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 XVI.—(Continued.)

He rose and advanced to me with a soft, stealthy tread, and I backed away until I stood fairly against the wall, vainly endeavoring to find some way to circumvent him.

"Hold!" cried a clear voice, and as Paola swung around upon his heel I saw beyond him the form of Valcour outlined by the dark doorway.

"You were doubtless about to search the prisoner, senhor," said the spy, calmly, as he approached us. "I have myself just come from the Mexican's room and heard his ravings. But the task must be mine, since the Emperor has placed the search for the key in my hands."

Paola turned with a slight shrug and resumed his seat.

"I have searched the prisoner already," he announced, "but failed to find the ring. Doubtless he has passed it to Piexoto, or secreted it. Or, it may be, the Mexican's words are mere ravings."

The detective hesitated.

"Who is this Mexican, Senhor Paola?" he asked.

"Frankly, I do not know. Not a conspirator, I am sure, and evidently not a royalist."

"Then how came he to know of the existence of the ring?"

"A mystery, my dear Valcour. Have you yet identified the man this Mexican murdered?"

"Not yet."

"I myself have not had a good look at the body. If you will take me to him I will endeavor to locate the fellow. It was doubtless he who murdered Madam Izabel."

As he spoke he rose and walked quietly toward the door, as if he expected Valcour to follow. But the spy, suddenly suspicious, cast a shrewd glance at me and replied:

"One moment, Senhor Paola. I must satisfy myself that neither Harcliffe nor Piexoto has the ring, in order that I may report to the Emperor."

"As you like," returned the Minister, indifferently, and resumed his chair.

Valcour came straight to my side, thrust his hand within my pocket, and drew out the ring.

"Ah!" he cried, his face lighting with joy, "your search must have been a careless one, my dear Paola! Here is news for the Emperor, at last."

He hurried from the room, and Paola, still smiling, rose and faced us.

"It is a great pity," said he, pleasantly, with his eyes on my face, "that God permits any man to be a fool."

Before I could reply he had followed Valcour from the room, and Piexoto, regarding me with a sudden frown, exclaimed:

"I can say amen to that! Why did you not tell me you had the ring?"

I did not reply. The taunts and the loss of the ring had dazed me and I sank into a chair and covered my eyes with my hands.

Pacing the room with furious energy, Piexoto growled a string of laments and reproaches into my unwilling ears.

"My poor comrades! It is their death-warrant. These records will condemn to punishment half the great families of Brazil. And now when the battle is almost won, to have them fall into the Emperor's hands. Thank God, de Pintra is dead! This blow would be worse to him than death itself."

'However," said I, somewhat recovered myself, "we shall now secure his ly from that grim vault. That is one isfaction, at least."

He did not see fit to reply to this, but paced the floor in as great agitation as before.

Captain de Souza entered with two of his guards.

"The Emperor commands you to unlock the vault," he said to me. "Be good enough to follow, senhor. And Senhor Piexoto is also requested to be present."

"Tell the Emperor I refuse to unlock the vault," I returned, firmly.

"And why?" demanded Piexoto, scornfully. "It is merely a question of time, now that they have the key, when they will find the right indentation in the door."

"True," I answered. Then, to the captain: "Lead on, I will follow."

They escorted us to the library and down the winding stair until we stood in the well-known chamber at the end of the passage. The outer door of the vault lay open displaying the steel curface of the inner door, with its countless indentations.

The Emperor and his secretary, together with Paola and Valcour, were awaiting us. The latter handed me the ring.

"His Majesty commands you to open the door, senhor Americano," he said.

"I believe the Minister of Police designed this door. Let him open it himself," I replied, my resolution halting at the thought of what the open door would reveal.

"Yes, I designed it," said the Minister, softly, "but I did not execute it. Doubtless in time I could open the door; but the Emperor is impatient."

'hat further resistance was use-less. Bending over, I fitted the stone of the ring into the proper indentation, and shot the bolts. The great door was swung upward, a whiff of the damp, confined air entered my nostrils and made me shiver.

Reaching my hand within the vault I turned the switch that threw on the electric lights, and then withdrew that the others might enter.

But no one moved. The light illuminated the full interior of the great vault, and every eye gazed eagerly within.

