POOR DOCUMENT

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THE FATE OF A CROWN

A STORY OF LOVE, INTRIGUE AND ADVENTURE

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SYNOPSIS

Robert Harcliffe, fresh from college and a member of a firm in New Orleans, of which his Uncle Nelson is the head, is sent by his uncle to Brazil to act as private secretary and confidential companion to Dom Miguel de Pintra, head of the revolutionary movement against Dom Pedro. Dom Miguel had been a good customer of the Harcliffes, and he and the elder member of the firm were fast friends. Liking the prospect of adventure, Robert consented to go.

On the voyage he encountered Valcour, a spy sent by the Emperor of Brazil, who knew that the American secretary was expected. This spy had decided that Robert was the person for whom he was looking and had planned to make way with him.

But the American cleverly threw him off the scent and reached Rio in safety. There he was, however, arrested, but on the way to the police headquarters his captor was murdered by Police Sergeant Marco, a revolutionist, and he was allowed to escape, finally reaching his destination through the assistance of many devotees to the cause. At the beautiful home of Dom Miguel he learned more of the revolutionary movement. He met the Senhorita Lesba Paola, his host's niece; her brother Francisco—a man who puzzled him greatly—and Dom Miguel's daughter, Izabel de Mar.

The next morning he had an unpleasant experience with Madam Izabel, who had been acting as Dom Miguel's secretary, but was relieved by him. The revolutionists did not trust her. Dom Miguel revealed to him the secret of a hidden vault where all the party's papers and treasure were hidden. While they were entering the vault with lights extinguished Madam Izabel suddenly appeared, struck a light and tried to discover how the lock was worked. The father seized her and, denouncing her as a spy, sent her from the room.

Meanwhile Harcliffe had been getting deeper in love with Lesba, and more deeply mystified by her brother, who was chief of Dom Pedro's police.

One night Dom Miguel aroused his secretary with the startling statement that Izabel had stolen the ring which was the key to the treasure vault. They captured her as she came from the vault with a bundle of papers. When Dom Miguel went to return them, she dashed a lamp into Harcliffe's face locked her father in the vault and fled toward Rio. The secretary followed, but she eluded him, and caught a train at a distant station.

On the train she was stabbed to the heart, and the finger bearing the ring was severed from the hand. Harcliffe followed by the next train and was promptly "arrested" by revolutionary sympathizers. After exciting experiences Harliffe made his way back to Dom Miguel's residence, only to find the Emperor and a group of his friends there. In the shrubbery he found a man's body with the ring finger severed. Entering the house he was promptly made a prisoner.

CHAPTER XX.—(Contined.)

These men were not uniformed, and their appearance was anything but military; nevertheless there was a look upon their stern faces that warned me they were in deadly earnest and not to be trifled with.

As my intercourse with the republicans had been confined entirely to a few of their leaders, I found no familiar face among these people; so I remained impassive while my captor pushed me past the guards to a small doorway placed near a protecting angle of the building.

"Enter!" said he.

I obeyed, and the next moment stood before a group of men who were evidently the officers or leaders of the little band of armed patriots I had seen without.

"Ah!" said one, in a deep bass voice, "it is Senhor Harcliffe, the secretary to Dom Miguel."

I have before mentioned the fact that whenever the conspirators had visited de Pintra they remained securely masked, so that their features were, with a few exceptions, unknown to me. But the voices were familiar enough, and the man who had brought me here had mentioned Sanchez Bastro's name; so I had little difficulty in guessing the identity of the personage who now addressed me.

"Why are you here, senhor?" he inquired, with evident anxiety; "and do you bring us news of the uprising?"

"I know nothing of the uprising except that your man here," and I turned to my guide, "tells me there is war in the land, and that the Revolution is proclaimed."

"Yes," returned Bastro, with a grave nod.

"Then," I continued, "I advise you to lay down your arms at once and return to your homes before you encounter arrest and imprisonment."

The leaders cast upon one another uneasy looks, and Bastro drew a small paper from his breast and handed it to me. I recognized it as one of the leaves from his note-book which Paola had attached to the carrier-pigeon, and upon it were scrawled these words, "Arise and strike!"

It was the signal long since agreed upon to start the Revolution.

With a laugh I handed back the paper.

"It is from Francisco Paola, the traitor," I said.

"Traitor!" they echoed, in an astonished chorus.

"Listen, gentlemen; it is evident you are ignorant of the events of the last two days." And in as few words as possible I related the occurrences at de Pintra's mansion, laying stress upon the arrest of Piexoto, the perfidy of the Minister of Police, and the death of Treverot.

