt, poured out the words of his last message to her at such a speed that I could hardly get them down.

Humanity clamoured that I should act as this poor wretch's amanuensis; that I should write like a machine the love message of one in extremis to the sweetheart who had been his only thought ever since he fell; that I should let his last thoughts be of her undisturbed.

Interest for the cause commanded something very different. It was a matter of vital importance to us that we should know who these two parties were who had invaded the White Tortuga Key, and had fought there so venomously. If they had got to know some of our plans, and had endeavoured to intercept them, for us to go on as arranged would be to court shipwreck. But if, on the other hand, theirs was only a private vendetta, which seemed against the face of all likelihood, a change in our arrangements might be equally disastrous. So that either way it was imperative that we should hear from this Swiss definite news of the object which had brought him there.

The General was away at the further beach of the Key, so I could not call him to shift over the responsibility. Captain Evans, who came up to my beckoning, gave little comfort. "If you chip in," he muttered, as I went on scribbling, "and spoil

the fellow's last message to his girl, you'll feel a brute and kick yourself about once a fortnight for the next six years. But if you shirk the job I guess your General ought to shoot you out of hand for neglecting business. Anyway, you've got to hurry up and decide, because our friend here is pretty nearly through his shore leave. Speaking as a man who's seen this sort of thing before," the captain added thoughtfully, " he'll be wanted to toe the line upstairs in -less than two minutes now, poor devil."

I looked at the Swiss where he lay, a mere limp huddle of clothes in a gully of the sand. I had pillowed his head on my coat, but that was all he had let me do for him; his face was growing livid; his eyes were glazing; each red cough he gave went nearer to strangling him. The captain's estimate of his remaining life-span seemed absurdly past the mark.

In a scurry of regret at having delayed so long, I poured out my questions in a torrent. Who were the two bands of men, I asked, that had met in the Key? By whom were they sent? For what had they come? Which side had won?

He stared wide-eyed at the cobalt of the sky above, and answered, " I do not know, sir; ... and say to my darling ... "

"Man," I pleaded, "you must tell one thing. Are you from Sacaronduca?"

He nodded vaguely, and murmured something, of which I could only catch these words:

"... Donna Delicia sent ... so we came ... others here first ... so we fought."

Then a change came over him. With a surprising effort he scrambled to his feet and thrust his arms upwards, with fingers distended. " Oh, my love," he cried, with a last great burst of voice, " my love, I die without coming to you. Find me, love, and follow me where I go. Ah, darling, you hear me? Yes? Gretchen! My Gretchen!"

His hands dropped down limply, his head swayed round a small circle, he toppled over heavily on to his side. A small cloud of sand rose at the blow and settled back with a tiny pattering over the body. The man lay without stirring. He was dead before he fell.

"So you have managed to catch this poor fellow in the nick of time, Birch, and

get the secret of this mysterious engagement of him, eh?"

I looked round. The General had come up noiselessly behind me over the soft sand, and stood looking at the Switzer's body. I turned my head away from him.

"Have you," he asked, "let sentiment get in the way of my business, Mr. Birch?"

"In a degree," I said, "yes. This poor wretch has been dying very hard ever since last midnight, and all his thoughts have been for a girl at home who was to have been his wife. He prayed me to be his amanuensis before I could get a word in, and commenced to dictate before I had made my stipulations. When I began to question him about what had taken place here, he was too far gone to be very coherent. Still, I noted precisely what he said."

I repeated the scattered words, and the General listened attentively. I saw his face brighten at once. He made me go over them a second time, observing, as nearly as might be, the spaces between the words (as the Swiss had made them) so that he might guess at what was left out. Then he nodded his head and said "Ah."

He did not add anything else for a long time, but stood with folded arms, gazing down at the dead body of the Swiss. He was sunk deep in thought; and I do not think the matters which passed through his brain were all grave or all unpleasant, because once I saw his face light with the outlines of a smile. In the end, when he turned to me again, his preoccupation was gone, and he looked at ease and satisfied. Still, I did not get off without a reprimand.

"My dear Birch," he said, "it is very unpleasant for me to have to remind you of your duty, but it is a thing that must be done. As it happens, in this instance there is no harm effected. I can read between the lines, and know exactly what has happened; what manner of men the two parties who landed on this Key were, and what they came to do. It is a matter still hidden to you, and I learn it only by a fluke; yet if you had acted properly you should have had the whole tale ready for me from that man's lips.

"I know the feeling which moved you to write out this poor broken love story, and in ways it does you credit. But you have another call upon you before such matters can be attended to. You have pledged yourself to a certain service, and I who hold your word cannot accept anything less than all. If we are to win, it must be by putting every tittle we have got into the cause. With all of us, and at all times, it must be before all things Sacaronduca."

I did not know what on earth to say in reply, so merely bowed, but after a pause, as the General said nothing, I asked who he made out the two parties had been who had come to the Key.

“Ah, that,” he said drily, ” is a matter which (as nobody else seems to know it) I shall keep to myself for the present. I will merely tell you that a gang of ruffians came here, presumably in that naphtha launch, to raid us, and that a friend of mine (whose name need not appear just yet) sent a detachment to help us in case of attack. We were a trifle late in arriving, and as the two different commands met on the shore, they had it out there without our being mixed with the matter at all.”

“Which won?” I asked. ” May one hear that?”

“Certainly. My friend’s people; the ones that went off in the three ship’s boats and were carried away back by the steamer.”

“Well, if one may judge from the few who followed in the naphtha launch, your lot must have gone on the principle of ‘ smite and spare not ‘ when they got the upper hand.”

“Oh,” said the General, ” they were little better than pirates.”

“Which lot?” I asked.

“My dear Birch,” he replied, ” it does not do to be too nice in one’s inquiries into such matters in the preliminary stages of a revolution. I suppose neither party of last night’s engagement held commissions from any openly accepted authority; and, for the matter of that, nor do we; but I take it we are acting as we consider rightly, and I would extend the same charity of opinion to them. These things are only a means to an end. Afterwards, when we become a power in Sacaronduca, we shall naturally discourage such excursions, by way of preserving the Peace of the Land. But for the present one is forced to countenance them in order that Peace may be found.”

We returned on board the Clarindella then and breakfasted; and a boat’s crew went ashore with shovels and buried the dead. Later in the day we carried off the big double-roofed tents; and the sailors set them up in one long, straight street along the hard, level beach. The camp was ready; we had to look out now across the sea, which would bring us the men to fill it.

Again Davis was transport officer. Of course the various rendezvous and the necessary vessels had been chartered and arranged for long before; but many things might arise which would require a master hand during the actual embarkment; and so, as Davis had the responsibility, he preferred to have the actual management.

The recruits had been brought near the scene of action with a good deal of secrecy. Each of the three recruiting officers had split his men into squads of five, had sworn them to silence, and had elected one as corporal, and provided him with a strict route and money for all. No five was allowed to travel with another five, and the final destination was kept secret, the men being merely enlisted for "a filibustering expedition," with no place named. Moreover, only fifteen men rendezvoused at one spot, and no two fives of them were from the same country.

Humanly speaking, it seemed as though all reasonable precautions had been taken to prevent the affair getting wind till the proper hour came for action. But it was evident (from the black night affair amongst the sand dunes of the Key) that the news of our business had leaked out somewhere, and our anxiety was not small as we awaited the arrival of the troops.

They were to be gleaned from three places in Bermuda, and from eight in the Bahamas; from nine points on the shallow coasts of the Carolinas and Florida; from Tampico, Greytown, and Panama. As an additional safeguard, the collecting steamer was (if possible) not to go inshore at any of these places. She was to lie off, signal, and let the men come off to her in boats.

From this programme it will be seen that Davis's arrival at the White Tortuga was not a day to be predicted with any certainty. He had given us his own rough idea of the date, making it the 12th of September, and, being a man of the nicest accuracy, we had no fancy he would be very far out in his reckoning.

We looked out for him on the 10th and 11th; we expected him on the 12th; on the 14th we found occasion to tell one another repeatedly that we were not in the least anxious, and on the succeeding days we owned openly that anxiety was making us ill.

I do not think the General ever slept during that time of waiting. He had always before him a picture of his position if troops failed to arrive, and the

ridiculousness of it seared him like a branding iron. The other way round would not have been a tenth so bad. One can conceive (in a time of desperation) of an army without arms taking some shore-town by surprise, wresting for itself weapons and stores, and proceeding to brilliant reckless conquests. But to sit over a shipload of the most modern requirements in mechanical war material and to command but two pairs of hands willing to handle it, was to be set on a pedestal of the cruellest derision.

The 20th of September came, the 21st, the 25th; the month ended and October began. Still there was neither sign nor tidings, and a set, fixed look grew on the General's face which there was no putting two translations on. In a half-scared way, at the commencement of the new month, I tried to suggest that even if this expedition failed through the troops not coming to us, it was possible to get up a second. But my chief shook his head decisively. "If," he said, staring fixedly out over the blue Gulf waters, "if I do not leave this place at the head of troops, I stay here for always. I could bear to go home, Birch, as a defeated man, but not as a man who set off full of brilliant hopes and then stopped and made no bid for success."

"But," I pleaded, "the thing could be kept quiet. Or if a few words did leak out, the rumour would soon blow over and be forgotten."

"I am selfish enough to consider myself first, Birch. I am the principal person who could not forget. I used," he added plaintively, "to think myself a brave man once. But I have not the pluck to face life carrying about with me the memory of such a fiasco. It would keep me in eternal thumbscrews. And, besides," he added softly, "I should lose something else eternally, something that is dearer to me than all else in the world. No," he murmured, "I know her too well. She could love success, she might even bear with failure, but this! I do not think she would even bend to put words to it. Just one look yes, I can picture that look and then, 'Away out of my sight, you!' "

I let him think on for a while in silence, and then suggested quietly that Davis might come even yet.

"I shall give him time," said the General, "till the sixth. After that you will leave here in the *Clarindella* with Evans. I shall stay. There will be plenty of company for me," he added, "under the sand."

CHAPTER VI

THE LADY OF WIT WITH THE MASK

IT was in the greatest heat I ever remember that Davis came to us with those reckless English troops we had longed for so desperately. His steamer came in sight during a brazen midday on the fifth of October, the last burst of heat of the season. We lay panting under the mosquito bars in the tents, but when the word was passed, we rushed out into the merciless glare of the sun, and stood there trembling.

There was little certainty about it at first; we saw the ink of smoke staining the cobalt of the heavens where they rested on the western horizon; we took our glasses and found the masts of a steamer sprouting from the waters; and then we watched her with dumb longing as she slowly climbed up over the hill of the sea. She was heading straight for the channel, but closed with intolerable slowness. She showed no bunting; but a high, closed-in wheelhouse (beside other things) bespoke her as an American ship.

Anxiety bit into us like a plague. We guessed a thousand things. Only one matter we were sure about: Davis, when we parted from him, had chartered a British vessel to bring the men up to the White Tortuga Key.

Suddenly from the steamer's upper bridge there fluttered up in tiny jerks a string of barbaric colours to the wire span between the masts.

"They are signalling," the General said in a hard, strained voice. "Four flags, Birch."

"F. B. Q. C.," I read slowly through my glass as the bunting blew out.

"What's that mean?" the General asked.

"We must hunt it out in the signal book, and that's on board."

"Then why the devil/' he shouted irritably, "haven't you got it here, sir?" He started running, halted on the lip of the beach, and hailed the *Clarindella*. The second mate, paint brush in hand, answered him.

“What are the letters?”

“F. B. Q. C.,” the General roared back.

The man turned doubtingly, read the flags for himself, and went into the chart-house. It seemed half an hour before he came out again, with the paint brush between his teeth, and the book in the fork of a dirty fist. He turned over the pages slowly, found the one he wanted, and ran a finger most deliberately down the column.

“F. B. Q. C., says he’s got ‘troops on board.’ “Ah,” said the General, and that was all. He did not utter another word; he did not even turn to acknowledge my congratulations; he stood there with the wavelets tinkling beside his feet like a man just released from the twistings of an ugly dream.

The steamer came nearer at speed, wasting coal lavishly. Someone was pressing her to the top of her speed, and I guessed the name of that man to be Davis. A yellow ball was run up to her foremast truck, and when she opened the neck of the outer channel, and steered on the first two marks, they broke it out a sulphur-coloured flag with a crimson volcano erased in the fly; the new State ensign of Sacaronduca.

We had a boat on the beach, and the crew were standing by. ” Won’t you go out, sir, and meet them?” I asked.

He nodded and went with me to the boat, taking the tiller himself. The American steamer was coming with slow care down the zigzag channel, her rails lined with men’s faces under every kind of headgear. An accommodation ladder came down from its davit with squeaks and jerks, and the steamer slowed up to a halt astern of the Clarindella. As the anchor plunged out of the hause hole, we hooked on alongside.

The men, seeing for the first time the leader they were to serve under, greeted him with wild booming cheers. Davis, hat in hand, stood in the gangway to receive him, got up ” en grand tenue.*’ Davis was very much master of the ceremonies.

Briggs halted at the gangway and made them a sixty-word speech, addressing them as gentlemen (a title which the majority of them had earned by birth) and complimenting them on their businesslike appearance. ” I had looked for good

men,” he said, ” but you, gentlemen, appear for my purpose to be of the very best. I cannot promise you a long campaign. I can see that you will bring our enterprise to a brilliant climax before worse troops would have opened the first parallels. And afterwards there will be peace and pleasure for all, and healthiness and prosperity such as few of us have known before.”

“Three more big cheers, boys,” someone sang out, and the hats swirled in the air and the cheers were roared with a fine enthusiasm.

Orders were given to disembark at once. Coffin and Carew were near the gangway already; Fluellen came down from the upper bridge where he had been listlessly smoking cigarettes, and these three superintended the movement.

Davis the General took aside to the chart-house for an obvious reason, and I went with them.

“There can be no two questions about what you wish to hear first, sir,” said Davis as we sat down, ” and I tell you from the beginning it is not to my credit that we are here at all. A miracle was necessary to bring us, and it took someone else to work it. A lady, I think, was the person, or, at any rate, a young woman.”

“Eh?” said the General, leaning over the table with a flush springing up on his face. ” How could she how could anyone, I mean—Look here, Davis, I don’t understand. Hadn’t you better give me your report fully?”

“Certainly, sir. I picked up the steamer as arranged, called with her at all the places mentioned in this paper marked F, and picked up at each the number of men mentioned in the margin. Only one man had failed to appear at his rendezvous, and he was a British Columbian, who got shot in a train riot (of his own raising) on the C. P. R. I had with me by that time Mr. Fluellen, Mr. Coffin, and most of the men, and it only remained for me to pick up Sir William and forty others and come straight on here with (as I reckoned) two days’ margin inside the appointed time. My next place of call was the little village of Santa Clara, on the Mexican Gulf coast. We steamed up there after dark, lying about three miles out on account of shoal water, and made the night signal. It was answered from the beach. An hour afterwards a launch came out a naphtha launch, painted slate colour.”

The General tapped the table thoughtfully. ” I wonder if that was our friend,” he murmured.

“The launch came quickly up with us, making, as it seemed, for the accommodation ladder. I noticed she carried over her bows a spar with what seemed like an oil drum on the end of it; but (and here my culpability, sir, comes in) it never occurred to me to be suspicious of anything wrong.”

Davis paused. ” From what you have said,” the General remarked, ” I guess the oil-drum arrangement to be a primitive kind of spar torpedo, such as the Russians used against Turkish war vessels in the Danube.”

“It was.”

“But,” the General added, ” your story, and a matter which happened on the Key here, told me this. I do not fancy I should have discovered it for myself had I been in your shoes on the steamer.”

Davis stood up and bowed; then resumed his chair and continued:

“I was on the upper bridge myself, and not till too late did I make out that the naphtha launch carried but one man on board of her. He came out of the darkness at full speed; did not slow down; but holding the tiller under his knee steered so as to sweep past a fathom from the gangway. In one hand he had the fall of a tackle which formed a kind of lift to the top of the spar; in the other he held the lanyard of a trigger.

“My fellows saw him, and some of them understood his business, and yelled. Two of them who carried revolvers (without orders) fired. But they did not hit, and the naphtha launch came on. Then in an instant, so it seemed, the spar was lowered into the water with a surge, the lanyard pulled, and an explosion followed which careened the steamer till her bridge end splashed the water. Then she recovered herself, and at once began to settle down.”

“Ah,” said the General. “And the launch?”

“She broke in two and went down like a stone. That spar torpedo was more destructive than the scoundrel reckoned upon.”

“I don’t know,” said the General thoughtfully. “I think you had a coolly desperate man to deal with there, who would be aware that an oil-drum of dynamite kicks at both ends when it is exploded, and so would be ready for the next move. I should say he was quite ready to swim when the launch failed him.

Now if that man did escape, I would offer a good deal to win him on to my side.”

“Then I am afraid, sir,” said Davis rather stiffly, “that you will be disappointed. I conceived it my duty to order any man with weapons to fire on him if he reappeared, and as it happened not a bullet was let off. He must have sunk once and for all.”

“Well,” said the General, “we will take it that our cause is rid of a very dangerous enemy. And now, what happened to you next?”

“We had a dozen square yards of plate crumpled away beneath the water-line on two sides of a bulk head, and we were sinking fast. The engine-room and the fireholds were luckily untouched, and so we gave her the steam and went for the beach with all the speed we could make. She took the ground in three fathoms, and then the surf got her in charge and drove her still further on. One boat was swamped in the lowering, but with the other three we all got safely on the shingle. Not a man was drowned; not a man retained his freedom.”

“How do you mean?” the General asked.

“They had a guard of honour drawn up to receive us,” Davis said grimly; “a battery of artillery, a regiment of foot, and two squadrons of Lancers. We came ashore single boat loads at a time, with five revolvers to the whole ship’s company. Mr. Fluellen wished to fight; Mr. Coffin said he would do whatever anybody fancied; but I saw no use in being killed without the smallest shred of profit to you, sir, or Sacaronduca, or anyone else.”

“Quite right,” said the General, with a nod.

“So under protest we surrendered, were marched into the church, and were gaoled there for thirteen days. What they intended to do with us we did not know, and I do not think they had made up their minds. Probably a messenger had been sent to some bigger town to ask for instructions, and as the roads out there are bad, and transit consequently slow, these were long in arriving. So in the meantime they kept strong patrols round the church both night and day, fed us well, let us do practically what we liked.

“I don’t think the men found the time fall particularly heavy. One young sportsman from the Cape managed somehow or other to get hold of a roulette

table, and we had the whole crew of them gambling for each twelve hours on end. There is an Eton boy from New South Wales who is a millionaire twice over, I believe, if only he could get half his I. O. U. 'spaid. And there is a stonebroke Irish peer who had mortgaged his prospective loot to the tune of ten thousand pounds. We three officers did not conceive it our duty to scare them too soon about the gravity of the position."

"You had formed your own plans, though?"

Davis spread his hands helplessly. "How could we, sir? Our prison was most strongly guarded; we were without arms; we knew nothing of the country outside, except that there was no shipping, and no overland route to Sacaronduca. If we had attempted the utmost, we should have done nothing more than make ourselves look undignified."

"Which you considered," said the General, "a worse fate than being killed."

"I may be humbly born, sir," said Davis stiffly, "but I have the instincts of a gentleman, and I shrank from putting myself in the way of ridicule."

"A king would have done the same," said Briggs. "But get on with your tale, man. Get on!"

"Why, sir, I've so thin a tale to tell that I am almost ashamed to bring it out. There was no government we could apply to for protection. We were practically outlaws. We were in the hands of a power which is noted for its lawlessness, and which (owing to past events) has a horrible fear of filibusters. We were entirely helpless to avoid any penalty they might choose to put upon us. We could not guess what would happen, and did not try. We expected everything except having another steamer given and being sent off along our ways. Yet here we are with you on the White Tortuga Key.

"I cannot explain these things to you, because I do not understand them myself. I only know that one night half our guard rose upon the other half, and in the middle of the skirmish the church door opened and a lady with a mask came in, who very civilly told us to be off. We should find our own boats, she said, on the beach, and a steamer was lying off whose master would take us on board, and afterwards go wherever we bade him.

"'This is great news, madame,' says Coffin, 'and whom have we to thank for

this most suitable gaol delivery?’

“‘Me,’ says she.

“‘’Tis a curious thing,’ says Coffin. ‘I’m sure we must have met before, but for the life of me I’ve been rude enough to forget your name.’

“She put up a small, very white hand to hide her laugh, and I noticed a wedding ring. ‘I believe, sir,’ she says, ‘I’ve forgot it too just this moment, though it’s probable someone else will remember it afterwards and introduce us in form next time we meet. But for the present, if you want to make a note, you might put me down as a Friend to Sacaronduca.’

“‘Well,’ says Coffin, ‘I’m sure we’re all mightily obliged to you, madame, for your thoughtfulness in ridding this building of our wicked selves and letting us get off after business again; but if you’d lift your mask I’m sure you’d add a lot to the obligation.’

“‘I might scare you if I did,’ she said.

“‘Of that I must keep my doubts,’ says Coffin.

“She laughed. ‘Then, I think, sir,’ she said, ‘we are wasting time which may be valuable. I have contrived to set by the ears the troops who are told off to guard you; but they may tire before long of cutting one another to bits, and join hands again to attend you; and so you would put me to the pains of coming to nurse you again.’

“‘Madame,’ says Coffin, ‘we are only human. This is tempting us to stay on here for ever.’

“‘You silly fellow,’ says she, laughing, ‘probably I should send a deputy next time. But if you want to see me again, I should be very pleased to receive you on one of my afternoons, and give you tea or, but let me see, in your country you prefer whisky and soda. Is it not so?’

“‘But where?’

“‘Why, at my own house, to be sure,’ says she.

“‘Er—Paris, isn’t it?’ said Coffin.

“‘Paris, no. I’m a Sacaronducan, and,’ she added, backing towards the church door, ‘ being a person of position, naturally I live at Dolores. Gentlemen,’ she says, with a pretty bow to the whole wondering crowd of us, ‘ to the pleasure of seeing you all quickly again,’ and with that slipped out into the darkness.

“Coffin darted out after her; I at his heels; but we caught no other sight of her. We saw a pair-horsed carriage driving away at speed, and if she was not in that, she must have vanished like a wraith.

“Coffin was for following the carriage to see if a lady so interested in Sacaronduca would not come with us to take new possession of it; but Fluellen and I said no; and with the men we marched down to the beach with all the speed we could make. Twice small knots of cavalry rode up to us, but we went at them with our naked hands, and they did us the honour to turn their horses; so that we got down to the beach without a man hurt; and found our own boats waiting, and three other boats beside.

“A steamer’s three lights swung in the offing; her hull was thrown up black against a swill of phosphorescence; and half an hour later we were on board of her, asking questions. But the steamer’s master could tell us nothing of frivolous interest. He knew only that his ship was placed at our entire command as a transport, and that was exactly all.

“‘It’s of naw use coming to me, me lads,’ said he. ‘ I’ve been chartered by cable, and the money paid. An agent did it. I’ve been kept to secrecy over what you want to know, in the simplest manner possible. They’ve told me nothing. I’m to take my herders from a Mr. Andrew Davis till we pick up the White Tortuga Key, and afterwards from a General Esteban Puentos, who also (it appears) writes himself ” Stephen Briggs.” I’ve signed on to remain in this employ for as long as the steamer’s required/ and the master added with a chuckle, ‘ I don’t mind how long it lasts. The pay’s very much to my liking.’ ‘

“So,” said the General, with a queer look, ” you heard no more of the lady who was so instrumental in rescuing you?”

“Not a whisper, sir, except amongst ourselves,” Davis replied. ” We steamed on about our busi. ness, picked up the balance of the men all save twenty-three who failed to come off at the rendezvous and then came straight here.”

“Twenty-three men missing,” said the General. “That is a serious item. At what place did they fail you?”

Davis mentioned three points on the shores of the Mexican Gulf.

“Ah,” said the General, “Carew’s men all, aren’t they?”

“No, sir; five were recruited by Mr. Fluellen in British Columbia. But the rest are Sir William’s.”

“Well,” said the General, “gone they are, whoever raised them. It’s a great pity that we shall be weakened by so many, but it can’t be helped. By the way, what’s the matter with Carew’s left hand? I see he carries it wrapped up.”

“Oh, he found the time of waiting hang heavy, and as there was snipe shooting near him, he borrowed a gun and tried for some sport. His third day at it the gun burst in his hand and nearly cost him three fingers. The shock knocked him down, and in falling his machete dropped out of its sheath and gave him a nasty gash on the thigh. In fact, what with that and losing the men, he ‘seemed (if one may use a vulgarism) rather down on his luck.’”

“Some casualties were to be expected,” said the General. “Let us be thankful there are no worse. But now, if you please, we will all go ashore. I intend to serve out arms and uniforms, and begin drilling the men into military shape this very night. Time presses on us. I have fixed with my friends in Sacaronduca a day for the revolution to begin, and it would be a bad omen if we disappointed them.”

CHAPTER VII

INITIA BELLI

To describe the dull mechanism of drill by which the raw material culled from the by-ways of British colonies was transformed into the most wonderfully efficient pocket army a commander ever handled, would make a piece of reading inexpressively tedious. Many of the fellows had already served in the regular services, or with colonial troops which were more or less irregular. Most were (as I have said) men of good family, who, with the various devils of debt, ill-luck, and a thousand other difficulties dinging on their heels at home, and the chance of fortune, excitement, and another spell of soft living ahead, made unequalled soldiers. And the balance, if they could not talk over their camp-fires of the 'Varsity and the public schools, of Hurlingham and the clubs, were all the keener to outdo the "swells" who were their covering files.

One might say that our forces were divided into the regulation foot, horse, and guns; for though we had as yet no mounts, and all (save for a small corps who served the machine guns) went through infantry drill, yet there was a squadron of eighty strong set apart to act as cavalry so soon as we could get requisition animals to put beneath them. These men were all fellows who had served in that arm in Australia or Southern Africa, and, indeed, came to us as soldiers ready made.

We were singularly fortunate, too, in our gunners, having no less than eight men who had handled Maxims previously, of whom three had actually fought them in active service; so that, all of the corps being fine horsemen, when the guns were mounted on their galloper carriages, we had faith that they would never break down through ignorant bungling, and a comforting hope that they would be vastly useful to us.

Behold us, then, having broken camp at the White Tortuga Key, and embarked on the transports Clarindella, Captain Evans, and Silas Bloomer, Captain Torganssen. We had cleared the outermost shoals of the Key with the last of the day, and stood out across the smooth Gulf water to where the sun's afterglow glowered in the West. It was then for the first time that the General announced to us the name of the spot at which he intended to commence his campaign.

“I shall take Los Angeles,” he said.

To those of us who knew the coast, the announcement gave a bit of a thrill. We had discussed the matter a hundred times already; had pitched upon a hundred places where for a hundred reasons the landing should be effected; but had never once, even in the most reckless mood, cast our thoughts upon Los Angeles. It was the principal seaport of Sacaronduca, the second town of the Republic; it held a garrison of 3,000 regular troops, and was commanded on its sea face with concrete forts armed with weapons brought from Europe only a year ago. It was a place incredibly strong; a fortress written about with diagrams in the professional literature to school engineers; and he was a very bold man who would ram his head against it.

But it was not our part to criticise or comment, and (whatever we felt in our own private stomachs) outwardly we were full of rejoicing. We spoke with glee on the moral effect which the capture of such a place would have upon the Cause.

The night came away clear and dark; but later, when we neared the coast, a great white globe of moon burned over the waters behind us like some garish arc lamp. We must have been seen by sentries on shore from the first moment our masttrucks rose up out of the sea, in clean-cut black against the radiance.

It was the very daring of the plan which gave it hope. Ours were two small armed merchant vessels of no remarkable speed; the guns of Los Angeles could have sunk an ironclad navy with ease and convenience. We had separated from one another before rising the land, sheering some five miles apart, so that we steered in as strangers to one another on converging courses. Of course it was a coincidence (from the shore point of view) that we should both pass the outer pier heads within thirty seconds of one another.

Then came the difficulty. The harbour was long and lean; a river, in fact, dredged out and embanked with stone; and the law ran that all vessels should drop an anchor at the entrance of the port, and wait till the doctor's boat should choose to come off and give them pratique. To do this one had to slow down outside.

We did not. We ran between the pier heads at thirteen knots, with black smoke rolling in greasy coils from our funnels, and live cinders leaping out amongst it. The General knew the harbour like a book, and he stood at the con on the Clarindella's upper bridge. The Silas Bloomer followed close in her wake.

To give the forts due credit, they were not slow to wake. Sentries' rifles cracked in warning on every side of us, and two of the water batteries summoned us to stop with unshotted guns. Lights kindled in the embrasures. Flash signals winked their messages all round the cup of the hills. But the big guns were neither manned nor loaded; and by the time the gunners had their breechblocks in and out, cartridges home, and sights aligned, we were far too dangerous a mark to fire at. We had run (amid much wailing from Captain Evans) with noise and violence against the Custom House quay; had made fast warps ashore in the fastest time in experience, and had landed with the derricks five light machine guns on field carriages. There was not a gangway put over. The men jumped from the bulwarks on to the wharf. They fell into rank as the keys of a piano leap up when a player rests. But only for a moment. The next instant, at word of command, they split into three companies, and went off at the double through different streets.

The forts were ready to fire then, but there were only two deserted steamers and the huge stone Custom buildings of Los Angeles to vent their shells upon. The invaders had gained a way into the white streets of the city without losing a man.

So far General Briggs had succeeded brilliantly in (so to speak) getting under the forts with no other weapon than strategy; but the occupying a few streets of the city and holding the entirety of it as a conqueror were two very different matters. There were three thousand troops in garrison; we had a bare two hundred and fifty all told; and it was a certain thing that, unless we somehow contrived to pin them, they would most assuredly beset us.

But it required no great astuteness on the General's part to foresee this plainly, and, being a man of nice invention, he had made his dispositions so as to meet the circumstances. From a large-scale map, the officers had learnt up the ways of the city, the turns of the suburbs, and the lay of the country beyond, till the curves of it lay at their fingers' ends. The General had shown photographs, had made sketches, had described vividly. Here was a boulevard of palms, there a cable tramline, there a palace with a front of pink and grey stucco; here lay the Fonda del Falcone, with a golden bird by way of sign, at that corner was the Paseo de Colon, leading from the Columbus Statue to the Great Plaza, where the obsolete artillery was parked.

Fluellen's orders were the most delicate. He was to raid a tram-stables, take mule-teams for his guns, and get out of the city at forced speed through the

poorer quarter at the back. He was to make his way through a maze of mountain roads to the foot of a rocky spur called La Nuca del Diabolo, and then, as best he might, he was to get his Maxims on to the top of the rocks.

“Why they have not fortified the place themselves,” said the General in his instructions at the Key, ” I do not know. In view of an event happening such as I hope to bring about it is a piece of incredible folly. One must suppose they considered it inaccessible for any rapid occupation. But there I do not agree with them. I have been at the top of this Devil’s Crag myself at the cost of a stiff climb, and I know that with plenty of men I could get three light machine guns up in three hours. I shall give you credit for being more skilful, Fluellen, and I shall be obliged to you if you will plant me there a battery of four.”

Fluellen had with him fifty men. The rest, with Coffin and Carew as divisional commanders, debouched from the central plaza in two bodies of some ninety odd apiece, Carew going to the northward, Coffin marching down an avenue which carried the cable cars, and led in a general direction south-west.

With Coffin went the General and the headquarter staff, which consisted mainly of Davis and myself; and our attack was to be the signal for the others to begin playing their part. If from one reason or another they failed to cooperate at the right time, then whatever happened to them we, at any rate, were doomed to extinction. So any way the position was anxious enough.

Our way lay (as I have said) down a street which carried the cable cars. At each side there were two rows of feathery cabbage palms, making shade for the foot walks; and beyond these were gardens and lawns; and beyond again villas of the most irregular size and tint. They were pink, mauve, brick-red, and white, and in the half light they gave one the bewildering idea of an impressionist picture done with a palette knife and looked at close to. The most of these villas had their windows close shuttered, with lights gleaming yellow through the crevices; some were all dark; a few, a very few, were all lit up. From one of these last some men and a cluster of women cried a welcome at us and waved handkerchiefs as we tramped past. Some of the men began to raise a cheer. ” Silence there in the ranks,” the General ordered sharply. ” Mr. Coffin, mark those men, and punish them afterwards.”

From another of the lit villas a different kind of salute was given us. It came from an old man, white-haired and upright, who stood in the entrance to a patio.

He cursed us as we came up, and then, lifting a revolver, fired rapidly five shots at the head of the column. None of us officers were touched, but a poor young Australian in the first rank was shot through the head. His rifle pitched forward with a clatter on to the tramline, he after it; his comrades in the line closed up stolidly and without command; and the steady tramp-tramp went on without a whisper or a check.

I glanced back. The old man in the patio was staring after us in wonder. When he flaunted his principles with that crazy piece of daring, he had expected a platoon in reply, and (as I afterwards heard) hoped to fittingly close a life of recklessness. The cold ignoring of his anger struck him like a blow; the wooden discipline of the filibustering troops awed him; and his allegiance to President Maxillo dropped from that very minute.

At two other points down that avenue were we fired upon, once from the shadow of a side road, once from what appeared to be an unoccupied house. To neither did we return any notice, though at the last discharge a bullet hummed through Coffin's pith helmet, but tramped stolidly on up a gentle gradient; and saw on the downward side the harbour and the business part of the town twinkling with lights and activity.

Los Angeles was very much alive to our invasion, and behind us we could hear at times brisk firing. Apparently both Carew and Fluellen were being attacked, though with what fortune we could not tell. But they had our best wishes for success. It meant nothing short of annihilation to us if they failed to gain their positions and do the work allotted to them by the appointed time.

The moon fell when we came to the end of the avenue, and the night grew darker. The cableline had ended with a sweep; the ground underfoot yielded a crop of sun-dried ruts; the road began to lead with petulant zigzags up a steep mountain flank. High above us a bugle shrilled out a call.

