THE LOST SHIP MERCEDES.

BY ELIZABETH W. CHAMPNEY.

My friend Andrew Gridley is a most matter-of-fact man of business and a confirmed old bachelor.

Seated one day in his office, my eye ran over the rows of pigeon-holes filled with documents tied in orderly packets, and endorsed in his cramped, precise hand, and asked carelessly, "Is there the slightest trace of romance, of the pathos or passion in human hearts, in those dry husks of papers; or are they all mere legal technicalities, pertaining to business and moneys—bills and receipts, bonds and conveyances, title deeds and mortgages, and all that sort of thing?"

A merry twinkle gleamed in the old gentleman's eye. "Money and business have to do with a good deal of the passion and romance of most lives. There are certain wills stowed away in that japanned tin box that have occasioned more tragedy to the square inch, and made and broken more matches, than any batch of love-letters which I fancy you can muster. But here are three letters in a lady's hand which created something of a sensation in business circles in their day, and at the same time gave my heart a wrench from which it has never quite recovered."

Delighted to find my old friend in such a communicative mood, I listened eagerly to a story which I have set down as accurately as possible from memory:

"Ze winter of 185— I was traveling and happened to spend a few days city of Manzanillo. As I was not an Spanish, I put myself in the hands ze of a hackman, who took me to all directions, and amused me with commentary in broken English on ew.

's,' he would say, 'is ze sugar estate at Don Raphael de Arroyo y Sosa, ends himself for miles and miles in direction. Zess is ze country house same Don Raphael, who is constructed Moorish style, wiz ze patio, ze arches horseshoe, and fountain, ze orange trees, statues inside of him. Ah! Santiago! Raphael! Santisima! Ze senorita is

"The man's absurd English was forgotten in that swift vision of beauty. A childlike face of rare sweetness, with grave wondering eyes, this was all, but it turned me from a sober man of business to a fool. I became possessed of an insane desire to see the beautiful grounds of Don Raphael's villa, and gave my coachman a round sum for securing me this privilege. But the avenue of palms, the tropical fruits and flowers, were not sufficient to gratify my curiosity. I desired also to see what my guide always spoke of as 'ze incomparable interior of Don Raphael.' This, however, was not granted me. My guide, I was very sure, understood my feelings and sympathized with me, but he was powerless to aid me. Even the pertinacity of a book agent would scarcely have availed to pierce the bulwarks with which Don Raphael surrounded himself and his daughter. I walked once more in the grounds, but did not meet the senorita. I found a bit of fancy-work in an arbor, and was tempted to carry it away, leaving, by way of exchange, a volume of Longfellow's poems which happened to be in my pocket, with my name inscribed on the fly-leaf. Then I strolled once more toward the house, and returned to the carriage out of humor at my ill success.

"My coachman greeted me with a smile. 'One of ze domestic did bring me a small book of blue,' he said, 'conceiving it to have been left by mischance by ze senor.'

"'Then give it to me,' I exclaimed, shortly.

"But my inscrutable man gave me an expression of great surprise. 'Ze little book of blue was zen indeed belong to ze senor! Ah, Santiago! what have I done! I did assure to ze domestic zat it must be forgotten of ze senorita, and did him cause to take it to ze house.'

"This was my last effort. After this, realizing that I was spending my time to no purpose, I gathered up sufficient strength of mind to tear myself away without a second glance at the beautiful senorita. As I was paying my hack fare at the steamboat landing my coachman caught my arm excitedly.

"'Ze senor is in good fortune,' he whispered. 'Don Raphael has taken passage upon ze boat for Havana. It is he wiz ze great

"'Is he long coat.'

"'Ah I what?' I asked.

not enough to make ze senor have? Is it ze acquaintance of ze father?'

"I turned aside with an impatient expression of my contempt for Don Raphael; but for all that I found myself examining the stranger with furtive interest, and when later in the day he made the first advances toward acquaintanceship, I did not spurn them. I found him well-informed and talkative. He chatted principally about his own business, but asked a hundred questions relative to the United States.

"'I have often thought,' he con[illegible] me before we parted, 'of establishing [illegible] to tions with some commission merchants in New York, but have hesited because I [illegible] not known whom to trust.'