Valcour uttered a groan of baffled rage; Piexoto swore horribly in a scarcely audible tone, and the Minister of Police laughed.

"Good God!" cried the Emperor, with staring eyeballs, "the vault is empty!"

CHAPTER XVII.

The Torch of Rebellion.

With a bound I stood within the grim vault and searched its confines with anxious eyes. True enough, the place was empty. Not a scrap of paper, a book, or a bank-note had been left there. The shelves that lined the walls were as bare as Mothers Hubbard's cupboard.

The records of the Revolution were gone. The body of Miguel Pintra was gone. Thank God, the great and glorious Cause was as yet safe!

Valcour was on his hands and knees, prying into the corners for some scrap that might have been overlooked.

Paola stood beside me with the old aggravating simper upon his face, twirling one end of his moustache.

Suddenly Valcour stood up and faced him.

"Traitor!" he cried, with a passionate gesture, "it is you who have done this! It is you who have led us here only to humiliate us and laugh at us!"

"Your Majesty," said Paola, without moving his head, "will you kindly protect me from the insults of your servants?"

"Have peace, Valcour!" growled the Emperor. "Senhor Francisco has proved his loyalty, and doubtless shares our chagrin. Come, gentlemen, let us leave this dismal place."

I followed slowly in the train of the party as it wound its way through the narrow passage and up the iron stairs into the library. My hand-cuffs had been removed when I was brought to open the vault, and an idea came to me to lag behind and try to effect my escape from the house.

But Valcour was waiting for me at the trap door, and called Captain de Souza to guard me. I was taken to the large room on the ground floor, from whence they had brought me, thrust through the doorway, and the key turned upon me.

Piexoto had been taken elsewhere, and I found myself alone.

My thoughts were naturally confused by the amazing discovery we had just made, and I was so engaged in wondering what had become of Dom Miguel and the records that I scarcely looked up when the door opened to admit Francisco Paola.

He had in his hand a small parcel that looked like a box, which he placed upon a table near the open window.

Next he drew a note-book from his pocket, scribbled some lines upon three several leaves, and then, tearing them out, he reached within the box, taking care to lift but a portion of the cover, and busied himself some moments in a way that made me wonder what he could be doing. I had no suspicion of the truth until he carried the box to the window and quickly removed the cover. Then, although his back was toward me, I heard a rapid flutter of wings, followed by a strange silence, and I knew that Paola was following with his eyes the flight of the birds he had liberated.

So, my dear Minister, I have at last discovered your secret!" said a sharp voice, and Paola whirled about as I noted that Valcour had entered the room and was standing with folded arms and eyes that sparkled triumphantly.

"Orders to my men," remarked the Minister, quietly, and brushed a small feather from his arm.

"True enough!" retorted Valcour, with a bitter smile. "Orders to General Fonseca, whom you strangely overlooked in making your decoy arrests. Orders to Sanches Bastro, who is to distribute arms to the rebels! And where did the third pidgeon go, my loyal and conscientious Minister of Police? To Mazanovitch, or to that Miguel de Pintra whom you falsely led us to believe had perished in yonder vault?

He came close to the Minister.

"Traitor! In setting free these birds you have fired the torch of rebellion; that terrible flame which is liable to sweep the land, and consume royalist and republican alike!"

Paola, the sneering smile for once gone from his face, gazed at his accuser with evident admiration.

"You are wonderfully clever, my dear Valcour," said he, slowly. "You have wit; you have a clear judgement; your equal is not in all Brazil. What a pity, my friend, that you are not one of us!"

Somehow, the words seemed to ring true.

Valcour flushed to the roots of his hair.

"I hate you," he cried, stamping his foot with passion. "You have thwarted me always. You have laughed at me—sneered at me—defied me! But at last I have you in the toils. Francisco Paola, I arrest you in the name of the Emperor."

"On what charge?"

"The charge of treason!"

Paola laughed softly, and in a tone denoting genuine amusement.

"Come, my brave detective," said he; "we will go to the Emperor together, and accuse each other to our heart's content!"

He attempted to take Valcour's arm, in his inimitable jaunty fashion; but the spy shook him off and followed Paola from the room, trembling with suppressed rage.