They were not so deeply impressed as I had expected. The discovery of the empty vault had aroused no interest whatever, and they listened quietly and without comment to my story of Paola's betrayal of his fellow-conspirators to the Emperor.

But when I mentioned Treverot's death Bastro chose to smile, and indicating a tall gentleman standing at his left, he said:

"Permit me to introduce to you Senhor Treverot. He will tell you that he still lives."

"Then Paola lied?" I exclaimed, somewhat chagrined.

Bastro shrugged his shoulders.

"We have confidence in the Minister of Police," said he, calmly. "There is no doubt but General Fonseca, at Rio, has before now gained control of the capital, and that the Revolution is successfully established. We shall know everything very soon, for my men have gone to the nearest telegraph station for news. Meantime, to guard against any emergency, our patriots are being armed in readiness for combat, and, in Matto Grosso at least, the royalists are powerless to oppose us."

"But the funds—the records! What will happen if the Emperor seizes them?" I asked.

"The Emperor will not seize them," returned Bastro, unmoved. "The contents of the vault are in safe-keeping."

Before I could question him further a man sprang through the doorway.

"The wires from Rio are cut in every direction," said he, in an agitated voice. "A band of the Uruguayan guards, under de Souza and Valcour, is galloping over the country to arrest every patriot they can find, and our people are hiding themselves in terror."

Consternation spread over the features of the little band which a moment before had deemed itself so secure and powerful. Bastro turned to pace the earthen floor with anxious strides, while the others watched him silently.

"What of Francisco Paola?" suddenly asked the leader.

"Why, senhor, he seems to have disappeared," replied the scout, with hesitation.

"Disappeared! And why?"

"Perhaps I can answer that question, Senhor Bastro," said a voice behind us, and turing my head I saw my friend Pedro, the station-master at Cuyaba, standing within the doorway.

"Enter, Pedro," commanded the leader. "What news do you bring, and why have you abandoned your post?"

"The wires are down," said the station-master, "and no train is allowed to leave Rio since the Emperor reached there at midnight."

"Then you know nothing of what has transpired at the capital?" asked Bastro.

"Nothing, senhor. It was yesterday morning when the Emperor's party met the train at Cuyaba, and I handed him a telegram from de Lima, the Minister of State. It read in this way: 'General Fonseca and his army have revolted and seized the palace, the citadel, and all public buildings. I have called upon every loyal Brazilian to rally to the support of the Empire. Return at once. Arrest the traitors Francisco Paola and his sister. Situation critical.'"

"Ah!" cried Bastro, drawing a deep breath, "and what said the Emperor to that message?"

"He spoke with his counselors, and wired this brief reply to de Lima, 'I am coming.' Also he sent a soldier back to de Pintra's mansion with orders to arrest Francisco and Lesba Paola. Then he boarded the train and instructed the conductor to proceed to Rio with all possible haste. And that is all I know, senhor, save that I called up Rio last evening and learned that Fonseca was still in control of the city. At midnight the wires were cut and nothing further can be learned. Therefore I came to join you, and if there is a chance to fight for the Cause I beg that you will accept my services."

Bastro paused in his walk to press the honest fellow's hand; then he resumed his thoughtful pacing.

The others whispered among themselves, and one said:

"Why need we despair, Sanchez Bastro? Will not Fonseca, once in control, suceed in holding the city?"

"Surely!" exclaimed the leader. "It is not for him that I fear, but for ourselves. If the Uruguayans are on our trail we must disperse our men and scatter over the country, for the spy Valcour knows, I am sure, of this rendezvous."

"But they are not hunting you, senhor," protested Pedro, "but rather Paola and his sister, who have managed to escape from de Pintra's house."

"Nevertheless, the Uruguayans are liable to be here at any moment," returned Bastro, "and there is nothing to be gained by facing that devil, de Souza."

He then called his men together in the clearing, explained to them the situation, and ordered them to scatter and to secrete themselves in the edges of the forests and pick off the Uruguayans with their rifles whenever occasion offered.

"If anything of importance transpires," he added, "report to me at once at my house."

Without a word of protest his commands were obeyed. The leaders mounted their horses and rode away through the numerous forest paths that led into the clearing.

The men also saluted and disappeared among the trees, and presently only Bastro, Pedro, and myself stood in the open space. "Come with me, Senhor Harcliffe," said the leader; "I shall be glad to have you join me at breakfast. You may follow us, Pedro."

Then he strode to the edge of the clearing, pressed aside some bushes, and stepped into a secret path that led through the densest portion of the tangled forest. I followed, and Pedro brought up the rear.