"He spoke in more broken English than I care to reproduce—it was even worse than the efforts of my coachman—and further explained that he wrote no language but Spanish; but incoherent as were his sentences, he conveyed his meaning distinctly, and appeared to understand me perfectly. As he explained the vast interests which he hoped some day to confide to some trustworthy New York consignee, I saw the importance of securing so wealthy a patron to our own house, and worked my cards so well that before the short voyage was over he had promised to allow us to represent him. I was mentally considering the necessity of engaging a clerk who could read and write Spanish, when Don Raphael explained that his part of the correspondence would be conducted by his daughter, who had studied English in a convent.

"'It is well,' he added, 'that she should know something of business, as she is my only heiress.'

"If I had been eager to act as Don Raphael's agent before, I was quite wild now. I could scarcely believe my good fortune. Here I had labored for days without success, simply for a glimpse, and now permission to correspond with her had fallen as it were from the skies. It mattered not that our letters were to have to do with rum, sugar and molasses, I was already cudgeling my brains for means of hoodwinking the old Don, and introducing into them other sweets of a contraband nature. How anxiously, how impatiently, I waited the first advices from the consignor, I need not explain.

"At length there came to me the first of these three perfumed notes, written, as you see, on rose-colored paper, in a delicate curving hand. Read, if you will, and tell me what your woman's insight makes of such a letter:

"Manzanillo,

"De esta su casa Plantacion Perequito,

"May——.

"MOST APPRECIABLE SIR,—I write to the request of my father concerning some business he to have spoken to you on the boat to Havana, some time in the winter, if you did not forget. The business is this: He have one large boat of sail, the Mercedes, which is now at Manzanillo about to load herself of rum and sugar, when she shall sail to Oporto. This boat of sail (my father thinks you would call it a cleeper ship) we would insure with the cargo in some of the North American companies, and we send you the certificate of the construction, which shall be of the first class, built of the best material, and sail by a captain the reliableness of whom is known to every one in Cuba. I send also the bill of lading and the ship's manifest, by which you will see the value of the cargo, which is very great and precious, consigned to one of the most honorable firms in Oporto, for the manufacture of pure old port wine for English use, and the small per cent. of insurance desired. Still my father is of opinion that it to be better to insure in several companies, but this you will understand better than us. Will you kindly tell him the amount you do require of policy, and he will send to you by draft, but will you out of kindness lose no time in the matter.

"And now of myself I have also some business. I have some small poems of Senor Longfellow, for which I believe myself to be indebted to you, and I desire to express to you my gratefulness for this gift. I have find these poems to possess a charm greater as any of our Spanish writers, even to surpass the Cantos del Trovador. It is as if a cool wind did blow from your Northern land, so sweet, so refreshing, so pure I find them. I think I find most to my own heart the story of the Signorita Evangeline. Indeed, I found my eyes to be wet many times in reading that sad story. Think you, my friend, that it is true? And will you inquire of this of Senor Longfellow? And so, senor, you will place the daughter under obligation as well as the father. Deign, senor, to receive our most distinguished contideration.

"S. S. S. Q. S. M. B.,

"MARIA INCARNACION ARROYA Y SOSA."

"I was at first deeply puzzled," said Mr. Gridley, "as to the meaning of these mysterious initials. When informed by those conversant with Spanish epistolary etiquette, that they signified that the lady kissed my hands as my very humble servitor, and that she had dated the letter from my house, thereby placing Plantacion Perequito at my service, I was not cruelly deceived, for I knew how to value such Southern protestations, but the meaningless words seemed, nevertheless, to my ardent wishes gilded with the light of prophecy. I smiled at the naivete which presupposed my intimacy with the distinguished poet, and the innocence which found no absurdity in her father's rum and sugar being destined for the manufacture of pure old port; but the letter pleased more than it amused me. The papers accompanying it were all in good form, and I immediately effected the insurance desired to the amount of $42,000 in three companies, located respectively in Baltimore, Philadelphia and Boston. I advanced the premium, and sent the papers by return steamer. I was bankrupt in affection now, and money seemed a very little thing. With the papers I sent a volume of Tennyson, heavily marking the 'Swallow's Song':

"'O, tell her, Swallow, thou that knowest each,
That bright and fierce and fickle is the South,
And dark and true and tender is the North.'

"Incarnacion's answer, which came immediately, seemed to show that my trust had been rightly bestowed, for this, the second of the pink letters, contained a draft for the money advanced, with a handsome bonus as commission.

"The letter, you see, addresses me as 'Querido Don Andrew,' which is certainly better than 'Appreciable Sir.' But, skipping the business part, begin here, and read for yourself:

"Since I have read these poems of Senor Longfellow I feel that I can say of him almost justly in his own words,

"'Ah! my brother in the North Land,
In the land of the White Rabbit,
You have stolen away the maiden
With your stories of the North Land.'