For my part, I knew not what to make of the scene, except that these men were bitter enemies, and each endeavoring to destroy the other. But could Valcour's accusation be true? Had the torch of revolution really been fired?

God forbid that I should ever meet with such another man as Francisco Paola again! Deep or shallow, coxcomb or clever conspirator, true man or traitor—it was as impossible to read him or to judge his real character as to solve the mighty, unfathomable secrets of Nature.

One moment I called him traitor; the next I was sure he was faithful to the Cause. But who could judge the man aright? Not I, indeed!

Thus reflecting, I approached the window and looked out. Eight feet below me one of the Urugayan guards paced back and forth upon the green lawn, his short carbine underneath his arm, and a poniard swinging at his side.

The fellow looked up and saw me.

"Close that window!" he commanded, with a scowl.

I obeyed, sliding the sash to its place. But still I gazed through the glass at the labyrinth of walks and hedges defining the extensive gardens at this side of the house. I knew every inch of these grounds, having wandered there many hours during my sojourn at the mansion. And the thought came to me that it would not be difficult to escape in that maze of hedge and shrubbery, had I once a fair start of my pursuers.

Within my range of vision was a portion of the driveway, and presently I saw the Emperor's carriage roll away, followed by several others. Piexoto was seated in the last of the carriages, but only a small portion of the Urugyan guard accompanied the cortege.

I tried to see if the Minister of Police was among those who were returning to Rio, but was unable to note his presence in the brief time the carriages were in view. Nor did Valcour seem to be with them. Captain de Souza evidently remained in charge of the guards left at the mansion.

Well, I longed to leave the place myself, now that the emptiness of the secret vault had been disclosed; but for some reason my captors desired me to remain a prisoner.

The day dragged wearily away. One of the Uruguayans brought me food at noontime, and I ate with good appetite. The room grew close, but when I attempted to raise the window the surly guard outside presented his carbine, and I respected his wish to leave the sash lowered.

During this time I had ample opportunity to speculate upon the astonishing events of the morning; but my attempt to solve the problem of what had become of Dom Miguel and the records seemed absolutely futile. That the body of the chief had been removed by some friendly hand—the same that had saved the funds and papers—there was no doubt whatever. But when had this removal taken place?

At one time a fleeting hope animated me that the vault had been entered in time to save Dom Miguel from suffocation; but a little reflection soon caused me to abandon that notion. Allowing that the slayer of Madam Izabel had been a patriot, and left the train at the first station beyond Cruz, he could not possibly have returned to de Pintra's mansion on the swiftest horse within eight hours of the time my friend had been entombed alive, and long before that Dom Miguel would have succumbed to the confined atmosphere of his prison.

Moreover, none of the conspirators who knew of the ring or was competent to recognize it had been on the train at the time of Izabel de Mar's death. Therefore the patriot who finally secured the key to the vault and seved the records must have obtained the ring long after any hope of saving the life of the imprisoned chief had been abandoned.

Somehow, it occurred to me that the man in the shrubbery had not been murdered by the Mexican, but by some one of our band who had promptly cleared the vault and escaped with the contents—even while the Emperor and his party were in possession of the house. The ring might have been dropped during the escape and found by the Mexican—this being the only plausible way to account for its being in his possession.

Although these speculations were to some extent a diversion, and served to occupy my thoughts during my tedious confinement, there were many details to contradict their probability, and I was not at all positive that I had discovered the right explanation of the mystery.

It must have been near evening when the door was again opened. This time a man was thrust into the room and the door quickly locked upon us.

I started from my chair with an exclamation of dismay. My fellow-prisoner was the mad Mexican!

CHAPTER XVIII.

A Narrow Escape.

The man did not seem to notice my presence at first. For a time he remained motionless in the position the guards had left him, his vacant eyes fixed steadily upon the opposite wall.

Then, with a long-drawn sigh, his gaze fell and wandered to the table where stood the remains of my luncheon. With a wolf-like avidity he pounced upon the tray, eagerly consuming every scrap that I had left, and draining a small bottle of wine of the last dregs it contained.