For some twenty minutes Bastro guided us along the path, which might well have been impassible to a novice, until finally we emerged from the forest to find the open country before us, and a small, cosy-looking dwelling facing us from the opposite side of a well-defined roadway.

Bastro led us to a side door, which he threw open, and then stepped back with a courteous gesture.

"Enter, gentlemen," said he; "you are welcome to my humble home."

I crossed the threshold and came to an abrupt stop. Something seemed to clutch my heart with a grip of iron; my limbs trembled involuntarily, and my eyes grew set and staring.

For, standing before me, with composed look and a smile upon his dark face, was the living form of my lamented friend Miguel de Pintra!

CHAPTER XXI.

One Mystery Solved.

"Compose yourself, my dear Robert," said Dom Miguel, pressing my hands in both his own. "It is no ghost you see, for—thanks be to God!—I am still alive."

I had no words to answer him. In all my speculations as to the result of Madam Izabel's terrible deed, the fate of the records and the mysterious opening of the vault without its key, I never had conceived the idea that Dom Miguel might have escaped his doom. And to find him here, not only alive, but apparently in good health and still busy with the affairs of the Revolution, conveyed so vivid a shock to my nerves that I could but dumbly stare into my old friend's kind eyes and try to imagine that I beheld a reality and not the vision of a disordered brain.

Bastro assisted me by laughing loudly and giving me a hearty slap across the shoulders.

"Wake up, Senhor Harcliffe!" said he; "and hereafter have more faith in Providence and the luck that follows in the wake of true patriotism. We could ill afford to lose our chief at this juncture."

"But how did it happen?" I gasped, still filled with wonder. "What earthly power could have opened that awful vault when its key was miles and miles away?"

"The earthly power was wielded by a very ordinary little woman," said Dom Miguel, with his old gentle smile. "When you rode away from the house on that terrible morning Lesba came and unlocked my prison, setting me free."

"But how?" I demanded, still blindly groping for the truth.

"By means of a duplicate key that she had constantly carried in her bosom."

I drew a long breath.

"Did you know of this key, sir?" I asked, after a pause, which my companions courteously forbore to interrupt.

"I did not even suspect its existence," replied Dom Miguel. "But it seems that Francisco Pola, with his usual thoughtfulness, took an impression in wax of my ring, without my knowledge, and had an exact duplicate prepared. I think he foresaw that an emergency might arise when another key might be required; but it would not do to let any one know of his action, for the mere knowledge that such a duplicate existed would render us all suspicious and uneasy. So he kept the matter secret even from me, and gave the ring into the keeping of his sister, who was his only confidante, and whom he had requested me to accept as an inmate of my household, under the plea that I am her legal guardian. This was done in order to have her always at hand in case the interests of the conspiracy demanded immediate use of the duplicate key. That Francisco trusted her more fully than he has any other living person is obvious; and that she was worthy of such trust the girl has fully proved."

"Then you were released at once?" I asked; "and you suffered little from your confinement?"

"My anguish was more mental than of a bodily nature," Dom Miguel answered, sadly; "but I was free to meet Paola when he arrived at my house, and to assist him and Lesba in removing the contents of the vault to a safer place."

a duplicate key, did the Minister send me

"But why, knowing that his sister held in chase of the ring Madam Isabel had stolen?" I demanded.

"Because it was neccessary to keep the matter from the Emperor until the records had been removed," explained de Pintra. "Indeed, Francisco was on his way to us that morning to insist upon our abandoning the vault, after having given us warning, as you will remember, the night before, that the clever hiding-place of our treasure and papers was no longer a secret."

"I remember that he himself revealed the secret to the Emperor," I remarked, dryly.

"And acted wisely in doing so, I have no doubt," retorted Bastro, who still stood beside us. "But come, gentlemen, breakfast must be ready, and I have a vigorous appetite. "Be good enough to join me."

He led the way to an inner room, and de Pintra and I followed, his arm in mine.

It seemed to me, now that I regarded him more attentively, that my old friend was less erect than formerly, that there were new and deep furrows upon his gentle face, and that his eyes had grown dim and sunken. But that the old, dauntless spirit remained I never doubted.

As we entered the breakfast-room I saw a form standing at the window—the form of a little man clothed neatly in black. He turned to greet us with pale, expressionless features and drooping eyelids.

It was Captain Mazanovitch.

"Good morning, Senhor Harcliffe," he said, in his soft voice; and I wondered how he had recognized me without seeming to open his eyes. "And what news does our noble Captain Bastro bring of the Revolution?" he continued, with a slight note of interest in his voice that betrayed his eagerness.

While we breakfasted Bastro related the events of the morning, and told how the news he had received of the activity of the Uruguayan guards, in connection with the impossibility of learning from Rio what Fonseca had accomplished, had induced him to disband his men.