"That is our point," Briggs said in his cool voice. "The fort up there is the key to the whole position, and we have got to take it."

"Or die trying," said Davis.

"Oh, no," replied the General; "take the place, my dear fellow. That is much better. I prefer in a vital case like this to make up my mind for success. It is much pleasanter, and always more profitable."

“By Jove, yes,” said Coffin. ” A man who thinks he may lose at a bluff game never wins. There’s only one thing I’m discontented about, and that’s this infernal marching. Nature never intended me for a footpad. General, dear, as a man who knows the district, couldn’t you recommend me to a convenient spot where I could lift a piece of horse-flesh?”

“Cavalry can’t storm forts,” said the General. “But when we have got that duty off our hands, I’ll mount you, next thing. Whew! listen to that.”

“Fluellen is getting it,” said I. ” There’s hot firing going on in his direction.”

“Fluellen is giving it, I fancy,” returned the General drily. ” He has got two of his guns in action, and ah! There is ‘ cease fire both.’ He’s cleared the coast behind him, and on he goes again. What time is it? Four o’clock. He’s running it very close. He ought to be at the foot of that Devil’s Crag by now, and he’s a mile from there still, but if he isn’t stopped again he’ll do it yet.”

All this time we had been marching between heavy walls of timber, the trees so matted with linas and undergrowth that without a machete a man could not have struggled a mile in a day. The foliage on the lower parts of the hill masked us effectually from any watching eye in the fort above; but as it grew in height, so it thinned; till the crest, which was shaped curiously like the cranium of a man, lay completely bald, save for a downy growth of tussock grass. Out here, on the middle of the forehead (so to speak) the fort squatted like some uncouth beetle; and at the back, a mile away, the Devil’s Crag loomed up black against the night sky.

It was not our object to be viewed too soon. The stronghold was a place of prodigious strength, and only by a sudden attack on the weakest and most unexpected point could we hope to carry it by storm. So when the cover thinned, we left the main road and turned off down a narrow trail which led along the edge of the tonsure.

The attack was arranged for the break of day. Fluellen with his guns on La Nuca del Diabolo was to open the ball by a furious fire from above into the heart of the fort. Under the cover of this, Carew was to break ambush and storm the angle of the back which lay nearest him, whilst simultaneously with him Coffin was to escalate the opposite corner.

There had been a little margin allowed for delay on the road, though not much.

In our case, having been hindered by nothing at all, we found ourselves on the spot half an hour too soon, But the delay was not without its advantages. The march had been at a brisk pace, and much of the ground was rugged and steep. Many of the men were blown and leg-weary. So we advanced cautiously to the edge of the fringe of cover, and there lay down silently on our arms to rest and bide the time.

The men were very willing in their effort at keeping the silence, but absolute noiselessness was beyond their power. All around me I could hear the rustle of breathing, and the faint creak of moving limbs. There were besides the hums of mosquitos, the swishings of jar-flies, the chatter of katydids, and the other night sounds of the forest; so that it was not easy to pick up smaller sounds. I could make out the movement of brisk life in the fort, but not so much as a whisper told of Carew's advance, and from the towering Devil's Crag came the silence of a monument.

So we lay when the higher clouds in the east began to redden in prophesy of the dawn, and then an alarming thing happened. From out of the earth, so it seemed, in our midst there suddenly rose a man, mother-naked; who ran in zigzags amongst the resting troops, and stabbed with a long lean knife at any hand which made a clutch for him.

Someone he had wounded drew and levelled a revolver.

"Any man who fires," said the General, in his quiet, carrying voice, "I will shoot with my own hands. Pluck the legs from under him; give him the steel."

The Indian dodged like a football player; his limbs were greased; he was with us one instant, the next he was through our line and racing for the fort.

The General looked at his watch. Then he stood up and drew his sword. "When that fellow gets in with his news they will slew guns over here and start shelling us at once. Fluellen and Carew certainly are not up; but I do not see that we have any choice left us other than to attack at once. I shall have the honour, gentlemen, of leading you myself, and I shall be very much disappointed if we are not inside that fort within ten minutes. It is the key to Los Angeles, and with Los Angeles we can unlock Sacaronduca."

"Fall in there," said Coffin. "Now, boys, the fewer there are to share the more there is to get. Come along, now."

The men had heaved themselves on to their feet and edged up into line. They yelled out a cheer, and then came a groan or two and one vivid shriek. The fort had seen us, and a hundred men with rifles resting on the wall had already opened fire.

The General sprang out for the foot of the concrete walls a dozen paces ahead of any of us; we others followed at the run, and I owned that it seemed to me impossible that one man of the whole lot could by any chance be alive ten minutes later on.

CHAPTER VIII

FREE WOMEN

NOW, to explain matters which had a great influence with our efforts upon Sacaronduca, it is needful at this point to put in a plainer account of some relationships which so far have been only touched upon very lightly.

Humanly speaking, the whole of the events recounted in this book owe their start to one young lady having unusual liberty of action granted to her at an extremely youthful age. Her father was a Sacaronducan, who made money in the country out of gem and gold mines, and was shrewd enough to store it elsewhere. Her mother was a lady of Co. Fermanagh, educated in Paris, and so pinned down by rule during the days of youth that life was made a torment to her. The pair of them lived a married life that was not altogether idyllic, nor completely miserable, nor at all ordinary; pleasantly varied, in fact; and all were sorry when it came to an end. Monsieur le pere died first of a rifle shot in one of the periodical revolutions. Madame inherited all his enormous wealth, on the one condition of residing in Sacaronduca, a country she loathed. During the next six years she bewailed this tie without ceasing; and, regarding the matter in the abstract, expended a very pretty talent in invective solely on the subject of human restrictions in the bulk; after which time she joined her husband, and left a most consistent will. Delie Alicia, the only daughter, was to inherit without stint; and though law insisted that the property should be held primarily by trustees, Madame so contrived that these should be the merest figureheads.

There are beyond doubt a vast legion of other young ladies of fifteen who would consider it the ultimate earthly bliss to find themselves supreme mistress of an income of £80,000 per annum, derived from sound investments; and it is a very probable thing that were they to have their wish and put a little enterprise into the handling of it, the great majority of them would come to the worst kind of grief. But Miss Delicia's previous education had been peculiar. She had a very shrewd notion of taking care of herself; so that, although the track of her progress was usually marked with a series of moral earthquakes, minor and great, she, Delicia, always kept upon her feet.

There is no place here for Miss Delicia's earlier escapades in full; besides,

another man is writing them in another place. One alone of her thousand freaks demands mention, and that is her invasion of Ireland.

She descended upon that country of her mother in a whirlwind of liveliness and Parisian clothes, and she took Dublin and Ulster by storm. She eclipsed all the other women, but even they loved her, which is certainly the most generous certificate which could be given to anyone. They seemed to take it quite as the right thing that all their men-kind should propose to Delicia if they were clever enough to get her for three consecutive minutes "en tete-a-tte."

She proved herself handy in many ways. She drove a tandem of two Arab polo ponies unbroken to harness in the front of a car, and kept out of many tempting wayside ditches. She steered a notably unlucky cutter in a race on Lough Erne, during a stiff blow, and got an easy win. She was certainly the best waltzer in the North of Ireland, knew several fresh figures for the cotillon, and when put to the test showed that she could handle a very useful gun at cock-shooting. And when she climaxed all these accomplishments by avowing a passion for bricks and mortar it will be understood why the good folks of that impulsive clime found her completely irresistible.

Finally, after two months of the most toothsome amusement, she went away, as suddenly as she had come, and this time the whirlwind was made up of warm-hearted Irish regrets. She had (as has been hinted) many volunteers who wished to escort her further, but they were of the male sex, and as she said she could not marry all, and did not wish to be specially slighting to any, she suddenly flitted away to London, which lies morally further from Fermanagh than New York does. She took only one extra person in her train, and that was a certain Miss Julia Armitage.

Now, Miss Armitage was a little lady of sprightliness, whose parent, a retired Colonel in the British service, had pinned himself down for life by commencing to rebuild the family castle on a scale of generous magnificence. He got the pulling down done very nicely and effectually, but when the new building began to rise above the cellars of the old he started to discover that the amusement was costing money. So when one half was completed he filled in the loose end with weather-boards, sent the masons away, and turned their sheds into stables for his hunters and polo ponies, and brought up his family in this halfhouse on potatoes and pomp.

“It is no doubt amusing for a while,” Miss Armitage said to Delicia, ” to live on a tessellated pavement of price, under a ceiling brought from Italy, and between walls where the bricks have never had their blushes hid by plaster. There’s variety in it, and there’s always the fun of speculating on what a fine place you might make of it if the family could only pay off a few of its last ten years’ debts and get a little ready cash for improve, ments.”

“I’d like it myself for awhile,” said Delicia.

“For a very little while, perhaps you might. You’re great at plotting and planning. But you like to think of a thing one minute and have it done the next, and that’s what we can’t do at our place. There’s no money. There never is any money. The other day one of my dearest friends wanted me to be a bridesmaid at her wedding, and I had to refuse because the dresses were light blue serge and that wouldn’t make an evening frock afterwards, and I couldn’t afford two for the year. It was sickening. I’ve never been a bridesmaid yet.”

“Then,” said Delicia, ” come along with me and be one of mine.”

“But you aren’t engaged yet? Or oh, I say! Have you accepted one of the boys round here? And never told me. Ah, I’ll never forgive you now.”

“Not a bit of it,” said Delicia. ” They’re all extremely nice, as I’ve told each of them; but I’m afraid that none of them individually would quite do to marry. Still the right man’s got to be found somewhere, because I’ve quite made up my mind to have a husband before I’m twenty.”

“And you’re nineteen now.”

“That is so,” said Delicia, “and I’m tired of having even the most harmless of duennas dangling at my heels. I’m going to indulge in a nice convenient hubby, and be my own chaperone, and do precisely as I like.”

“If you ask me, you seem to do that very tolerably now.”

“Hum,” said Delicia. ” There are different ways of looking at the same thing. Still, as I’ve said I’m going to try the husband attachment, you may be sure I shall do it; so you’d better come and watch the process, and then you’ll be able to act as bridesmaid at a moment’s notice. When’s there a train? Let’s go now.”

Miss Armitage got very red. "I can't," she said. "I mean, Delicia, dear, I'd rather not."

"Now, my sweet child," returned Delicia, "look here. I know exactly what you're thinking of. You're trading on that terrible pride of yours, the fine old family pride which built this half house and made all your lives a burden to you. Put it in your pocket. The stuff's not a bit of use. Just come along with me and help yourself out of my cheque book when you want to."

"But, Delicia—"

"Now do be quiet. I'd do the same by you if things were the other way on. I haven't a scrap of pride to my possession. It's a useless commodity which you can make nothing out of and which only gets in the way. You have heaps more fun without it, and can do lots more things which you want to do."

"You're a darling, of course, and it's immensely good of you, and I'd like to come awfully, and I don't think I'd really be so very extravagant, even if you did give me the freest chance. But, Delicia, there's—don't you know there's someone else I've got to think about."

"And pray who's that?"

"Why, Delicia, how silly you are. Of course I shall have to ask Charlie."

"What, that Mr. Fluellen, the serious-looking person in the six photographs?"

"Delicia, don't; I'm engaged to him, dear."

"Of course you are, and that's the very reason you should do what you want to first and ask him about it afterwards. I never saw such a girl. You always make a point of having your own way here, and I'm sure you're not likely to care for a change afterwards."

"But I couldn't"

"Oh, yes, you could anything. But I'll tell you what. We'll compromise this matter; we'll step across to London first, and there the man can call upon us. Then we'll go on/I^

“Where?”

“Haven’t the faintest idea. I never cramp myself by making an armful of plans on ahead. Besides, it’s good practice to often make up your mind on the spur of the moment. Now, as I’ve said, I’ve decided upon going off and taking you with me, and you’d better come peaceably, because I’m quite equal to kidnapping you if you won’t. Run away now and write out a long telegram to the Fluellen man messages over thirty words always tickle people favourably and I’ll go downstairs and find some nice boy who will rummage the time-table for me.”

In twenty-four hours after this they were in London, and forty-eight hours later saw them settled down in Paris. Fluellen had not called; had not been able to call, so he said, being detained by regimental duties; but instead had written a letter which was, perhaps, a little stiff, and was certainly injudicious.

“You let him write to you like this?” said Delicia, in high scorn, when the sheet was handed her to read. ” My word! I’d marry that man tomorrow if I was engaged to him, and soon let him see who was going to do all the ordering.”

“You couldn’t,” said Miss Armitage, bridling up. ” His aunt’s just dead. That’s what’s been stopping us.”

“Why, bless me, that’s no reason. You can’t bring the poor woman to life again, or do her any good by remaining single.”

“But, Delicia, one must observe the conventionalities a little.”

“Some of them certainly, but when they are gratuitously foolish, I don’t see why. Eh? Hullo, I didn’t know it was as late as all this. Now you must get your shoes and some outdoor things put on within eight minutes or we shall miss the Club train, and that’s a thing I wouldn’t do for a diamond bracelet.”

“But, Delicia, your maid can’t pack for the pair of us in that time.”

“Who thought of packing? Can’t we buy a fresh set of everything in Paris? My dear child, you must get rid of these stay-at-home oldfashioned notions.”

It was in this manner, then, that Miss Julia Armitage was launched into an entirely new phase of life under Delicia’s auspices; and very good she found it; and very much she altered under the treatment, as was to be expected. Being an

Irish girl and brimming with vitality, she picked up the new openings readily enough. She was a very accurate understudy of Delicia in two months' time, and enjoyed the change to its full. Fluellen did not, which is perhaps no matter for surprise; but he said so bluntly, and from a distance, which was about as big an error as he could conveniently have made. Miss Julia Armitage began (most selfishly) to tell herself that "Charlie, dear," was selfish.

At last she put the matter in words. "It is hard," she wrote, "that you should begrudge me this one piece of enjoyment. I've been penned up in one semisavage village all my life, with two inferior dances per annum, and horse-flesh and gunpowder for the entire scope of conversation. Now that I am in a way to learn that there are other ideas in the world besides these you write stiffly to me. I don't think it is kind of you. Surely there is no harm in my becoming a woman of the world."

Fluellen thought there was, though he did not say so in plain words. In the first instance he had fallen in love with this little ignorant Irish girl for her freshness and innocence of the wiles and uncleanness of the more fashionable world. She was just a lady, no more and no less, and that was all he required of her. But now that she threatened to develop into something very much more sophisticated and different he still did not wish to lose her. He had been inoculated with a love for her which had gone into every corner of his system, and which there was no getting rid of. He wearied for the sound of her voice. So he temporised, and said in his letters as little as possible.

"What a very dull person that young man of yours must be," Delicia said at intervals; and the other girl, from hearing the statement so often, began to think there must be a grain or so of truth in it. In this way was she prepared for the coming of Juan Carmoy.

Don Juan by birth was a Mallorquin, the son of a noble family in Palma, and a grandee of profound descent. His immediate ancestors had (following the custom of their era) gambled most profusely and recruited their means in the time-honoured way. Consequently when young Juan came upon the scene the estate near Valledemosa and the gloomy old palazzo in Palma were all more or less securely in the grip of the chulta, which is the local equivalent for Jew.

Now, Don Juan with cleverness put this all forward first, and because there was something extremely homelike and Irish about the whole proceeding Miss Julia

took a liking for the man at once. This liking remained even when she learned that he had been a traitor to his traditions and hers.

It seemed that he had soon tired of "res angustae domi," and had set off Pizarro-fashion across the seas to a land where rumour said there were other fine estates for the man who was man enough to grab them; and having plenty of enterprise, abundance of appetite, and no nice scrupulousness at all, had carved himself out of the Republic of Sacaronduca as fine and valuable a property as any gentleman might wish for. It is true that in the carving a number of other people were shredded up exceedingly small. It is true also that in the cities of Dolores and Los Angeles many honest gentlemen considered that the Mallorquin nobleman showed the business morality of a sixteenth-century pirate. But then Central America is a long way off the continent of Europe, and further still from the island of Majorca, and Don Juan's reputation was filtered down to a mere romanticism by the time it reached Palma.

It is true that Delicia knew him domestically, and advertised his peculiarities most impartially. She said: "My dear Don Juan is an out-and-out Sacaronducan. He's adapted himself most thoroughly to the requirements of the country. That is, he's as big a thief as any man can be without getting hanged. But he's the most gentlemanly kind of brigand imaginable, and, moreover, he's very successful at his trade."

"His trade?" said Miss Armitage, doubtfully. "Has he a business? Does he make something?"

"There you go again! Oh, this fine old crusted Irish pride! What does it matter if the man sells lottery tickets; what does it matter if he makes soap, so long as he is successful at it? You don't see that? You think a soldier, whose pay isn't even big enough to square his mess bill, far more desirable as a husband."

"It appears so," said Miss Armitage.

"Now I've not that humdrum sort of taste. I can fancy I shall get tired of dancing and gadding about, and those sort of things, some day, and I shall take up another set of interests. I shall want to be something big. And being tied up to a man who was content with commanding a troop in a lancer regiment wouldn't help me to that. I should either want a nobody or a somebody."

"But I'm not you," Miss Armitage objected.

“My dear child,” said Delicia drily, ” you are not. That is why I strongly advise you to marry Juan, who is emphatically a somebody. He is distinctly taken up with you, probably because you are nothing like anything he has ever come across before; and so you can do it if you like. His ‘ trade ‘ which you so object to is one which kings dabble in, so that it does not lack respectability. An American would describe him as an operator in real estate; we in Sacaronduca speak of him as a mine-grabber; and a monarch employed on the same occupation would describe the process as annexation. We will speak of it as a profession if that pleases you better.”

“Ah,” said Miss Armitage, ” of course, all this is very interesting, but it can’t be of use to me, because I am still engaged to Charlie.”

“You will also observe,” continued her friend, “that Don Juan is a man of excellent family, better, if anything, than your own, and that is an obsolete thing which I know you Irish people set a lot of store by. His ancestors came over from Arragon with King Jaime the Conqueror, selecting the slice of Majorca which pleased them, and took possession by torturing to death all the Moors they found on the premises. A marquisate was the natural reward, and as it has been kept going ever since, the present family can trace a distinguished connection with almost every piece of brilliant knavery which has taken place between 1400 and now,”

“Delicia,” said the other, ” you are laughing at me.”

“Have you found that out? Then, my dear child, let me advise you to take care. I am always most dangerous when I’m laughing.”

Now precisely how it came about I do not know; and no one who can do so with accuracy seems inclined to tell me; but it is a certain fact that one month after this talk took place these two girls were married women on their way out to Sacaronduca. There are many yarns straying about as to why and wherefore, but I see no reason to doubt that they are one and all of them guesswork, and therefore quite unworthy of repetition. There is a mystery hanging over the whole affair, and so far as I am concerned it must remain there. Perhaps the other man who is writing the separate book upon Miss Delicia’s life may be authorised to raise it.

One thing, however, is certain, as may be seen from official records in Paris. The

little lady from Ireland assisted (as per agreement) in Delicia's wedding, and then figured in her own with Don Juan Carmoy.

Delicia of course achieved the unexpected. Everyone took it for granted that her husband would be some heroic being of the heroic order. Indeed, several men who were (or fancied themselves to be) in this category offered themselves as aspirants for the vacant post. Not a bit of it; she would have none of them. She picked out a little, delicate, dainty-voiced Italian, whose one marked trait was that he carried his cigarette tobacco in a Louis Quatorze snuff-box. He had not another feature to distinguish him from the general herd, or money, or position, or anything except the manners of a gentleman. And she married him, departing the same day for Sacaronduca with the Carmoys, and leaving that part of Europe and Great Britain which knew her in a very curious twitter of surprise.

When they heard that her husband had died of sunstroke on the voyage out they wondered what Delicia would do next. There were not wanting cynics who said that it was a merciful release for him.

CHAPTER IX

OCCUPATION OF THE ANGELS

A VERY pestilence of bullets swept against us as we left the cover of the trees and dashed across the bare strip, and every moment the line of heads above the white parapet of the fort grew blacker with numbers. Our men were falling with fearful rapidity, but their discipline held. They kept to their line, neither spurting forward nor lingering behind; and because the order had not been given, they fired no single shot. A set of iron targets could not have endured that terrible punishment more stoically.

We reached a point thirty yards from the walls, and a bugle rang out a lusty call. One half of our little force stopped instantly, dropping behind any boulder or clump of grass which would offer a vestige of shelter, and offering a smart fire with their repeating rifles to cover the attack of the rest. It was the fusilade of practical marksmen, and as coolly delivered as if they had been firing at the range on the White Tortuga Key. It did heavy execution, but there was such an abundance of men in the fort that as fast as one fell another was ready to stop up the gap.

By this time we had come to a very fit mind for the work. We had ceased to be men having human fears; the thought of death or maiming had gone from us; the lust of the battle had filled us like long draughts of spirit. We bit our teeth, and thought of nothing but getting at handgrips.

We reached the foot of the white concrete wall, and stood in a ditch sown with empty tins and crockery. For an instant we found a lee out of the pelting; but for an instant only. The next the soldiers were craning over the parapet and shooting down on us.

I cannot speak of what happened collectively after this. It was a time for individual striving. I only know what occurred to myself. From out of the blinding, stinking smoke one of the defenders fell down between me and the wall, striking my arm as he fell. I gripped one of our fellows, drew him to me, and made him stand on the corpse. Then I clambered on to his shoulders, and stood for a second panting and blindly nuzzling the wall. The sweat and the smoke poured in my eyes, and I could not see a thing, but sweeping about with

my fingers found a crack in the masonry.

Somebody from above made a stab at me with a bayonet. My spare hand closed on it; I gave a spring from below, and next instant was on the ridge of the wall. The man with the bayonet wrenched it from my grasp and drew it back to stab. At the same moment some one behind raised a rifle and fired, and the man fell with half his head blown away.

Remembering the thing afterwards, I concluded that that shot was intended for me; but at the time I did not stop to think; was not even thankful for the let-off; but picking up a rifle from the ground, raged with the butt against every man I could see. Indeed, there was no lack of them. They ringed me round in a fence of weapons and savage faces with teeth gleaming like dogs, and had not relief come they must surely have got me down in another few seconds.

But first another of our men clambered up, and fired a revolver from so close behind that the grains of powder stung my neck; and then from through the smoke the General came with a dozen others; and then from the other side of the fort there came a diversion of another kind. Carew's men had turned up just in the nick of time.

We knew of it first by a rattle of startled yells, then by some unmistakably British shouts (which, if the truth be known, were mainly curses), and then by some bugle calls and a thinning of the soldiers who were trying to drive us back over the walls. The fight eddied, and staggered, and dwindled like a snowball which is set on a warm hob. The Spaniards began to throw away their weapons and run for the barracks in the middle of the fort. Our men killed a little more to appease the "manes" of their comrades: "Here's an end to you to square up for poor old Frank," one would say, and "To hell you go, my son," another would shout, "because you sent my best chum there ten minutes back;" but considering the place had been carried by storm, there were no glowing atrocities in the sack. The men soon calmed down, what few there were left of them, and stood ready to do the General's bidding. There was much to be gone through before he got his hand over all Los Angeles.

Orders followed on the heels of one another with quick despatch. First, nine men were sent to summon the other nine forts to surrender, each of them being accompanied by a comrade who carried a white flag. Next, we set about gaoing the prisoners, disarming them thoroughly, and stowing them in a long, narrow

cellar. At the entrance of this a couple of Nordenfeldts were run up, so as to rake the whole, if necessary, and, as only two men could be spared as sentries, the prisoners were given clearly to understand that at the least sign of trouble, they would be annihilated. And then gun crews were apportioned off to the big Krupp cannon with which the fort was armed, with ammunition carriers to supply them.

We officers saw to these duties, and then gathered round the General, who had stationed himself at the foot of the flagstaff in the centre of the fort. Carew had a red bandage round his left arm, and carried it in a sling made from his sash. The rest of us were unwounded, save for myself, who had picked up from somewhere or other a bayonet graze against the fifth rib.

“Fluellen,” said the General, “has failed me badly. He will probably have good excuses; but I do not care for excuses; I prefer good service. Coffin, you and your men behaved splendidly. You have lost very heavily, but I will see that all who remain over are thoroughly rewarded. Sir William, you were late.”

“I know it, General, and I am sorry. We came as soon as we could. We didn’t stop to loot a thing, but the road was blocked by troops in four places, and we had to fight our way through. We killed about three times our own weight of them, and it cost us twenty-four men to do it. They were bad in discipline, they were nothing special as fighters, but they just rioted in numbers.”

“Well,” said the General, “you came in time to save our skins, and we have this fort, and I thank you for it.”

“What about the wounded, sir?” Davis suggested.

“For the present they must attend to themselves, poor fellows, with what help the two doctors can give. I have too few sound men left to spare a single one just now. We may be engaged again any minute. And now, gentlemen, back to your posts, please, and if you see any of the other forts below beginning to train guns on us, concentrate all your force and smash them at once. Our envoys cannot reach the nearest of them for another half-hour yet.”

The sun was high and bright by this time, and the palms and the green, heavy-laced banana leaves swung in the crisp sea-breeze. The city lay beneath us, very beautiful and very restless. The houses stood out in little dabs of white and pink and mauve amongst the greenery, and from out of the houses soared up the cathedral with its great square towers of amber-coloured stone. A bell clanged

mournfully in one of its turrets.

In the streets here and there little black dots moved about hurriedly, slinking in at doors, and going at the run across the open plazas. But there were no big congregations of people; the tram-cars were stopped; and it was clear that the greater part of the folk were staying within the houses and waiting what the day might bring forth.

We, too, were expecting that same thing with no little eagerness. We were pretty well strung up by what had gone before. We were ready either for a desperate bombardment or to receive capitulation. And whatever was to come, we wanted it soon, because our wounds and our bruises were stiffening on us.

“Billy,” I heard Coffin say, “if the music doesn’t begin again soon, or if somebody doesn’t give me the equivalent of a whisky and soda, I shall sit down in some retired corner and bust.”

“I don’t know what in the fiend’s name we’re going through all this palaver for at all,” said Carew. “We’ve turned the position; and if we’d given each of those other forts a dose straight away we’d have blown half of them to rags and made the others surrender in a hurry. Then we should have had a good excuse to sack the town and get hold of a thing or two worth having. I bet there are lovely pickings in that cathedral. Oh Lord, if I only could get hold of that fat old priest who keeps the plate chest, and squeeze him... .”

“You sacrilegious ruffian,” said Coffin, laughing, “there is no talk of sacking this, our very prosperous city of Los Angeles. We’re reformers, not pirates.”

“Oh, where’s the difference?”

“The reformer’s methods are far less crude than the pirate’s. He gets hold of the place first, as quickly and suavely as may be, and then tightens his grip on it, and squeezes out all the good things into his own pocket. The pirate is a person never spoken about now in decent society. There is too much red paint and pistols about him for the murder idea.”

“Look here,” said Carew, “you’d better go and talk to Davis. Your excellent sentiments will just about suit him. They’re wasted on me: I’m past improving.”

“I don’t think that anything but a rope and a lamp-post will cure you,” said

Coffin, ” and that’s a fact. But, hullo, look there. It seems as if we are going to be saved further shooting. There goes up the white flag on one of the water forts, and what’s this ‘ D. W. H. B.’ on two of the others. What does that mean? Where’s the signal book?”

Davis came up with it, and turned over the pages on the chase of a gun.

“‘D. W. H. B.’ means ‘surrendered.’”

The other forts seemed only to be waiting for the lead. Another white flag fluttered up to one of the redoubts on the heights, and from two others ‘ D. W. H. B.’ broke out in splashes of gaudy colour. The others followed within a minute or so. The defences of Los Angeles had all capitulated: it only remained for us to take possession.

Just about that time, with a clatter of hoofs and a jangle of harness, Fluellen’s battery came to us up one of the forest roads. A sergeant, a fellow from Matabeleland, was in command, and Fluellen lay a limp, senseless mass across one of the limbers. They had met with the worst kind of luck. Their plans had been forestalled. They had been beset by masses of troops at every point, and it was only by a marvel of pluck and cleverness that they escaped annihilation. They lost half their numbers in these fierce attacks, and when at last they did get through, it was only to meet with a crushing disappointment. The Nuca del Diabolo had been guarded in a way there was no getting over. The lower ledges, by which, time before, Briggs had climbed to the summit, had been blasted away by dynamite charges. The foot of the crag was made into a smooth precipice a hundred feet in height.

The Sacaronducan troops were waiting for them even there, and in repelling their last desperate assault, Fluellen fell with a bullet through his side.

“Coffin,” said the General, ” I shall leave you here in the post of honour to hold this fort for me and keep command of the city. You will have five and thirty sound men and both the doctors, and you will do all you can for the wounded. Possibly you can set small squads of prisoners to work helping you. Do so if you see a chance, and any way treat them well. I wish to gain the army over to my side if it can be done, because then it will cost far less life to win the country.”

Even with the total submission of the troops for the three regiments in garrison followed the example of the artillery our day’s work was a heavy one. The

soldiers marched into the great plaza where our Maxim batteries were drawn up, piled their arms, and marched off to the two large warehouses where they were billeted under guard. The arms were carried up in mule-waggon to Carew's post, as were also the breechblocks of the great guns in the other forts; and in fact the means of offence was taken away from the city as thoroughly as possible, and yet without doing any unnecessary damage. The General's policy was to carry matters with the firmest possible hand, but yet at the same time to leave everything free for conciliation.

Then began the political movement.

In the ordinary course of events a great ball was to have taken place in the city two evenings after our landing, in aid of a charity. In the scare which followed it was very natural that this should be forgotten by some entirely, and dropped by others through the press of greater excitements. But it did not suit the General's book that this ball should fall through. He got the list of acceptances, and sent out invitations to all the considerable people of the city who had not already got tickets, with the significant rider that a non-appearance would be construed into a personal slight.

Now dancing is not in my way, and accurately speaking I should not say it was in the General's; but he was a man who was quite ready to turn his hand to anything at all in reason which would serve his ends, and I well, I was his secretary.

So to the great electric-lighted operahouse we both went in accurate evening dress, the General wearing the order of the Gem-Orchid of Sacaronduca, with its crimson ribbon at his throat.

The whole affair was frankly political. Twenty of our chaps splendid-looking soldiers they were, too formed a guard of honour up the two sides of the grand staircase. The General stood at the top before a small knot of notables, and as each group came up, a steward told me their names, and I presented them formally. I was anxious to hand that duty on to Davis, and the General was quite willing; but Davis (after vast consideration and a careful study of the subject in some abominable work on etiquette) stammered out some yarn to the effect that he was not sufficiently certain of himself, and dreaded that he might commit some "faux pas." For a man whose one ambition of life was to advance himself socially, Davis was singularly nervous and diffident.

The General, of course, here was called by the Spanish form of his name, Don Esteban Puentos, and mixing with the people, I was astonished to find what a strong reputation he had made for himself during his previous life in the country. One fierce partisan of his (a lady, by the way) said to me, " Senor, he was the man of the moment when he left us; now that he comes back we look to him as a second Bolivar."

"That is very well," I said; " but, what is more to the point, will the country assist to liberate itself?"

"Certainly it will," she answered. " The troops you conquered yesterday will be ready enough to help on your side tomorrow. Fighting is their trade, but fighting against such Paladins as your young gentlemen have proved themselves to be is an occupation too dangerous to be steadily profitable. Offer them arms, and they will be enthusiastic in your support."

"That doesn't sound very moral," I said.

"Mais que voulez-vous?" (are they not soldiers that we speak about?) she replied.

"Say, rather," suggested a little woman in pince-nez who joined us, " that they have fought for a bad government because it was the government, and there was no other in view. I can't have you being rude to our service, Mr. Birch. There are some awfully nice boys in it. By the way, are you any relation to the Birches of Lisnaskea in County Waterford? I'd a great friend there once Willie Birch, that broke his neck driving home from a Cork race meeting."

"I'm afraid I'm not Irish. Do you know that island well?"

"Born there, Mr. Birch, and lived there most of my time till I married Don Juan Carmoy. You have a Mr. Coffin with you, I'm told. Is he one of the Galway Coffins, or is he connected with the Devonshire lot?"

"He's Irish, certainly, and I fancy he comes from the West."

"I knew a Hugh Coffin once Wee Hugh, they called him who played number one in their county polo team, and was always getting cursed for crossing. There was always terrible language flying about the ground when Wee Hugh sat down to ride. He went abroad to England and other places afterwards. I wonder if he's the

same.”

“I shouldn’t wonder,” I said. ” Our man’s Hugh, I know, and he rides eight stone easily. He’s on duty to-night, but I’ll introduce him tomorrow if I may, and let him answer for himself. And now would you excuse me for just eighteen seconds? I’m the General’s secretary, and I must see what this despatch is about.”

A cablegram had been handed to me from the great firm in Europe who were financing the revolution. This is how it ran, translated, of course, from the private code in which it was written:

(Copy.)

“From Holstein’s, London.

“To C. O. Revolutionary Forces,

“Los Angeles, Sacaronduca. “Received your cable announcing capture of town. Offer congratulations. We learn on undeniable authority that a firm whose interests are opposed to ours has made a determined bid to upset your enterprise. Who their agent is we cannot discover, but we have learnt that he is a needy, desperate man, and formerly in the British Service. He is to be paid by results. If by any device he succeeds in crushing you, our opponents have guaranteed him a payment of half a million sterling drawable on a London bank. This seems to hint that some tremendous weapon will be used against you; and though we know nothing of its nature, we thought best to put you on your guard.”

I had been obliged to go to my quarters for the code book, and the translation was tedious, so that an hour had passed before I got back to the operahouse again to give the General the news. The scene there had entirely changed. I had left a brilliant, glittering assembly, rather ill at its ease, and rustling with an uneasy curiosity. The band, the warmth (and perhaps the champagne) had livened it up. The excitement was there before, latent, and subcutaneous; these things had set it loose; and from excitement had grown enthusiasm.