When he had finished he still continued to fumble about the tray, and presently picked up a large, two-tined steel fork and examined it with careful attention. They had brought no knife into the room, and I had scarcely noticed the fork before; yet now, as the Mexican held it firmly in his clinched fist, and passed it to and fro with a serpent-like motion, I realized with a thrill of anxiety that it might prove a terrible weapon in the hands of a desperate man.

Evidently my fellow-prisoner had the same thought, for after a time he concealed the fork in his bosom, and turned to examine the room more carefully. His first act was to approach the window, and when he started and shrank away I knew our ever-vigilant guard had warned him not to consider that avenue of escape.

Next he swung around and faced the place where I sat, slightly in the shadow. The day was drawing to its close, and he had not noticed me before. A swift motion toward his breast was followed by a smile, and he advanced close to me and said, in his stumbling English:

"Aha! My American frien' to which I gave the ring! It is safe, senor? It is safe?"

I nodded, thinking to humor him. Indeed, I could not determine at that moment whether the man was still insane or not.

He drew a chair to my side and sat down.

"Listen, then, my frien'. Together we will find riches—riches very great! Why? Because we Mexicans—Careno and myself—we build the door of the big vault under this house. So? They bring us here blindfold. We work many days on the big plate with strange device cut in the steel. Careno was expert. Only one place, cut with great cunning, shot the bolts in their sockets. For myself, I am clock-maker and gem-cutter. They tell me to cut emerald so it fit the plate, and mount it in ring. Yes, it was I, Senor Americano, who do that fine work—I, Manuel Pesta!

"Then they carry us away, blindfold again, to the border of Uruguay. We do not know this house—we cannot find it again ever. So they think. But to make sure they hire men to assassinate us—to stab us to the heart in those Uruguay Mountain. Fine pay for our work—eh, senor? But, peste! Careno and I—we stab our assassins—we escape—we swear vengeance! For two year we wander in Brazil—seeking, ever seeking for the house with the vault.

"How clever they are! But we, are we not also clever? On a railway train one day we see a lady with the ring! We cannot mistake—I made it, and I know my work. It is key to the big vault! Careno cannot wait. He sit beside lady and put his knife in her heart. The train rattle along and the lady make no noise. But the ring sticks, so Careno cuts off finger and puts in pocket. Are we not clever, senor? Now we have the ring, but yet know not of the house with the vault. We keep quiet and ride on to Rio. There the dead lady is carried out and all is excitement. She is Senor Izabel de Mar, daughter of Dom Miguel de Pintra. She come from her father's house at Cuyaba. This we hear and remember. Then a man they call Valcour he rush up and cry, 'Her finger is gone! The ring—where is the ring?' Aha! we know now we are right.

"So we go away and find out about Miguel de Pintra—the head of great rebellion with millions of gold and notes to pay the soldiers when they fight. Good! We know now of the vault. We know we have key. We know we are now rich! Careno and I we go to Cuyaba—we find this house—we hide in the bushes till night. Then Careno get mad for the money—he want it all, not half—and he try to murder me. Ah, well! my pistol is quicker than his knife, that is all. He is wearing ring, and it stick like it stick on lady's hand. Bah! I cut off Careno's hand and carve away the ring. It is simple, is it not?

"But now the soldiers gallop up. The house is fill with people. So I must wait. I hide in secret place, but soon they drag me out and make me prisoner. What! must I lose all now—millions—millions of gold—and no Careno to share it? No! I am still clever. I keep ring in mouth until I meet you, and I give it to you to keep. When they search me, there is no ring."

He sprang up, chuckling and rubbing his hands together in great delight. He danced a step or two and then drew the steel fork from his breast and stuck it fiercely into the table-top, standing silently to watch it while the prongs quivered and came to rest.

"Am I not clever?" he again asked, drawing out the fork from the wood and returning it to his breast. But I am generous too. You shall divide with me. But not half! I won all from Careno, but you shall have some—enough to be rich, senor Americano. And now, give me the ring!"

By this time his eyes were glittering with insanity, and at his abrupt demand I shifted uneasily in my seat, not knowing how to reply.

"Give me the ring!" he repeated, a tone of menace creeping into his high-pitched voice.

I arose and walked toward the window, getting the table between us. Then I turned and faced him.