"I consume myself with curiosity and longing to visit this wonderful North Land. Figure to yourself, my friend, I have never seen the snow! That must be a wonderful sight, the ground all white, white, the air full of flying white feathers like the down of swans, and the ice, the skaters! I think I should never induce myself to step upon it. Also your woods in autumn—the trees all red and yellow, like our camellias and jasmine—that must indeed be gloriful. I think I shall persuade my father to give me a winter in North America. If I do indeed arrive at success in persuading him, I fear we shall be a great trouble of mind to you, for we are as ignorant as babies of the custom of the North.

"And so, my friend, I kiss your hand.

"INCARNACION."

"A month passed away, and just as I was becoming uncontrollably impatient to hear from my fair correspondent, I received this newspaper from Bermuda. Only this short paragraph has to do with my story, but you can understand what a shock I received on reading it:

"'There arrived yesterday at Southampton two long-boats from the Cuban clipper ship Mercedes, which foundered in a gale not far from the island a few days previous, containing the officers and crew, with the ship's owner, Don Raphael Arroya y Sosa, with his daughter, who were the only passengers. The ship was bound for Oporto, and was heavily freighted. The cause of the disaster is unknown, though it is captain's opinion that they must have run into a submerged wreck, which stove so an opening in the ship's bottom that she filled almost instantly. Senorita de Arroya y Sosa was, through mistake, at each upon the vessel, the occupants of the other opposing her to have left in the boat before appeared on deck a few moments crew left wreck lurched under, and, the sucked out to row near, for fear of being Raphael, with the sinking ship, Don vessel, called risk of his life, swam to the got her safely, daughter to jump, and

"Several days to the boat.'

rose leaves from, and the last of my

"Tears came Incacion came to me. the dear child have as I read of what

"Querido Amigo, already have been wrote, 'you shall the dreadful thing by the periodico It was a sudden happen to us. to Oporto on our owners to sail now deeply regret. which he do can I express to you what friend, how the waves went over my when the instant which I precipitated. Almost the water the ship sank, myself in drawn down, down, as I thought Will you believe to me, at death. supreme I thought of you? Almost it seem to me long after, I felt lifted from the water, I was in so dream that I thought it was not but you who had rescue me. coming to life was far worse as dying for three days we rowed on the open being without food, and with very water, such having been the haste of embarkation. The captain, however, fortunately saved the log-book, which I send you, with his protest before a magistrate, and other papers, as you may need them in securing to us the insurance, which, with our plantation, is, I fear, the small remnant of our fortunes. My father endured so much privation that he is now quite ill. I fear that the worry for the loss of his properties has much to do with it, but I trust that the arrival of the insurance will be to him a good medicine. I know, my friend, that your friendship for us will not suffer now that we have lost so much, and I hope to see you so soon as my father is able to travel, for he has consented that we shall come to New York for the winter. You may thus judge how strong is my desire to see your Land of White Rabbit, since after such experience of the ocean I am willing again to adventure myself upon it. And so, amigo, I kiss your hands and rest INCARNACION.'

"The papers which accompanied this letter were all regular. Each day was described in the log-book, even to the appearance of the sky; and the invoices, with custom house seals attached, were so convincing, the captain's protest—or account of the shipwreck under oath—so straightforward and manly, that the insurance companies, at my earnest representations, paid the losses on presentation, without waiting for the time usually demanded. I was very anxious to go on with the money myself, and it was particularly unfortunate that I was not able to do so; but there were other important business matters which required my attention for several days, and I did not like to keep my patrons waiting. I accordingly sent the insurance money per draft, and accompanied it by a formal offer of my heart and hand, assuring Incarnacion that I would follow the letter at the earliest possible moment. The dear girl had read me rightly. The change in their fortunes was of no consequence to me. What though the good steamer and the product of the plantation for the past five years had gone to the bottom of the ocean? Incarnacion was more to me than much sugar, and her value was not to be estimated in many hogsheads of rum. Besides the sum of $42,000, the amount of insurance on the hull and cargo of the vessel, with the beautiful plantation at Manzanillo, would be surely enough to keep a man of modest desires, like myself, hitherto accustomed to a salary of $1,200 per annum, from groveling poverty. Still, let me do myself justice. I was not mercenary at this time. I had become very boyishly, but very genuinely infatuated by the swift glance which I had caught of Incarnacion's lovely face in Cuba. I would have outlived it probably; and had this been all, could have said now, with Praed,

"'Our love was like the snowflakes,
Which melt before they pass,
Or the bubble on the wine-cup
Before you tip the glass.'