The place was all aglow with it. Women with their cheeks flushed, men with their eyes bright with tingling moisture, stood on the floor of the house listening to a woman who spoke to them from a first tier box. I did not hear what she said

to stir them up like this; I only saw her as she finished a lithe, beautiful creature with diamonds in her black hair, and lovely bare rounded arms which gesticulated as she spoke and heard the last words.

“Long live President Puentos! ” she cried, and the answering ” vivas ” made the great theatre tremble like thunderclaps. Never did any man have such an ovation. Never I think did any man have such a champion.

I turned and saw Donna Carmoy at my elbow.

She was pale as a ghost and trembling violently. “Delicia here! ” I heard her mutter. ” Delicia here and playing that part! What can it all mean?”

CHAPTER X

A CHAIR AMONGST THE GREAT ONES

“I’LL tell you what to do with all this stock of prisoners,” said Carew. ” Keep half here in gaol at Los Angeles, send the rest to fight at the front, and shoot your hostages out of hand if the others don’t do as they’re told. Give ‘em clearly to understand this, and you’ll have fifteen hundred very possible second-rate troops. That seems a plain, sensible way to deal with the matter.”

“Rather bloodthirsty, Sir William,” said Davis.

“Oh, I’m no man,” Carew retorted, ” for milkand-water schemes. I’m about sick of this infernal country already. I want to make my pile out of it and be off home, and so far the only things I’ve collected have been two items I didn’t want to wit, wounds.”

“Of which only one would rank for a pension if such things were throwing about,” said Fluellen.

“I’ll ask you to explain?” said Carew, sourly.

“Why, didn’t you get one snipe-shooting on your own account, or at any rate not Sacaronducan-shooting on Briggs’s?”

“If you put it that way,” said Carew, ” I suppose I did. But you mustn’t speak of the gentleman as Briggs now. He’s rather adopted the Grand Llama style of behaviour, and Don Esteban seems the most familiar name he can comfortably do with. I should call the move a little unwise. He’s counting too much on his Presidency before it is quite hatched.”

“He has to keep up the dignity of his position,” said Davis.

“Oh, dignity be sugared,” Carew returned. “Aren’t we a gang of filibusters, which is the polite modern way of saying a crew of pirates? And wouldn’t old Maxillo hang Briggs if he could only lay hold of him, with just as little pomp and ceremony as he’d hang any of the rest of us? It’s no use our playing at being kings and queens; that’s a kid’s game. But what we did have a fine chance of

was an excellent lot of loot, and that we aren't going the right way to collect. No, nowhere near. I don't see the prospect of fingering so much as a miserable gold candlestick, let alone getting a concession for a mine which one could sell to fools at home, or anything big in that line. It strikes me I've been made a common gull of, coming out here; yes, in more ways than one."

"Why don't you hedge?" Coffin asked with a laugh. "Why don't you write to Maxillo and say that for a cool ten thousand down you'll put your hands in your pockets and go off peaceably home?"

"Because the old beast hasn't got the money or else I'd do it, although, by Jove, ten thou's little enough to get one's skin slit up like mine is."

"Billy," said Coffin, "don't be cantankerous. 'We're going to march on Dolores next week, and then you'll have work enough to keep you from grumbling. It's high feeding and nothing to do that's at the bottom of your complaint. That, and sighing after Delicia. You're wasting time and good looks there, my boy. She's the General's money. It's a sure thing."

"My dear Wee Hugh, nothing is certain in this life, especially women. If I cultivate Delicia, 'pour passer le temps/ I'm at any rate no more conspicuous than the rest of you. I admire the lady; who doesn't? But I'm not after marrying her. If I were, I should nip her up whilst other people were waiting (and under their noses if it suited me to do so) and put her down a 'padre,' and marry her whether she liked it or whether she didn't."

"I don't fancy," said Coffin, drily, "you'd make a model husband, Billy. There's rather too much of the savage about you at times for domestic consumption."

"Had we not better close the subject, Sir William?" said Davis. "Do you know, I think it is hardly gentlemanly to discuss with so much freedom er"

Carew laughed. "A lady you are sweet on yourself, eh? You are a good old muddler, Davis."

"Oh, she never looks at me," said Davis.

"Own fault, man; make her. Put less fashionplate into your talk, and more dash. If she won't listen to you when you're civil, be rude; and if she won't listen then, be damned rude. You don't know how to tackle women."

“Ladies,” said Davis. ” No, I don’t.”

“There you are, and you let ‘em see it, which is fatal. They care nothing for fledglings. But if you let out you’ve committed three murders already and a highway robbery, and are quite ready to continue the series, then they will be prepared to adore you. It’s stupid of them; but that’s the way the dear things are built.”

“Sir William,” said Davis uncomfortably, ” we will not continue this talk, if you please. I have taught myself to regard ladies chivalrously, and I do not think I am likely to change.”

“Bravo,” said Coffin, “you are the only decently moral man amongst us. Billy, you old ruffian, there goes the ‘ assembly.’ You’ve got five hundred of our ex-prisoners to lick into shape, and you’ve got your work cut out if you’re going to make a regiment of them. So have I, only worse, because there’s devilish few of my poor old corps left to make officers and non-com’s out of. So long, boys. Do your work. See you at mess.”

Off they went, and Davis left at the same time to hammer at his transport and commissariat business. I found myself alone with Fluellen, and what I had been dreading for some days took place at last.

“Look here, Birch,” he said, ” who is this man, Don Juan Carmoy, they are talking about?”

“Oh,” I said indifferently, ” he’s a person who considers himself big in these parts, and who certainly has money and influence, and who has been kind enough to declare for us. A regular Spanishlooking body, but businesslike, and a goodish acquisition, as men go round here. He is to have some sort of a billet in the new Government.”

“Seen his wife?”

“If he’s married I dare say I have. One meets such scores of people. Why, have you seen her? I thought you’d been lying here on your back all the time.”

He turned over on the sofa, and faced the wall.

“I’m not altogether a fool, Birch, or a child; though I’ve no doubt you’ve heard

all about my particular bother, and imagine me both. Now just tell me fairly and squarely how things are going on in that direction here, and what they say about me in connection with them."

"You ask me," I said, "a great deal more than I can tell you. I did hear some time since that you were engaged to Donna Carmoy once, and (remembering that) when I met her here and your name was mentioned, I did not see that she showed an interest which was not altogether calm and placid. She's rather an excitable little woman, I should say."

"And Carmoy?"

"Is wrapped up in furthering the interests of Don Juan Carmoy. So far he hasn't shown the least outward uneasiness about your existence, though by the way of experiment, I let drop casually the fact that you had known his wife previously."

"And what did he say to that?"

"Ah, I'm sorry he's hurt," said he. "Hope he gets better. I should like to ask this Seflor Fluellen to dinner."

Fluellen laughed bitterly. After a pause he asked, "And she, Julia, does she care for this fellow?"

"My dear chap," I answered, "you expect me to know too much. It is not a question which I should like to put to the lady, and so far she has not given herself away. The few times I've seen them together, they behaved as ordinary society people; neither gush nor squabble; and in fact show up like a reasonable married couple."

"Any children?"

"No at any rate none living now. I asked that."

"Ah," said Fluellen, "I think I'm glad of that. Well, Birch, thanks for what you've told me. You want to be off to your work? Then I won't pester you any longer now, and in a week or so I shall be about again to see matters for myself. But in the meanwhile you might be a kind chap and keep your eyes open, and tell me what's going along."

“Look here,” I said; “I tell you flatly I’m going to assist in raising no earthquakes between Don Juan Carmoy and yourself. The Cause is going most prosperously ahead, and I do not want to see it brought up with a round turn. You and he are both of you men far too capable to be wasting your time in cutting one another’s throats.”

“Our throats are our own, I suppose.”

“Yours isn’t, anyway,” I said, with my hand on the door. “You’ve signed yourself away body and brains to help the General in this revolution, and until he gives you your formal discharge, you know what you’re liable to if you fail him.”

“That’s right,” said Fluellen; “try and scare me with the idea of being stuck up against a wall and shot. Oh, you well-intentioned old owl. There, away with you, and get on with your work, and leave me to pick up strength.”

“Hope Fluellen is pulling up again,” said the General as he rode past me when I got outside the door, and I said, “Oh, yes, nicely,” but I can’t say that I felt enthusiastic over his quick recovery. It rather struck me that as soon as he emerged from the shelf, there would be other complications to deal with which we could very well do without. Holsteins’ lengthy cablegram was giving us quite all the extra anxiety we had any use for already.

As it turned out, however, though these vague dangers dangled over our heads, neither of them fell; other worries vanished which we had quite reckoned on having to deal with; and, in fact, matters prospered with us beyond belief. The country had been without its revolution for months, and we had come at the psychological moment. Our leader was popular, and his method had the delicious charm of novelty. They had experienced most kinds of fighting in Sacaronduca; never before the inroad of British filibusters; and certainly never fighting to set up a government of such a kind as Briggs proposed.

They were a people quick to take up new ideas; to flash out with one wild enthusiasm to-day, and another on entirely fresh lines tomorrow; a race of human beings with souls hung on spiral springs. They were starving for excitement when we came; had been for seven solid months; and when the meal was set down before them, they ate of it with greedy splutterings. Three quarters of Los Angeles wanted, so they said, to fight or intrigue for their new hero, Don

Esteban Puentos; and as a preliminary they desired the blood of everybody who did not agree with them utterly; and (what we could not avoid) got some flow of it. A little murder was necessary to warm them up to the part.

When it came to actual volunteering for service in the new army, there they did not show up so well. True, we had abundance of offers from aged men and cripples, and others who obviously could not pass the most lenient physique examination; but the able-bodied (when it came to the point) felt themselves wanted by the calls of their business in Los Angeles, or were the last male survivors of an old and important line, or reluctantly stayed behind at the plea of a fiancée, or a mother or an only sister. Several indeed wished to join us as war correspondents, and some enthusiasts did get up a red cross society with a very correct uniform; but when all was said and done a bare hundred only of these eager civilians came forward to shoulder a rifle; and if it had not been for our former military opponents joining us, we should have been in queer street so far as number went.

These gentlemen, however, made small bones about changing their allegiance. A very short spell in prison persuaded them that it was quite unsatisfactory to rust there any longer; and on the fourth day of their incarceration a memorial, couched in the most handsome of terms, was forwarded to their "Illustrious Conqueror." They avowed themselves as eager to serve the rising sun, and wrote out a wish that he might shine a thousand years. In fact, plain people might have called them the most pernicious of renegades, and (probably from such feeling as this) their offer was not accepted in all its completeness. We did not re-enlist them "en bloc." We picked out small squads at a time and joined them to our "corps d'élite," and then, as we got confidence in these, added others, and so on. Moreover, many we retained in an unarmed condition to make the personnel of the transport and commissariat services.

This last was a very important item in our forthcoming expedition against the capital. There had been countless railways projected from Dolores to the Mexican Gulf Coast; for three of them the money had actually been raised; but the sums so gathered were "bonnes bouches" which no self-respecting Sacaronduncan could resist having a snatch at, and in the general scramble a mere derision of a capital had remained over. One of these lines had two thousand and four yards of track laid under a dense growth of secondary forest; another possessed three second-hand locomotives and a scrap heap of venerable flange-rails; whilst the third had exhausted itself in setting up a commodious terminus

building, and as a forlorn hope of dividends had rented this to a Wesleyan mission.

All communication, therefore, between Los Angeles and the capital (excepting over a constantly broken telegraph wire) was by road, and a very bad road at that. It had never been treated to the principles of MacAdam at any point; the utmost it could boast of being a fathom or so of corduroy at the more than usually impassable spots; and the rivers which gapped it were never thought worth rebridging between revolutions. This road was eighty-nine miles in length, and native gentlemen of energy were proud when they traversed it on mule back within the week.

Now an army, marching on foot and being encumbered with its military stores, artillery, camp followers, and other impedimenta, cannot be expected to move at the pace of mounted men travelling light. So General Briggs announced publicly that he should allow ten days to make the march, and would start on the twenty-first of November. He gave facilities for spies to carry these tidings to President Maxillo in Dolores, and then proceeded to do the unexpected. He paraded troops and transport at dawn on the 16th, and set off on the quickest of forced marches, taking care that no one got in front of him to carry on the amended news. Delicia, with Donna Carmoy, accompanied the army on horseback.

He covered the distance in five days, and marched into Dolores an hour before dawn on the 22nd. President Maxillo was making the safest of preparations to crush us; but unfortunately his dispositions were not to come into force till the end of November; and, so instead of a pitched battle on the plain before the city, conducted on scientific lines, we had a morning's sharp rough and tumble fighting in the streets, and we rushed the Presidential Palace so unexpectedly that Maxillo had barely time to escape by a side door when Carew and a handful of his men capered in at the front.

I fancy it was Briggs's design that his rival should have met with a fatal accident in the taking of the place, so as to avoid further complications with him; and if this was impracticable, he wished to take the man prisoner, and hold him closely; but the old ruffian was too slippery to lay hands upon, and too wily to stand in the way of a bullet. He got on a horse and galloped away through the devious old streets of the capital, with his guard following, and his household not far behind.

He was making for his estate amongst the Tolpec Mountains, a place that was

half hacienda, half stronghold, and so fortified by nature that twelve men could hold it for ever against twelve armies. It could not be reduced by famine, seeing that it produced its own food; it could not be shelled; and any attempt to storm it would be the maddest kind of foolishness. And in retreat to this point the troops which remained loyal to him passed out along converging roads as fast as we drove them from the city.

Our cavalry, when the fighting in the streets slackened, and they were disengaged, followed, and in some small degree cut up the retreat. But both men and horses were jaded with the forced march and the work they had done before, and I don't think they did much damage, and certainly brought in but few prisoners. These last apparently expected to be shot out of hand, and so were agreeably surprised to learn that they would be set at complete liberty again so soon as the country had been allowed a week or so to settle down.

I cannot say that Dolores gave us a reception like the one we got at Los Angeles. The capital contained older-fashioned, less enterprising people, who saw much more of the bi-annual revolutions, and were so cloyed with them that they held rootedly Conservative objections to each fresh change. The citizens did not rise against us; but they showed an apathetic dislike to the new cause which was far more galling.

On the day after our arrival the troops were paraded in the plaza before the palace, and from the balcony Don Juan Carmoy proclaimed the new President. The square was packed with people, men and women both, and they listened with grave attention whilst the General gave an outline of his future policy. There was some little enthusiasm, when he ceased speaking, but not much. The better class of people in Dolores considered it bad form to be demonstrative, and most of their inferiors followed the example set them. But on the other hand there was no counter-demonstration. There must have been many of our opponents present in the square, but for one reason and another they thought best to preserve a massive silence.

The General finished his speech, and two or three other men spoke, lamely and without spirit, and then we went back off the balcony into the state drawing-room of the palace. For myself I can honestly say I was feeling chilled and depressed. I had expected a repetition of the scene at Los Angeles, a show of wild enthusiasm; and this callous indifference went into me like a drizzling cold rain. I verily believe I should have preferred howls of execration.

As for the General the President, as I suppose he should now be called his face was inscrutable, his manner as quiet and decisive as ever. From the natural appearance of the man he might have had the most brilliant reception that was ever accorded. With a smile he handed me a cablegram he had just received. It was from "Hoisteins, London," and said, "Repeat previous warning."

"H'm," I said, "taken all together things look rather blue."

"Oh, no, my dear Birch," he said. "I am President already, and I shall remain in office. People do not quite realise the matter yet; and I have no doubt that Maxillo, and this mysterious assistant of his whom Holsteins talk about, will try and regain power; but 'j'y suis et j'y. reste,' and Sacaronduca will discover that more fully before long."

"I had a notion," I remarked, "that Miss Delicia was to have been with us on the balcony to-day."

"I confess I quite expected her," the General replied, "and (compliments aside), I am sure we lost by her absence. The mere sight of her would have woke many of these people up, just as it did at Los Angeles. And if she had said ten words to them, they would have warmed up at once. But I conclude she had some excellent reason for staying away."

"Davis came into the room of a rush. "Gentlemen," he cried, "Donna Delicia has disappeared. She must have been carried away kidnapped. I have just got the news from her maid."

"My God," exclaimed the new President; "that is Maxillo's doing. He will kill her."

CHAPTER XI

POLITICS AND A PLAIN GOLD RING

“IT seems to me, gentlemen,” the General said that evening, ” that it would be better if I told you something about Donna Delicia’s previous connection with Sacaronduca.”

He passed a hand wearily over his face and paused. I had never seen him so knocked up before. Delicia had vanished without leaving so much as a trace behind her. She had lunched with the Carmoys; had spoken of assisting at the scene in the grand plaza in the afternoon; had gone to her room for some matter of toilette; and had not again been viewed. An instant search had been made, with every force available, and with scientific thoroughness. We could only satisfy ourselves that she was not in the city. She had been spirited away with consummate cleverness, and everything pointed to Maxillo as the kidnapper. And if it was true that he had the girl in his hands, then one could only hope that God would help her. Maxillo was a revengeful man, and one entirely ruthless, and by this time he could not be ignorant that he owed his down-throw almost entirely to Delicia alone. It made one shiver to think what he might do to her if he got her up in the Tolpec Mountains. The people were half Indians there, and he was an autocrat amongst them. She would be hopelessly in his power.

“I saw her,” the General began, ” when she first came back to this country as a widow. Her husband had died on the road out a weak creature by accounts, whom she had married for a freak but she did not pretend any deep sorrow for him. She came straight to her palace here in Dolores, and (if one may so express it) set up her court. She did not encourage any flagrant gaiety. But she by no means shut herself up. She said that to do so might be conventional, but it was entirely useless; it did that poor fellow her husband no good; and if she donned black, it was because black suited her, and was, moreover, a very fashionable wear.

“It was at this time that I first met Delicia. I did not see her often, because my business brought me seldom to the capital; and I cannot say that she showed any marked preference for me. I just stood to her a grade above the level of an ordinary acquaintance. You see I was a successful man just then, and she has a

liking for success.”

He paused again, and Carew nodded at Coffin, and I exchanged glances with Davis. This creed of cultivating success was one which we were beginning to have a good strong intimacy with.

“Now you must please to remember that I speak to you from now, not as my officers, but as friends and inmates. There are things which a man does not care to bawl abroad openly, and one is the matter of love. But it is necessary for a proper understanding of what happened afterwards that you should be clearly told how the balance of feeling lay between Delicia and myself, and one other. I, gentlemen, feel no shame in confessing that I felt the strongest affection for her from the moment of our very first meeting. You have seen her, all of you; you have felt her charm, and you will have small difficulty in understanding this. She, I may say at once, did not return this feeling in any degree whatever. She was completely wrapped up in President Maxillo.”

“What, she was sweet on that old goat?” Carew rapped out. “Well, up till now I had credited the lady with taste.”

The General frowned. “You are jumping at a conclusion, Sir William. A woman may be attracted to a man by other reasons than love. Maxillo was a strong man in his way, and he was the head of Sacaronduca. Delicia chose to be ambitious. She knew that she could strengthen the President’s hand and increase the power of the State if she chose to set about it; but she did not see fit to do this unless it was put in her way to share some of the resulting ‘kudos.’ There was a way to do this which everyone saw, Maxillo amongst others. Indeed, he proposed it to her. ‘Marry me,’ he said.

“That is precisely what I want, with limitations,’ says she. ‘I will take your name, help your work, and share your rewards, and that is exactly all. We must keep up two different establishments, precisely as we do at present.’

“That is not a thing I shall do,’ says Maxillo. ‘Either I marry you or I do not. I have never peddled in half measures yet through forty years of life, and I do not intend to begin even for the most fascinating young woman in Central America.’

“Yet I shall be useful to you as an ally.’

“Señora, I place the highest value on your wit and cleverness.’

“‘And possibly might prove destructive as an enemy.’

“‘Dangerous at any rate.’

“‘Well,’ says Delicia, ‘ it is curious that the only man I want as a husband refuses to marry me. A good many scores of others have asked for the post, so up till now I used to think myself rather attractive than otherwise.’

“‘Seflora,’ says Maxillo, ‘ if you were a thousand times less attractive I might do as you wish; but because you are as you are, I must either make you my wife or not marry you at all. The “so-near-and-yet-so-far ” type of existence with you would be a torment which a Dictatorship over all the Americas could not compensate. You see I am human enough to have so great an admiration for you.’

“‘Why, bless the man,’ says Delicia, ‘ how unreasonable it is. The admiration is quite as large on my side, or I shouldn’t have offered to go into any sort of partnership whatever.’

“‘Maxillo sighed and shook his head. ‘ Perhaps,’ he said, ‘ matters may continue to go on as they have done heretofore. Quien sabe? ‘

“‘Quien sabe?’ says Delicia. ‘I make no threats and few promises. That isn’t my way. I mostly do things and let them announce themselves. I wonder you haven’t seen that for yourself.’

“‘The bother is, I have,’ says Maxillo, thoughtfully; ‘and I know you can be dangerous if you like. I believe if I were wise, I should give my feelings a wrench, and have you deported over the boundary line.’

“‘My dear man,’ says Delicia, ‘ either have me conveniently killed out of the way and that is probably your only safe course or else do nothing. If I want to be up to mischief, it is a matter of utter indifference whether my carnal body is in Dolores or London. And if you do send me into exile, and I did take it into my head to meddle (and of course do it successfully) you’d only look ridiculous.’

“‘That is so,’ says Maxillo. ‘I won’t send you away, and as kill you I can’t, you will have an entirely free hand. But, Seflora, I shall keep a most paternal eye over your doings.’

“‘Then,’ says Delicia, ‘I will provide a most connective set of movements for your inspection. And so, Senor et Presidente, hasta la mañana.’”

The General paused again. “This,” said Carew, “throws light on many things. Not a clear electric light, you understand, but a good steady glow which shows up several matters which were in the dark before.”

“If you would talk plainer English, Billy, you’d be a more popular man,” said Coffin. “Perhaps you’d better explain. I can’t puzzle it out for myself without getting a headache. I’m not intellectual.”

“That’s true. You’re a nice little man, wee Hugh, but you don’t always have the gumption to see which side your bread’s buttered. General, we’re interrupting most rudely. I suppose you have to tell us now that Madame Delicia went about very promptly on the other tack.”

“She has not been used to reverses,” the General said drily, “and it is not to be supposed she sat down quietly under that one. She sent me a line, and I saw her the same evening, and in two hours’ time the Revolution in Sacaronduca had been schemed and started.

“‘If you can get the men,’ she said, ‘I can raise the funds. I know three of the Holsteins well, and one of them would do anything for me. Indeed I believe, business man though he is, the Baron would finance us without any promise of concessions at all if I made a point of it. He is wonderfully fond of me.’

“‘I can imagine that/ I said. ‘But some people are greedier and less disinterested. They think more of themselves, and want a definite “quid pro quo.” I am one of those people. I want to know, Seflora, what I personally am to expect out of this matter.’

“‘Why the Presidency of Sacaronduca, to be sure.’

“‘A very good thing in its way, but I am more exorbitant in my demands. If I have to fill the chair alone, I do not care to try for it. But if you will consent to share it with me, then you may count on my not only gaining it, but making the Presidency a thing of mark which all the world will look at.’

“‘Tall words, Don Esteban. You will have to show yourself a strong man if you are to make them good.’

“‘There is only one thing that could have made me speak like that, and that is the idea of seeing you as my wife, and winning your love, but under those conditions I should know myself with certainty to be strong enough to gain any human mark you wished for.’

“‘That is what I like,’ she said. ‘ You can let me see you are confident, and that you are a likely man to force success. As to what you ask, that depends upon yourself. You have my admiration now and Seflor, nothing beyond. What they call my love you may win if you can, and I tell you that if you raise yourself to be President of Sacaronduca, and make her cease to be a petty robber state, and force her up to a niche amongst the nations, I could love you as few men have been loved before. But, on the other hand, if you fail, I shall get a hatred towards you which will leave its mark, because, you see, I shall be deeply mixed in the matter myself, and the upsetting of any of my own schemes is not a thing which I ever intend to pass over lightly.’

“‘As witness the matter of Maxillo.’

“‘Exactly. He is a case in point; the only one on the record so far. You see I am telling you plainly beforehand how your chances lie, so that whatever happens you cannot blame me for using you badly afterwards.’

“‘Sefiora, you can do no wrong. Moreover, were my chance eight times as small, I would try for the reward. So if you please, we will consider the attempt a settled thing.’ And after that,” the General concluded, ” we went on to discuss the sum which it was necessary for Holstein to lay down to properly finance the revolution, and to decide upon what concessions Delicia should dangle before their eyes to make them inclined to speculate. Holsteins really held the key to the whole situation. If Delicia could not persuade them to put down the necessary million to float us, we could not even begin to fight.”

“‘Speaking as a business man,” said Davis thoughtfully, ” the influence which Madame Delicia brought to bear must have been tremendously great. The Holsteins have too many safe investments before them to be easily persuaded into embarking in such a risky speculation as this must have appeared. It seems marvellous that Madame’s name never came to light in the matter. But perhaps she brought the business about from here?”

“‘On the contrary,” said the General, ” she caught the Southampton steamer at

Los Angeles a week after our compact, and did the work in person in the middle of a London season. Maxillo sent word to the Sacaronduca Embassy in town to watch her movements; and they did it carefully; and sent him a dozen cuttings from the papers, which stated that she was quite the most popular person of the season, and that in the near future she would certainly become Baroness Hoistein. I know for a fact that the man proposed to her; and I know also that she warned him openly before he did it that she would not marry him, because (she was good enough to say) she was engaged already; yet in spite of that she brought her business off successfully. She got the final promise during a royal ball after dancing with the Baron for half the evening.”

“After which she returned to Sacaronduca?” “Not at all. She stayed on, and enjoyed herself, and was taken into the Marlborough House set. She had promised Maxillo, if you remember, to provide a complete set of movements for his inspection, and I think that she did it pretty completely. No one would have guessed that the woman who was dazzling London with her charms and brilliancy could be plotting revolution in an obscure Central American Republic. The only person to connect her with Sacaronduca was myself; and I kept out of the way. I was nominally in England to procure quartz-crushing stamps for a gold mine on my own estate, and we had communication together twice only during the whole time. Once she wrote to say that the night before she had secured Baron Holstein’s promise of aid; and once I met her in person. You fellows will remember the date. It was the evening of the day when you signed your contracts in the Metropole to serve me and the Republic.”

“Her work was done in England then; and because the London season was at an end, she had a good excuse for going away. She sailed for Los Angeles within a week of your setting out to find recruits, and then began a time for her of infinitely more personal danger than any awkward minutes we men may have gone through. She was forwarding the cause in Sacaronduca itself; gaining adherents in the very heart of the enemy’s country; with the fine foreknowledge that if any one betrayed her (as was almost certain to happen amongst so many confidants) she would promptly be killed by one means or other. Maxillo, as you have heard for yourselves, had a strong notion of nipping opposition in the bud, and of doing it so firmly that there was only need to nip once. ‘

“He had the reputation of a merciless scoundrel, even in Europe,” said Davis.

“He was reported to act very much like a Sacaronducan/ said Carew, drily.

“Suspicion came out of the man like his breath,” continued the General. ” He knew that he was hated, and felt that the country was full of unrest, and he and his spies were peering in every direction to pitch upon the leaders of the movement against him. So Delicia’s was the most dangerous kind of part to play. But she went through with it steadily and cleverly, and she never made a mistake. She posed as a leader of society here in Dolores, and one imagines she must have found it more exciting than receiving admiration in London. It is not every woman who has the nerve to give a series of balls and dinners with always the consciousness that next moment may see her a prisoner, and next day a dishonoured corpse.”

Carew hit the table with his shut hand. ” No, by God,” he cried. ” She’s about the only one in the world, I should say. I know if I had found another, I should be a married man this minute.”

“She had a large party organised before we came to the coast, and with it she twice saved our expedition from destruction. She heard that the Clarindella was going to be attacked at Tortuga Key. She sent off a well-armed, well-manned steamer, and you know what took place in that vicious fight amongst the sandhills in the darkness. She heard that another blow was to be struck at the vessel which was collecting our recruits, and although she could not save the ship from being torpedoed, and could not rescue her people the day they came ashore, she chartered the Silas Bloomer, brought her to the place, and at the same time partly by diplomacy, partly by open fighting contrived that the guard on the church should be taken away. As you know, she directed that operation herself.”

“And looked prettier at the back of a mask than most women I’ve seen in front of one,” said Coffin. ” She’d a way of usin’ her voice, too, that was mighty taking.”

“By a marvel of dexterity she did not openly exhibit her partisanship, but it seemed almost impossible that the matter should remain hidden many more hours. Yet she did not hesitate. With consummate daring she went back again to Los Angeles, and continued there her work for the cause, and, as you know, she remained in the city doing her utmost. It was not till she stood up in her box that night at the ball in the operahouse, and spoke of her adherence aloud, that it was openly known that she had cut herself loose from the old regime. “You saw for yourselves,” the General concluded, ” the enthusiasm she raised. I have told you what we all owe to her, and I ask you, outside any personal feeling to myself, to

do your utmost to bring her back to Dolores unharmed.”

The four of us stood up with a simultaneous movement, and thrust out eager right hands. It was Davis who spoke, and he did it with his usual stilted earnestness. We usually laughed at Davis, but somehow it never occurred to any one of us to raise so much as a smile then. ” Sir,” he said, “you honour us by asking us to serve such a lady. If by laying down my life I could save her from any serious harm, I should feel rewarded by the opportunity.”

“That’s about the size of it,” said Carew, ” but it strikes me the first matter to find out is, where has she got to? Till we know that no one can say what has been done to her, and whether she is to be rescued or avenged. Even supposing

Maxillo has got the lady, it doesn’t follow that he has illtreated her. I know I shouldn’t, under the circumstances. I should do something quite different.”

“And what’s that, Billy?” Coffin asked.

“Why, marry her, of course, you little owl.”

The General started violently. ” My God,” he muttered, ” I never thought of that!”

“Doesn’t it stand to reason?” Carew went on. “With all due deference to you, General, Madame Delicia is the most popular person in Sacaronduca this minute. Three-quarters of the people idolise her, and if the balance doesn’t, it’s because they haven’t seen her, and because it’s an attractive amusement to disagree from a majority. Maxillo is no damned fool to bring down the country permanently about his ears for the sake of venting a passing spite.

“But,” I ventured, ” Maxillo refused to marry her before.”

“My good Birch,” Carew retorted, ” he’s got a fresh inducement now. He didn’t see that Madame was of any particular value then; he can’t avoid putting a much more accurate price on her now, and he’s far too commercial a man to chuck such a good thing away. I’d bet heavily she’s ceased to be a widow, even by now. Only thing is, if you catch old Maxillo, you can very quickly put her into complimentary mourning again.”

CHAPTER XII

THE OTHER OF THE INFLUENCES

IT was in the evening of this very day that accurate news first came to us concerning the adverse influence which on two occasions had so industriously tried to wreck our enterprise. It arrived in the shape of a cablegram from Hoisteins', in London, and it was handed in to me as I was smoking "en tete-a-tete" with Carew in my quarters.

"We learn," it ran, "on undeniable authority, that the active agent of our opponents in Sacaronduca is Sir William Carew."

That was all. And enough too. Without knowing it, my face must have shown the shock it gave me, and Carew's nerves, iron though they were, had been too much on the strain for the last month to let him pass over the sign.

"That's about me," he said, coolly enough.

I nodded.

"You may as well let me see it."

I hesitated a moment, and then handed the flimsy paper across to him.

"Well, Birch," he said, "it's a marvel to me how the thing's been kept dark so long. But, still, I'd give something to know how it's come out at last. Is this all you've heard?"

"Do you think," I retorted, "that if we'd got wind of the matter before you'd be here now?"

"No, that's right enough. There's nothing soft about Briggs. He'd have shot me within the hour. Quite the proper thing for him to do. By the way, how do you propose to act, old man?"

"The only thing," I answered stiffly, "that I can do on my own responsibility is to arrest you at once." I got up and walked towards the bell. "And if you want

my private opinion, you're a damned scoundrel. So you may put that in your pipe and smoke it."

"Halt, there. I say, Birch, bring-to; I'm covering you. If you move off the puma skin you're on now, I'll shoot you dead."

I turned smartly round. The man's hand was gripped on a small-bored revolver, and his wrist was steadied on the mouth of the decanter. The muzzle of the weapon seemed to grow into a great black ring hanging in the air. I saw that, and one brown eye which glittered above it. And above all things, I remembered what manner of man Carew was. I take to myself no shame in owning that I stopped smartly and stood there facing him on the mottled skin. No man but a fool chucks away his life without scoring.

"If you'll give me your word of honour not to ring that bell," he said, quietly, "or raise any alarm till I give you leave, you may come back to your seat."

"Very well," I said, and went across the room again, and threw myself into the long cane chair.

Carew helped himself to a small tot of whisky, and "Will you split a soda?" he asked.

"No," I said, "I will not. I've told you what kind of man I consider you, and I don't drink with that sort."

"Very well," he said, coolly, "suit yourself. I don't suppose I shall ask you again for some time, because after this it may be healthier forme to clear out for a while. Not that your small 'coup' makes any special alteration in my plans, because, to tell the truth, I was going some time this week anyway."

I stared. "What for, pray?"

"Because, my good Birch, this game here is an unwholesome fraud. A man can't so much as pay expenses out of it. I told Briggs in the first instance exactly what I was after; that I came to him solely for the sake of loot, and nothing else, and when I tried to pin him to definite promises he promptly got vague. So I looked round to see if there wasn't a more promising opening elsewhere and I found it. I was offered a fixed sum to upset him."

“Then don’t you consider yourself,” I asked acidly, ” a bit of a cur for coming with us?”

He answered with perfect good humour. ” Not a bit. Isn’t it Briggs’s own maxim that all is fair in war? And haven’t I all my life been fighting one continuous desperate scrimmage against poverty? My good chap, it is a written thing that I must get rich, or at least comfortably off, and if anything or anybody gets in the way the course has got to be cleared somehow. Honour is a very fine thing, and friends are a luxurious possession; but a poor man who has made up his mind to be poor no longer has to tread on them both when they get in his way.”