"But can you again assemble them, if you should wish to?" inquired Dom Miguel.

"Easily," answered our host; but he did not explain how.

While he and Dom Miguel discussed the fortunes of the Revolution I made bold to ask Captain Mazanovitch how he came to be in this isolated spot.

"I was warned by the Minister of Police to leave Rio," answered the detective; "for it appears my—my friend Valcour would have been suspicious had not Paola promised to arrest me with the others. I have been here since yesterday."

"Your friend Valcour is a most persistent foe to the Cause," said I, thoughtfully. "It would have pleased you to watch him struggle with Paola for the mastery, while the Emperor was by. Ah, how Paola and Valcour hate ench other!"

Mazanovitch turned his passionless face toward me, and it seemed as though a faint smile flickered for an instant around his mouth. But he made no answer.

After breakfast Pedro was sent back to Cuyba for news, being instructed to await there the repairing of the telegraph wires, and to communicate with us as soon as he had word from Rio.

The man had no sooner disappeared in the forest than, as we stood in the roadway looking after him, a far-off patter of horses' feet was distinctly heard approaching from the north.

Silently we stood, gazing toward the curve in the road while the hoof-beats grew louder and louder, till suddenly two horses swept around the edge of the forest and bore down upon us.

Then to the surprise of all we recognized the riders to be Francisco Paola and his sister Lesba, and they rode the same horses which the evening before had been attached to the carriage that had brought me from de Pintra's.

As they dashed up both brother and sister sprang from the panting animals, and the former said, hurriedly:

"Quick, comrades! Into the house and barricade the doors. The Uruguayans are upon us!"

True enough; now that their own horses had come to a halt we plainly heard the galloping of the troop of pursuers. With a single impulse we ran to the house and entered, when my first task was to assist Bastro in placing the shutters over the windows and securing them with stout bars.

The doors were likewise fastened and barred, and then Mazanovitch brought us an armful of rifles and an ample supply of ammunition.

"Do you think it wise to resist?" asked de Pintra, filling with cartridges the magazine of a rifle.

A blow upon the door prevented an answer.

"Open, in the name of the Emperor!" cried an imperious voice.

"That is my gallant friend Captain de Souza," said Lesba, with a little laugh.

I looked at the stranger girl curiously. She had seated herself upon a large chest, and with her hands clasped about one knee was watching us load our weapons with as much calmness as if no crises of our fate was impending.

"Be kind to him, Lesba," remarked Paola, tucking a revolver underneath his arm while he rolled and lighted a cigarette. "Think of his grief at being separated from you."

She laughed again, with real enjoyment, and shook the tangled locks of hair from her eyes.

"Perhaps if I accept his attentions he will marry me, and I shall escape," she rejoined, lightly.

"Open, I commanded you!" came the voice from without.

"Really," said Lesba, looking upon us brightly, "it was too funny for anything. Twice this morning the brave captain nearly succeeded in capturing me. He might have shot me with ease, but called out that he could not bear to injure the woman he loved!"

"Does he indeed love you, Lesba?" asked de Pintra, gently.

"So he says, Uncle. But it must have been a sudden inspiration, for I never saw him until yesterday."

"Nevertheless, I am glad to learn of this," resumed Dom Miguel; "for there is no disguising the fact that they outnumber us and are better armed, and it is good to know that whatever happens to us, you will be protected."

"Whatever happens to you will happen to me," declared the girl, springing to her feet. "Give me a gun, Uncle!"

Now came another summons from de Souza.

"Listen!" he cried; "the house is surrounded and you cannot escape us. Therefore it will be well for you to surrender and rely upon the Emperor's mercy."

"I fear we may not rely on that with any security," drawley Paola, who had approached the door. "Pray tell us, my good de Souza, what are your orders respecting us?"

"To arrest you at all hazards," returned the captain, sternly.

"And then?" persisted the Minister, leaning against the door and leisurely puffing his cigarette.

But another voice was now heard—Valcour's—crying:

"Open at once, or we will batter down the door."

Before any could reply Mazanovitch pushed Paola aside and placed his lips to the keyhole.

"Hear me, Valcour," he said, in a soft yet penetrating tone, "we are able to defend ourselves until assistance arrives. But rather than that blood should be shed without necessity, we will surrender ourselves if we have your assurance of safe convoy to Rio."

For a moment there was silence. Then, "How came you here?" demanded the spy, in accents that betrayed his agitation.

"That matters little," returned Mazanovitch. "Have we your assurance of safety?"

We heard the voices of Valcour and de Souza in angry dispute; then the captain shouted: "Stand aside!" and there came a furious blow upon the door that shattered the panels.