"They have taken the ring from me." I said.

He stood as if turned to stone, his fierce eyes fixed upon my own.

"They have opened the vault with it," I continued, "and found it bare and empty."

He gave a shrill scream at this, and began trembling in every limb.

"You lie!" he shouted, wildly. "You try to cheat me—to get all! And the vault has millions—millions in gold and notes. Give me the ring!"

I made no reply. To reiterate my assertion would do no good, and the man was incompetent to consider the matter calmly. Indeed, he once more drew that ugly fork from his breast and, grasping it as one would a dagger, began creeping toward me with a stealthy, cat-like tread.

I approached the edge of the round centre-table, alert to keep its breadth between me and my companion. The Mexican paused opposite me, and whispered between his clinched teeth:

"Give it me! Give me the ring!"

"The guard will be here presently," said I, fervently hoping I spoke the truth, "and he will tell you of the ring. I am quite sure Senhor Valcour has it."

"Ah, I am betrayed! You wish to take all—you and this Valcour! But see, my Americano—I will kill you. I will kill you now, and then you have nothing for your treachery."

Slowly he edged his way around the table, menacing me with his strange weapon, and with my eyes fixed upon his I moved in the opposite direction, retaining the table as my shield.

First in one direction and then in the other he moved, swiftly at times, then with deliberate caution, striving ever to take me unawares and reach me with his improvised dagger.

This situation could not stand the tension for long; I realized that sooner or later the game must have an abrupt ending.

So, as I dodged my persistent enemy, I set my wits working to devise a means of escape. The window seemed my only hope, and I had lost all fear of the sentry in the more terrible danger that confronted me.

Suddenly I exerted my strength and thrust the table against the Mexican so forcibly that he staggered backward. Then I caught up a chair and after a swing around my head hurled it toward him like a catapult. It crushed him to the floor, and e'er he could rise again I had thrown up the sash of the window and leaped out.

Fortune often favors the desperate. I alighted full upon the form of the unsuspecting sentry, bearing him to the ground by my weight, where we both rolled in the grass.

Quickly I regained my feet and darted away into the flower-garden, seeking to reach the hedges before my guard could recover himself.

Over my shoulder I saw him kneeling and deliberately pointing at me his carbine. Before he could fire the flying form of the Mexican decended upon him from the window. There was a flash and a report, but the ball went wide its mark, and instantly the two men were struggling in a death-grapple upon the lawn.

Away I ran through the maze of hedge and shrubbery, threading the well-known paths unerringly. I heard excited shouts as the guardsmen, aroused by their comrade's shot, poured from the mansion and plunged into the gardens to follow me. But it was dusk by this time, and I had little fear of being overtaken.

The estate was bounded upon this side by an impenetrable thich-set hedge, but it was broken in one place by a gardeners' tool-house, which had a door at each side, and thus admitted one into a lane that wound through a grove and joined the main highway a mile beyond.

Reaching this tool-house I dashed within, closed and barred the door behind me, and then emerged upon the lane.

To my surprise I saw a covered carriage standing in the gloom, and made out that the door stood open and a man upon the box was holding the reins and leaning toward me eagerly as if striving to solve my identity.

Without hesitation I sprang into the carriage and closed the door, crying to the man:

"Quick! for your life—drive on!"

Without a word he lashed his horses and we started with a jerk that threw me into the back seat.

I heard an exclamation in a woman's startled voice and felt a muffled form shrinking into the corner of the carriage. Then two shots rang out; I heard a scream and the sound of a fall as the driver pitched upon the ground, and now like the wind the maddened horses rushed on without guidance, swaying the carriage from side to side with a dangerous motion.

These Brazilian carriages have a trap in the top to permit the occupants to speak to the driver. I found this trap, threw it upward, and drew myself up until I was able to scramble into the vacant seat. The reins had fallen between the horses, evidently, but we were now dashing through the grove, and the shadows were so deep that I could distinguish nothing distinctly.

Cautiously I let myself down until my feet touched the pole, and then, resting my hands upon the loins of the madly galloping animals, I succeeded in grasping the reins and returned safely to the box seat.