“That’s all very well, but what will you do with wealth even if you get it now? Can’t you see that you’ve dirtied your ticket eternally?”

“In England?”

“All the world over.”

“Not in England, any way. What do they know about Sacaronduca at home? Two persons in twenty may remember that it is in Central America, and the balance have never heard of its existence. When I get back with my pile some fool will probably write to the papers saying how I raised it, and after that (as I shan’t call attention to the letter by contradicting it) the thing will die out for good. No, Birch, one dollar out of this delightful country is quite as good as any other dollar.”

“That remains to be seen. But I might remind you that you haven’t earned your loot yet, and you’re not at home to enjoy it. To begin with, you have still to get out of Dolores, and even if you do contrive to slip away, you’ll find a very tolerably warm hunt clamouring on your heels. And after that you’ve got to upset Briggs before you can earn your dividends. If you ask me, your outlook is pretty sick. You’ve no resources at the back of you.”

“Well,” he said, ” what of that? Didn’t I nearly upset your apple-cart twice before, and what resources had I then?”

“I’d like to hear that.”

Carew grinned. ” I daresay you would.” He looked at his watch. “Twenty minutes past midnight. Well, as I don’t intend to shift out of this till after one,

perhaps, it would be a charity to relieve some of your curiosity. So I'll tell you how the job was done. I made dazzling big promises in actual figures, and showed needy men how they might become rich in one dash if they didn't get killed in the process. Of course I used gumption in broaching the question to them; didn't pick out the saintliest specimens, you understand; and I didn't have one solitary refusal. I could have got six times what I asked for. The first go off was a fizzle, thanks to that confoundedly smart young woman Delicia. I'd have grabbed your utensils of war on the White Tortuga for an absolute certainty if she hadn't put her spoke in; and as it was, I left most of my beauties behind."


"Dead. Yes, we saw them."

"They are quieter than wounded," he said significantly, and then paused and stopped. "It wouldn't have done to leave behind anyone who could talk," he added, and stopped again.

"So you cut their throats, did you?" I asked.

"My good Birch, don't dwell on the gruesome side of things. Why shouldn't all the wounded have been carried off in the naphtha launch?"

"We burnt a flare as she went by, and you didn't seem to have a superabundant crew of either hale or halt. Moreover they appeared to have had enough fighting for the night. That was you steering, I suppose? We saw you try to run us aboard, and we saw them sit on you. Certainly you seemed furious enough at the time, but I suppose you understand now that they saved your life?"

He shrugged his shoulders. "I suppose I was in a tolerable passion at the time. Who wouldn't have been, to see such a dainty scheme so completely split? Man, I wouldn't have sold my chances when we first landed on that Key for  200,000. A kick-out of that description would shove an archbishop off his balance. But if those fellows had backed me up, instead of sitting on my chest, there's no saying we wouldn't have done the trick even then. Guns miss even with good men behind them instead of tarry old sailors; and when a handful of men are as fighting mad as we were then, they're generally good to tackle and beat five times their own weight. Yes, looking back at the matter dispassionately from here, I should say the odds on that event if it had come off would have been very nearly even. But it didn't, and so a good many men lived to fight another day." He lifted his tumbler, looking at it against the light, and laughing at some

remembrance. ” They fought another day, Birch, and, according to you, they fought devilish well.”

“Ho,” I said, ” some of our chaps, were they?”

“Ah, now,” said he, ” you’re wanting to know a little too much. I was annoyed with those men at the time, but not sufficiently to wish them to get into hot water now. So we’ll say ‘ requiescat.’ I signed them off their articles when we got away from the White Tortuga, and went for my next bit of business single-handed.”

“You mean blowing up Davis’s steamer?” “Exactly. I knew when she was expected at Santa Clara, and I was there the day before with my naphtha launch. There was no time to get a scientific weapon. But I contrived to rig a spartorpedo ‘alaRusse,’ and then went out and slapped at your steamer in the roads. I hadn’t another body with me. I didn’t want a second hand, because the launch was absolutely simple to handle, and in the after-scramble (because, you see, I reckoned upon her getting smashed up) the fewer men there were squalling about in the water the more chance I had of getting clear.”

“By Jove,” I said, with a flash of admiration for the scoundrel which I could not help, ” you are a reckless beggar. Did you deliberately go to smash your naphtha launch up with the steamer, and leave yourself adrift to swim ashore through all those sharks?”

“Oh, no, not so bad as that,” he said with a laugh. ” I had a dinghy in tow, and I slipped her painter a score of yards from the steamer so that I might have something to swim to. But either I lost her bearings during the attack and I tell you the excitement was pretty brisk or else she was swamped or got in a quick drift of current; which, I don’t know; but I swam after her for an hour and never caught so much as her loom. It was pretty miserable work; the launch had lifted under me like a live volcano, and when I squelched down again into the sea I’d three splinter-wounds and a disabled left .arm; and all the time I’d the horror of sharks nibbling at my kneecaps. I’m sure I don’t know how I got ashore; worried along somehow, I suppose; and perhaps the sea didn’t want me; but anyhow I was bound to get there. I had done too well at the start to get bowled over at the finish.”

“You don’t suffer from lack of confidence,” I said.

“If I did,” he retorted, “I shouldn’t be here now. You can bet on that. You try and swim five hours in a heavy sea with wounds smarting all over you, and one fin out of action, and see how you’ll like it. If I hadn’t been so cocksure of getting through, I should have chucked up my hands after the first twenty minutes. But, as it was, the sea spewed me up on the beach; and a fisherman Johnnie overhauled me to see what plunder hid in my pockets; and under his mauling I came to my wits again. I contrived to knock him on the head before he did the same for me, and got into Santa Clara.”

“Well,” said I, “it doesn’t appear you did much good to yourself there.”

He frowned. “You’re right. I didn’t. And it, was all through my not pushing up my first advantage. I ought to have got a crew of men together from somewhere and taken that cathedral, where the fellows were fastened up, and shot every soul in it. Then the whole thing would have been safe, and I should have earned my money. But I liked wee Hugh, and I liked that queer bounder Davis, and I was squeamish about personally conducting them into the next world. Besides, I fancied the Sacaronducan troops would do the job for me, and so I waited on. And then up came Delicia, and forced the game so suddenly that I couldn’t upset her.

“First and last, I’ve split with that clever young woman, Birch, and I’m beginning to have a very big admiration for her skill. She’s the strategy of two generals and the pluck of the devil on top of it. By gad, if only I could have collared her at the commencement of the whole business and tied her up somewhere where she couldn’t meddle, or, better still, have made her back me, I’d have settled all Briggs’s hash here in Sacaronduca in a dozen hours.”

“And, as it is, Briggs has settled you,” I repeated.

“You can say that when you’ve been to my funeral, Mr. Secretary Birch, not before. I think Maxillo is my best card now, and so I’m going to try him next.”

“He’s not likely to deal with you.”

“Why not? When he was President I grant you he might have been too big to tackle. But he’s in retreat now, and he’ll be correspondingly humble. I shall be like the Assyrian, Birch, and comedown some night like a wolf on Briggs’s fold when I’m least expected, and upset him and Hoisteins, and earn my own dividends from Holsteins’ opponents.”

“By the way,” I asked, “who are these opponents of Holsteins?”

“My employers,” he said drily; “Israelites of the city of London, and very good paymasters.”

“Whom I suppose you’d betray for a consideration.”

“Any way, your pocket isn’t deep enough to buy me off, nor is Briggs’s. Don’t get nasty, Birch.”

“Oh,” I said, “you can’t expect me to be civil now. I’m not squeamish, but you go too far. You aren’t fit for any decent man to touch except with an execution axe.”

“You seem to carry your resentment pretty far.”

“I’m ashamed of ever having liked you. It makes me ill to feel that I’m sitting this moment in the same room with you.”

Sir William Carew leaned across the table, and gave me a queer look. “That’ll do, Birch,” he said. “I’ve taken more words from you already than I’ve ever accepted from any man alive, but now you’ve gone a bit too far. Do you feel inclined to apologise?”

“Not I. I’ll stick to all I’ve said, and say more if you want it.”

“Then we’ll just have to see which can shoot best.”

“That’s as good as murdering me. You’re a crack shot; I’m a duffer.”

“You should have thought of that before you allowed yourself the luxury of insulting me.”

“Oh, don’t make any mistake. I wasn’t trying to back out of it. A duel with you will suit me down to the ground. You dirty the earth by treading on it, and I shall be doing mankind a service by clearing you out of the way.”

He shrugged his shoulders. ,

“Of course, you’re sore at what’s happened, because I know as well as you do

Briggs will visit his displeasure at what's happened on your shoulders. You were the first here to learn that I was spoiling his game, and you ought to have killed me or taken me prisoner. Of course, you hadn't the least chance of doing either, but Briggs won't count that. You didn't do it; you didn't arrest me in any way whatever; and Briggs will deal with you on the result."

"If you want me to state at greater length what I think of you"

He hit the table.

"Have done with it," he said, "or I'll shoot you where you sit. I'm one of the least patient men in the world, and you may be flattered that I've listened to so much of your tongue already. But as I have injured you to a certain extent, I'll give you a gentleman's reparation. You may shoot me if you can, and I'll handicap my powers by holding my pistol in my left hand. Now don't give me any more abuse. Does that suit you?"

I bowed.

Carew looked at his watch.

"Then we'll go now. Once out of ear-shot from the city limits, I shall be at your disposal, and I must ask you to give me your word of honour not to let a soul know by word or gesture what has happened until then. Afterwards, if you don't happen to get shot, you may do as you like."

I gritted my teeth. He seemed to have got me in a tidy fix. "You think this way, you'll get me to help you to escape?"

"My good Birch," he said, "don't be childish. I have this pistol ready to my hand here, and under the pistol's persuasion, you've done as I ordered you once already. If I hadn't held you covered, wouldn't you have rung that bell when you read the telegram?"

"Curse you, yes."

"Precisely. Now, if I had to leave you here, it would be in that condition when men tell no tales. I should owe the precaution to my own personal safety. There's nothing to tie you up with, and if there were, tied men sometimes get untied by interfering servants. If you're foolish, you'll put me to a very unpleasant

necessity; if you're a wise man, you'll give me your parole."

"You seem willing to trust to my word of honour. I tell you frankly, I wouldn't give a straw for your own."

He stamped to his feet, and flung the contents of his tumbler across the table into my face.

"There," he said, "you've earned that very thoroughly. I've stood enough of your beastly insults. Now, then, which is it to be?" He lifted his revolver. "Will you have a bullet, or give me the parole I ask for?"

I wiped my face, and stood up. "Oh," I said, "I'll come with you. I've got to shoot you somehow."

And with this grudging promise he seemed quite satisfied. He put up the pistol into the holster on his belt, put on his forage cap, took up his gloves and whip, and stood ready to go.

"I shall be pleased to follow you," I said.

"We shall want horses," he answered. "Will you lead the way to the stables?"

CHAPTER XIII

PREPARATIONS FOR AN EXIT

WE did not ring for orderlies. We went to the stables and saddled the horses ourselves, and rode out of the courtyard without, I believe, anybody noticing us.

The streets were lit and deserted, and the houses were dark. The new President did not encourage wandering about after nightfall in Dolores, and he frowned upon evening parties for the present. He knew that revolutionary schemes were hatched for the most part during evening hours, and for the present at any rate he did not choose to be embarrassed by an active opposition.

Twice we met street patrols who recognised Carew and myself, and let us pass; and then we came to the Nicaragua Gate, and the guard let us through without the least demur. Sir William Carew's escape could not have been made easier. And so there we were, outside the capital; and I, the only responsible being in Sacaronduca who knew of the fellow's colossal treachery, had helped him successfully to avoid the just consequences. It is true I was in a manner forced into doing this, but that did not make me any the more pleased with the result.

We had a good long ride in front of us before we came to a piece of quiet ground, for that side of the city is well fringed with the villas, and bungalows, and country houses of the better-off people, who prefer the sweet open air of the plains to the somewhat dubious scents of Dolores. A cable tramway ran down the first two miles of the road, with double avenues of palms shading the sidewalks on either side, and we trotted along together on the right-hand flank of the metropolis, to all appearance the most amicable pair of gentlemen who ever took an early morning constitutional.

After villadom, came larger estates and farms, and after the farms came a broad quaking belt of marsh full of black pools and waving reeds, and uneasy with night fowl and alligators. The stars hung in the night above us, the fireflies danced over the sour morasses at our sides, and the road swung under the beat of the horses' hoofs as a ferry swings on a river. A close moist heat exhaled from the place.

In the middle of this belt of quagmire Carew pulled up his horse. " This would

suit us, I should say, Birch,” he remarked. “After I’ve shot you I can tip you over the edge of the causeway, and you’ll be neatly and inexpensively buried.”

“Quite so,” said I, ” but it happens that I intend to shoot you if it can be managed, and it wouldn’t suit me at all to chuck you to the alligators after the event. I should want to take your carcass back to Dolores as a guarantee of good faith.”

“And stick my head on a spike at the top of the Nicaragua Gate? Rather out of date that sort of thing, isn’t it? However, we can put the horses on one side and blaze at one another up and down the road, and then the man who drops will be lying on dry ground for the other to deal with as he sees fit. There’s another thing I might call your attention to. It’s just possible that the man who remains alive may be wounded, and if he is I’ll bet a lot he finds the water precious handy and comforting. I’ve been wounded myself more than once, and I know what thirst is.”

I was quite prepared for the possibility of being shot dead, but in the blaze of my anger against Carew the idea of being wounded had not come to me before; and I confess that when the scoundrel mentioned it I was conscious of an unpleasant chill. It is not desirable to be wounded at any time; and here, if the survivor of the duel was badly enough hit to be helpless, he might very well starve to death before he was interfered with. Since the revolution traffic had ended with the farms at the Dolores side of the belt of marsh.

The country beyond was for the most part wild, and inhabited only by miners, hunters, Indians, and log cutters, who were either still loyal to Maxillo’s rule, or were too indifferent about politics to have acknowledged the new Government. It was overrun by bands of men who called themselves guerillas in the service of Maxillo or one of the former presidents, but who were in reality mere brutal-handed brigands. And the belt of swamp was tacitly looked upon as neutral ground, and no one risked a gunshot by crossing it.

I put this coldly enough to Carew, and suggested that we should go back a mile or two. “We can have our fight there quite undisturbed, and if a wounded man occurs, he will get somebody to look after him. It seems to me we have come too far.”

“And it seems to me we have not gone far enough,” he retorted. ” It would be a

choice between frying-pan and fire for me back where we have come from, because all Dolores will know by tomorrow morning the little game I have been playing, and Briggs would string me up on sight dead or sound if he could manage it. On ahead I grant it might prove an unhealthy neighbourhood for you, Birch, but at the same time it isn't exactly a safe harbour of refuge for me. Of course, there's a good deal to be said in favour of both views, but we haven't time for talk now, and so look here. I'll toss you for which it is to be, forward or back." He spun a quarter, and clapped it down on the knee of his riding-breeches. "You show to me."

"Mine's a head."

He uncovered the coin, and scraped a match to show it me.

"A tail," said I. "I don't mind. It's lucky to lose at the beginning of a game: it improves my chance of winning later."

Dawn was beginning to thin down the horizon from purple into grey; the stars were snuffing out; and from somewhere in the marsh a curlew gave a scream or so preparatory to beginning the business of the day. The road swung under with us as we cantered on, and ahead the rim of the forest began to show up like the line of a low black cliff. Carew drew a cigar out of his pocket, bit the end off, and lit it dexterously without slackening speed.

A smoke would have suited me very well also, but my horsemanship is of a more elementary order, and I did not choose to pull up to get a light.

The dawn grew as we went on, and the wall of trees began to show feathery crests projecting from its cornice. Soon the outer paling of trunks made itself distinguishable, and then we could make out the outlines of palmettos and the other shrubs which made up the undergrowth. AncJ presently, indeed, we were off the quaking marsh road, and out of the dawn, and well into an alley of the forest, which was still rilled with a gloom of night. Here it was that I made a halt. "Get down," I said. "There's a glow of a logcutter's fire over yonder amongst the trees, and assistance will come from there to the man who wants it."

"But, my good man, it's too dark to shoot one another here. We should only waste a lot of cartridges and kick up a deal of unnecessary noise. I've got pressing business on ahead; you might just as well ride on with me and save time."

“I’ll stick by my bargain. It was to be either this side of the swamp or the other, and you won the toss. Here we are, and here we stay till we’ve had it out.”

“Well, I must say you’re deuced unaccommodating,” Carew grumbled, and swung a leg over the neck of his horse, and slid to the ground. “However, I’m not going to beg favours of you. I’ll just tie up my moke and take a bit of a rest till you’re pleased to be ready.”

I also dismounted, and tied my horse’s reins to an overhanging bough and sat down with my back against a mossy stump. I pulled out a pipe and lit it, and fell to wondering whether I should ever smoke another. It was an eight-year-old briar, and just then, although I cleaned it out three or four times with a grass, it persisted in bubbling like a kettle. But for all that, I do not think I ever found a smoke more luxurious. But, then, when you are waiting for a crack shot to blaze at you the commonest things of former everyday life do seem to come to you in a strangely pleasant guise.

By degrees the night noises of the forest, the croaking of the tree toads, the rustle of jar-flies, and the talk of the katydids died out; a cold, raw light filtered through the upper tree stems, and the jungle of undergrowth crept out of formless gloom into familiar shape. I was not enjoying the wait enough to want it prolonged unnecessarily. Besides, the neighbourhood was full of dangers with which I did not wish to tamper. So I shouted across to Carew, who was sitting down some twenty yards away, that I could see the whites of his eyes distinctly.

He jumped to his feet. “Very well,” he said, “if that’s the case it’s light enough for us to get through with our business.”

I got up also, unholstered my revolvers, and put a cartridge in the unloaded chamber in which the hammer had been resting, so as to have the entire six shots ready if necessary. “You can give the word yourself,” said I. “Sing out one, two, three, and at three we shoot. We’re about right for distance as we are.”

“Move away to the right, man, against those palmettos. You’ve got a light background behind you where you are now. I don’t want to take an unfair advantage.”

“Thanks,” I said. “You can’t help being a gentleman sometimes, Carew. It’s a pity you’re such a horrid blackguard between whites.”

He did not reply in words to this, though I did see the ghost of a grim smile wry his mouth. I was just beginning to step out to take up the ground he had pointed out when a whistle shrilled out from the trees, and I saw a couple of men break violently out of the cover behind Carew. At the same moment a noose of plaited rawhide rope dropped over my head and shoulders, was instantly plucked taut, and before I could so much as struggle I was heaved over thump on to my back.

Carew's pistol cracked, and I heard the bullet whisp past my head, and simultaneously a yell told me that it had hit one of the men who were interfering with my comfort. And then for an instant I caught sight of Carew, also lassoed, and struggling like a wild cat in the toils.

Now it sounds funny to remember afterwards that I should give a thought for the welfare of this scamp who not ten seconds before I was arranging to shoot; but the fact remains that I did empty the first shot out of my pistol on his behalf. The noose of rawhide had pinned me above the elbows, I had my forearm and wrists free, and I took as steady a shot as I could manage from that inconvenient position at the man who held the hauling part of Carew's tether. It is probably equally funny from the point of view of history to remember that Carew sang out " Hold up, you d d fool, or you'll be shooting me next."

But any way I did not interfere with his affairs any more just then. My own business was pressing. I squirmed round in my bonds and saw two big, ragged men pulling in hand over hand on the rope, and four more running up to help them as quick as they could crash through the undergrowth. Naturally I did my best to make things hot for all the crowd. But not a bit could I ease the noose that held my elbows in to my ribs, and shooting from the hips spoiled my aim Altogether.

I did contrive to touch one fellow, and he let a yelp out of him like a suddenly kicked dog, but he was more surprised than hurt, and the next moment he was taking it out of me with his shut fists in fine style. However, I managed to get my boot toe well home on his kneecap, and he went to grass howling, upon which the others effectually sat on me and very soon had me tied up safe and sound.

Meanwhile there were sounds enough to tell that Carew was making it monstrous unpleasant for his visitors at the other side. I don't know a man more difficult to hold at close quarters than Sir

William Carew. Amongst the officers of the force, if anyone ever showed off a trick of strength or suppleness, Carew could always beat him, and, moreover, the man, do what he liked, never seemed to get out of condition. He was slim enough in build, but his muscles were iron, and for agility he was like a monkey.

He was a man who made a practice of being able to shoot straight with a pistol from the hip, because (pirate as he was) he said it was always useful to be able to drop a man with your hand in your jacket pocket, and in his present plight the habit came handy to him. He was pinned to the elbows as I was; the fellows were yanking on the lasso as they pulled themselves up to get to hand grips with him; but in spite of these disadvantages he contrived to bag first one and then the other before he had finally emptied his revolver.

Some dozen others were coming up for his annoyance as fast as they could break a way through the trees, and if he could have got to the horses I believe he would have scraped clean away, but as it was, the lasso got a turn round one of his spurs, and tripped him heavily, and before he could scramble to his feet again and unbuckle the spur for the rawhide had jammed into a hard knot over the rowel the fellows were upon him, and had him on the ground again through sheer weight of numbers.

Even then, however, they did not have it all their own way. He got his thumb in one man's eye-socket, and the fellow jumped back and ran away squalling and half-blinded for life. He diverted a knife that was lunged at him till it laid open its owner's cheek. He followed no civilised rule of fighting. He raged like some seaport drab who was endowed with a man's skill and strength. He hit, he bit, he kicked, he butted, and if ever I saw a fight where the rule was "all in," that was it.

Fresh men kept adding themselves to the mele, but it was long enough before they could hold him permanently. He would disappear amongst a regular octopus of vengeful arms and legs, and then there would be screams of pain, and the grip upon him would loosen, and he would almost get away. But never did he quite struggle free. Some dogged fellow would always hang on to his heel, or his coat, or his waist, or something, and hold him till the pack dragged him down again, and then the furious scuffle would be fought out afresh. He hurt his adversaries often enough, to judge by their screams and yells, but either they did not do him any serious injury, or he had the stoicism not to cry out.

But fresh forces kept gathering against him, and the end was inevitable. One man may fight against three and win; he may even wrestle with five together and escape; but with a round dozen against him, he has got to go under sooner or later, and in the end he generally gets paid back for value received. An arm went up holding a revolver, muzzle end; the weapon descended with heavy good-will, and the butt end hit viciously on the back of Carew's head. The stiffening seemed to go out of him; his fighting ended; and though for a moment he was held upright in the fiercely struggling press, when this loosened for a moment, he fell limply to the ground.

He seemed to lie there as lifeless as an empty meal sack, and the hunters used their feet to him as though they intended to make things sure by trampling out any little spark of life that remained.

After a little while, however, they desisted from this pleasing occupation, and set to work counting up the cost of their victory; and to judge by their looks, they were a bit sorry for the expense.

There were four men killed outright, one with a broken wrist, two with smashed ribs, my man with a fractured kneecap, Carew's with a missing eye, and not a single one of them without some lasting token of our esteem and embrace.

They were pretty angry over the result, and not a little puzzled. In Sacaronduca it is always the custom to be sensible, and surrender at once if you are outnumbered. And, finally, they came to the conclusion that we must have something on our persons that was thoroughly well worth fighting for, and set about to discover what this something was, with system and industry.

I'm afraid they were disappointed. From the total of our pockets they collected some seventythree dollars in notes and silver, a lady's watch from Carew, and a Waterbury from me, a couple of pocket knives, a button-hook, some smoking tackle, and a scrap of lead pencil. One of them went to the horses and cried out that he had got a find; but it was only a small stone bottle of whisky and a packet of cartridges in one of Carew's holsters.

Finally, as the search did not instruct them much, a fellow without ears, who seemed to be their leader, turned to me for an explanation.

"We came out here to fight a duel," I said.

“Now, look here, ladon,” said he, “if you don’t speak truth, and at once, I’ll stamp your face in.”

“You may stamp till you’re tired,” said I, “but you can’t get squarer truth than that. If you want to do an act of courtesy, put the pair of us up, loan us our weapons, and we’ll fight it out now.”

“Think I’m a fool?” said the earless man. “We have had trouble enough with you already, and tied up you’ll remain till you’ve paid your debts. After they’re squared off you’ll be quiet enough.”

“If you meddle with me,” said I, “you’ll have the President to settle with.”

“Which President do you mean? There seem to be so many.”

“Don Esteban Puentos.”

“Oh, that President, is it? Well, we happen to be for Maxillo, if we’re for anybody, and to show how much we care for this new upstart, I’ll tell you what we’ll do.” He turned round to the others. “We’ll send the pair of them back, cooked. That one’s carrion already. But this fellow here is plump, and will roast nicely. Quick, now. Light a fire, and we’ll get the business over. When we have stopped their crowing for good we’ll send what’s left back to Dolores as a hint that this side of the swamp isn’t a healthy district.”

“But how?” asked somebody. “It will be a ticklish job going near Dolores with that kind of baked meat. We’ve had trouble enough over the beggars already.”

“Simple enough,” said the earless man. “We’ll lash them on the backs of their horses, and set them on the road. The horses will go back to stables fast enough. Here, one of you, throw me a couple of ropes over that big bough of the magnolia yonder, and then make an end of each rope fast to their heels. The rest of you gather dry wood. No green stuff, mind. I’m not going to have them smoked and stupefied. They’ve earned the worst we can do, and, by God, they shall have it.”

Nobody raised an objecting voice. Indeed, if facial expression meant anything, every man present was cruelly pleased with the sentence, and those who were sound enough to do so set about collecting wood and getting the ropes rove over the bough with all the good-will in the world.

Personally I must confess then to a feeling of freezing terror. It seemed that nothing but a miracle could prevent my getting my exit from this life by the most abominable of tortures, and miracles were not in the habit of coming in my way. My faith, how I did envy Carew then as being dead already, or, at any rate, senseless. I hadn't a bit of hope that the earless man or any of his friends would go back on their decision. They were brigands pure and simple, had lived in touch with brigandage all their lives, and had probably seen this same punishment of roasting to death inflicted before. It was nothing new in Sacaronduca, and there is no crueller devil-in-man's-image than a brigand of Sacaronduca.

CHAPTER XIV

FATHER JUPE

YOU who read this memoir will probably have learned of these preparations of the brigands for our discomfort with something of a shudder; we two who watched them with such supreme personal interest felt our veins full of icicles. I say we two, for as it turned out afterwards Carew was in full possession of his senses, and was only simulating unconsciousness for any advantage which might accrue therefrom.

The blow from the pistol butt had certainly stunned him for the moment, but the shower of kicks seemed, curiously enough, to revivify him; and he was stoic enough not to express his pain. Indeed, as he said afterwards, the fellows were all shod with the sandal of the country, and if you keep your body limp these cannot deal out any vast hurt. It was a mortification to him when they lashed his wrists and heels, even as they had lashed mine, so as to make sure that he should not inconveniently come to life again; but he had the wit to make no further resistance, knowing full well that he could not escape just then, and hoping as usual all things from the future. It was one of the mottos of Sir William Carew's adventurous life never to believe he was going to die, however black the momentary outlook might be; and by this means he had more than once escaped being killed when a less hopeful man would have thrown up the sponge.

And as it turned out, in this particular instance a respite came. The thudding of a horse made itself heard as it galloped down the forest road, and our captors picked up their arms and slipped into cover. For the moment we two intended victims were left, with our heels made fast to the hauling ropes, and the pyre already "in situ" under the tree. Half a minute could see us hove up with our heels towards the branch of the magnolia, and our faces beginning to purple and blister over the bright crackling flames; and as any other fate, however dreadful it might be, was preferable to this horror, I can tell you we waited the oncoming of that horseman with a very paroxysm of anxiety. Would he come to interfere? Would he pass by on the other side, judiciously non-interferent? Or would he halt awhile and idly overlook the spectacle? In my horrid suspense, one or other of the last two alternatives seemed a certainty. I had been long enough in Sacaronduca to understand the ways of a native. It was considered all through

the country vastly impolite to interfere with another gentleman's vengeance. And what chance could make this newcomer one who in any way would be interested in our welfare?

The horseman drew near with intolerable slowness. He even slackened his animal's gait to a walk. He did worse; though it seemed a blasphemy to do such a thing, he started to hum a melody. And then just out of sight of us he halted to roll a cigarette. So still was everything, so feverishly quickened were my senses, that I could even hear the crinkling of the paper as it crisped between his ringers. But the tree stems of the dense undergrowth still hid him from view, and my eyes glancing upwards caught sight of a loathsome turkey buzzard gallinaso, as they call it in Sacaronduca slowly circling down from the sky in anticipation of a meal.

The omen of the bird sent a fresh chill through me. I had been long enough in the country to have imbibed the local belief that the gallinaso is a fowl of the devil, and that it never comes down from its sentry-go above without an absolute certainty that meat will be spread for it.

My ears caught the faint splutter of a sulphur match as the unseen man, with exasperating slowness and deliberation, lighted his cigarette, and then came a cheerful "arree," and the renewed thudding of horse-hoofs upon the soft turf-covered road. A moment later he came into sight, saw us two on the ground, with the hauling ropes over the magnolia branch, the pile of faggots, and the four dead men lying under the shadow of the bushes beyond; and he pulled up his horse and gave a queer surprised lift to his eyebrows.

His headgear was an ancient beaver shovelhat; his outer dress a rusty cassock; and beneath it showed a well-darned stocking and the heel of a sturdy shoe projecting out of a box stirrup. He had a fine seat on his horse, but his looks as well as his garb quite put him down as the ecclesiastic.

Presently the brigands began to come one by one out of the cover, and he gave each one a sharp separate look, and a nod of dry recognition.

"Ah," he said at last, "and is Manuel knocked over? I do not see Manuel here on his legs, and he doesn't appear to be lying on the ground yonder."

"He was here a minute ago," said someone. "He is close at hand if your Excellency wishes."

The earless man, with an embarrassed snarl, meant I suppose to be an easy laugh, swung into sight from behind the trunk of the white flowered magnolia. "Eh, Father Jupe," said he, "is this you?"

"I feel sure of it myself," said the priest.

"We did not expect you, Father."

"I can imagine it," said the priest with increasing dryness. "So you have been dabbling in politics again, eh, Manuel?"

"You know I was always for Maxillo, Father."

"Pardon," said the priest, "I had forgot. I thought you were always for el presidente Don Manuel. But then these trifles do slip out of the memory. And your visitors here, you were merely trying to give them a little scare, I suppose."

"Merely that," said the earless man.

My spirits rose. The priest had evidently authority. Here indeed was a rescuer come to us as by a miracle. But the next few sentences damped my spirits again pretty effectually.

"Ah," said the priest, "from the trouble and preparations you seem to have gone through, / feared that perhaps you were going to waste them. You see, Manuel, I have known your angry passions run away with your, shall we say, sense of economy before, and as these two Englishmen appear to have made a pretty useful fight of it, I was afraid in a moment of indignation you were going to offer them up to the manes of your departed fellow-thieves."

"Father Jupe," said the earless man with a sudden bristle of anger, "you go too far. We are patriots."

"Patriots with appetites, shall we say, my dear Manuel? Your commissariat is so perpetually breaking down that you are compelled by the barest instincts of self-preservation to forage. Must I congratulate you over your last coup? Judging from the way these gentlemen have defended themselves they must have had well-lined pockets?"

The earless man with a little tornado of disgust described the loot.

“How exasperating! ” said the priest. ” Well, amigo, stay you here and gather what harvest the road offers, and I will ease you of this useless lumber. I know how unpleasant it is to have this sort of prisoner in one’s camp. They carry with them such objectionable reminders.”

“Carrajo! ” swore the earless man. “You get on too fast, Father.” He pointed to the dead men; he pointed severally to the wounded. “You see what they have done? They must stay and pay the cost.”

The priest drew a long, meditative draught at his cigarette.

“I am growing old, Manuel,” he said, “and I am at times shall we say a trifle hard of hearing. Once or twice men on this side of the swamp have defied me,” he continued dreamily, ” and so far as I recollect, things did not seem to prosper with them afterwards. I might even go so far as to say that the mortality amongst them was great, and shall we say sudden? You will doubtless recall instances, amigo?”

The earless man shivered.

“So,” said the priest, thoughtfully, “you must pardon these reminiscences, Manuel. They are a failing of old age. Let me see; before I made this little digression, we were talking about these two Englishmen, was it not? I was saying that I would take them off your hands for purposes of my own; you were remarking what was it you were remarking, Manuel?”

“They have got to pay for what they have done.”

“Oh, certainly, certainly. They will probably be very sorry they ever came to Sacaronduca at all before I am quit of them. But, in the meanwhile, they will be useful. So useful, in fact, that I am sure Maxillo, in return for your kindness in securing their presence ” he weighed out his words one by one ” will be good enough to overlook any peccadilloes you or your friends may have committed in the past.”

The earless man still looked sullen, but his companions brightened. The priest was offering them a free pardon, and it was clear even to us foreigners that he was a man with power to be as good as his word. The bait was far too appetising to resist; the consequences of refusal were evidently far too dangerous to risk, and it was plain to see from their faces which way the wind blew. As for Master

Manuel, he was openly dispirited. As a brigand or a guerilla, as I suppose he would call himself he was a chief; as an honest man he evidently quite foresaw he would not be a success, and would soon inevitably drift into brigandage again; and there he would be once more at the bottom of the ladder, with another position to gain. It was a cheerless outlook, but acceptance was forced upon him. His men had no two ways of thinking about the matter.

“If you could find me some little appointment?” he suggested.

“I will keep my eye on you,” said the priest, “when you have turned honest.”

“It is not every appointment that would suit. My ears”

“I have a nice discrimination,” said the priest.

“Bueno,” said the man, with a poor attempt at appetite. “Then, my children, we can leave the matter safely now in Father Jupe’s hands. But how will you take your prisoners to Maxillo, Father? It would be rather delicate for us to move out of the woods here till the pardon is formally signed.”