Bastro raised his rifle and fired. A cry answered the shot, but instantly a second crash followed. The bars were torn from their sockets, the splintered door fell inward, and before we could recover from the surprise we were looking into the muzzles of a score of carbines leveled upon us.

"Very well," said Paola, tossing the end of his cigarette through the open doorway. "We are prisoners of war. Peste! my dear Captain; how energetic your soldiers are!

A moment later we were disarmed, and then, to our surprise, de Souza ordered our feet and hands to be securely bound. Only Lesba escaped this indignity, for the captain confined her in a small room adjoining our own and placed a guard at the door.

During this time Valcour stood by, sullen and scowling, his hands clinched nervously and his lips curling with scorn.

"You might gag us, my cautious one," said Paola, addressing the officer, who had planted himself, stern and silent, in the centre of the room while his orders were being executed.

"So I will, Senhor Paola; but in another fashion," was the grim reply.

He drew a paper from his breast and continued, "I will read to you my orders from his Majesty, the Emperor Dom Pedro of Brazil, dispatched from the station at Cuyaba as he was departing for his capital to quell the insurrection."

He paused and slowly unfolded the paper, while every eye—save that, perhaps, of Mazanovitch—was fixed upon him with intent gaze.

"'You are instructed to promptly arrest the traitor Francisco Paola, together with his sister, Lesba Paola, and whatever revolutionists you may be able to take, and to execute them one and all without formal trial on the same day that they are captured, as enemies of the Empire and treasonable conspirators plotting the downfall of the Government.'"

The captain paused a moment, impressively, and refolded the document.

"It is signed by his Majesty's own hand, and sealed with the royal seal," he said.

CHAPTER XXII.

The Death Sentence.

I glanced around the room to note the effect of this startling announcement upon my fellow-prisoners. Bastro's scowling face was turned full upon the officer, but showed no sign of fear. De Pintra smilled rather scornfully and whispered a word to Mazanovitch, whose countenance remained impassive as ever. Paola, with the perpetual simper distorting his naturally handsome features, leaned back in his chair and regarded his trussed ankles with whimsical indifference. Indeed, if the captain thought to startle or terify his captives he must have been grievously disappointed, for one and all received the announcement of the death sentence with admirable composure.

It was Valcour who broke the silence. Confronting the captain with blazing eyes, while his slight form quivered with excitement, he cried:

"This is nonsense, de Souza! The Emperor must have been mad to write such an order. You will convey your prisoners to Rio for trial."

"I shall obey the Emperor's commands," answered the captain, gloomily.

"But it is murder!"

"It is the Emperor's will."

"Hear me, Captain de Souza," said Valcour, drawing himself up proudly; "you were instructed to obey my commands. I order you to convey the prisoners to Rio, that they may be tried in a court of justice."

The other shook his head.

"The order is to me personally, and I must obey. A soldier never questions the commands of his superiors."

"But I am your superior!"

"Not in this affair, Senhor Valcour. And the Emperor's order is doubtless to be obeyed above that of his spy."

Valcour winced, and turned away to pace the floor nervously.

"But the lady—surely you will not execute the Donzella Paola in this brutal fashion!" he protested, after an interval of silence.

The captain flushed, and then grew pale.

"I will speak with the lady," he said, and motioning aside the guard he entered the room where Lesba was confined, and closed the door after him.

We could hear his voice through the thin partition, speaking in low and earnest tones. Then a burst of merry laughter from Lesba fell upon our ears with something of a shock, for the matter seemed serious enough to insure gravity. Evidently the captain protested, but the girl's high-pitched tones and peals of merriment indicated that she was amusing herself at his expense, and suddenly the door burst open and de Souza stumbled out with a red and angry face.

"The woman is a fiend!" he snarled. "Let her die with the others."

Valcour, who had continued to pace the floor during this interview, had by now managed to get his nerves under control, for he smiled at the captain, and said:

"Let us see if I have any argument that will avail."

While the officer stood irresolute, Valcour bowed mockingly, opened the door, and passed into Lesba's room.

It was de Souza's turn now to pace the floor, which he did with slow and measured strides; but although we strained our ears, not a sound of the interview that was progressing reached us through the partition.

After a considerable time it seemed that the captain regretted having allowed Valcour this privilege, for he advanced to the door and placed his hand on the knob. Instantly the spy appeared, closing the door swiftly behind him and turning the key in the lock.

"I withdraw my opposition, Captain," said he. "You may execute the lady with the others, for all I care. When is the massacre to take place?"

The officer stroked his moustache and frowned.