Then I braced myself to conquer the runaways, and when we emerged from the grove and came upon the highway there was sufficient light for me to keep the horses in the straight road until they had tired themselves sufficiently to be brought under control.

During this time I had turned to speak a reassuring word, now and then, to the unknown woman in the carriage.

Doubtless she had been both amazed and indignant at my abrupt seizure of her equipage; but there was not yet time to explain to her my necessity.

We were headed straight for the station at Cuyaba, and I decided at once to send a telegram warning Mazanovitch of danger. For Paola had turned traitor, the vault had been opened, and the Emperor was even now on his way to Rio to arrest all who had previously escaped the net of the Minister of Police.

So we presently dashed up to the station, which was nearly deserted at this hour, and after calling a porter to hold the horses went into the station to write my telegram.

Mazanovitch had asked me to use but one word, and although I had much of interest to communicate, a moment's thought assured me that a warning of danger was sufficient.

So, after a brief hesitation, I wrote the word "Lesba," and handed the message to the operator.

"That is my name, senhor," said a soft voice behind me, and I turned to confront Lesba Paola.

CHAPTER XIX.

The Wayside Inn.

Astonishment rendered me speechless, and at first I could do no more than bow with an embarrassed air to the cloaked figure before me. Lesba's fair face, peering from beneath her mantilla, was grave but set, and her brilliant eyes bore a questioning and half-contemptuous look that was hard to meet.

"That is my name, senhor," she repeated, "and you will oblige me by explaining why you are sending it to Captain Mazanovitch."

"Was it your carriage in which I escaped?" I inquired.

"Yes; and my man now lies wounded by the roadside. Why did you take me by surprise, Senhor Harcliffe? And why—why are you telegraphing my name to Mazanovitch?"

Although my thoughts were somewhat confused I remembered that Lesba had accompanied her brother to Rio; that her brother had turned traitor, and she herself had ridden in the Emperor's carriage, with the spy Valcour. And I wondered how it was that her carriage should have been standing this very evening at a retired spot, evidently awaiting some one, when I chanced upon it in my extremity.

It is well to take time to consider, when events are of a confusing nature. In that way thoughts are sometimes untangled. Now, in a flash, the truth came to me. Valcour was still at the mansion—Valcour, her accomplice; perhaps her lover.

To realize this evident fact of her intrigue with my brilliant foe sent a shiver through me—a shiver of despair and utter weariness. Still keeping my gaze upon the floor, and noting, half-consciously, the click-click of the telegraph instrument, I said:

"Pardon me, donzella, for using your carriage to effect my escape. You see, I have not made an alliance with the royalists, as yet, and my condition is somewhat dangerous. As for the use of your name in my telegram, I have no objection to telling you—now that the message has been sent—that it was a cypher word warning my republican friends of treachery."

"Do you suspect me of treachery, Senhor Harcliffe?" she asked in cold, scornful tones.

I looked up, but dropped my eyes again as I confronted the blaze of indignation that flashed from her own.

"I make no accusations, donzella. What is it to me if you Brazilians fight among yourselves for freedom or the Emperor, as it may suit your fancy? I came here to oblige a friend of my father's—the one true man I have found in all your intrigue-ridden country. But he, alas! is dead, and I am powerless to assist farther the cause he loved. So my mission here is ended, and I will go back to America."

Again I looked up; but this time her eyes were lowered and her expression was set and impenetrable.

"Do not let us part in anger," I resumed, a tremor creeping into my voice in spite of me—for this girl had been very dear to my heart. "Let us say we have both acted according to the dictates of conscience, and cherish only memories of the happy days we have passed togethef, to comfort us in future years."

She started, with upraised hand and eager face half turned toward the door. Far away in the distance I heard the tramp of many hoofs.

"They are coming, senhor!" called the man who stood beside the horses—one of our patriots. "It's the troops of Uruguayans, I am sure."

Pedro, the station-master, ran from his little office and extinguished the one dim lamp that swung from the ceiling of the room in which we stood.

In the darkness that enveloped us Lesba grasped my arm and whispered "Come!" dragging me toward the door. A moment later we were beside the carriage.

"Mount!" she cried, in a commanding voice. "I will ride inside. Take the road to San Tarem. Quick, senhor, as you value both our lives!"