“Quite so,” said the priest. “If we did chance to come across any troops they might be so overcome with joy at seeing you again as to induce you to stop with them before I could get in my word.” He looked down and addressed himself to me for the first time. “I am afraid, señor, that under the circumstances you will have to put up with my poor escort alone. Manuel, I will trouble you for one of those English revolvers. No, loaded please. Gracias. But, Seftor Englishman, if you and your friend (who need pretend unconsciousness no longer, as I have seen him peeping at me already), if you and your friend will just honour me with an instant’s attention, I will try and give you a little confidence in my small powers.”

He fumbled with his cassock, produced a quarter dollar, and spun it in the air. It hung for an instant in the blaze of sunshine, and then was eclipsed in a grey blur of smoke, and when it was picked up again by one of the brigands, a blue lead splash was well grained into its texture.

Carew sat up. “A very pretty trick, padre,” he said. “I shouldn’t care to stand up before your gun at twenty paces. May I introduce Mr. Birch? My name’s Carew.”

“Charmed, I’m sure,” said the priest.

“And talking of shooting,” Carew went on, “you’re a man of the world, sir, I can see, and the fact is Birch and I had a little affair, to settle between one another, which has been delayed over long already. Your good friends here chipped into the argument just as we were commencing. If you could just spare us a couple of minutes we could get it off our minds, and the survivor, I’m sure, would be most happy to go on further with you.”

The priest rubbed his hands together and shook his head benignly. ” Mr. Carew,” he said, ” believe me I am most sorry to interrupt your amiable intentions, but you see before all things I am a man of peace; my cloth makes me so, and, in short, till you have passed beyond my care I really could not officially countenance any such little exercise as you so pleasantly hint at. Of course, afterwards, as an amateur, I should be delighted to look on, or, perhaps, if you cared for it, offer a little professional assistance.”

“Oh, all right,” said Carew; ” I quite see. Thought I’d just mention it, that’s all, as I know Birch is a busy man, and his time’s precious. Sorry, Birch, old man; our little account will have to stand over for the present.”

The priest was politeness itself, but it seemed that he was not inclined to carry complaisance too far. The horses were brought up and our legs were untied. We were hoisted into the saddles, and our feet made fast beneath the horses’ bellies with a thong of rawhide; and as our hands were still lashed behind our backs, the bridles were knotted so that they should not fall and get entangled with the horses’ feet.

The priest was full of apologies for our discomfort; talked deprecatingly about the disturbed state of the country; and in fact treated us to so much open sardonic hypocrisy that of the two I think I almost preferred the coarse, brutal insults of the man without the ears; and as it was, being a helpless prisoner, I preserved a glum, sulky silence. Carew was different. He returned pleasantry for pleasantry, irony for irony; in fact, I think he recognised in Father Jupe a man of very much his own kidney, and was almost disposed to like him though I make no doubt he would have shot the fellow down like a dog if a chance had been given him and he thought that it would have suited his purpose.

However, Father Jupe was very well able to take care of his person. He trusted

the brigands apparently because he had got some great power over them. He trusted us not at all. He rode at the tails of our horses with his reins in one hand and a revolver in the other, and whenever I looked over my shoulder I always found his eyes instantly upon me.

Our ride was a long one. The brigands escorted us to the rim of the forest and sent their farewell shouts after our heels; and then we left them behind us and would have been well enough content to have seen their faces no more. Immediately before us lay foot hills, part in some sort of desultory cultivation, such as an agriculturist can manage who has to hoe the ground with a cocked rifle in his spare hand, part disfigured by the dumps of mines, part barren, and part covered with scrub forests of ilexes and dye woods; and beyond them reared up the great huddle of the Tolpec Mountains, which in three places showed white crests close beneath the burning azure of heaven.

“By Jove,” said Carew, with his eyes on the distant range, ” what an ideal place for a robber’s nest.”

“Ah no, se♦or,” said the priest at our heels. “President Maxillo lives there.”

“Well, of course,” said Carew, ” one could scarcely call him a robber now, since Briggs took Dolores. His opportunities have been so very much curtailed.”

“The tide ebbs and flows, se♦or, and presidents have their ups and downs. Maxillo will be up again before long.”

“I shouldn’t wonder. I’ve come to help him.”

“Yes,” said the priest, drily. “I’m bringing both you and el se♦or Birch.”

“Oh, I didn’t mean that,” said Carew. ” I mean I was coming out to help him when I left Dolores.”

“I thought I had the honour of hearing that you set out to take part in a duel?”

“Certainly. But that was only an incident by tHe way. As Birch could tell you if he chose, I’ve made Dolores too hot to hold me. It was to my interest to try and upset Briggs, and I’ve been working pretty hard to that end. Somehow or other I’ve got dropped on, and had to bolt. If Briggs caught me now he’d have me shot on sight; and so I’ve set out to offer myself as a volunteer to Maxillo.”

“Sefior,” said the priest, “let me call your attention to the scenery. It would be hard to find a prettier setting to a fairy tale.”

“I didn’t suppose you would believe me,” said Carew, “but what I’ve been telling you’s fact for all that, as you’ll probably find out for yourself before long. However, I don’t want to quarrel with you, padre. But for your kind interference I’d merely be grilled meat by this time.”

“Don’t mention it, amigo,” said the priest warmly. “I’m always glad to help anyone I think will be of use to me.”

With these amiable pleasantries Carew and Father Jupe beguiled the way, whilst I held a glum silence. If the priest had rescued us from earless Manuel and his crew, I was tolerably confident he had not done it from any humane desire to save us discomfort; he wanted to make use of us in some other way; and as to what that way would be I had unpleasant qualms. Maxillo had not got any nice reputation for civility to his enemies; there was about as much chivalry in the man as there is in the ordinary half-bred Indian; and it was just as likely we had escaped one set of tortures to come in for another series equally abominable. He had managed to get hold of a couple of our poor fellows who had done him no particular harm, and when, as I rode, I remembered the method of their death, my teeth got on edge till I thought they would have grated themselves into splinters. So that no detail of the horror should be lost, it had chanced that I myself was the officer in charge of the detachment which found their poor mutilated bodies.

Presently, however, a new front was put on the situation. We had got up over the hummocky foot hills by that time, and were entering the main chain of the mountains by a narrow, rocky defile, where the road was little more than a torrent bed. To force such a place with troops would have been as easy as climbing to the moon. A couple of decently placed machine guns and a dozen rifles could have held the pass against an army. And probably because of the absurdity of making an attack there, it was quite unguarded. Except for the clashing of small waterfalls, and the moan of the wind amongst the peaks, there was not a sound of movement anywhere.

“Seftores,” said Father Jupe, “there are parts of Sacaronduca which have been under various masters. Dolores, Los Angeles, and other portions of the country are at present in the grip of that very clever filibuster, your Don Esteban Puentos.

But these mountains here have never been trespassed upon. As far back as records reach they have been in the hands of our family. The Spaniards came, but they never conquered us, never even attacked us. From time to time we took unto ourselves Spanish women, and the old Indian blood was revived by the new strain; just as I believe in England your countrymen are bred from many different stocks. But such as we are, we have endured, and if through the course of ages we have not always held our grip on the lower ground, at least we have never been evicted from the mountains.”

“Are they worth taking?” asked Carew. “They look chilly and barren enough. Or have you mines up here?”

“We have our little comforts,” said the priest. “For instance, we have amongst us a lady called Donna Delicia.”

“The deuce you have?” said I with a start. To tell the truth I had forgotten all about her till that moment.

“You will perhaps gratify us by dancing at her wedding,” said the priest.

“Not much,” said I, “if she marries up here.”

“Well,” said the priest with a shrug, “if you do not dance at the wedding, I can guarantee you will dance before it. And if you don’t do as you are bid I am afraid you’ll both be sorry I didn’t leave you to undergo friend Manuel’s little pleasantries.”

“You old devil,” I said viciously. “I wish I could get at you.”

“Now don’t get ruffled, my dear Mr. Birch,” said the priest with his lazy smile. “It’s so useless to lose one’s temper over trifles. Look at Carew, how cool and cheerful he is. I’m sure he’d like to hear of the little eccentricities by which my brother can show his displeasure on those who annoy him.”

“Your brother?” I said.

“Yes; don’t you know, I’m Jupe Maxillo, and I should have been Archbishop of Dolores if you gentlemen had not come to interfere.”

“And so at present?”

“At present, Mr. Birch, I am merely a simple country parson, with so much time upon my hands that I can spare a moment now and again to help with my friend’s affairs. You know we country clergy in Sacaronduca are notorious for our genial meddling. But just now all my thoughts are set upon one thing. I want to make my dear brother and that sweet Donna Delicia happy at one and the same time, and at present the lady seems to have some foolish objections. I’m bringing you with me to try and remove them.”

“You’re talking foolishness,” I said.

“Yes,” added Carew, “I’m afraid you’ve got hold of the wrong advocates this time, Jupe, old man.”

“Well,” said the priest, “we must hope for the best. We must bring pressure to bear. D’you know, Mr. Birch,” he said, rubbing his hands, “we are famous for our, shall we say, pressure up here in the mountains?”

I shivered. I knew what the suave brute was hinting at. It seemed that we had only escaped one abominable set of tortures to meet with a worse.

CHAPTER XV

AN INDUCEMENT TO MARRIAGE

I BELIEVE I've shown that the Tolpec Mountains were not a district which could be invaded against any real defence. In many places the sheer rock walls towered up five thousand feet from the hummocky foot hills, as vertical as the side of a house.

There was one large fertile valley right in the midst of this chaos of stone, and here lived a selfsupporting population of some eight or ten thousand souls. They possessed water, grain, cattle, and all other necessities of a simple life, and by no means short of a pestilence could they be starved out of their stronghold.

By only one narrow gut of a cañon could anything living get access to this valley from the outer world, unless it had wings or the floating power of a balloon; and in all political conditions of the country the ravine was stoutly guarded. Even when Maxillo sat on the presidential throne in Dolores, the guard was still maintained in this ravine, and intercourse forbidden with the rest of the nation which called itself Sacaronducan. They paid Sacaronduca no taxes, and received from it no protection or interference. Except for the name of the thing, they were no more part of Sacaronduca than Belgium is part of France; to all intents and purposes they were an independent State to themselves.

Never in the course of history had the valley been invaded, and its inhabitants knew nothing personally of the horrors of civil war, or the mercilessness of a foreign army; and that through long security they might not grow slack and neglect the guard, there was an object lesson in the fruits of political excitement perpetually at their gates. Ever since Sacaronduca, in company with the other colonies of the New World, wrested herself from the power of Spain and set up as an independent republic, she had been in one constant simmer of revolution. The highest patriotism her chief men knew was to enrich themselves, and as a consequence life and property were perilously insecure. The climate of Sacaronduca might at times be enervating, but society was never without its excitements.

Our horses were beginning to stumble dangerously over the rocky defiles before we came into the final pass which led to this secluded glen. We were bone-weary

with travel; our spirits were dulled with what we had gone through; but the sight of that stupendous cañon woke even us, prisoners though we were, to admiration. By some upheaval of nature the river which quarried out the cañon was diverted to another course. All the rock was bone dry, except here and there where some peak towering higher overhead than its fellows preserved its winter snow cap, and exuded a thin gleam of moisture.

Looking upwards, the two walls of rock seemed absolutely vertical, and the thin canal of blue sky above, though infinitely distant, appeared to float on the uppermost ridges of the stone. Underfoot the road was intolerably boulder-strewn and ungentle; there was absolutely no Invitation to the traveller; and in the gullet of the cañon, where it gave upon the valley plain, there was built a guarding wall worthy of China itself.

In the face of the wall were port-holes, each with its gun muzzle like some forbidding eye; on the battlements of the wall were other guns; and in a barrack at the further side were three companies of thirty men each, who stood an everlasting guard, watch and watch about. The wall itself was no less than sixty feet thick, the gun chambers being mere cavities in its ponderous girth. The gateway which penetrated this wall was a mere slit, so low that a man had to dismount before he could pass it, so narrow that a horse had to be stripped of its saddlebags before it could squeeze between the sides.

A stronger place it was impossible to conceive. The heights above were as unscalable as heaven, so no new attack could be made from there, and as the part of the cañon leading to it was straight for quite a couple of miles, any hostile force would be exposed to a quick shell fire of modern artillery for all this distance, and would be swept out of existence before it could come within rifle-shot.

A far-away bugle, thin and clear in the mountain air, acknowledged our coming as soon as we came in sight of this barrier, and we had the satisfaction of blundering over the next two miles of advance under a whole battery of converging muzzles. It was good practice, I suppose, to “man and arm fort ” on the smallest provocation.

We clattered up to the doorway, a score of rifles keeping us snugly covered, and a shaggy fellow showed himself at the grille of the gate, and demanded our names and business. He must have known Father Jupe as well as he knew his

own brother, but there was a form to be observed, and the form was rigidly gone through. The priest kept his sardonic sentences for once in reserve; gave plain answers to plain questions; and in due time procured the opening of the gate. As we could not ride in as we were, owing to the lowness of the lintel, he got down, cast off the lashings which linked our feet beneath the horses' bellies; and then, as we were too stiff to do it for ourselves, helped us to the ground.

One by one, in Indian rank, we hobbled in stiffly through the gateway, and then halted in this narrow cell of a passage made in the thickness of the wall. The door behind us squealed on its hinges and shut, and was made fast there by a dozen ponderous locks and through-bolts, and then the shaggy doorkeeper sung out the word of the day, and the door beyond us was opened from without, and we hobbled wearily into daylight again.

Father Jupe pulled out a long knife, and cut the lashings from our numbed wrists. "I am sure, señores," said he, "that you will both appreciate the unwilling compliment I have paid to your powers of offence. You see I am only a poor, weak, nervous ecclesiastic, and I had to keep you tied up for the benefit of my own bare existence."

"Don't mention it, as far as I am concerned," said Carew. "As I told you, I was bound in this direction before we were interrupted by your friend without the ears and his assistants. For purposes of my own I want to help your excellent brother, Mr. Maxillo, on to his perch again. So you needn't at all apologise, my dear fellow, for bringing me in the direction I want to go. No, Birch is the man to feel annoyed. You're taking Birch quite in the wrong direction, and it's very awkward for him to be away from business without leave of absence."

The priest spread his hands deprecatingly. "I can only hope that Sefior Birch will pardon me," said he, "when he remembers that it is for a lady's advantage that his services have been enlisted. I am sure there is chivalry about el señor Birch."

"Tons," said Carew. "Look here, Jupe. Touching the lady: what's your little game with her?"

But the priest did not choose to discuss this subject further just then. "I only know what I have told you already," he said. "My brother will give you all the further details when we come to his hacienda. Come, now, let me ask you the

usual American question. What do you think of our country?"

We were on our tired horses again by this time, and were leaving the grim rocky barrier behind. The level valley lay spread out before us, comely, peaceful, deliciously fertile. White villages clustered here and there amongst the fields; irrigation trenches lined the greenery with gleaming silver threads; and in the valley's centre, like some patriarch in the midst of a flock, stood the hacienda of Maxillo. It was a huge building built four square round a courtyard. Its roofs were flat, its windows square, its walls trimly whitewashed. The sky above was blazing, but the building carried with it a look of coolness and almost a suggestion of gloom. So thick were the walls that one half of the window embrasures were filled with inky shadows. So dense were the trees sprouting up from the inner courtyard that their fringing branches overhung even the roof itself,

Carew surveyed the place with a quick interest. "It's a pity this valley of yours is stowed away so deep in the heart of the country," he said.

"Why?" asked the priest. "We poor humble folk who live here find the place not intolerable as it is. It seemed to us very snug and undisturbed."

"Quite so. I'm a practically minded man. I see the snugness; I see how difficult it is to disturb you; but I can't help seeing also how small your opportunities are for raiding. You are too far off the big towns of Sacaronduca to levy tribute from them, even if there was anything much worth levying which there isn't. But by Jove, if you'd got a bit of a snug port on the coast, fancy what a chance you'd have of it then. With a small fast steamboat"

"My dear Carew, I'm afraid you are hinting at piracy."

"Well, and aren't you pirates? What's Maxillo but a pirate any way? What's Briggs if you come to that? You can call it declaring war on somebody if you want to stand upon niceties, but it amounts to the same thing in the end: you only do it for what you can make."

The priest laughed and rubbed his hands. "The valley is as God chose, and we can't change it. And of course we may be what you say, amigo. But why not call us patriots? It's a suaver term, and I seem to prefer it."

"I'm sure you would," said Carew shortly, and turned his head away to end the

talk.

Children and women stared at us as we rode past the houses, men looked up and stared at us from their work in the fields. Strangers in the valley were evidently a rarity. Probably with the exception of Donna Delicia not an alien had come before their eyes in the last dozen years.

We were riding free now, and Father Jupe had put away the revolver in a pocket of his rusty cassock. If we had attempted to bolt he could not have stopped us. Indeed, it was not at all likely he would have attempted to try. We had seen for ourselves how the only passage into the valley was guarded; and as for other outlets, the grim snow-capped mountains which fenced us in seemed an open advertisement of their non-existence. There was no help for it; we were trapped securely enough this time; and we had got to do what they wanted with regard to Delicia and this marriage or take the consequences.

Slowly we drew nearer to the hacienda, and in the dense shadow of the wide portico I could see men watching us. The tired horses kept perpetually stumbling; we ourselves were so weary that we could scarcely sit in the saddles; even the indomitable Jupe was giving signs that the strain was beginning to tell upon him. The scent of cigarette smoke reached us, lying stale and stagnant in the breathless air, And then of their own accord the fagged horses divined rest and forage ahead, and quickened to a lumbering trot to reach it.

We drew up with a clatter before the portico, and could almost smell the cool air from within coming out of the gloom with the cigarette smoke. There was a lazy chatter of salutations, and a few indolent hands stretched out to take our bridles. What was said was beyond our following, as the Tolpec dialect is quite unlike Spanish, even Sacaronducan Spanish; but it was easy to guess from the tone that Father Jupe was the hero of the moment, and the subject for hearty congratulations, and that we were looked upon as being unmistakable prisoners, and possibly victims.

When the explanations were over, a couple of men signed to us to follow them, and the priest bade us farewell for the present, with ironical politeness. He was always polite, that infernal priest, whatever he had got to say.

The men who had us in charge did not trouble to be civil. We were tired, and stiff, and wanted to go slowly. They seemed inclined to hustle us, but they did

not persist in this. They got one look apiece from Carew, and concluded to let us go our own pace. Carew certainly has a very handy way of looking ugly at times.

However, go we had to, quick or slow, and, come to think of it, we had no special cause for objecting. We had been treated pleasantly enough in this mountain valley up till then. And so we were taken (or driven, if you like it better) into a big airy room on the ground floor, with a barred window, of course, and a good deal of bare wall and whitewash. It was just the ordinary bedroom of the country districts, with a couple of “quatre” with mosquito bars over them, and an earthenware basin and a gourd of water on a stone shelf.

We washed in part of the water and drank up the rest, and then a fellow brought us in a couple of jugs of wine and a couple of plates of some sort of garlicky sausage mess, fried up with beans and peppers. It seemed they didn’t intend to starve us, and we supped gratefully enough, though it was an effort to keep awake even to eat. Then I for one lifted the mosquito bar, and fell back on the “quatre.” But I think Carew must have hesitated, for I heard him say, “Birch; look here, Birch. About that duel of ours. We have a chance to settle it now, and the Lord knows when we may get another.”

But I was past plucking up a bit of spirit then. I had ridden, and I had eaten, and I had lain me down; and not to save even my honour could I have roused myself from that drowsiness. My lips mumbled something, I don’t know what; and in the midst of mumbling, I tumbled off into the dearest kind of unconsciousness.

However, a sea training, even for a purser, whatever its other results may be, has one good effect: it teaches one to extract the maximum of rest out of a given amount of sleep. I don’t know how long we were left there undisturbed, but it could not have been more than three or three and a half hours at the outside, because the sun was only just upon its setting when they roused us. I was fairly rested, with all my wits ready to occupy themselves with what came next. Carew was in the usual condition of a man who has not had his sleep out; and amongst other things he was in a vile temper.

It was Maxillo himself who did us the honour of paying a visit, and a dozen lusty well-armed men trooped into the room at his heels so as to be ready for emergencies. The ex-President was not a bit like his sardonical brother. He was a little, shrivelled, pompous man, with a yellow face, and a bright black eye, and a regular rattrap of a mouth. He came to the point with curt directness.

“Now, you two,” he said, ” I’ve got you here, and I’m going to make you useful, or you will suffer for it.”

“It was my intention to come,” said Carew, “and offer you my services.”

“I shall take the services I require, and then dismiss you,” said Maxillo coldly.

“I have done with Briggs and Briggs has done with me. It suits my purpose to put you on the throne again, and you will find that I shall do it faithfully and effectually.”

“I shall find nothing of the sort. I refuse to let you meddle. To be accurate, Seftor Carew, I doubt both your faith and your capability. You have been treacherous once, and you would be treacherous again if it suited your purpose; you have obviously been unsuccessful over your own affairs or you would not have come in this direction now; and I do not choose that you should have the opportunity of bungling with my interests.”

Carew’s face darkened.

“I make no doubt,” the little man went on contemptuously, ” that you flatter yourself you can make an ugly enemy. But I leave you to your own convenience about that matter. After you have done what I want here, you will be free to go where you like, and to do what you like. If you fail to do what I want, you will not go, that is all. The matter will be decided one way or the other before tomorrow morning.” He turned to me. ” Your name is Birch, I believe, sir, and my agents in your army tell me that you have the character of being a sensible man. My brother respiteed you from a very painful death, but you must understand that you were respiteed, not necessarily reprieved. The reprieve you must earn yourself.”

“May I ask the process?”

Maxillo had his face under good command, but I could have sworn his mouth twitched then. “By persuading an acquaintance of yours, Donna Delicia, to honour me with her hand in marriage. At one time, not very long ago, she offered it to me freely under conditions and I refused. Since then history has moved on. I desire to marry her now, for political reasons.”

“I know Donna Delicia’s will,” said I. ” Mere words of mine are not likely to

change it.”

Maxillo waved aside the interruption, and went on. “You will please to picture her situation. My agents have had their orders for long enough, and, on the whole, they have served me faithfully. It is true they did not find out at first that she was backing your Briggs ” the name seemed to stick somewhat in his throat “your Briggs and his filibusters; but as soon as she declared herself, they watched their opportunity, and they spirited her away from Dolores with a success and an absence of trace which I am sure even you must own was masterly. And so she came to my poor house here, and again I had the honour of placing myself at her feet.

“I asked that she should honour me with her hand in marriage; she refused. I pointed out as delicately as might be the compromising situation in which she found herself with a discarded suitor, and suggested marriage as a simple end to the scandal. She replied that she did not care a fig for scandal ” Maxillo sighed ” and that I believe is true. Physical coercion I did not see my way to use, even to gain so weighty an end for, mark you, se~~ñ~~ores, the man who gains Donna Delicia as his wife gains the presidential throne of Sacaronduca as her portion. I am convinced of that now. But now fate, and my dear brother Jupe, have put in my way a piece of moral suasion which I do not think she can resist.”

“You old he-goat,” broke out Carew; ” if you think you’ll get help from me after your recent politeness, you’ve come to the wrong shop. You’d better try Birch.”

“Seflor Maxillo,” I said, ” you seemed to dislike treachery, and I’m afraid the other thing may be equally intolerable to you. I must tell you that before all things I am loyal to General Briggs, and so naturally therefore I cannot help you to take away his promised wife. Besides, I am quite a humble person, a mere secretary, and I am sure Donna Delicia would give very little weight to my advice. You know quite well she sets a high value on her own opinion.”

“Well, Mr. Maxillo,” said Carew, ” there you have it from both of us; we’ll see you at the devil first. And now, what’s next?”

Maxillo stamped with passion. ” You escaped, it seems, being roasted to death? Defy me further, and you shall find there are worse things than that. You saw the fields of sorghum and sugar cane as you rode down the valley? We boil down the juice of those, when the season comes, in great iron coppers which hold a

thousand gallons. I'll fill two of these a third full of water and put you in, and then light the fires beneath. That brigand Manuel threatened to roast you to death, did he? Well, you were saved from that, and you shall be boiled to death instead if you force me to it, and Delicia shall watch your writhings whilst the water heats. Carrajo! Defy me, would you?"

CHAPTER XVI

THE MARRIAGE OF DONNA DELICIA

MAXILLO stormed himself out of the room, and his truculent following stumped out after him on their rope sandals; the door was slammed to and locked, and Carew and I stared at one another rather blankly.

“It looks like a very devil of a mess,” said I ruefully.

“It’s that and no less,” said Carew. ” Look here, Birch; when you were turning in last night I reminded you that the pair of us had come out to shoot one another. Now I don’t for a moment suggest that affair should be considered as off; I for one have heard more from you than I can stomach without a shot in return, and you seem to think you’ve got a pretty heavy grievance against me; but we’ve got no weapons here which could settle our business with any degree of neatness nothing, in fact, except our bare hands and the survivor would feel a bit lonely and apt to come by a bad end. So I suggest an armistice for the time being.”

“It would be more comfortable getting respectably killed in a duel than being boiled like a lobster in one’s own shell.”

“Who intends to get boiled? I don’t for one. There’s a lot between this room here and that old he-goat’s coppers.”

“Yes, but what?”

“We must think it out, Birch. But first, what about that temporary truce?”

“Very well, I agree, for the time being.”

“Oh, don’t be too damned condescending. Believe me, I’m quite ready to shoot and be shot at on our first possible opportunity. But, as I say, there’s too much big business on hand at the present moment to leave time for amusements of that kind just now.”

He sat down on the edge of his “quatre ” and put an elbow on his knee, and presently fell to gnawing at his nails. ” She’d do it, I suppose, if it was the only

way to save us from the kettle especially if she knew she'd have to look on and see us stew. But to have her marry that stinking old billy-goat. By gad, no."

"If the worst comes to the worst we can always jump out at the fellows when they come next, and make them kill us. We're both as fit as can be again now, and we're both pretty useful with our hands. With luck we should manage to make things so hot that they'd be obliged to give us knife in self-defence."

"Oh, yes, there's always that. But I've no notion of deliberately getting killed if there's any other way out of the scrape." He kicked his heel petulantly, and it hit against something under the bed. "What's that? A brazero, by Jove, with plenty of unburned charcoal. And I have matches. Phew!" he whistled, and went off into thought again.

"Well," I said at last, "have you got an idea?"

"I have and I haven't. But, my faith! If the chance comes somebody had better look out .

Yes, there's a long iron holdfast in the wall above your head. Birch, that will pull out and do capitally. I shall not be delicate-minded in handling these brutes if that chance I want arrives my way."

"There's someone coming."

"Lord! Footsteps by all that's unlucky. Well, we aren't ready, and we must do as we can. We're quite powerless to help Delicia any way, and she must take care of herself. I guess we're about on the edge of torture, and that's not in my line at all. I'm not going out of this room."

"I'll fight it out with you, and old Maxillo can make soup of my dead carcase if he pleases. He-

"Stand back beside the door," whispered Carew. "Stand back, and don't show fight, and risk it. That's Delicia's voice outside, and if we can get her into the room and gain a bit of time we may manage to have a better run for our money."

It was Donna Delicia's voice surely enough, and presently the door opened and we could hear what she said. She was delivering an ultimatum to no less a person than Maxillo himself.

“Understand clearly,” she was saying, ” that unless I go into that room alone I shall not speak. You will get nothing out of me neither proposal nor acceptance; you may kill these two Englishmen, and I cannot prevent it; but it will not bring you any forwarder. You know perfectly well that you cannot marry me unless I choose; I would kill myself sooner than be forced into it against my will: and if that happened, then look out for yourself, señor. There are men in Sacaronduca who would pull down these mountains sooner than not get at you, and you know it.”

Maxillo gritted his teeth. ” If I let you go into that room alone you will plot with those men.”

“So ho! señor. Then you are afraid of your poor prisoners?”

“Madame,” he said sourly, ” I am the least timorous of men. But I do not want to make the way open for more trouble.”

“Ah, then,” she retorted, ” take the advice of a woman who has once been married, and keep clear of married life. Senor, you are a brave man to push me so hard. I should lead you a terrible time of it once you were my lawful husband. You did me once the compliment (in your coarser moments) of admiring my teeth. You have got a small notion of what a tongue lies in at the back of them.”

“Ah, but I have,” said he, with a rueful face. “Well, take your way; but see to it things are arranged to my liking. If it will please you,” he said, ” to step into this poor room?” and bowed her towards the doorway.

She walked in, bowed to each of us formally, though with a shut lip, and then she turned and looked inquiringly towards the door. Maxillo was watching her with a lowering face.

She waited on, and then ” Your courtesy does not seem to run very deep, seflor,” she said.

Maxillo swore beneath his moustache, and “Shut the door!” he ordered. It slammed to with a force that shook the room.

In a moment her manner changed. Through the growing gloom of the chamber I could see her eyes grow full of pity and anxiety. She came across to us in her quick, bright way, and took a hand of each. ” My poor friends,” she said, “what a

terrible plight to find you in. And all because of me. But it is just a ruse de guerre that I find you here as prisoners? Perhaps in your cleverness you have some of the force ambushed”

“Donna Delicia,” I broke in, ” please wait a minute. We didn’t come here to find you at all. We are just what you see, prisoners. We quarrelled; we left Dolores to fight a duel; we got picked up by brigands; and here we are. That is the gist of the tale. But by accident we find you here, and we are very much at your service.”

“A los pies de usted, seño^{ra},” said Carew.

“A duel! ” she said wonderingly.

“That is postponed for the present,” I said. “You see us here quite ready to do anything for your advantage.”

“Yes, but what can you do?”

“We are open to a suggestion.”

“And I never felt so much at a loss. Maxillo has been too clever for me.” She shuddered. “And he is a man to keep his word. He will be entirely ruthless.” She shuddered again.

“He has got to put us in the pot before he can make soup of us,” said Carew, ” and he may find that difficult. I know I for one have not the least intention of being boiled alive, and I believe Birch has similar scruples. The only thing is, if we get killed, my dear lady, that doesn’t help you, does it? You’d have to marry the old goat sooner or later, all the same.”

“I could kill myself also.”

“Oh, dear no! That would be a terrible waste of good material.”

“I see no other way out of the trouble,” she said, smiling bravely.

“Well,” drawled Carew, “you might marry me, you know.”

She started, and for the first time looked (I think) a trifle scared. ” Sir William,”

she said, "I suppose this is a joke, and I think it a poor one. Any way I do not see the point. As you must know, I am promised to marry your master, General Briggs."

"He's no master of mine, madam. Birch here will guarantee you that. No, I've chucked Briggs finally and for always, and I had thought of chipping in with Maxillo. Maxillo, however, is not polite; refuses to have me, in fact, on any terms; and so here am I a lone lorn orphan, so to speak, and out on the world on my own hook. Now, Delicia, you admire success, and you want to be wife to the President of Sacaronduca. Well, I'm going to bid for the berth myself, and there's only one thing that will stop me, and that's my own funeral; and I tell you I'm not dead yet, or anywhere near it. There's no denying you're in a bad hole here, and you see no way out of it. Isn't that so?"

"Yes, yes. Go on."

"Well, as I say, marry me, and then I'll clear out suddenly. Once you've got a husband, Maxillo's scheme falls to the ground. He daren't illtreat you, and if he doesn't let you go out of sheer disgust at being sold I'll find some way of hooking you out of his grip. In the meanwhile, if Briggs remains President of Sacaronduca he'll only do it by knocking me on the head, in which case you'll be quite free to marry him when things have settled down. On the other hand, if I get to the head of the country, you'll find yourself the wife of the biggest man Central America has ever seen."

Now I was watching Donna Delicia pretty narrowly whilst Carew was making this extraordinary proposal, and it was clear to see that she was moved. But she by no means showed a sign of giving way at once. She wanted to gain a little time for consideration probably, and so, womanlike, she opened up a side issue.

"You seem to be showing a change of object," she said. "When you first came to this country, Sir William, I thought you stated somewhat openly that you only did it for the money you could gather to carry home again. I seem to have learned too that at that time you professed an utter contempt for all political advantage."

"I hadn't seen you then," said Carew. "I may remark that it is you who want the political eminence, and that's why I am ready to get it for you for the pair of us, in fact. I never looked upon a woman with an eye to marriage before, but, by

God, Delicia,” he burst out, ” I want you, and if this sort of thing is what you care about, you shall have not only Sacaronduca but half these wretched little Central American states tacked on at the back of it. Nothing shall stop us. You shall have a kingdom worthy of a queen. Being near, you makes one equally ambitious with yourself.”

Donna Delicia’s eyes were sparkling now, and her cheeks were pink; but she did not offer either a “yes” or a “no.” “You do not ask love from me?” she said, almost shyly.

“I shall earn that by service. As for my own feelings on the matter I do not choose to parade them.”

“And if I give way to your proposal you will understand that circumstances press me on?”

“If,” retorted Carew, “you had stayed in Dolores, I should probably not have asked you to marry me. At least not yet. Being here; being, as I may say, in an extremely tight place, I throw out the suggestion as a possible means of escape from worse evils. Hang it, Delicia, whatever’s wrong with me I’m a better specimen than that old goat Maxillo.”

Donna Delicia looked him in the face, and then let her glance fall.

“I should like to annoy Maxillo,” she said rather coyly.

“We’ll shake hands on that,” said Carew, and they did so heartily, just as two friends might have done. ” And now,” said he, ” we’ll get ready for the wedding.” |

He pulled out the brazero from under the bed, scraped a match, lit the charcoal, and with his breath blew it into a smoulder. Then he wrenched the long iron holdfast from the wall, pushed its tip well into the glowing embers, and stood up again.

Donna Delicia and I had been watching him in silence, wondering what it was all about, but instinctively trusting to his wit for the next move. However, he did not explain just then. Still when he stood up out of the gloom of the floor, and the moon’s rays pouring in through the window fell upon his face, I saw there a look of pleased certainty which comforted me more than anything I had come

across for many a weary hour. He was a man, as I had learned already, of extraordinary resourcefulness.