"But these letters had been a revelation of her character. Her sweet innocence appealed to every chivalric feeling of my nature, and changed what might have proved only a passing fancy to a strong man's love. As soon as I could arrange my affairs I took passage in a swift-sailing schooner for Bermuda. Arrived at Southampton, I hurried to the hotel from which the last letter had been dated, only to find that the clerk knew nothing of Don Raphael or his daughter, no such names appearing on the registrar. Somewhat puzzed I resorted to the postoffice. Yes, there the postmaster remembered having received my letter addressed to the Don. Was it a long, blue, linen-lined envelope, bearing such and such a business advertisement? Certainly, the letter had come, and had been delivered to a Cuban gentleman, who had evidently expected it with much anxiety, as he had inquired for it three times before its arrival. It was reassuring to know that this valuable letter had not miscarried. But where was Don Raphael? I began to suspect that he did not look with favor upon my pretensions, and had whisked Incarnacion away, covering up their tracks by bribing the hotel clerk to erase every trace of their stay. It occurred to me to ask the postmaster if he knew of the whereabouts of the captain of the Mercedes.

"'Excuse me, sir, but I am positive that no vessel of that name has arrived in our port this season.'

"'Certainly not. I mean the crew that were cast away a month since, and came in in row-boats.'

"The postmaster's face evinced mild surprise. Luckily I had the newspaper in my pocket which described the event. He read it with blank astonishment.

"'It is very strange,' he commented. 'I take this paper, but I do not remember to have read of this shipwreck.'

"'I will go to the editor,' I decided. 'He will know all about it.'

"But the editor was more bewildered than the postmaster. He turned to a file of his periodical, and found the one corresponding to mine. It was identical in every respect, except that where mine recorded the shipwreck of the Mercedes, his contained some remarks on Spanish politics.

"'Are we all bewitched?' I exclaimed, as the editor continued to stare at the two papers.

"'Let me think,' he replied at last. 'You have been the victim of a joke or a swindle. Was there any money at issue in this affair?'

"'I should think so,' I groaned; 'but I don't understand. What do you make of it?'

"'This paper,' he replied, 'was printed in our office from our type. Apparently one of our type-setters set up this account, and printed this copy after our regular issue was completed. We do things on a small scale here; very often there is only one man in the composing-room. I regret to say that it could have been done very easily.'

"'Then the rogue is probably still with us.'

"'Perhaps so. Ah, no! I am positive he must have been a journeyman printer who whom we employed only a few weeks, left us a fortnight since. All our compositors are old and trusted employés.'

"And I came like one walking in a trance. I began to say that there was no shipwreck? No ship's boats arrived here?'

"'Not to my knowledge, sir.'

"'But I have also the captain's manifest.'

"'Then I advise you to see the magistrate.'

"I did so, and that worthy functionary declared the paper a forgery. Distracted with indignation and blighted affection, I took passage at once to Manzanillo, where I prosecuted a similar series of inquiries with a like result. The invoices were unknown at the custom house. The certificate of instruction was a forgery, no such sailing vessel as the Mercedes having ever been heard of at Manzanillo, or known by Lloyd to have even existed. I felt myself authorized to demand the arrest of Don Raphael by the local authorities. I found the officials ready to aid me, but was met by another surprise. The plantation, which I had been informed by my coachman was the property of this wealthy planter, had been for many years owned and occupied by a fat and wealthy widow of the name of Barillo. Don Raphael himself was a myth, a fraud, the creation of the fertile brain of my coachman, to whom, with the associate whom he pointed out to me on the steamer, I now traced the entire plot. This knowledge came too late to be of any use, for the enterprising rascals had disappeared from Manzanillo, and were never found, though the cleverest detectives were placed upon their track by the outraged insurance companies.

"And Incarnacion—the guileless girl—she, too, was a myth. I never ascertained the name of the beauty whom I met that day as I drove in the suburbs of Manzanillo. Whoever she was, she had nothing to do with the letters which won my heart. I keep them still, though they represent only a part of the machinations of a shrewd sharper. Sometimes by a great effort of the will or the imagination, I almost forget the denouement, and these faded rose leaves seem to exhale the old perfume, and rouse the old sweet delirium in my withered heart."—[Harper's Bazar.

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