I gathered up the reins as Pedro slammed tight the carriage door. A crack of the whip, a shout of encouragement from the two patriots, and we had dashed away upon the dim road leading to the wild, unsettled plains of the North Plateau.

They were good horses. It surprised me to note their mettle and speed, and I guessed they had been carefully chosen for the night's work—an adventure of which this denouement was scarcely expected. I could see the road but dimly, but I gave the horses slack rein and they sped along at no uncertain pace.

I could no longer hear the hoof-beats of the guards, and judged that either we had outdistanced them or the shrewd Pedro had sent them on a false scent.

Presently the sky brightened, and as the moon shone clear above us I found that we were passing through a rough country that was but sparsely settled. I remembered to have ridden once in this direction with Lesba, but not so far; and the surroundings were therefore strange to me.

For an hour I drove steadily on, and then a girl spoke to me through the open trap in the roof of the carriage.

"A mile or so further will bring us to a fork in the road. Keep to the right," said she.

I returned no answer, although I was burning to question her of many things. But time enough for that, I thought, when we were safely at our journey's end. Indeed, Lesba's mysterious actions—her quick return from Rio in the wake of the Emperor and Valcour, her secret rendezvous in the lane, which I had so suddenly surprised and interrupted, and her evident desire to save me from arrest—all this was not only contradictory to the frank nature of the girl, but to the suspicions I had formed of her betrayal of the conspiracy in co-operation with her treacnerous brother.

The key to the mystery was not mine, and I could only wait until Lesba chose to speak and explain her actions.

I came to the fork in the road and turned to the right. The trail—for it had become little more than that—now skirted a heavy growth of underbrush that merged into groves of scattered, stunted trees; and these in time gradually became more compact and stalwart until a great Brazilian forest threw its black shadow over us. Noiselessly the carriage rolled over the beds of moss, which were so thick now that I could scarcely hear a sound of the horse's hoofs, and then I discerned a short distance ahead the outlines of an old, weather-beaten house.

Lesba had her head through the trap and spoke close to my ear.

"Stop at this place," said she; "for here our journey ends."

I pulled up the horses opposite the dwelling and regarded it somewhat doubtfully. It had been built a hundred yards or so from the edge of the dense forest and seemed utterly deserted. It was a large house, with walls of baked clay and a thatched roof, and its neglected appearance and dreary surroundings gave it a fearsome look as it stood lifeless and weatherstained under the rays of the moon.

"Is the place inhabited?" I asked.

"It must be," she replied. "Go to the door, and knock upon it loudly."

"But the horses—who will mind them, donzella?"

Instantly she scrambled through the trap to the seat beside me and took the reins in her small hands.

"I will look after the horses," said she.

So I climbed down and approached the door. It was sheltered by a rude porch, and flanked upon either side by wellworn benches such as are frequently at wayside inns.

I pounded upon the door and then paused to listen. The sounds drew a hollow reverberation from within, but aroused no other reply.

"Knock again!" called Lesba.

I obeyed, but with no better success. The place seemed uncanny, and I returned abruptly to the carriage, standing beside the wheel and gazing up through the moonlight into the beautiful face the girl bent over me.

"Lesba," said I, pleadingly, "what does all this mean? Why have you brought me to this strange place?"

"To save your life," she answered in a grave voice.

"But how came you to be waiting in the lane? And who were you waiting for?" I persisted.

"By what right do you question me, Senhor Harcliffe?" she asked, drawing back so that I could no longer look into her eyes.

"By no right at all, Lesba. Neither do I care especially whether you are attached to the Empire or the Republic, or how much you indulge in political intrigue, since that appears to be the chief amusement of your countrymen. But I love you. You now it well, although you have never permitted me tell you so. And loving you as I do, with all my heart, I am anxious to untangle this bewildering maze and understand something of your actions since that terrible morning when I parted with you at Dom Miguel's mansion."

She laughed, and the laugh was one of those quaint flashes of merriment peculiar to the girl, leaving one in doubt whether to attribute it to amusement or nervous agitation. Indeed, where another woman might weep Lesba would laugh; so that it frequently puzzled me to comprehend her. Now, however, she surprised me by leaning over me and saying gently:

"I will answer your question, Robert. My brother is at the mansion, and in danger of his life. I was waiting with the carriage to assist him to escape."