“I must ask you, Delicia,” he said, “to go into the corridor and send for Father Jupe. Get him in here, and get him in alone. Say that we have arrived at a compromise over this marriage question, and want his help to get Maxillo to accept it. That will be quite true, and should appeal to that sardonic humour of his when he has time to think it out coolly later.”

“But if he brings others with him.”

“Then they have my pity beforehand. Birch and I will have to handle them so that they do not interfere.”

“There is a bar here on the inside,” said I, “running into a socket in the wall which will keep the door shut once we get our man in the room.”

“I’d seen it,” said Carew. “Now, Delicia, please.”

She stepped towards him, laid both hands on his arm, and looked up in his face. “There seems a horrible risk about everything,” she said, “but I will do my best. Whatever happens, please know that I am grateful, and do not—do not—” the words seemed to stick in her throat.

“Get into the kettle,” Carew suggested. “No we won’t, either Birch or myself. You can trust us for that, Delicia. Now away with you and wheedle Jupe into the room alone. You’ve got plenty of cleverness; you can do it if you try.”

She shuddered a little, and then with an effort she pulled herself together again and went towards the door. I opened it for her. The corridor seemed to be empty, though there were plenty of men chattering out of sight at the further end. She walked quickly away towards the voices, and I went back into the room.

“It’s just a chance she may bring it off,” said Carew, moodily.

“A slim ghost of a chance,” said I.

“There’s not another woman in the world would have so much. But if it does come off, we’ve got to be ready. Look here, Birch, I’ll shut the door if we can get Jupe inside, and slip the bar in place. You must get your arms round the man

and hold him tight. You can do that?”

“Oh, I can do that right enough as far as physical ability goes, but the question is, do I intend to? It seems I am going to help you to marry Briggs’s promised wife. That’s what I can’t quite make up my mind about.”

“Now, for the Lord’s sake, don’t let’s have any more of this nonsense now,” he said irritably. “Hang it, man, respect the truce. We’ve got a beggarly chance of saving our lives and of serving Delicia at one and the same time. Have you got a better plan? No, you haven’t. Then, for heaven’s sake, shut your mouth and use your wit to help mine. Afterwards if we do get clear of this mantra]) forty things may happen. You may shoot me, Briggs may shoot me, other people may do it; but, any way, if I live I shall be President of Sacaronduca, in which case Briggs by his own contract with Delicia would be out of the running. Whereas if I get knocked on the head there she’ll be a widow as she was before, and the situation’s unaltered. You’re serving Briggs by keeping her out of that beast Maxillo’s fingers, and you can salve your conscience with that.”

We dropped the talk then, and tramped about in the dusk of the room waiting tediously. I formed a thousand theories as to how Donna Delicia could fail in her negotiations. I could by no means see how Jupe would be foolish enough to trust himself within our reach. And always at the back of my thoughts loomed the sugar boilers, with fires lit beneath, and water seething and bubbling inside, and ugh, it makes my flesh creep to remember that time even now.

At last we heard Delicia’s voice again, and then Father Jupe. My heart almost stood still as I listened. Yes, they were coming down the corridor towards us; two pairs of footfalls, both quiet and soft; no others. I strained my ears; I could swear there were no others.

Father Jupe said something, I forget what, though I know it was droll, and Donna Delicia filled the corridor with laughter, merry, light, delicious laughter. Heavens, fancy being able to laugh like that then! What nerves that woman had got.

They came into the room, and Jupe said he was glad his gentle arguments had prevailed. ” I am sure, seflores,” said Father Jupe, “that you and all the world will congratulate my brother on securing so charming—” and there he stopped.

He saw Carew moving towards the bar of the door, and in an instant he bristled

with suspicion. I saw his hand dive towards a pocket of his cassock which sagged down with the outline of a revolver, but I was too quick for him. I threw my arms round him, and squeezed all the wind out of his body with the first hug.

Carew made fast the door and came up in front of him. "Now, Father Jupe," he said, "I need scarcely tell you that if you sing out, whatever happens to us, we shall have plenty of time to take the change out of you before they can break down that excellent door from the outside and disturb us. You quite understand?"

Jupe nodded.

"There's something in the pocket of your cassock which spoils the hang of the cloth, and doesn't do your tailor justice. Permit me? A thousand thanks. By Jove, my own revolver and cartridges. Jupe, you are a real benefactor. I recommend the pattern of this gun to your future notice; a four-fifty, you see; never try the smaller bores: they won't always stop a man."

Father Jupe took all this philosophically which was wise of him, seeing that he could not resist; and by degrees got back his wind which was wiser still, in view of possible emergencies.

Carew went on: "Having induced you to visit us, amigo, I want you next to give me a little professional assistance. There seems so much marriage in the air that Donna Delicia and I propose having a wedding of our own presided over by you, Jupe."

The priest set his lips tight like a man prepared to accept the consequences of his words. "No," he said, "I will take no part in this sin."

"Sin be hanged," said Carew. "We are both of age, and both know our own minds. Listen, Jupe: I publish the banns of marriage between William Howard Motte Carew, bachelor, and Delie Alicia Spinoza, widow, both at present of this parish. If any of you know any just cause or impediment mark that, Jupe; JUST cause why these two persons should not be snugly married out of harm's way, ye are now to declare it."

"You are heretics for one thing," said the priest coldly.

"I beg your pardon, father. We are both members of the church which you adorn."

Father Jupe winced. "But still I shall not marry you," he said, "so you may shoot me if you choose, and get it over."

"Nothing of the kind," said Carew. "We are now in the Tolpec Mountains, and it may come to your memory that as we rode here from the plains below, you brightened the way by tales of how the inhabitants of this district dealt with captives who proved obdurate. I regret, amigo, that our apparatus is so scanty, and we cannot reproduce all their playful eccentricities; but we have this " he kicked the brazero with its glowing charcoal into the middle of the floor; and picked up the red-hot iron bar, and brought his savage face close to the priest "and we're minded to pay you back in your own currency, you torturing brute."

"I saved you from Manuel," said the priest sullenly.

"I know you did, and we owe you nothing there. You only did it for your own purposes. But I'm not going to argue with you further; either you do what I want, or you take the consequences. If you refuse, you shall take an hour to die, and rue every second of it."

"Let me think," said the priest huskily.

"I'm not going to let you gain time," Carew retorted. He lifted the iron bar till I myself could feel the heat of it; and it must have scorched Jupe's face. "Hold him tight, Birch, and don't let him squeal; we've heard a lot about boiling and burning in this infernal country, and now we shall see for ourselves how it affects a man. I'm going to burn his eyes out as a commencement."

The man could have faced a shot, but he shied at torture, and I don't blame him. He nearly wrenched himself free from my arms when the red-hot iron came near his face, and "I give in," he cried: "I'll marry you. Oh, for God's sake, Carew, take that cursed thing away."

Carew stood back. "Very well," he said, "but don't make such a noise about it, or you'll wake the place. And mind, don't you go back on your promise, Jupe, or try and burke the service, or we'll mark you yet."

"I know when I am beaten, señor."

"Do you?" said Carew.

“And you may put your weapons away. I have given you my word.”

“I don’t value your word at a cracked nickel. Birch, you stand behind this man, and if he tries any pranks, bottle him. Don’t kill, you understand: break his arm. No, don’t do that either: follow the custom of the country: slice his ears off.”

But from this point onwards I think the priest gave Sir William Carew a lesson in dignity. He motioned to Donna Delicia, who up to this had been sitting on one of the “quatrefoils” with face hidden in her hands, and in a quietly reverent voice asked her and Carew to take their places before him. He might be a place-seeker, a semisavage politician, a brigand and a hypocrite when the mood suited him; but under it all he was the priest still, duly consecrated, and duly empowered; and as I stood grimly in my place behind him, I was more than half ashamed of the butcher’s work which had been threatened in order to bring about the climax.

It was a queer scene, come to think of it. Here was the richest, most beautiful, most famous woman in the country, celebrating her marriage not with pomp and circumstance in the national cathedral as might have been expected, but under conditions separated only by a hair’s breadth from bloody tragedy. The chapel was an unconsecrated chamber in a most unhallowed house; for illumination there was the silver moonlight from the window which fell on the heads and shoulders of all the earnest group, and the faint crimson glow from the brazero on the unseen floor beneath; and instead of sweet clouds of incense, there were acid charcoal fumes to touch up the remembrance.

The old sardonic manner had gone from the celebrant. His very face had changed. Here was the ecclesiastic, and nothing more, and either he was a consummate actor (which I do not care to believe) or else he was a man of deep convictions and did not care to tamper with the holiness of the sacrament. The affair had been forced on him, bitterly against his will; but once the human part of him had been defeated, his spiritual half took the matter up and carried through the ceremony with an impressiveness which showed how deeply he felt its deep and holy significance.

He made them man and wife according to the ritual of his church, bestowed his benediction as a priest of that church, and for ever set Donna Delicia beyond the reach of his brother Maxillo, so long as Sir William Carew should live.

But how long had Carew to live? That was the question which worried me. As

that weird marriage service was drawing to its end, someone came to the door of the chamber and called for Father Jupe with lusty vigour. Upon which, on getting no reply, he had fallen to rattling the sneck; and as this produced no vestige of a reply he had departed cursing, and would probably in a very short time bring other inquisitors, and a key in the shape of an axe to break the door.

It did not seem to me that we had any of us bettered our condition. The best that Carew and I could hope for would be permission to die fighting, and though Donna Delicia certainly had changed her name, she would still be a widow, as before, and liable to more of Maxillo's attentions. Yes, I didn't see that we had bettered ourselves one little bit, and I was itching with impatience to get it over. It is not pleasant to wait on the threshold of the next world like that. And as soon as the service ended I said my say.

CHAPTER XVII

OVER THE HILLS AND FAR AWAY

THAT strange marriage service came solemnly to an end, and Father Jupe put back the tattered missal in the pocket of his cassock. "Lady Carew," I said from my post behind him, "may I be the first to give you your new name and to wish you much happiness?"

Her pale face flushed to a sudden pink. She had taken the step irrevocably now, and married a man whom twenty minutes before she had never thought of except as an acquaintance; and even for her lively ideas it must have been somewhat of a shock. But she thanked me for my congratulations very prettily and collectedly; and asked me what was to be done next. "It is you that I am thinking of, gentlemen," she said. "For myself I shall be quite safe here ^now; you need have no fear on that score. At least I shall be safe so long as my as Sir William keeps away from harm."

"Delicia," said Carew, "you make my life seem quite valuable. You may trust me to take eminent care of it." In the moonlight from the window I saw his face was full of smiles, and it struck me that he was rather more elated than the circumstances warranted. I don't think anyone would have cared to have insured either his life or mine for anything short of cent, per cent, just then.

However, if he was pleased with results so far, he was by no means a man to let his exultation interfere with his care for the future. He nodded across at Jupe, and thanked him for marrying them; "and," said he, "if circumstances permit, I'll see that you have your personal fee when the time comes. You spoke about a wish to be archbishop of Dolores. When I am made President I'll manage that the see shall be left vacant for your acceptance. You are a very capable man, Jupe, and you know which side your bread's buttered. Once you're archbishop you'll be far too sensible to plot against the man who put you there."

"I should take none of your favours," said the priest sullenly.

"Haven't I bid high enough? Shall you make it a point that I approach Rome to get a hat for you? Do you think you'd make a good cardinal, Father Jupe?"

The priest writhed. "I have married you under compulsion," said he. "You may want me to perform another office of the holy church before long."

"Extreme unction," said Carew. "I think not."

But that reminds me, Jupe. I do want another service at your hands, but it is an entirely temporal service this time, so your conscience need have no further qualms. With your help, Birch and I intend to leave this valley now, with the smallest possible delay."

"You have seen how the pass is guarded; you can guess what orders the men there hold from my brother."

"Precisely," said Carew. "So I should suggest that we make our exit by the other road. I think you'll understand me, Jupe, when I say the other road?"

Now as I guessed at the time, and as Carew owned to me afterwards, this was neither more nor less than a bluff on his part; he guessed there might be a second exit from the valley, and if there was not, no harm had been done by the suggestion. However, Jupe's face made suspicion a certainty. He was visibly startled. And then he tried to sneer the proposal away. "If you and Birch have wings," he said, "I shall be delighted to help the valley be rid of you."

"I should think fins would be more to the point," said Carew. He told me later that he suddenly remembered to have seen a flowing stream as we rode across the valley floor, which certainly must have an exit beyond the mountain chain somewhere, and which certainly did not flow out through the defended cañon. "But we should prefer," he added, "to be your debtors for a boat."

"There is no boat," said Jupe sulkily. "I believe only one man has ever got down the rapids, and he did it by swimming. How many have been drowned there, I can't tell. A man must be pretty hard pressed to try it."

"Let me flatter you," said Carew, "by admitting that Birch and I are pretty hard pressed, and I must ask you to hurry. It amazes me that we have been left undisturbed so long."

"Oh," said Jupe ruefully, "my brother knows I'm here, and he thinks I am quite able to take care of myself and you, too."

“Your brother, I take it, is a revengeful man. Perhaps a change of air would be as good for your health as it will be for ours.”

“Yes,” said Jupe. ” I don’t think my brother will ever forgive me for this last few minutes’ work so long as it stands, that is. Yes, I will come with you, gentlemen.”

“And try and kill us when you have an opportunity, and earn your pardon by taking back the news? Well, Jupe, we are two to your one, and we are neither of us squeamish, and we understand your feelings to a nicety. If you don’t get us clear of the hacienda, one or other of us will kill you whatever else happens; and if you try any unpleasant pranks afterwards, we’ll knock you on the head as cheerfully as we’d_ shoot that, old goat of a brother of yours. And so on the whole, you see, we shall make delightful travelling companions. Let’s shake hands over the bargain.” Which, oddly enough, we did.

“We mustn’t waste any more time,” said the priest. ” I must take you away from this at once.”

“Yes, go, go,” said Donna Delicia. ” I shall I shall faint, or do something silly if you keep me on this strain much longer. Good-bye, Mr. Birch.” (She pressed my hand in both of hers.) “Good-bye, Sir William.”

“Has my bride got no warmer a farewell than that?” asked Carew whimsically.

With an effort she pulled herself together, and shot a glance at him from her eyes. ” You may kiss my hand.”

He knelt on one knee, and did it, with a courtly reverence.

Her face flushed a sudden pink. ” You shall do more,” she said. ” You are a brave man, and I like brave men; you are a better man, too, than you think; and, after all, you are my husband. You may kiss my lips once.”

He drew her gently to him; and leaned down over her face. Father Jupe turned towards the door. I did the same. ” Good-bye, Delicia,” he said, very quietly.

“Good-bye, Billy,” I heard her whisper back.

Father Jupe thrust back the bar in its socket, and gingerly opened the door and

stepped into the empty echoing corridor. I followed, with a short machete I had taken from underneath his cassock, quite ready to cut him down if his game was treachery, and treading on my heels came Carew, with revolver muzzle upwards, level with his cheek, ready to shoot on the instant.

A chatter of talk rattled down the corridor from the portico beyond, and Jupe led on towards it, treading with niceness, so as not to let his footsteps sound. On ahead there was no light; above, below, and on each side of us were bare plastered walls; the tiny glow from the room we had left soon died away, and the darkness was almost solid. Did this devil of a priest think to give us the slip in the gloom? I doubted him perfectly. But I had no notion that he should sell us without paying the price, and so I laid hold of the slack of his cassock behind, and cleared my right arm so that I could split his skull with the heavy machete the moment I decided he was betraying us.

I suppose I ought to feel ashamed of myself now for distrusting the man when after all he was really doing what he had contracted, but on the whole I do not. Personally I am quite convinced that Jupe Maxillo would have sold the pair of us gladly if he could have done it with advantage to himself and would not most certainly have been knocked into the next world in the progress. He understood that he had two coolly desperate men to deal with, who would risk a good deal to escape his brother's sugar boilers, and so he accepted the inevitable, and saved his own life by doing as he was told. There are not many men in this world who, when it came to the point, would have done anything else.

However, as it was, he stopped when we had crept some fifteen yards down the corridor, and turned the handle of a door in the wall. I pressed the flat of the machete against his head as a hint to be wary, but he pushed the door open confidently enough and went inside. We followed. We were in another room, much the same as the one we had left, except that this held a staircase. It was lit by the moonlight, and, being whitewashed, showed up plainly enough. The moonlight showed also another thing, and that was a table covered with books and papers. This gave Carew an idea.

He cautiously closed-to the door behind him, and then said he, " By Jove, we've forgotten a very serious item in the wedding. The bride hasn't got her marriage lines."

Father Jupe nodded, and seated himself at the table. " I'm willing to convince

you of my bona fides in every reasonable way I can, Carew. I will write out the usual form if you like, and we can go back and get the lady to sign it.”

But this was a bit too much extra risk even for him. There seemed a glimmer of a chance now that we might escape, and no one but a madman would have delayed for such a triviality. So he said: ” Well, write this ‘ For reasons of my own I have formally and legally married Donna Delicia to Sir William Carew/ and then sign it with your own name.”

The priest bit his lip; it was clear the form of words jarred upon him; but he probably reflected that Maxillo’s enmity would be so great against him anyhow that this document could scarcely add to it. So he wrote what was dictated, and signed his name at the foot with a regular Spaniard’s maze of flourishes. He peppered sand over it to dry the ink, ran the sand back into its castor, and handed on the document to the bridegroom.

“Much obliged,” said Carew, ” but we’ll leave it here.” He built a pile of books, and placed the paper conspicuously. ” And now, my dear Jupe, once more we have the honour to wait for your lead.”

“Up the stairs then, and on to the roof.”

He showed us the way, and we followed, and still as a precaution I kept a grip on his cassock.

The staircase did not go straight. It twisted and turned through the buildings, making connections with other rooms; and once, as we came on to a half pace, I heard voices in discussion close at the other side of a door. But we all three trod our way like cats, and in the end came out on the flat concreted roof, just then lit as” bright as day by the moonlight.

There was a parapet all round the roof, and so we were fairly safe from being spied at from below, but to make sure that no one was stirring beyond the walls we peeped over each side in succession and searched the surroundings with industry. No; unless there was anyone in close hiding amongst the trees which was unlikely the place was deserted, except for some outbuildings which showed lights, but which we decided would not have to count. So the next thing was to get to the ground.

How this was to be managed I didn’t see. I had expected an external staircase, a

common addition to native architecture. But the hacienda was something of a fortress or could be used as such on occasion and the Maxillo who built it had evidently no wish unnecessarily to weaken his defences. However, the priest had a way out of the difficulty. 'There was a long pole lying on the roof, which I fancy at some time or other had been used as a flagstaff, and which, I grimly thought, would have been used for that purpose again on the morrow if Maxillo's plans had gone off as he intended; and this pole with some difficulty we managed to get on the parapet and lower vertically down the wall.

We chose the side of the house away from the moon so as not to throw an unnecessary shadow across any of the windows; but the wood squeaked and jarred abominably, however careful we might be, and I know my heart was bumping all the time we handled it. But at last we got the pole fairly up and down the wall, and Carew nipped over the parapet and lowered himself briskly away into the shadow of the dusty ground below.

"The Church next," said I, and Father Jupe, like a sensible man, did as he was bade and followed, and I climbed down the pole close above his head, so that he might be up to no pranks when he was out of our immediate reach. I didn't quite know what mischief he might find ready to his hand during that transit; but I had a high opinion of his cleverness, and I don't mind repeating that I had the strongest possible distrust of the man. However, we all three got into the black shadow at the base of the building without any alarm being spread, and set off over the soft carpet of dust towards a gap between the encircling outbuildings.

The moon hung up in a clear sky like a great glowing silver coin, and I have never been less pleased to see it. The shadows were to our taste; but out of the shadows and we had to leave them sometimes we were an open advertisement. There was a quite a little settlement of outbuildings to pass through before we got into the fields beyond, and if there had been anyone with eyes, by no possibility could we have missed being seen.

Once indeed we did have a horrid alarm. As we rounded the angle of one of the stone buildings, a voice spoke out close at our elbows. We stopped in our tracks as though we had been frozen there, and I laid suggestive fingers on Jupe's cassock. A second voice a woman's took up the talk; and the first answered back; and then came the sound of unmistakable caresses and fondlings.

In the course of journeyings I have been in Louisiana and Cuba, and know an "

ingenio” when I see one, and am well acquainted with the scent of boiling sugar. The knowledge did not comfort me then; I recognised in a moment that we were leaning against the wall of the very torture house with which Maxillo had threatened us; and there for a mortal twenty minutes we had to stop and listen to the silly love-sentences of that pair of tools who were not a yard away from us. They were parishioners of Father Jupe, and it was plain to learn that their love-making was none of the most orthodox. Jupe was hearing the confession with obvious distaste, and if one could judge by a face, the pair of them were in for a thumping penance if ever their pastor got within reach of them again. I suppose there was humour in the situation, but I’m sure we all of us quite failed to see it then.

However, at last they wound up the interview with one long last ecstatic kiss heavens, how long a kiss can seem sometimes and took themselves slowly off; and once more we got under way and left the unpleasantly suggestive neighbourhood of the boilers. Another minute and we were clear of the buildings altogether; another five and we were walking quickly down a track between stalks of Indian corn which rose on either side of us eight feet high.

Carew, as being the man with the gun, brought up the rear now; the priest led, and I stepped close behind his heels and laid an occasional hand on the skirt of his cassock, as a hint that I was quite ready to stop him if he tried a bolt.

Through corn, through maize and sorghum, through grass land and sweet potato fields we kept on in this order at the best of our pace for the rest of that night, talking little, so as to save all our wind for the walk. They must have discovered our absence by that time one would think, but still there was no sound of pursuit. Probably Maxillo rested satisfied with the idea that we could not get out of the valley, and promised himself the luxury of hunting us down by daylight and at his leisure.

Nearer and nearer we drew to the enormous wall of stone which ringed the valley round, and even when the moon had grown faint against oncoming day, nowhere could I see a break in the towering crags. So steep were they that they hardly looked like natural mountains as one stared at them in that grey light of dawn they gave one the idea of a vast wall of titanic slabs built up with sweat and toil and labour by some forgotten race of giants. And, as I say, nowhere did an outlet show itself. Ever and again we came upon a bend of the stream, and a minute later were leaving it as it swerved off on its serpentine course; and every

time we struck it the volume of water had increased. It flowed onwards round its curves with a gentle purr, and though it sometimes dissipated for a mile or two into marsh and reedy tarn, it always came out again, clear and musical, at the further side, and always, despite its flirtings, made headway towards the vast stone barrier beyond.

It was evident that the priest was growing very weary. Walking is not cultivated in Sacaronduca amongst the better classes; indeed, there is a local saying to the effect that any man who can afford it will take a horse even if he is only going to cross a street. But I will say he stuck to it gamely, and, moreover, Carew and I were able to feel for him, as we were more than a little tired ourselves. When we had taken our first look upon the expanse of the valley we had put it down as a nice snug little retreat; but when we came to measure it up with footsteps we had a much more respectful idea of its size.

However, it was obvious that we were coming rapidly to the end of our walk. The foot of the vast crags was less than a mile away now, and although any break in them still refused to show, it was a certain thing that the stream must have passage somewhere to empty into the sea. What the nature of that passage was we had got to find out. It might merely be an underground filter, it might be a tunnel, it might be a narrow gutter of a cañon; and again the pace of the stream in this outlet, whatever it might be, was by no means guaranteed gentle. In fact, from the beginning, Father Jupe had given the poorest opinion of its practicableness for our purpose.

However, as we drew nearer, the rush and the clash of falling water began to announce themselves by noise, and a great wall of the cliff commenced to separate out from the mass till it showed us a lean alley of a cañon leading with windings and turns into the very heart of that huge barrier of stone, and the stream with noisy falls and rapids gushing along its base. And just about that time we learned for a definite fact that Maxillo had sent after us a force which would put successful resistance (if they came in contact with us) entirely out of the question.

We saw them topping a bit of a grass-covered rise, and counted some twenty men on horseback and another score on foot. Up till then they had not been especially hurrying themselves, relying probably on the belief that we could not get beyond the barriers of the valley, and promising themselves the sport of hunting us down at their leisure. But when they saw us persistently bending for

this river canon, they grasped the fact that there was a possibility of losing us even then, and so the cavalry left the others and came on over the rough ground as fast as their horses could carry them.

We on our part brisked up. We had tasted the sweets of escape, and did not want to be killed now if it could be avoided; and though the boil of water in the canon was far from appetising, we had a strong inclination for giving Maxillo's braves the complete go-bye and taking the chances of the stream as they arrived.

It was a case of dragging to get the priest on the last hundred yards, but I lugged him along somehow. And at last we got to the outermost barrier of the canon, and, dry-shod, at any rate, we could go no further.

Father Jupe turned to me with a little spit of anger. "Take your infernal fingers off my clothes, Mr. Birch," he snapped.

"Yes, don't bully the man so," said Carew; upon which I swore back at him, and the three of us started a wrangle which very nearly resulted in blows.

A little kick of dust thrown up by a rifle shot from beneath our feet had the effect of calming us somewhat for the time being. Other bullets began to whizz past us viciously. Seven of the riders had dismounted and were firing from the knee as fast as they could load; the others, who had only revolvers, were coming on alongside the line of fire with all the pace their horses could give them.

"Oh, stop this row," said Carew. "You and I must be off, Birch."

"Yes," said I. "There's an account between us that has to be formally settled."

"And I'm as keen to get it squared up, my man, as you are. So, for the Lord's sake, don't keep harping on the matter, when you know quite well we haven't got a pair of even weapons amongst us. Jupe, my friend, you are at the end of your usefulness; you may stay behind now."

"Gracias, señor, for the permission. But how if I do not choose to stay? I fancy this marriage question has made the Tolpec district unhealthy for me for the present."

"And so," muttered Carew, "you want to earn your pardon by making Delicia a widow again?" A bullet sent a splash of gravel stinging into his face. "Here, one

of those tailors will hit us in a minute.”

He stepped down into the rocky bed of the stream, where the high stone bank gave protection from the firing till the riflemen should come nearer. I got in after him, the water coming well up to my armpits. But Father Jupe was quicker than either of us. He dropped down flop into the water, his rusty cassock filling out like a balloon and keeping his feet off the river floor. The heavy stream threw his shoulders forward; and he was swept away down the current before either of us could lay a finger on him. There was only one way to stop him, and that was by shooting, and I fancy Carew had half a mind to do it at once and get it over. But on second thoughts he left his revolver where it was, and started off, half wading and half swimming, down the stream. I brought up the rear.

For a while we were free from the rifle-fire, and were able to give all our attention to making a passage down this swirling lane of water. It was no easy matter, either. Sometimes we were in shallows scarcely ankle deep; sometimes we were swimming in oily overfalls and rapids; and next moment we would probably be shooting like fish between a pair of smooth black rocks which spouted with spray and did their best to drag us under the surface. For Carew's swimming powers I would have given a certificate any time; but the priest certainly surprised me with his cleverness in the water.

Personally, I swim like the average incompetent, can keep myself afloat with ease when stripped, if the water is decently warm, but from want of practice soon tire, and make a very poor performance of it when weighted with clothes. Swimming down a torrent, too, was a new experience for me; and as I cannot rid myself of a sensation of drowning when my head goes under the surface for many seconds together, I very soon got extremely breathless, and (to tell the truth) not a little water-logged. Added to which discomforts we got under rifle-fire again, and the bullets hit the water all round us with little spouts and geysers.

I had only one consolation about that final bombardment. Father Jupe stood an equal share of its inconveniences. And, moreover, wherever that rushing, hurrying stream took me, it took Carew and the priest also. There was the boom of a deep fall from somewhere close ahead. I might be killed in going over that, but it was a grim satisfaction to remark that my two enemies, and fellow-fugitives, stood an equal risk.

CHAPTER XVIII

SUCCESS WANTED, NOT EXCUSE

THE bullets whooped through the water, or spat viciously against the rocks, but the swirls of current swept us to this side and to that like corks in a flooded gutter, and so through no device of our own we made but indifferent targets. Still, if lead enough was expended, there was a chance that one or other of us might get hit, and as a consequence the fellows blazed away whilst we were in range as fast as they could shift cartridges.

But the contour of the cañon came to our assistance. The rattle and vibration of the firing abruptly ceased, and the lingering echoes of it died away amongst the rocky walls. We had all had our narrow shaves, of course, but as it turned out none of us had been so much as grazed by that lead storm. I looked up for a second from my struggle with the waters, and threw a glance behind. The canon had twisted; we were in a reach now at right angles to the last; and we had left the rifle-fire behind us. We had left also all chance of harm from Maxillo's men unless they chose to follow us, which, in view of the terrific appearance of the route, was unlikely. For a handy swimmer, a passage down the canon there might be, though that we had got to learn; but a passage back to the valley there certainly was not, since no human man could have swum against those rapids and the sluice of that stream; and other means of warping along there were none.

However, if we had successfully left this Scylla behind there was a very good imitation of Charybdis in front. Our ears told us of its nearness, and the danger of it branded itself on our brains in aching letters. If there is one sound in Nature which is unmistakable, that sound is the roar of a great waterfall; and the deep diapason of the cascading river ahead grew louder and fuller every second as we raced towards it.

Already I was heavily wearied with the swimming; my highest ambition was to keep my mouth and nose free from the water; and, in fact, I navigated myself like a log in a rapid. Carew and the priest were much the same; and even if there had been any chance of getting out of the race of the stream, I do not think they could have managed it any more than myself. But as it happened there was not. The walls of the canon rose up on either side of us as smooth and sheer as the

walls of a dock, and quite unscalable; and every second the bellowing fall ahead grew more near.

I fancy then that we all expected to be smashed up into the smallest kind of pulp within the next minute, but we had enough doggedness left to keep on swimming and wait till execution actually came.

But then our headlong progress slackened. We found ourselves in a kind of backwash, close on the lip of the fall itself, and in the swirling boil of waters which existed there we simmered round and round, in company with a scum of grasses, a drowned ox, and scraps of other flotsam, till we were spewed up on a narrow ribbon of shingle and left there to drain.

Father Jupe sighed quietly. "What a blessed taste of ease."

"Heavenly," said Carew. "We've been through hades, and quite possibly there's worse to follow. But for the present it's heavenly." (He coughed and spat out more water.) "Birch, you refused to drink with me once, but I bet you'd do it now if we'd a pint of whisky in camp. Lucky this water's moderately warm or we'd never have got through it all."

Nobody spoke much after that, and we lay where we were for the better part of an hour. It was pretty chilly. No ray of sunshine got to us of course. Indeed, so deep was the cafton, and so steep were the walls, that at the level of the stream nothing ever struggled down brighter than a dim grey twilight. And added to this an air was blowing up from the cafton, sodden with water from the falls and the spouting rapids, which came to us dank and cold as a sea fog. So there was little enough comfort to be found in waiting overlong.

We soon started searching with our eyes for a possible track downwards otherwise than through the water, but with small enough success. The beach of shingle where we rested was a mere ledge; on the other side of the cafton the boil of backwash creamed up against the vertical wall itself; and down stream we could see nothing for the twilight and the water smoke from the fall. However, if there was a path, the sooner we found it the better; and if there wasn't, we might as well break our necks prospecting, and get it over.

Here was a sound idea. I didn't wait for either of the other two to give a lead. There had been a bit too much directing of other people recently to quite suit my taste. So I got up and went off without consulting anybody, and if they chose to

follow, there was nothing to hinder.

“Good man, Birch,” sang out Carew when I started. ” Now, Jupe, wish him luck.”

“I shall be delighted to pray for your soul, Mr. Birch,” said Jupe drily.

At the end of the beach of shingle was a narrow cleavage ledge, six inches wide, and some couple of feet above the water. I stepped out along this with my face to the wall of rock, balancing my nicest. As a purser on a steamboat, I had always held a fine contempt for sailor-men on windjammers; but just then I would have given a good deal, if I could have looked back at a year’s experience amongst the climbing places on a sailing ship.

The ledges went on, sometimes up, sometimes down, sometimes making one wade knee-deep through hissing water, sometimes setting one to hang like a fly, on dizzy slabs far up the rock. The others had followed the lead and were scrambling after me, and I was not prayerful for their safety. If they had both come to grief I should have been complacent. They were a pair of utter scoundrels, and Sacaronduca would have been well rid of both of them. But though the chance more than once came in my way, I could not quite harden myself up to killing either, though my own life would have been all the more purchasable if they were out of the way.

However, as we moved onwards, it began to look as though private murder might with safeness be postponed indefinitely. We had worked down past the main fall, a roaring slide of water that sent up a dense geyser of mist from its foot, and we hung with fingers and toes to the last frail trace of ledge. There was no possibility of climbing down, or of scrambling onwards or upwards. The two alternatives were to go back and starve or jump.

The churning white water at the foot of the fall was a good sixty feet below, and it looked shallow. If we jumped, we should probably be smashed to pulp on some slimly covered rocks, and yet a jump was the only vague possible chance left for saving our lives. The distance made one sick to look at, but waiting only made matters worse. Already my toes and ringers were so tired that I could hardly hold on with them.

“One,” I said.

“Two,” I said.

“Three,” I said, and took a grip on my courage, and chucked myself away from the rock, and jumped.

It was horrible. I could feel the air fairly whistling out of my carcase. How any man can dive except to save his life I cannot tell. And then feet foremost I hit the surface. The water spumed away from me in sheets and fountains; it seemed hard, like rubber; but it checked the violence of my fall, and though my feet did hit the gravel of the stream bed, which for an instant I saw dry and bare, the impact was no harder than if I had dropped from a sixfoot bank.

But instantly the greedy water closed round me again, and choking and breathless I was washed away down the torrent. I fancy I must have lost consciousness then, for a little later I found myself on a bank of sand, and found Carew scrambling up beside me. I was just in time to see Father Jupe in his ‘turn take the dive. One moment he was like a fly stuck up against the cliff face; the next he had jerked stiffly out, and was falling downwards like some grotesque jumping-jack, with his wet clothes all hanging out from him in streamers, and his legs and arms clawing and kicking convulsively. He hit the water with a smack that sounded high above the din of the rapids and the cataract, was lost for a moment in an eruption of spouting water, and then reappeared again, floating like a limp, black, helpless rag.