"The order commands the execution on the same day the conspirators are arrested," he announced. "I do not like the job, Valcour, believe me; but the Emperor must be obeyed. Let them die at sunset."

He turned abruptly and left the house, but sent a detachment of the Uruguayans to remain in the room with us and guard against any attempt on our part to escape.

We indulged in little conversation. Each had sufficient to occupy his thoughts, and sunset was not very far away, after all. To me this ending of the bold conspiracy was not surprising, for I had often thought that when Dom Pedro chose to strike he would strike in a way that would deter all plotting against the government for some time to come. And life is of little value in these South American countries.

"Where are the records?" I whispered to Dom Miguel, who sat near me.

"Safe with Fonseca in Rio," he answered.

"Do you imagine that Fonseca will succeed?" I continued.

"He is sure to," said the chief, a soft gleam lighting his eyes. "It is only we who have failed, my friend." He paused a moment, and then resumed: "I am sorry I have brought you to this, Robert. For the rest of us it matters little that we die. Is not a free Brazil a glorious prize to be won by the purchase of a few lives?"

It was futile to answer. A free Brazil meant little to me, I reflected; but to die with Lesba was a bit comforting, after all. I must steel myself to meet death as bravely as this girl was sure to do.

Paola, after sitting long silent, addressed Valcour, who, since the captain's exit, had been staring from the window that faced the forest.

"What did de Souza say to Lesba?" he asked.

The spy turned around with a countenance more composed and cheerful than he had before shown, and answered:

"He offered to save her from death if she would marry him.

"Ah; and she laughed at the dear captain, as we all heard. But you, senhor, made an effort to induce her to change her mind—did you not?"

"I?" returned Valcour. "By no means, senhor. It is better she should die than marry this brutal Captain de Souza."

This speech seemed to confirm my suspicion that Valcour himself loved Lesba. But Paola cast one of his quick, searching glances into the spy's face and seemed pleased by what he discovered there.

"May I speak with my sister?" he asked, a moment later.

"Impossible, senhor. She must remain in solitary confinement until the hour of execution, for the captain's gallantry will not permit him to bind her."

Then, approaching de Pintra, Valcour stood a moment looking down at him and said:

"Sir, you have made a noble fight for a cause that has doubtless been very dear to you. And you have lost. In these last hours that you are permitted to live will you not make a confession to your Emperor, and give him the details of that conspiracy in which you were engaged?"

"In Rio," answered Dom Miguel, quietly, "there is now no Emperor. The Republic is proclaimed. Even at this moment the people of our country are acclaiming the United States of Brazil. Senhor, your power is ended. You may, indeed, by your master's orders, murder us in this far-away province before assistance can reach us. But our friends will exact a terrible vengeance for the deed, be assured."

Valcour did not answer at once. He stood for a time with knitted brows, thoughtfully regarding the white-haired chieftain of the Republic, whose brave utterances seemed to us all to be fraught with prophetic insight.

"If your lives were in my hands," said the spy, with a gesture of weariness, "you would be tried in a court of justice. I am no murdered, senhor, and I sincerely grieve that de Souza should consider his orders positive."

He turned abruptly to Mazanovitch, and throwing an arm around the little man's shoulders bent swiftly down and pressed a kiss upon the pallid forehead. Then, with unsteady gait he walked from the room, and at last I saw the eyes of Mazanovitch open wide, a gaze of ineffable tenderness following the retreating form, until Valcour had disappeared. Paola also was staring, and the disgusting simper had left his face, for a time, at least.

Silence now fell upon the room. Bastro, in his corner, had gone to sleep, and Dom Miguel seemed lost in thought. From the chamber in which Lesba was confined came no sound to denote whether the girl grieved over her approaching fate or bore it with the grim stoicism of her doomed comrades.

The guard paced up and down before the closed door, pausing at times to mutter a word to his fellows, who stood watchfully over us. From my station on the chest I could gaze into the yard and note the shadow of the house creeping further and further out into the sunshine, bringing ever nearer the hour when the bright orb would sink into the far-away plateau and our eyes would be closed forever in death.

Yet the time dragged wearily, it seemed to me. When one is condemned to die it is better to suffer quickly, and have done with it. To wait, to count the moments, is horrible. One needs to have nerves of iron to endure that.

Nevertheless, we endured it. The hours passed, somehow, and the shadows grew dim with stretching.

Suddenly I heard a clank of spurs as de Souza approached. He gave a brief order to the Uruguayans who were lounging in the yard, and then stepped through the doorway and faced us.

"Get ready, senhors," said he. "The hour has come."

CHAPTER XXIII.

At the Eleventh Hour.