"But how do you know he is in danger?"

"He sent me word by a carrier-pigeon."

"To be sure. Yet there is one more thing that troubles me: why were you in Rio, riding in the Emperor's carriage with the spy Valcour?"

"It is simple, senhor. I went to Rio to assist in persuading Dom Pedro to visit the vault."

"Knowing it was empty?"

"Knowing it was empty, and believing that the Emperor's absence would enable Fonseca to strike a blow for freedom."

"Then Fonseca is still faithful to the Cause?"

"I know of no traitor in our ranks, Robert, although it seems you have suspected nearly all of us, at times. But it grows late and my brother is still in peril. Will you again rap upon the door?"

"It is useless, Lesba."

"Try the back door; they may hear you from there," she suggested.

So I made my way, stumbling over tangled vines and protruding roots, to the rear of the house, where the shadows lay even thicker than in front. I found the door, and hammered upon it with all my strength. The noise might have raised the dead, but as I listened intently there came not the least footfall to reward me. For a time I hesitated what to do. From the grim forest behind me I heard a half-audible snarl and the bark of a wolf; in the house an impressive silence reigned supreme.

I drew back, convinced that the place was uninhabited, and returned around the corner of the house.

"There is no one here, donzella," I began, but stopped short in amazement.

The carriage was gone.

CHAPTER XX.

"Arise and Strike!"

I sprang to the road and peered eagerly in every direction. Far away in the distance could be discerned the dim outlines of the carriage, flying along the way from whence we had come.

Lesba had brought me to this place only to desert me, and it was not difficult to realize that she had sent me to the rear of the house to get me out of the way while she wheeled the carriage around and dashed away unheard over the soft moss.

Well, I had ceased to speculate upon the girl's erratic actions. Only one thing seemed clear to me; that she had returned to rescue her brother from the danger which threatened him. Why she had assisted me to escape the soldiery only to leave me in this wilderness could be accounted for but by the suggestion that her heart softened toward one whom she knew had learned to love her during those bright days we had passed in each other's society. But that she loved me in return I dared not even hope. Her answer to my declaration had been a laugh, and to me this girl's heart was as a sealed book. Moreover, it occurred to me that Valcour also loved her, and into his eyes I had seen her gaze as she never had gazed into mine during our most friendly intercourse.

The carriage had vanished long since, and the night air was chill. I returned to the porch of the deserted house, and curling myself up on one of the benches soon sank into a profound slumber, for the events of the day had well-nigh exhausted me.

When I awoke a rough-looking, bearded man was bending over me. He wore a peasant's dress and carried a gun on his left arm.

"Who are you, senhor," he demanded, as my eyes unclosed, "and how came you here?"

I arose and stretched myself, considering who he might be.

"Why do you ask?" said I.

"There is war in the land, senhor," he responded, quietly, "and every man must be a friend or a foe to the Republic." He doffed his hat with rude devotion at the word, and added, "Declare yourself, my friend."

I stared at him thoughtfully. War in the land, said he! Then the "torch of rebellion" had really been fired. But by whom? Could it have been Paola, as Valcour had claimed? And why? Since the conspiracy had been unmasked and its leaders, with the exception of Fonseca, either scattered or imprisoned? Did the Minister of Police aim to destroy every one connected with the Cause by precipitating an impotent revolt? Or was there a master-hand directing these seemingly incomprehensible events?

The man was growing suspicious of my silence.

"Come!" said he, abruptly; "you shall go to Senhor Bastro."

"And where is that?" I asked, with interest, for Paola had reported that Bastro had fled the country.

My captor did not design to reply. With the muzzle of his gun unpleasantly close to my back he marched me toward the edge of the forest, which we skirted for a time in silence. Then the path turned suddenly into a dense thicket, winding between close-set trees until, deep within the wood, we came upon a natural clearing of considerable extent.

In the centre of this space was a large, low building constructed of logs and roofed with branches of trees, and surrounding the entire structure were grouped native Brazilians, armed with rifles, revolvers, and knives.

(To be Continued.)