He came within reach of the sand-bank, drifting past with his face under the surface, and like a fool I must needs pull him out of the water and lay him to drain. I knew I was a fool to meddle when there was a clear chance of being rid of the beggar for once and always, but couldn’t help doing it all the same.

Carew watched me and shrugged his shoulders. “Stupid of you,” he said, but did not interfere further.

“You’d have done the same,” I snapped.

“You over flatter my foolishness, or my humanity, or whatever you like to call it. I’m not vindictive, Birch, but I’m intensely practical. I’ve certain business on ahead; you and Jupe for your own reasons want to kill me, and until I’ve got the pair of you out of the way, you’ll always be apt to interfere at awkward moments.”

“There’s a certain ruffianly frankness about you that I like,” said I. ” I’ll have it carved upon your tombstone as your most notable virtue. In the meanwhile, as you and I can’t have our settling time here, let’s get on our way down stream. Jupe’s coming around.”

“Aren’t you tired with your dive and swim? Don’t you want to wait here a bit longer?”

“I am tired, but I’m going to swim no more. If you watch me you’ll pick up a hint.”

The sand-bank tailed out into shallows. Other sand-banks lay beyond up against one of the grim stone walls, and the stream rushed deep at the other side of the canon. Further down, on the side of these shallows, I had spotted a small oasis grown over with osiers not very far up the cliffs, and I walked and waded along till I was underneath it, and then climbed up without much trouble. They were fine osiers when one came to look at them, many running to as much as ten feet high and the thickness of my wrist in girth, and I set to work on them with my machete with a cheerful mind. It warmed one to be amongst vegetation again after that cold bleak wilderness of stone and water.

There was no temptation to loiter over the work. Amongst other things the food question was beginning to obtrude itself unpleasantly. The next meal, if there was going to be one, was somewhere down at the far end of the canon, at the other side of the Tolpec Mountains, in fact, and I wanted badly to get in contact with it. I was as hungry as a stowaway already.

There was no question about making a substantial raft. The other two soon joined me when they saw my game, and put in a claim for their share of the osiers. The supply was not large, and I could have done with all myself; but somehow I couldn’t quite screw up my vindictiveness into leaving either Jupe or Carew unprovided for; and, besides, if it came to a scuffle, Carew with his pistol held the balance of force. So I stuck to the machete and chopped and shredded, and the other two made up the osiers into three bundles and lashed them together with withes. Then we toppled them down to the water’s edge, tossed for choice, set them afloat, and got under weigh.

I’ve done more pleasant navigating. We lay each of us lengthways on his bundle, and steered as best we could with legs and arms. In the smooth reaches our heads

and shoulders were nicely out of the water, but these were rare, and in the frequent rapids the bundles were more or less unmanageable, and the navigation for the most part sub-marine. One did not contract a liking for this sort of thing in spite of its frequency, but one grew in a way numbed to it; and tiredness by simple shading merged into exhaustion.

What is the length of the canon I have not a notion, for though I have measured it up on paper since, the existing ordnance maps of Sacaronduca are sufficiently inaccurate to leave the matter quite vague. We, its explorers, passed along our choking way without idea of pace or direction, and indeed we made the latter portions of the passage in a state approaching coma. Our legs and arms it must be supposed performed certain mechanical functions of steering and fending off, or our bodies would have stranded on some rock in one of the rapids and stayed there to rot; but our minds had become quite torpid, as though all volition had been swilled away from them by the water.

It seems the cañon ended almost as abruptly as it had begun; the river led out on to a vast plain that stretched right down to the sea; and on the grassy edge of this plain we and our osier bundles were stranded and left to drain. I suppose we three semi-living creatures must have slept. I know I have a memory of waking with a sense of hunger, and staggering off through the grasses in the vague search for food, and then, presumably, I must have again toppled down in a state of blank unconsciousness. It seems also that this grassy plain was overrun with herds of wild cattle, which were hunted for their hides and tallow by a few half-breed Indians, and a brace of these hunters picked me up, killed a bull for my especial benefit, and coaxed me back to life with freshly squeezed beef juice. But it was long enough before I had the civility to acknowledge their attentions a matter of three weeks, in fact, during which time, except when I was raving with fever, I dozed in quiet unconsciousness; and at the end of that span I got my wits again, and began to review the situation.

I was alone with the hunters. Carew and Father Jupe had gone without a trace, but were both presumably alive, and potential for any amount more mischief, if not then in the actual performance of it. Dolores was distant quite a three weeks' hard journey. And here was I as weak as a rat, with no possession available except for some ragged clothes and a rusty machete, and already in debt to my entertainers.

Dolores, on first thoughts, certainly seemed the place to aim for; but on second

thoughts it began to strike me that my reception might be none of the best. My hand had been forced; I was full of excuses for what had happened; but excuses were a diet for which Briggs had no appetite. He preferred performance. And there was no denying several facts which told badly against me: in the first place, it was I who got the earliest tidings of Carew's treachery; it was certainly I who had let him leave Dolores; I had certainly failed to kill him afterwards; I had found the missing Donna Delicia in Maxillo's hands, and left her there; and, lastly, I had let Carew slip away from me without the faintest idea as to his next movements.

Of course, as I say, I was not without my excuses for all this, but the advisableness of carrying them in person to lay before the consideration of General Stephen Briggs was more than doubtful. It was quite on the cards he would stick me up against a wall and give me a platoon as fitting pay for my performances.

However, the matter was in a way decided for me. My excellent hosts, it seems, regarded me as an asset of value, a cheque, so to speak, which could only be cashed in Dolores, and it was hinted to me that if I did not go peaceably I should be ignominiously carried off to that city as a prisoner. They knew I was a member of the Expeditionary Force; indeed, I had admitted as much. And I suppose they argued that if I had reasons for keeping out of Briggs's way, Briggs would be inclined to pay for my presence. So with an unspoken understanding to this effect between us, we set off on a tedious three weeks' journey round the base of the Tolpec Mountains.

At the outset of that piece of travel I was like to have been shaken to pieces. Of road there was not a vestige. We zigzagged over rough foothills, wriggled through forests, squirmed through bad morasses, and swam rivers. I was weak still with fever, and the horse they put me on was a rough-gaited brute without a notion of any civilised paces. But somehow I seemed to pull round, and by the time we got to Dolores I was all right again, though very lean and gaunt, and like a scare-crow for rags and hair.

However, there was no opportunity to trim up. My hosts or captors, if you prefer the term insisted on going straightway to the President, and the tale they chose to give overcame all scruples of the guard and the chamberlains.

Briggs I beg his pardon, Don Esteban Puentos was dining in some considerable

state, and amongst others at the table were Davis, Coffin, and Fluellen. There was a bit of a hush at our entrance, and a chamberlain was whispering something into the President's ear.

The answer was spoken aloud: " Quite right to bring him here. Yes, quite right to bring him now. I am the State's servant, and always quite ready to attend to the State's business."

Then little Coffin recognised me, and jumped up and wrung my hand. " Faith, it's Birch! " he shouted. " The immaculate Birch not knocked on the head after all, but turned into a woodnymph."

"Colonel Coffin," said the President in that quiet, carrying voice of his, " Mr. Birch is in the employ of Sacaronduca, and will therefore wish to report to me first."

Coffin shrugged his shoulders and sat down, and I well, I stood there like a fool, not knowing where or how to begin. The President waited till the silence in the room had grown thoroughly chilling, and then, " Have you come to tell me. Mr. Birch, that you have condoned for your absence without leave by killing Sir William Carew as an enemy to this country?"

"No," I said, " I did my best, but he escaped me."

"And yet my reports say that you were with him several days with arms in your hands."

"I had no opportunity of killing him honourably."

"Your duty to this State, sir, comes .first. It lay within your power to have killed both Carew and Father Jupe as active enemies to the Republic. You did not do this. You assisted, moreover, in a sacrilegious marriage which was calculated to further disturb the peace which I have made for Sacaronduca; and I should be giving you only justice, according to the terms of our contract made in London, if I had you taken from this place and forthwith shot. If my interests in this country depended on the like of you, sir, anarchy would soon come back again. It is my fortune, however, to be differently served. Jupe Maxillo was caught in act of brigandage yesterday morning, and was promptly hanged. Carew has made attempts at various points, has been beaten each time, and has finally been driven out of the country. Unfortunately, his power of doing harm has not yet

ended. He has seized a steamer and has got away to sea, and has practically turned pirate. I may mention also that he terrorised a coast village and had himself proclaimed President by way of giving a sort of countenance to his actions.”

I thought that I had seen a parallel to this last item myself, and that Carew was acting very much as Briggs had acted before him. But I said nothing. I quite understood that I was very near to being taken away from that glittering diningroom and summarily shot. Briggs went on:

“I am willing to believe, Mr. Birch, that you bungled through weakness and not through disaffection, though, as you know, in my eyes, there is very little difference between the two. I always judge and reward by results. But as I quite admit you have served me faithfully and successfully in the past I am willing to give you a chance to retrieve your failure. Stamp out this emeute of Carew’s, put the man in the only place where he will be beyond the opportunity for further mischief, and I will forget your lapses and put you back into your old position. You are willing to attempt this?”

“Yes,” said I, ” even if I have only my bare hands to do it with. Besides, I have an appointment to fight a duel with Carew, and if I can come across him in a reasonable place he will not disappoint me. He is a man, like myself, with some ideas of personal honour about such private matters.”

I intended this as a stab, and I think Briggs took it as such, though he never moved a muscle of his face in acknowledgment. ” You will kindly remember,” he said icily, ” that the agreement which you signed to carry out was ‘ Before all, Sacaronduca; ‘ but if you can make your private enmities fall in with this, so much the better.”

CHAPTER XIX

H. M. S. RABBIT

IT appeared I was not to go against Carew with my naked hands. Fluellen was already detailed off for the work, and I was to accompany Fluellen as his may I say? lieutenant. You will understand that I had my own strong reasons for crushing Carew once and for all, but I think that Fluellen was, if anything, keener over the matter than I was myself. The reason was an obvious one. Don Juan Carmoy had failed to get what he wanted from President Briggs, and had incontinently turned his coat. President Maxillo up in the mountains was for the time non-active. President Carew, self-elected, energetic, desperate, was his only alternative. Carmoy could bring over a good following, and Carew was quite ready to promise anything to gain such a man's support, and as a consequence the pair of them were running in double harness for the time being.

Here, then, was an occupation after Fluellen's own heart: to hunt these two. Carmoy had robbed him of the little Irish girl he loved, and so ruined all his life; Carew was helping farmoy; so Fluellen had a heavy personal bill against both of them.

However, will for harm is one thing, and ability to do it is quite another. The pair of us rode across the country down to Los Angeles, intending to take the one armed cruiser Sacaronduca possessed to go after our pirate without any delay. There would be no trouble in finding him. He had got a steamer armed and manned, was visiting the coast towns systematically and extorting an oath of allegiance and a boat-load of tribute from each. As a pirate he was magnificent; as a President he was acting completely according to Sacaronducan standards; and although the good people of Los Angeles cursed him openly in their speech, one was not very long in finding out that there was a very tolerable wave of public feeling settling in his favour. As I have hinted before, the Sacaronducan, like all his Spanish-American brethren, is very fickle in his political amours.

We had a practical instance of this not an hour after our tired horses had brought us to the Government House in Los Angeles. There had been an attempt to gain over the officers of the cruiser, with the result that a brace of the tempters were summarily shot. To cut her out from under the guns of the forts was an

impossibility, and so, as they could not gain her over to their own side, the Carew faction took care that she should not be used against them. She lay in the harbour, moored against the Custom House quay, and in the blackness of night some ingenious sympathiser, paid or voluntary, put her effectually hors de combat for the succeeding month.

There was a good steady breeze blowing at the time, and by means of a kite with a wire string this anonymous genius floated a parcel of dynamite across through the air from the opposite side of the harbour, and then with a tripping line spilt the kite so that the load fell slap on to the cruiser's decks.

Both her officers and crew were staunch enough; they had sentries on the quay; they had sentries all over the ship; they were taking all reasonable care against interference. But they did not expect an attack from the air, and in fact they never dreamed of its possibility till it had succeeded. The whole vessel, the whole city, indeed, was waked by a deafening roar, and presently a messenger came running in to us with the news. The dynamite bomb, or whatever it was, had been cannily dropped down an open engine-room skylight, had exploded against the engines, and had smashed the high pressure and intermediate cylinders to scrap, and had effectually put the war-ship out of action for at least another couple of months.

"I heard the dockyard superintendent say that he would cable to some works in England at once, and have new cylinders cast and turned," said the lieutenant who brought the news. "You see the job is quite beyond what we could do here in our own shops. But at the very quickest it will be six weeks before we can get the castings out here, and we are not likely to get them fitted or ready for sea in less than another fortnight or three weeks. You see, seflores, we have so few dockyard appliances in Los Angeles at present. President Puentos has promised us better things under his regime, and I can assure you that we of the navy look forward to them most keenly."

"You'll have to continue looking if this sort of thing goes on," said Fluellen. "Here's Carew at us already with the cruiser, and he's beaten us in the first round. What speed has this steamer of his?"

"There's no knowing," said the lieutenant. "Pie's changed her twice already, and gives no one a chance of telling tales about him."

“By Jove, a regular vvalk-the-plank pirate, the man’s turned. Well, he always had the taste for it in his heart.”

“As you know,” continued the lieutenant, “we’ve been out cruising after him and only came back into port again to coal. But we were never lucky enough to do more than follow in his footsteps. We put into half a dozen places which he had just left after levying a ransom, but we were never lucky enough to catch him in the act. He had amazing luck.”

“Or cleverness.”

“Well, say both. Any way we did our best. We spoke every ship we met except a couple that had the heels of us and, oh, one other and could not get word of him anywhere. As I told you, he has a knack of changing steamers.”

“What other ship was it you didn’t board?”

The lieutenant gave a wry smile. “A Britisher. A little old barque-rigged gunboat with single topsails and about eight knots of steam. Her name’s the Rabbit, and her captain might be admiral of the station from the airs he puts on. He’s only a commander in rank, by the way. We steamed up within hailing distance, and told him we were hunting for a pirate, whereupon he coolly hinted that we were not much better than pirates ourselves, and that he would fire on us if we were not respectful. He had got his ship cleared for action and his crew at quarters, and I really believe he would have blazed into us if we had given him an atom of chance. The bumptious insolence of the man was rather amusing. If we had chosen we could have blown his old tub out of the water in five minutes, and he hadn’t got a gun to touch us.

The lieutenant, who was a Texan, was rather inclined to take the situation flippantly. Fluellen, however, chilled him down.

“Seflor,” he said, “I trust that your commanding officer oil the cruiser upheld the dignity of his country. Of course, it would be impolitic to have a fracas with Great Britain, but President Puentos’ government must be respected. At the same time you must remember that the political change in this country is still new. The Sacaronducan Minister in London has been discredited by us, as he was an appointment of Maxillo’s, but so far he has not been replaced.”

“That Britisher said he was still in possession, and that the only government

which England recognised in this country was Maxillo's.

"Ah, well," said Fluellen, "I suppose we must admit that diplomatic relations between the two nations have been more or less suspended during the past few months. Home matters have occupied every attention. But I do know for a fact that President Puentos will shortly have an accredited Minister in London, and the reason for the gunboat captain's brusqueness probably lies in the fact that he was a long time from port, and has not received any fresh information about the change of affairs."

Fluellen sat down at a desk and began to write a despatch, and the lieutenant turned away and rolled himself a cigarette. "Brusqueness," I heard him murmur. "Oh, my only aunt Louisa! Brusqueness! I wish you could have heard the beggar."

The lieutenant lit the cigarette and went away, and Fluellen sealed his despatch and turned to me and shook his head.

"Carew's a hard nut to crack," I said. "I found that out for myself already. I wish we could set him and this meddlesome gunboat by the ears to settle one another's hash mutually."

"Carew's not a fool," said Fluellen. "To judge from the cleverness he's shown already, he's much more likely to play off the gunboat against us. As a point of fact, I know this Rabbit and her skipper. Meadey's his name. He got the appointment just before we left England, and I'm afraid he's the type of animal that has very little respect for any service except the British navy, and rather less than none at all for anything connected with a Central American Republic."

"Does Carew know him personally?"

"Not that I know of."

"Do you?"

"I met him once, but merely during a day's covert shooting," he frowned, and added "in Ireland. It was at Julia's place."

"Phew! Then does this naval person know that the lady is now Mrs. Carmoy, and that her excellent husband is co-pirating with Carew?"

“Can’t say, I’m sure. But you can go and ask her if you like.”

“Where?”

“Here, in Los Angeles. She and Don Juan came here when he made up his mind to turn against Briggs Puentos, I mean, bless his change of names and she settled down in her palace here whilst he went off to sea.”

“And she isn’t interfered with?”

“My dear Birch, what do you want? We don’t fight against women. But I’ve no doubt she’s pretty carefully watched, and quite knows it. However, if you want to learn more, go and call. I’ve no doubt she’ll receive you.”

“Will you come with me?”

“No,” he snapped, “I will not. I haven’t seen Julia since she came into the country, and don’t intend to as long as she is married to that brute. But you go if you think it will be useful. I wish you would, in fact: I’d like to know how she’s going on. And I’ve no doubt you’ll be amused. Delicia’s there I beg her pardon Lady Carew is staying in the palace, and you and she will be able to exchange views on the Tolpec district.”

“Donna Delicia!” said I, regularly startled. “Why you don’t mean to say old Maxillo let her go?”

“Of course he did. Haven’t you heard?”

“This is the first word. You must remember I’ve been with you all the time.”

“Well, it’s fact enough. I’d have told you before, only I took it for granted you’d heard. Yes, the old gentleman was apparently very much upset at the turn affairs had taken, and strung up half a dozen of his suite out of hand so as to teach the rest smartness. But as that did not make the lady a widow, and as he was too much of a churchman to encumber her with another husband till she was rid of her last, he sent her to Dolores with an escort and a sarcastic note of condolence to Briggs. Speaking impartially, I think it was the best thing he could have done.”

“Why, yes. Donna Delicia is delightful when she chooses, but I can imagine she

would not make a pleasant guest if she was kept at a place against her will. Why didn't she stay on at Dolores?"

"Perhaps she found it painful. Anyway she must have known her presence (under the circumstances) would be painful to Briggs. So she came off to Donna Julia's house here in Los Angeles, to wait."

"To wait! what for? Till she's a widow?"

"To wait till she's the wife of a president, I suppose," said Fluellen drily. "If one states the question so, it cuts both ways. For the life of me I can't make the lady out."

"Then you have seen her?"

"Of course. She's a lot too openly grateful to Carew to suit the taste of Don Esteban Puentos."

"What, does she really care for the scoundrel?"

"My dear Birch, ask me to do most kinds of impossibility, and I'll try. But don't ask me to state what Delicia really thinks when she doesn't mean to say. She's got a lawful husband, there's no getting over that; he's clever, and a strong, and a daring man, as even his bitterest enemy will admit; and it's not in the nature of woman to deny him some admiration. Whether she's any affection for him is quite another matter. She'll laugh and joke over it, and say 'Yes' and 'No' in two consecutive breaths. But there's one thing she's solid on: she's the lawful Lady Carew, and no other need apply for the post of husband whilst Carew's above the daisies."

"Which our chief will not like."

"Naturally."

"And did he promise to shoot Carew when he could lay hands on him, or did he offer to do the Quixotic and abdicate the Presidency in his favour?"

"I am not in their confidence, but knowing the pair of them fairly well, I should say, neither. He is not the kind of man to give up anything he has set his mind on; and she is not the sort of woman to ask favours which would certainly be

refused. Moreover, whatever they thought about the matter, they did not show it outwardly. In fact, to all outward seeming they feel much the same as they did before. Eh, well ” Fluellen sighed heavily ” I suppose it doesn’t cut either of them very deeply, or they couldn’t help letting it show somehow.”

We both went off to our bedrooms then, and whatever Fluellen did, I can answer for it that I put in six hours the solidest sleep a man could do this side of the grave. It was well into the morning when I woke, and as I lay in bed and got through my matutinal coffee and roll, I argued with myself as to whether a call at the Carmoy palace was advisable. Of course, it would be eminently unpleasant, because, come to think of it, there are nicer occupations than going to socially interview the wives of a couple of men whom you hope in the very near future to kill; but I am getting imbued with my chiefs motto of ” before all Sacaronduca,” and I argued the matter out on the lines of whether or not such an interview would help the business Fluellen and I had in hand. And finally, after coldly and dispassionately looking the matter through, I came to the conclusion that it would not. I have a tolerable conceit of my own tongue-power a purser on big ships learns how to make use of talk but I was not likely to get anything out of the Carmoy Palace which I did not know already. Delicia was there; Delicia would receive me; and I was quite sure Delicia would not let out, either herself or through the lips of her friend, anything she wished to be hid. It was much more likely that Delicia would extract news out of me.

But as it happened, I might have saved myself the trouble of coming to a decision over the matter. Before I had finished my coffee and roll a message was brought in that caused me to leap out of bed and dress with the best of my speed. The English gunboat, the Rabbit, had hove to off the port, and had sent a boat ashore with an ultimatum concerning I couldn’t quite make out what, and threatened that unless she got satisfaction in some three hours’ time she would open a bombardment.

Fluellen and I both came into the business room together, finishing our dressing as we walked. The Texan lieutenant of the disabled cruiser was waiting for us, smoking cigarettes. It was he who had brought the news to Government House, and I must say he seemed rather pleased with the situation than otherwise. ” Them are all awake in the forts,” said he, ” and as soon as that fool gunboat squibbs off one of her popguns, they’ll blow her into the smallest kind of matchwood. They are quite keen on the chance; it’s the first time they’ve had an opportunity of seeing what their batteries will do.”

“Rubbish,” said Fluellen. ” This mustn’t go on. We can’t afford to have international complications now. When Sacaronduca has settled down and is stronger”

“But, sir,” said the Texan, “there’ll be no international complication. If your silly, fatheaded John Bull Meadey’s his name, by the way chooses to come and ram his wooden skull against our fortifications, it’s his own fault if the consequences are a bit big. I guess our boys have savvy enough to sit tight and let him shoot first. After that, by all the rules of Christianity, it’s his funeral.”

Fluellen clapped on his pith helmet and tossed me across mine. ” Rubbish,” he said again. “This must not go on. I know Meadey. He’s just the sort of fool to do what you say. But we can’t murder him and sink his ship for all that. Birch, you and I will get a launch and go off to the Rabbit and pacify the idiot.”

We went out into the street, got a carroza, and drove rapidly down towards the quays. ” By the way, ” said I to the Texan, who was in the carriage with us, ” I haven’t heard yet what all the fuss was about. I suppose they’ve got a pretty good ‘ casus belli? ‘ ‘

“That’s the funny part of it,” he said. ” They haven’t. It’s Carew they’re mad with, and they will persist in confusing Carew with us. Carew’s on the war-path, there’s no doubt about that. And he’s bagged one of Johnny Bull’s fancy ships, and old Meadey ‘s brought in the bill right here. What’s more, he says he wants our cruiser to take away in pawn till the account’s settled, and if he doesn’t get her he’s going to let loose the whole strength of his fourpenny earthquake on the fortifications of Los Angeles. I suppose he didn’t trouble to think what we should be doing when he started action, and yet, hang it, you’d guess the man must read his service magazines sometimes and know the kind of dandy set-out we’ve got here to take care of ourselves with.”

“You can take it from me,” said Fluellen, ” that Captain Meadey knows the strength of Los Angeles armament as well as you do; and if he makes up his mind to bring them to action he’ll do it as calmly as though they amounted to half a dozen brass yacht guns. They don’t worry themselves particularly about odds in his service. If they get wiped out, they always cheer themselves by knowing that there’s heaps more British fleet to come and make things hot for the wipers.”

“Well,” said the lieutenant, “ personally I have no use for post-mortem squaring up of that description. Now, gentlemen, here we are at the quay, and there’s a naphtha launch with pressure up at the foot of those stairs. I wouldn’t go to the Rabbit, though, if I were you. John Bull Meadey is just as likely to hang you as not in his present mood.”

“I shall risk that,” said Fluellen, “ and any way it’s my duty to go. I am senior officer here in Los Angeles, and I’m vain enough to think that I’m the most capable man here for dealing with the situation. I tell you this absurd fuss may develop into something serious if it isn’t delicately handled.”

“I didn’t know you were down here officially. By Jove, of course you are senior.” The Texan drew himself up and saluted formally. “Any orders, Colonel Fluellen?”

“Thanks, no.”

“Can I volunteer as an aide-de-camp, or coxswain, or something?”

“Yes,” said Fluellen, “you may come along if you like.”

“That’s what I want just now,” said the Texan, and stepped down into the naphtha launch and took the tiller. We followed, and the engineer set her going; and whilst the horses in the carroza on the quay above were still purring and blowing after the pace they had come, we had circled round, and were heading for the harbour entrance between the concrete walls.

The queer old obsolete gunboat was sawing up and down over the swells outside, with sails furled, topgallant masts struck, and the propeller giving an occasional flap just to keep her in place. She’d got ports triced up, guns run out, and her crew at their fighting quarters, and fifty years earlier she could no doubt have given a good enough account of herself. But against modern gun fire she would have been neither more nor less than a death-trap, and with very little chance of doing any return harm before she was blasted off the face of the sea.

This knowledge must have been quite common to all of her crew, but it did not seem to depress them. When the naphtha launch brought us alongside, and we were, after some rigid formalities, admitted on deck, we saw the fellows at their fighting stations to all appearances brimming with glee. They were very spick and span, and, after the ragged crew we had been accustomed to of late, slightly

reminiscent of a theatre scene or a fancy dress ball; but, for all that, individually they were businesslike enough, and it was only the inefficiency of the old auxiliary barque herself and her guns which gave its pathetic side to their valour.

However, we were not given much time for sentimental inspection. We were received up the side with machine-made etiquette; we were conducted along decks clean as a dinner plate by an armed guard; and, in fact, underwent a reception which would have been equally appropriate for a pair of ambassadors or a brace of convicts. We were marched off to a quarter-deck and halted by a skylight, and an officer went and reported our presence to Meadey on the bridge, who then for the first time became officially aware of our exist, ence, though as a matter of fact he had been staring at our arrival for a good quarter of an hour.

He accepted his junior's report I half wondered he did not ask for it in writing and walked down to us with short, quick steps. He was a stuffy little man with a great deal of uniform, clean shaved, and with a fine, plum-coloured complexion. His acknowledgment of us was guarded. I admired the amount of courteous chill he managed to throw into it. He looked at Fluellen with a distant glance of recognition, but without remark on a previous meeting, and Fluellen did not choose to claim acquaintanceship. And so there the three of us stood on those bleached deck planks of Her Majesty's, as stiff and unbending a trio as you could wish to find.

Whether we two newcomers liked or disliked it, one could see that Meadey fairly revelled in this prim stiffness; thought it showed a proper deference to his service and himself, I suppose; and instantly checked any tendency towards a thaw, and as that was his mood we threw ice on his ice, and capped his dryness by still greater aridities.

It appeared that Carew, cruising at large along the coast, had come upon an English merchant steamer which suited his fancy more than the vessel which was then carrying him, and he had forthwith (according to Meadey) "pirated her."

"Did he kill her people?" asked Fluellen.

"It was not reported to me that he did," said Meadey.

"Did he set them ashore?"

“I have not been informed of it.”

“Then did he give them over his old steamer in exchange?”

“So I hear.”

“I suppose he would call that requisitioning. May I take it that he gave an order for payment?”

The captain of the Rabbit allowed himself a little smile of triumph. ” You may take it that he did, sir. He gave an order on the treasury at Los Angeles; the master of the captured steamer applied to me for protection; and I have come to help him cash the draft and secure damages.”

“I see,” said Fluellen. ” Then let me congratulate myself, Captain Meadey, on having warned you that you propose committing an act of rank piracy. You set yourself up as a policeman of the seas; well and good. You come across the tracks of this irresponsible ruffian, Carew, who gives a false address did it never occur to you, sir, that the address might be false? and here you are within an ace of levying your distraint at the wrong door.”

“I do not know officially that it was the wrong door.”

“I have the honour of telling you officially that it was. I have given you my credentials. You cannot avoid knowing officially my name and official position in this country. Incidentally I might venture that this man Carew is in rebellion against Sacaronduca, and my Government has put a price on his head.”

“Ah,” said Meadey, “and you are attached to the Government of?”

“General Don Esteban Puentos.”

“We do not recognise him. Officially, as far as England is concerned, Mr. Maxillo is President of Sacaronduca.”

“You are out of date,” said Fluellen. He looked significantly round the decks of the gunboat, and contemptuously at her masts. ” Somewhat dangerously out of date, I should say. You would find it advantageous, Captain Meadey, to keep somewhat more abreast of the times.”

The little stuffy man's face deepened in tint. "Sir," he said, "you wish to save the harbourdefences of your ar recently adopted country from destruction. Your arguments are ingenious and worthy of a man who has ar changed his nationality. But at the same time my clear duty is to secure compensation for the outrage on this British steamer. However, I am willing to offer you a compromise. If you and your Mr. Birch will come with me, and take this Carew whom you disown, and assist at his hanging as a common pirate, then I on my part am willing to forego my operations against Los Angeles, at any rate till the matter has been referred to my Government at home." He looked at his watch. "It is now eleven fifty-one. My ultimatum said twelve o'clock, and the cruiser has not yet been surrendered. " If you do not agree to these new terms, I open fire in nine minutes."

Fluellen had not relished the hint about being a renegade, and his answer contained a touch of acid. He said that personally he had no inclination to prevent Captain Meadey committing suicide; but had a kindness for his crew; and moreover took an archaeologist's interest in the Rabbit. "It would be a pity," he said, " that such an interesting link in the naval architecture of the past should be wantonly destroyed. So, sir," said he, "Mr. Birch and I have much pleasure in permitting you to carry out the work for which we ourselves have been detailed off by President Puentos; and until you have captured Sir William Carew, or satisfied yourself that the task is too big for you, we shall be pleased to stay here as your guests on the Rabbit."

"My hostages, if you please," said Meadey. "Kindly send away your launch, and then, if you please, come below and give me your statement of the case in writing."

CHAPTER XX

THE CORNERED CLARINDELLA

IT turned out we were in touch with old friends or perhaps I should say old acquaintances. We had given a few hurried messages to the Texan lieutenant, and he had carried them off in the naphtha launch in Los Angeles Harbour; Meadey had pronounced his formal stilted orders for the Rabbit to get under weigh for her new cruise, and when these orders had passed through about fifteen hands they came into effect; and whilst the bustle of unarming ship was going on overhead Fluellen and I had gone below under the chaperonage of a sub-lieutenant.

The sub-lieutenant, a cheerful irresponsible creature, after the manner of his kind, suggested a drink, belauding the Rabbit's cocktails, which we presently sampled; and in the first minute of talk frankly stated his relief at our arrival. "The skipper," said this ingenious youth, "got let in from a promise to get the Clarindella paid for, and he'd have had his try if your batteries had been as strong as Cronstadt."

"They are pretty nearly as strong," said Fluellen.

"Well, any way they are strong enough to, settle our hash without much argument, and I don't want to get killed just yet without a show for my money. I say, doesn't our steward make good cocktails here?"

"Fine," said Fluellen. "What was that you were saying about the Clarindella? She's not out in these seas now, is she?"

"She is, unless this Carew man's sunk her. She was tramping for cargo when he took her over, and she'd her owner on board, and it was the owner who came across us and kicked up all the fuss. By Jove, to hear him talk, you'd think that half the British Empire had been looted. But I think he knew what he was up to pitching his yarn that way. He quite got over our skipper. I say, though, do you fellows know the Clarindella? What's she like?"

"We ought to. Birch ought to know her owner pretty thoroughly, too, for that 'matter, if she hasn't been sold recently. You've heard of our reforming

expedition to Sacaronduca?”

“Who -hasn’t? By Jove, I say, you have been envied. But they talk of you as filibusters, though, for all that, and say you have just been hired by Holsteins for the job.”

“Very likely. I don’t suppose our doings and objects have been very accurately reported. For instance, you don’t appear to know that the whole of the war material for the expedition was carried out in this same Clarindella which you were talking about.”

“By Jove,” said our entertainer, “here is her owner. I’ll leave you fellows to compare notes with him. You must excuse me now; I’ve got to go on deck again. Steward, bring these gentlemen three more cocktails.”

The owner of the Clarindella greeted me almost tearfully, and when I introduced Fluellen I thought he would have wept over his hand. “I shall never forget the business I did with you, Mr. Birch. It was most profitable to me. I am proud to know any friend of yours. Ah, sir, but I’ve had sad losses since that day you and I signed our names across an honest sixpenny charterparty stamp.”

He was the same small, stuffy creature, with the stutter and the perpetual perspiration, that he had been when I dealt with him before, and his heart was still wrapped up in the welfare of this same middle-class steamboat.

“If it had been one of my other vessels, Mr. Birch, I should not have minded so much; but the Clarindella ” he broke off again and passed a tremulous hand across his eyes. “I am out here trying to make a regular line of my boats, calling at fixed ports, you understand, and running so far as might be on scheduled time. That was my ambition. But cargo is very hard to find, and the landings are bad roadsteads and surf beaches for the most part. And then this man, this pirate, this Carew comes up and has taken the ship before I knew what he was doing. He runs up from astern with a signal flying that-he wanted to speak, and brings to slap across our* bows. He’d his boats in the water before you could say knife; and his men across and on our decks before I could stop ‘em. ‘ You’ve no right here,’ says I, ‘ I’m a British subject.’

“‘If you were a Chinese subject or a Liberian it would give me equal concern/ says he.