We aroused ourselves, at this, and regarded the captain attentively.

He turned his stern gaze upon one after the other, and gave a growl of satisfaction as he noted no craven amongst us.

"You shall draw cuts, gentlemen, to decide the order in which you must expiate your crime. I will show no partiality. See, here are the slips, a number written upon each. Julio shall place them in his hat and allow you to draw."

He handed the bits of paper to one of his men and strode to the door of Lesba's room.

"Open!" he commanded, giving it a rap with his knuckles.

There was no reply.

"Open!" said he, again, and placed his ear to the panel.

Then, with a sudden gesture, he swung the door inward.

A moment the officer stood motionless, gazing into the chamber. Then he turned to us a face convulsed with anger.

"Who permitted the women to escape?" he demanded.

The guards, startled and amazed, peered over his shoulders into the vacant room; but none dared to answer.

"What now, Captain, has your bird flown?" came Valcour's soft voice, and the spy entered the room and threw himself carelessly into a chair.

De Souza looked upon his colleague with evident suspicion, and twisted the ends of his moustache in sullen fury. Perhaps he dared not accuse Valcour openly, as the latter was the Emperor's authorized representative. And it may be the captain was not sincerely sorry that Lesba had escaped, and so saved him from the necessity of executing her, for, after a period of indecision, the wrath of the officer seemed to cool, and he slowly regained his composure. Valcour, who was watching him, appeared to notice this, and said:

"You forgot the window, my Captain. It was not difficult for the senhorita to steal across the roadway unobserved and take refuge in the forest. For my part, I am glad she is gone. Our royal master has little credit in condemning a woman to such a death."

"Have a care, senhor! Your words are treasonable."

"The Emperor will be the first to applaud them, when he has time to think. Indeed, de Souza, were I in your place, I should ignore the order to execute these people. His Majesty acted under a severe nervous strain, and he will not thank you, believe me, for carrying out his instructions so literally."

"A soldier's duty is to obey," returned the officer, stiffly. Then, turning to the tall Uruguayan who held the hat, he added:

"Let the prisoners draw, Julio!"

Another soldier now unfastened our bonds, and Paola, who was the first to be approached by Julio, took a slip of paper from the hat and thrust it into his pocket without examination.

Sanchez Bastro drew next, and smiled as he read his number. Then came my turn, and I own that I could not repress a slight trembling of my fingers as I drew forth the fatal slip. It was number four.

"Good!" murmured de Pintra, reading the slip over my shoulder. "I shall not be alive to witness your death, Robert." And then he took the last paper from the hat and added: "I am number two."

"I am first," said Bastro, with cheerfulness. "It is an honor, Dom Miguel," and he bowed respectfully to the chief.

Paola wore again the old, inane smile that always lent his fare an indescribable leer of idiocy. I knew, by this time, that the expression was indeed a mask to cover his real feelings, and idly wondered if he would choose to die with that detestable simper upon his lips.

"Come, gentlemen; we are ready."

It was the captain who spoke, and we rose obediently and filed through the doorway, closely guarded by the Uruguayans.

In the vacant space that served as a yard for Bastro's house stood a solitary date-palm with a straight, slender trunk. Before this we halted, and Bastro was led to the tree and a rope passed around his body securing him to the trunk. They offered to blindfold him, but he waved the men aside.

"It will please me best to look into the muzzles of your guns," said the patriot, in a quiet voice. "I am not afraid, Senhor Captain."

De Souza glanced at the sun. It was slowly sinking, a ball of vivid red, into the bosom of the far-away plateau.

At a gesture from the officer six of the guardsmen stepped forward and leveled their carbines upon Bastro, who stood upright against the tree, with a proud smile upon his manly face.

I turned away my head, feeling sick and dizzy; and the rattle of carbines set me trembling with nervous horror. Nor did I look toward the tree again, although, after an interval of silence I heard the tramp of soldiers bearing Bastro's body to the deserted house.

"Number two!" cried de Souza, harshly. It was no time to turn craven. My own death was but a question of moments, and I realized that I had little time to bid farewell to my kind friend and strive to cheer him upon his way. Going to his side I seized Dom Miguel's hand and pressed it to my lips; but he was not content with that, and caught me in a warm and affectionate embrace.

Then he was led to the tree. I turned my back, covering my face with my hands.

"For the Cause!" I heard his gentle voice say, the carbines rang out a second time, and a convulsive sob burst from my throat in spite of my strong efforts to control my emotion.

Again I listened to the solemn tread of the soldiers, while from far away the sound of a shout was borne to us upon the still evening air.

Somehow, that distinct shout thrilled me with a new-born hope, and I gazed eagerly along the line of roadway that skirted the forest.