“‘It will be piracy to take this ship against my will,’ says I. ‘ I defy you to do it.’

“‘You may defy me till you’re black in the face,’ says he. ‘ If you don’t get over the side peaceably, you’ll be put.’”

Fluellen smiled grimly. ” I can imagine Carew saying it.”

“We’d no show for resistance. He’d a hundred ruffians at his heels, and all told we were only seventeen on the Clarindella, so I had to take the promise to pay which he offered, and row across to the old steamer he’d got tired of. I’d only a dozen hands to work her. He openly offered big bribes for anyone who’d volunteer to join him, and five of my beauties stayed. ” I hope,” he added with heavy viciousness, “they cut his throat.”

“So do I; but they won’t. Carew’s far too sharp, and knows how to handle men far too well to let experiments of that kind succeed. Besides they’ve all to win and no grievance against him. Did you find out where he was going to next?”

“No, I didn’t. They gave us sou’-sou’-west as a course, and said they’d be practising a gun or two in our direction directly, and hoped we wouldn’t be in the way to stop the shot. They’d brought four two-inch guns and a Maxim across with them from the other steamer in their boats. So we steamed off. Besides, I’d no wish to wait. I wanted to get to Los Angeles to see if his order on the Treasury there would be honoured.”

“You might just as well have taken your bill to New York or Paris.”

“I know,” said the owner of the Clarindella. “I guessed it when I heard this Carew was a baronet. I’ve always been brought up to look upon titles with suspicion. It has been part of my political creed.”

“I can imagine it would have been,” said Fluellen drily. ” Well, my good sir I haven’t the advantage of knowing your honoured name you may be congratulated on having engaged the most wooden-witted, perish-her-enemies advocate that could be found on all the seas to forward your claims with the help of this venerable relic of a gunboat; and though you have by your foolish talk very nearly made him commit a wanton act of war against a friendly power, I fancy the danger of that will be pretty well past when I drive a few of the facts you have given me into his pompous head.”

The shipowner started with a perspiring face, "What! " he stuttered, " are you a friend of this Carew's? I thought any friend of Mr. Birch"

"No, don't run away with that mistake, I'm an enemy of Carew, fast enough, and so is Birch. There are no two men living more anxious to see the scamp respectably hanged. But at the same time we have other interests. We have both of us a considerable stake in Sacaronduca."

"I don't care a fig for any of your rotten Central American republics," the man burst out angrily.

"No," said Fluellen. " Rule Britannia, floreat yourself, and let everything else rip. I quite understand your sentiments, and in a way I rather respect them. But, if you please, we will not discuss the question any deeper. We shall not agree over it."

With the exception of Captain Meadey, whom I disliked cordially, the after-guard of the Rabbit were as nice a set of clean-run young Englishmen as one could wish to meet anywhere. Fluellen, according to his usual habit, kept pretty much to himself, and spent his time brooding. I didn't, I found myself billeted amongst the wardroom mess, and set to work to have as good a time as possible. All my tales were new to them liners' smoking-room yarns don't drift out to the navy much and so I had some three thousand good ones very much at their disposal; and I don't mind owning I did my best to amuse. In the old professional days it had been part of my duties as purser to be the most popular man in the ship, and I had cared for such popularity with a mixed crowd for what it was worth. Here in the Rabbit's wardroom it was different; I was amongst gentlemen; and it filled me with a pleasant glow that never grew stale to see that they really liked me.

But living aboard the Rabbit was not altogether a yachting cruise. There was the eternal cleaning, and drilling, and devilment of everyday routine; and, moreover, there was the chasing of Carew and his Clarindella, and that all hands aboard were as keen upon as though their lives were staked on catching them.

We were not long in getting on to their trail. North, along the coast, seemed the most probable course, and so that was given. We'd a fair wind of it. Topgallant masts had been sent up, stunsails booms rigged out Her Majesty's are the only ships that have carried stunsails during the last dozen years and every stitch of

available canvas spread. It was amusing for a merchant sailor to see how these navy chaps took ten men for a one-man job. But there was no denying the fact that they squeezed the most there was of pace to be got out of their old tub; and that, with her poor old relics of engines grunting and grinding along over their humble six, made somewhere very near nine knots to the hour.

“By Jove,” said one sub-lieutenant to me, “if she were only clean, she’d be doing her ten and a half this minute. But it is a long time since she was docked, poor old girl, and there are weeds six feet long on her bottom, not to mention barnacles. Look at her copper when she lifts. By Jove, did you ever see anything so foul?”

A merchant barque of the same size would have had -four men and a mate to each watch, and with the watches eighty strong here they made light work of the sail handling. We sighted our port; we sailed straight into the anchorage with every stitch set, and then had everything sent down in the gaskets almost whilst she rounded up to an anchor. It was fine, really. I had never come across anything quite so smart before. And I have seen a good few windjammers, too, from a steamer’s rail.

A boat-boom swung out, a boat was lowered, manned, and armed, all with the same clock-work speed of course, they were strong enough manned to do everything at once, and I expect they wanted to let the merchant service see the best they could do and off a party went to the beach under the gunnery lieutenant. We saw them land officer in full rig, marines in pith helmets, jacks in straw hats, and all the rest of it and then back again, as hard as they could split, with the ten oars still keeping beautiful time. They came alongside out boat-hooks, toss oars, hand the side ropes to the officer, and all the rest of it, just like a play and the gunnery lieutenant went formally aft with his report I almost expected to hear Meadey demand to see it in writing before he condescended to accept it officially. But he did not do that; when the pinch came the man was keen enough, and I gave them credit, they got their old relic of a barque under weigh again at the top of her speed as quick as one wanted to see. But, of course, as I say, they were tremendously heavily manned.

It seemed that we had missed the Clarindella at this place by a short half-dozen hours. Carew had paid his call, had got himself formally acknowledged President of Sacaronduca, and had given the good people ashore the alternatives of having their town sacked and burned or of “subscribing ten thousand dollars

to his military chest within half an hour.” As he had quite sufficient force to make good his threats, the money was raked together and El Presidente Carew clapped it on his ship and steamed away not more than half a dozen hours before our arrival. Where he had gone he naturally enough had not said; but as his smoke was last seen trailing out from the northwards, it was concluded that he was going to raid the coast-towns up there seriatim; and northwards accordingly the Rabbit went in pursuit.

Fluellen got the gunnery lieutenant aside. Had he picked up any news of Don Juan Carmoy? Why yes, he had. Don Juan had gone ashore with the landing party from the Clarindella, but had not returned on board. He had helped at the “coup de main,” an’ d afterwards with an escort of six men had ridden off up-country. The gunnery lieutenant concluded that it was a case of thieves falling out, and congratulated Don Juan on his diminished chance of ornamenting the Rabbit’s main yardarm. What did Fluellen think?

“Well,” said Fluellen, “knowing a bit about the country, and knowing a bit about the ways of Carmoy, and the directions where he has interests I’m sorry to say I don’t agree with you in the very least whatever. I wish I did. If there had been disagreement between those two there would have been shooting also. No, what’s happened is this: Carmoy’s off to raise a guerilla force on land. This sea work is only a temporary affair till they rake a little hard cash together. They are succeeding at it finely, they are strong enough to have divided forces already; and presently you’ll see Carew will retire from the salt water and try his luck on land again.”

“If the Rabbit doesn’t catch him.”

“If the Rabbit does not catch and stop him,” Fluellen agreed. “I devoutly hope she may. Then we shall have more chance of running down the other scoundrel ashore.”

But as the hours wore on it became more and more evident we had lost the trail again after that first picking it up. This part of the Sacaronducan coast which we were searching is dotted with small towns and villages, and we called at them all in turn, but nowhere had they any news of the Clarindella. Both Fluellen and I endeavoured to give Meadey some items of local knowledge, and some suggestions as to where the missing raider might have disappeared to; but the utmost we could extort from him was a pompous assurance that he was captain

of H. M. S. Rabbit, and would take advice from no one except officers in his own service who chanced to be his seniors.

Accordingly we worked our way up the coast, persisting in these useless calls till we got to a place where there was a telegraph office, and there received news by wire that Carew was industriously raiding the dye-wood exporting towns to the southward. Upon which, of course, it was 'bout ship and back again as hard as we could go.

We came upon the Clarindella at last in Pueblo Bay, just as her people were in the midst of making negotiations with Pueblo town. It was said afterwards that Carew was going to leave her at this point whether we turned up or no; but there is no doubt that our coming was quite unexpected and unprepared for.

Pueblo Bay is not narrow, but it has deep water only between the two lines of buoys which run down its middle. The town is some mile and a half up a small estuary, at the further end, which has an easy bar at its mouth.

Our glasses showed us the Clarindella from a long distance, and probably theirs showed us to them about the same time. Of the Rabbit's people no one in the least doubted that this desperate fellow Carew would fight his stolen steamer to the last gasp, and they could not have had any entertainment ahead that would have pleased them better. But there was no individual stepping out of rank. The machine-like discipline went on as usual, and when the Rabbit was cleared for action and got into fighting trim it was all done exactly as it had been practised a thousand times before, exactly according to textbook and Admiralty instructions.

Myself, I had very strong doubts as to whether there would be a fight at all. Carew was not particular at the best of times, and just now he was pretty desperate. But even he, I judged, would not go so far as to make himself a perpetual outlaw by deliberately trying to destroy a British war-ship. He was a man of infinite resource, and he would probably see some way of wriggling out of the trap which he had yet to discover.

It was rather with surprise, then, that I saw a tiny thread of grey steam jet out from the Clarindella's bows as her windlass hove up an anchor, and with considerable astonishment that I saw her get under way and steer towards us down the estuary. She had a surf boat towing alongside, and when she was over the bar and well into the smooth, muddy waters of the bay we saw half a dozen

men get down into this, cast off the painter, and row back towards the town.

“There go the pilot and non-combatants,” said Fluellen to me. “The ass is going to fight after all. What an insane fool.”

“He’d better put another hand at the wheel then,” said I. “She’s steering shockingly badly. They’re yawing her about all over the place. She’ll be out of the fairway directly. Look at her.”

“I wonder what’s her game. I can’t see anyone on her bridge, or on her decks either for that matter. They’ll be all keeping very closely out of shot.”

“That’s hardly Carew’s way. Perhaps he isn’t on board.”

“Perhaps nobody’s on board. By Jove, that’s it. They’ve fired up all the furnaces will hold, turned steam full on, lashed the wheel amidships, and left her to take her chance and do the worst she can.”

Captain Meadey, who, to give him his due, was sharp enough, had understood this state of affairs as soon as we did, and found himself on the horns of a dilemma. With his own low-powered, slowturning ship, he would find it very hard to avoid the *Clarindella* if he got to close quarters with her and she took it into her head to ram him; if he left her alone she might very possibly run ashore and destroy herself, which would score to his discredit; and if he let her pass out to sea, the desertion might turn out to be a ruse, and he would be finely laughed at as another of Carew’s gulls.

There was small enough time for decision. The *Clarindella* was nearing him at the best of her twelve-knot gait, and I must say he took his risks like a man. He got his clumsy, slow, old vessel turned with her head away from the shore. The unmanned ship came chasing after him, yawing first to this side, then to that. She drew nearer and still nearer, threatening the gunboat’s stern with her sheering knife-like bow, and Meadey paraded his bridge, white-gloved, calm, and pompous as usual. But for all his iciness and his affectations he was a good enough sailor when it came to the pinch, and knew what he was doing. He gave his orders, and they were repeated like clock work; and as the *Clarindella* came alongside, the *Rabbit* lunged over and laid her aboard.

Officers and crew were ready for the manoeuvre. No sooner had the iron plating rasped against the gunboat’s wooden sides than they paraded on the white

hammocks that topped her rail, and scrambled over on to the Clarindella's dirty decks with an orderly armed torrent. In another moment the ships were separated again and the quicker vessel shot ahead. But then some of the invaders got down to her engine-room, and the propeller stopped, steam snorted from her escape pipes, and, a minute later she had lost way and was awaiting the war-ship's orders.

In the waist below us that stuffy little person, the owner of the Clarindella, was shedding tears of joy as his eyes gloated over his refound treasure; and on the bridge above us was Captain Meadey, unsmiling, pompous, and imperturbable; and Fluellen and I were as powerless to move one as the other. They had got their steamboat back, and that was all they seemed to care about. That the man who had escaped would continue to be a pest to Sacaronduca troubled them not one jot.

But Carew's evasion was a very real worry to Fluellen and myself. We had been sent out to catch him, and so far we had failed dismally. It was no excuse according to President Briggs's code that we had failed through no fault of our own. And if in the meanwhile Carew made himself a further nuisance to the wretched country, Briggs was quite as likely as not to hold us directly responsible, and have us stuck up against a wall and shot, if so be he could contrive to lay hands upon us.

So we were keenly enough anxious to get ashore and pick up Carew's trail, without further delay, and use the authorised forces of the country to crush him out of existence.

CHAPTER XXI

THE END OF CAREW'S GUERILLAS

AND now it becomes my duty to tell of the final disbanding of Carew's most capable gang of ruffians, and the final solving of the marriage question between him and Donna Delicia.

Fluellen and I said good-bye to the Rabbit and her people (by Captain Meadey's most kind and formal permission), and got ashore at Pueblo. Carew had oppressed the place ruthlessly, and being still sore from their skinning, any enemy of Carew's was a friend of theirs. Indeed, the good folks of Pueblo gave us a public reception; wanted us to stay and be feted with fireworks, a ball, and a banquet, on three successive nights; and in fact fairly bubbled with their demonstrations of loyalty to the Briggs regime. We could go hunting after that devil Carew "manana" they said; but we pointed out that the "manana" principle would have to be suspended if Carew was to be caught, and so, as they honestly wished the man every ill, and as they themselves were not called upon to hustle personally for his capture, they provided us with four good horses, and gave us a shower of blessings and fireworks as a send-off.

It was not difficult to follow in Carew's track. He had a hundred and fifty men in his company, and they did not carry a baggage train. Carew's idea for supplying the commissariat might not be pleasant from the point of view of the country he passed through, though it was eminently satisfactory from a military standpoint. He had a gift for foraging that we of the Expeditionary Force at one time used to describe as heavenly, though I can quite imagine that the people he foraged from would set down his peculiar talent as emanating from somewhere extremely far from heaven.

On this particular march he and his men always swapped the mount they bestrode for a better so soon as it came into their sight; they always contrived to halt at some good plump village, which they squeezed of everything available before they left it. Let them receive smiles and no opposition, and they were the mildest-mannered brigands imaginable; they would be civil to the men and more than civil to the ladies. But let any irritable person object to parting with the cream of his stock, and show an ugly front in defence of his fancied rights, and

the face of things would change at once. With equal glibness these predatory gentlemen would hang the objector to a branch of one of the village shade-trees as an example to his fellow-rustics, and would loudly profess their entire willingness to provide similar tutoring for anyone else who desired it.

Like the late Father O'Flynn, Sir William Carew undoubtedly "had a wonderful way with him." It was seldom that he had to resort to these disciplinary hangings. The villagers who came in for his visits rendered up what he was pleased to covet with the best grace they could muster. Indeed, during the whole of that chase we only came across two authentic instances where he had hanged obstructionists, and only a paltry three who had been in any way damaged by gunshots. In Sacaronduca, of course, they regard these matters more lightly than they do in England; indeed, the Spaniard of Central America would feel dull without his periodical revolution and occasional irruption of self-styled guerillas into his dwellingplace. Such a state of things has always been part of the course of life since the countries thereabouts threw off the hated yoke of Spain. They had a firm government then and personal security. Now they have very little government at all and no personal security worth speaking about.

But still, being human, they are apt to resent being robbed after the event, and as a consequence we received excellent treatment and full information as we scurried along at the guerillas' heels. We had two good horses apiece to ride turn and turn about, but it took us all we knew not to lose ground. We did not, you understand, want to do anything so Quixotic as catch the fellows up just then, as that would have spelled useless suicide. We knew, if you will remember, that Don Juan Carmoy had gone on ahead presumably on the expectation of raising a force in his own particular country; we noted with grim enjoyment that Carew and his ruffians were heading for Carmoy's district; and we held the amiable hope that we should be able to entirely upset their little plans. Twice we came across telegraph wires and jerked off lengthy messages to Briggs at Dolores, to Coffin, who was commanding at Los Angeles, and elsewhere; and three times where more modern communication was impossible, we despatched mounted couriers to the nearest wire office; and in fact kept all our chiefs posted as accurately as if they had been riding with Carew themselves.

In this way, then, both Carew and Juan Carmoy were being caught at a distinct disadvantage, and although we, like them, were quite ignorant of the measures that would be taken for their embarrassment, we had this advantage: we were complacently certain that our friends would be up and doing to get in a heavy

blow at them, whilst they so far were quite unaware that their movements were known.

Railways, as I have said before, were conspicuous in Sacaronduca by their absence; roads were remarkable for their vileness; and in fact transit, especially transit of troops with baggage, was everywhere tedious and slow. But it appeared that Carew was not the only man with energy. Within two hours of receiving the first of our wires, Briggs had got a couple of army corps in movement from either end of the country. They were to travel in light, marching order. A desperate strait requires heroic remedies, they were to forage as they went on, after the manner of the man they were hunting. By means of wellmounted scouts they kept always in touch with the telegraph line, and as our wires twinkled into Dolores, Briggs, who had taken up his quarters night and day in the receiving office, jerked out corresponding orders to his troops.

It was like a game of chess for Briggs, with a kingdom and Donna Delicia for the stake.

Speaking of Donna Delicia, or Lady Carew, as I should perhaps more correctly style her, you would probably like to know how she viewed this final struggle, which was to decide which of the two men was really to be her husband. But on that point I can give absolutely no information. The lady stayed during all these events at the palace of Donna Julia Carmoy in Los Angeles; living in nunnish retirement, and letting no word of her wishes be carried away by a living soul. That she was well posted in what was going on I cannot but believe. Since I have first observed her she has always had the knack of gathering information without apparent exertion, and she has also possessed in high degree the talent for entirely concealing her thoughts and plans.

The denouement was half worked out before Fluellen and I had any notion that Briggs had started to pull the strings. An overwhelming array of troops had marched into Carmoy's country from every side, and had crumpled him up completely. Some few had escaped, Don Juan Carmoy amongst them; but as a righting force they might be considered as nil. The few survivors, who owed their escape to the excellence of their mounts, made a junction with Carew just before he, too, got hemmed in, and I am bound to admit that the whole lot of them, Spanish or English, or whatever nationality they might be, fought with equal pluck and recklessness.

They were pinned beyond hope of escape. They first came within touch of the Presidential troops in a wide valley walled in by a couple of those inaccessible mountain ranges so peculiar to the country. Carew smelt the trap at once. He was no man to accept an engagement unnecessarily. He doubled like a hare, and made back as hard as he could race for the pass by which he had entered the valley. He found it occupied by three batteries of horse artillery, well posted, and a battalion of infantry to cover them. They gave them a shell at three thousand yards which bowled over two of his men. and he quite saw that his little force could be annihilated before he could ride down the guns. It was not a case of Balaclava over again, or he was quite the man to have risked it. He was face to face with a sheer impossibility, and he accepted the only alternative that was left. He and the men with him knew quite well that it would be Briggs's orders " to take no prisoners; " and that as there was no escape, they had got to die. But they naturally made up their minds to die as hard as possible.

They galloped back to the centre of the valley, over flat pasture land, with not an atom of cover. The ground was burnt bare with summer drought. There were no crops, no fences, no dykes; there was not so much as a stone to offer shelter from rifle-fire; and, of course, they had neither time nor tools to throw up entrenchments. They were less than a hundred and fifty, all told; the troops that were closing round them numbered all of fifteen thousand; and the one earthly ambition that was left to them was to kill as many of that force as they could manage before they themselves were wiped out.

Some sort of a rampart to fight behind was the first necessity, and so they cut the throats of their horses (to save precious cartridges) and dragged the carcasses into a rude square; and as the subsequent fight went on and their numbers thinned, they added to this wall the bodies of their fallen comrades.

Only one thing could save them from annihilation at the outset. As a natural move the guns were ordered up at once, but there was a broad morass at the further end of the valley, and in this every single piece stuck in spite of the frenzied efforts of the drivers to get their teams on solid land again. So from the point of view of the Presidential troops there were the alternatives of a long-distance rifle-fire which would be ineffective against men already in cover, or of a charge across the open, which would probably be so costly in human life during its first stages that the survivors would never charge home. And so for the while the little band of men behind the dead horses were left unmeddled with, whilst their enemies prepared more elaborate schemes for their destruction.

It was at this point in this game of life and death that Fluellen and I spurred our tired horses into the further pass behind the mountains. We came upon our own fellows suddenly round an angle of the defile, and were very nearly shot by them before we could explain exactly who we were. However, they gave us the great news, and a nip of fiery "aquardiente" to wash it down, and on we cantered with a couple of ragged troopers as escort. We exchanged greetings with the officers of the main guard in the pass, and pushed on into the valley. A broad belt of morass lay beyond, with the guns almost out of sight in black sludge, and the gun teams mired to the belly, and the drivers, gunners, and escort cursing and working like men half demented. They had given up trying to get the batteries across the morass, and were doing their best to scramble back on to dry land again, and even in this they did not seem very successful. However, it was clear they could any way be counted as out of action, and so neither Fluellen nor I stayed to bear a hand, but flogged and spurred our own horses through the swamp, and by dint of frantic exertion managed to get them out at the further side.

It was clear that both of our animals were pretty nearly foundered, though, perhaps, if anything, Fluellen's, which carried a stone less than mine, had got a little more left in it. The necessity for keeping together had ended. We had agreed to make first of all for the Headquarter Staff at the further side of the valley, and Fluellen quickly drew ahead. I could get no more than a walk out of my poor beast, whilst he managed to screw his up into some sort of a canter. And so, as I say, he pulled ahead of me. But I saw, to my surprise, that he was going out of the agreed-upon direction. He was making straight for the little knot of men behind the dead horses, and with a shiver I guessed that his intention was to have it out, once and for all, with Carmoy. I even sent a shout after him to come back, and he turned and waved his hand at me in farewell, and then rode on again. To prevent mistake he pulled out a white handkerchief and let that stream in the air as he rode.

Struggling on behind with my beaten horse, I saw every scrap of what followed, and the waiting soldiery saw it also. Fluellen rode up to within speaking distance of the square, and then dismounted. His animal stood with limply hanging head, a clear, small picture to me under the distant sunshine. Its rider, with the white handkerchief still fluttering, walked up to the square and apparently talked. He was a mile away, and, of course, I could hear no words; but my eyesight is good, and the day was clear, and, but for the absence of sound, I might have been looking at them close to through the wrong end of a telescope.

The men behind the wall of dead horses were sitting down eating and drinking. They had got a meal with them, and were making the most of it, with the deliberate foreknowledge that it was the last meal that any of them would eat on earth. There was not a doubt as to who Fluellen had gone to talk to; there was small enough doubt as to what was his business. But the man he was seeking preferred to finish his food before answering the challenge; and even after that he must needs roll a final cigarette; for when he stepped outside the fence of the dead horses, I could clearly see the blue smoke floating behind him. However, there was no more waiting then. They marched out together twenty yards away from the square; stood for a moment back to back; strode out with simultaneous steps twelve yards either way; then turned with quickness; then opened fire.

Each went down to the first shot, but each continued firing from the ground. How many shots they fired from that position I could not tell, as the smoke mixed things up; but presently the shooting ceased, and I saw Carmoy begin to crawl slowly and painfully towards his enemy. Fluellen half sat up and tried to crawl to closer quarters also, but without any effective result. It turned out afterwards he was shot through the backbone and was partly paralysed. However, his pistol hand was steady enough yet, and when the pair of them came almost to handgrips, he blew out Carmoy's brains quite as effectively as Carmoy did that service to him. And so that episode ended, and the world was poorer by two brave men and two strong haters.

But in the meanwhile, if Carew's brigands and myself were watching this duel, the Presidential troops were otherwise employed. Three regiments of them were advancing to the attack, and when they came within rifle shot they opened out into skirmishing order. It was a smart bid of parade work, and the fellows in the square were not unkind enough at first to spoil the show by shooting. Instead, some reckless scamp amongst them struck up the Eton Boat song, and the whole of them chimed in, trolling it out at the tops of their voices. They all seemed to know the words "Jolly boating weather," and all the rest of it and I know my eyes got wet as I listened. They were such fine chaps. It did seem such a blazing pity they could not have run straight. And now there was no help for it; the whole lot of them had just got to be shot, out of mischief's way.

However, theirs was going to be no tame executioner's finale. They coolly finished their song, and then applied cheek and shoulder to the riflebutt. They were all of them cool, careful shots, and they put in some pretty practice. The range was long, but they managed to cut up the advance considerably. The

attackers in the meanwhile were not idle. They had to fire at men ensconced behind a breastwork, but they fired for the cover the smoke gave them, and also to hearten themselves up. Spanish troops cannot storm a place under a heavy fire if they are not allowed to do a little shooting in return.

In this way, then, they advanced upon the square from two sides, alternately firing from the knee, and loading, and then rushing forward to fire again. The plain behind them was dotted with quiet dead and struggling wounded; and as they grew nearer the marksmanship of Carew's men grew more deadly. But since they were sending fifty bullets against the square for every one that was received out of it, they could not very well avoid now and then scoring a hit amongst the defenders.

But the desperate men who were selling their lives so dearly did not get flurried. They sent their shots with murderous deliberation, and twice by concentrating their fire they drove back whole blocks of the advancing line. Still, what could even desperate valour do against such overwhelming numbers? They might beat back a handful of the attackers, but in the meanwhile a regiment of others was steadily advancing.

The day was windless and the sky was hot. When the engagement began each man of the attackers travelled in his own little halo of smoke. But as the forces closed in, these smoke puffs merged into one large cloud of various degrees of filminess. The faintly acid taste of it crept out and made me cough where I stood, an idle spectator. It was very grateful to me that I was not officially obliged to take part in that day's action. From Carew's hands I had received many slights and injuries; we had still a personal duel to settle up; and I quite recognised that the welfare of Sacaronduca demanded his final quenching. But there was no getting over the fact that I liked the man; and as I watched while those ghastly preparations were being made to kill him I felt my heart applaud every plucky effort he made in his own defence, and I was hard put to it to keep my lips from following suit.

Time after time that little band of reckless men behind the dead horses made the attacking hordes roll back before the withering fire of their rifles. Time after time the Presidential troops were rallied by their officers, poured in a venomous fusilade, and with agitated little runs and crouching halts re-continued their advance.

The men in the square were falling fast now, and the fire of the survivors was slackening. Their ammunition was running out. With my glasses I could see them rummaging the cartridge cases on their dead and wounded. But the end was not come yet. With desperate valour the attacking troops charged right up to the barrier of the dead horses. A few of them scrambled in and were instantly knocked on the head. The rest were beaten off. Again they came up to the attack, and again they were furiously repulsed with knife and machete and clubbed carbine. And then with a last furious effort they swarmed over the barrier, and for a while the fight bubbled on an undistinguishable mele, and then stopped.

Not one of those men who had so bravely held the square remained upon his feet, and of the fallen all were dead. There had been an order of the day to "take no prisoners."

By Jove! No. There was one fellow at any rate very much alive. With my own eyes I saw him suddenly rise up off the ground, jump upon a mounted officer who was breathing himself and his horse after the skirmish, pluck him out of the saddle, and get there himself, and next moment, with his head upon the horse's mane and his heels hard jammed against its ribs, he was scampering away through the scattered troops whooping and yelling like a mad Indian. At first I had, somehow or other, got the idea that it was Carew. I knew how hard Carew was to kill. But that whoop and yell betrayed its owner. It was the young Irishman, a couple of years out from Harrow, whom I knew well and liked sincerely. I watched that mad gallop of his with a bumping heart. After the first surprise, shots went after him with a hailstorm. It seemed almost like murder. Was there no chivalry amongst these brutes?

But I think I wronged them. Fire they had to, but aim they did not. I could see the men laughing as they pressed home their triggers, and the lead squalls whistled harmlessly past the galloping horse's flanks.

The two passes from the valley were guarded still, and the young fellow wisely did not tackle either of them. He made for the rocky wall at the side, left his horse, and with a final yell of derision, disappeared. We saw no more of him, and I may say we did not send to look; but I heard quite recently that he escaped, came home again, steadied down, and is at the present moment of writing High Sheriff of his county and a likely candidate for the next Parliamentary election.

The scene outside that square of dead horses was too terrible to be described

here, and is hateful even to remember. But with my own eyes I saw there the author of all the mischief lying dead with a dozen wounds on him, and with a shock I realised that Donna Delicia, though still Lady Carew, was again a widow, and that the way was once more clear to Briggs's life ambition.

But would she marry him after all that had passed? Well, that had got to be seen.

CHAPTER XXII

FLOREAT SACARONDUCA

AT this point the history of Sacaronduca, as far as I am concerned, must be left for the present. To put the matter in blunt words, my connection with the country was severed very shortly afterwards.

I do not wish to pose as that rather absurd thing, an injured man, but I cannot help feeling aggrieved that my services were not more adequately rewarded. The truth was, Briggs never forgave me for letting Carew slip out of Dolores in the first instance. He quite admitted my excuses, but said it was his custom to reward actual services only. I pointed out that the manner in which Fluellen and I had followed up Carew and kept him posted by wire, had enabled him to crush the man finally, and so extinguished the last opposition to his Government. In a way he admitted this. And so he took me back again into the Service. He could not reinstate me as secretary, he said, for several reasons, one being that the post was already adequately filled up. But he gave me temporarily a berth in the Customs, which I took for the time, hoping that it would soon turn into something better. But it does not take a man very long to find when he is permanently shelved, and at the end of a year, as I saw there was going to be no further promotion, I sent in my papers and cut the country for good and always.

But still I shall be the last to hold that Briggs is bungling over the larger details of his task. As everyone who reads the papers must know, the Sacaronducan boom started almost immediately after Briggs got settled in the Presidential chair. Holsteins financed the country with no niggard allowances; and after Donna Delicia had visited London, and had a few further interviews with that Baron Holstein who had the tenderness for her, the sums his firm sent to Sacaronduca were still more liberal. The country's roads were mended and made suitable for wheeled traffic, railways began to sprout in half a dozen directions, mines were exploited, and the agricultural possibilities of the country developed to an amazing degree. Imports were practically free of duty, but a firm restriction was put upon immigration. As Briggs had said in his fore word, he did not choose to handicap his State by making it a dump for the pauper refuse of Europe. There were lazy men and unskilled labour already abundant within its boundaries. And so the Custom Houses refused to admit the weakly, the

decrepit, or the unskilled artisan.

There was a furious row over this "inhumanity," as it was termed by American and European press, and by various Governments "representations were made." But President Briggs stuck to his guns. He wanted a strong State and a happy State and a prosperous State, and he believed that his own method was best for obtaining this ideal.

The country, as I say, boomed. There was known to be a strong Government at its head; there were no exasperating legal restrictions to prevent a sane, clean-minded man doing practically as he willed. As a consequence the best type of immigrants trooped over in shoals. New steamer lines cropped up almost every week. Commerce worked double tides. Both exports and imports first doubled and then trebled, and then quadrupled, even before I had left the country. Occasionally a man misbehaved himself, and was shot as a public nuisance. But for the most part the people of Sacaronduca are not now of the sort to give trouble. They want to live their lives, and get on with their affairs, and extract as much enjoyment out of both as possible. The Government is firm and equable, and handled entirely for their benefit by a Dictator who is not self-seeking; and they are quite content to let him have his own way, and not to try the impossible by endeavouring to turn or upset him.

Yes, General Briggs is beyond doubt quite the most absolute head of any State at present existing in the civilised world. But he is not above taking advice. He sees a man with capacity, and he forthwith makes him (for a term at any rate) one of his Privy Advisers. I do not say that he picks the best men: as I have already hinted, there was at least one man of his former associates whom he pointedly passed over; but, then, I do not wish to state that General Briggs is without his faults.

However, there is no doubt that the man is intensely wrapped up in Donna Delicia, and the part I took, involuntary though it might be, in bringing about her marriage to Carew must always have made my presence jar upon him. But for that marriage and always supposing there was any other way of getting the lady out of Maxillo's clutches she would by their agreement have become his wife so soon as he became firmly settled in the Presidency. As it was, the moment of her widowhood was the first moment of his assured power, so the situation was a trifle awkward. He still wished to marry her at once; but this she said was out of reason. He pointed out that she had over-ridden conventionalities before. She

suggested that the circumstances then were different. She admitted that her marriage with Carew was nothing more than nominal, but professed a regard for him which I believe was sincere. At any rate, she insisted on a widowhood of at least two years before she again changed her state.

All this time she had been buzzing about the world quite in her own way, now in Dolores, now in Paris, next week in Cairo, and a fortnight later coming back for the London season. She certainly does a good deal of work for Sacaronduca, and it may be that the duties of State drag her to all these places. But at the same time she very obviously manages to enjoy herself thoroughly.

At the present moment of writing Delicia is still (as I see by this morning's paper in the announcement of Holsteins' ball) Lady Carew: though by the time that this goes to press she may very well have married Briggs, or again, on the other hand, she may still be wearing her old name. Personally, I know quite enough of her not to undertake the prediction of any of her movements. And at the same time, although I know that she very much admires both Briggs and his works, I cannot forget that she has a very tender regard for poor old Billy Carew.

However, latterly she has found a little distraction by again indulging in her match-making propensities. She had Donna Julia Carmoy left on her hands, and found that sprightly young person rather mopy and dejected, and as a consequence married her to Davis both to provide for the lady's future, and to be rid of her present society. It turned out that little Coffin also had ambitions in this direction which Delicia (having made up her mind) of course over-rode; and so Donna Julia is now Mrs. Davis, and Coffin is big game shooting in Central Africa, and Sacaronduca has lost a very smart cavalry officer.

POST SCRIPTUM.

I have kept this open till the last moment before going to press. Delicia has not yet married President Briggs. If she does you will see the announcement in the papers. The Archbishop of Dolores will perform the ceremony.