De Souza was gazing there, too, with a disturbed look upon his face; but the light was growing dim, and we could see nothing.

"Number three!"

It was Paola's turn, and he walked unassisted to the tree and set his back to it, while the soldiers passed the rope under his arms and then retired. But they left Valcour confronting the prisoner, and I saw the simper fade from Paola's lips and an eager gleam light his pale features.

For a few mements they stood thus, separated from all the rest, and exchanging earnest whispers, while the captain stamped his foot with savage impatience.

"Come, come, Valcour!" he called, at last. "You are interfering with my duty. Leave the prisoner, I command you!"

The spy turned around, and his face was positively startling in its expression of intense agony.

"If you are in a hurry, my dear Captain, fire upon us both!" said he, bitterly.

With a muttered oath de Souza strode forward, and seizing Valcour by the arm, dragged him back of the firing [illegible]

But at that instant a stat[illegible] reached our ears—the sound of a [illegible] and with it came the rapid patter of horses' feet.

The soldiers, who had already leveled the guns at Paola, swung suddenly around upon their heels; de Souza uttered an exclamation of dismay, and the rest of us stood as motionless as if turned to stone.

For sweeping around the curve of the forest, came a troop of horsemen led by a girl, whose fluttering white skirts trailed behind her like a banner borne on the breeze. God! how they rode—the horses plunging madly forward at every bound, their red eyes and distended nostrils bearing evidence of the wild run that had well-nigh exhausted their strength.

And the riders, as they sighted us, screamed curses and encouragement in the same breath, bearing down upon our silent group with the speed of a whirlwind.

There was little time for the Uruguayans to recover from their surprise, for at close range the horsemen let fly a volley from rifle and revolver that did deadly havoc. A few saddles were emptied in return, but almost instantly the soldiers and patriots were engaged in a desperate hand-to-hand conflict, with no quarter given or expected.

De Souza fell wounded at the first volley, and I saw Valcour, with a glad cry, start forward and run toward Paola, who was still bound to his tree. But the captain, half raising himself from the ground, aimed his revolver at the prisoner, as if determined upon his death in spite of the promised rescue.

"Look out!" I shouted, observing the action.

Paola was, of course, helpless to evade the bullet; but Valcour, who had nearly reached him, turned suddenly at my cry and threw himself in front of Paola just as the shot rang out.

An instant the spy stood motionless. Then, tossing his arms above his head, he fell backward and lay still.

CHAPTER XXIV.

The Emperor's Spy.

Although the deadly conflict was raging all about us, I passed it by to regard a still more exciting tragedy. For with a roar like that from a mad bull Mazanovitch dashed aside his captors and sprang to the spot where Valcour lay.

"Oh, my darling, my darling!" he moaned, raising the delicate form that he might pillow the head upon his knee. "How dared they harm you, my precious one! How dared they!"

Paola, struggling madly with his bonds, succeeded in bursting them asunder, and now staggered up to kneel beside Valcour. His eyes were staring and full of a horror that his own near approach to death had never for an instant evoked.

Taking one of the spy's slender hands in both his own he pressed it to his heart and said in trembling tones:

"Look up, sweetheart! Look up, I beg of you. It is Francisco—do you not know me? Are you dead, Valcour? Are you dead?"

A gentle hand pushed him aside, and Lesba knelt in his place. With deft fingures she bared Valcour's breast, tearing away the soft linen through which a crimson stain had already spread, and bending over a wound in the left shoulder to examine it closely. Standing beside the little group, I found myself regarding the actors in this remarkable drama with an interest almost equaling their own. The bared breast revealed nothing to me however; for already I knew that Valcour was a woman.

Presently Lesba looked up into the little man's face and smiled.

"Fear nothing, Captain Mazanovitch," said she softly; "the wound is not very dangerous, and—please God!—we will yet save your daughter's life."

His daughter! How much of the mystery that had puzzled me this simple word revealed!

Paola, still kneeling and covering his face with his hands, was sobbing like a child; Mazanovitch drew a long breath and allowed his lids to again droop slowly over his eyes; and then Lesba looked up and our eyes met.

"I am just in time, Robert," she murmured happily, and bent over Valcour to hide the flush that dyed her sweet face.

I started, and looked around me. In the gathering twilight the forms of the slaughtered Uruguayans lay revealed where they had fallen, for not a single member of Dom Pedro's band of mercenaries had escaped the vengeance of the patriots.

Those of our rescuers who survived were standing in a little group near by, leaning upon their long rifles, awaiting further commands.

Among them I recognized Pedro, and beckoning him to follow me I returned

(To be Continued.)