

THE CRAFTSMAN, HAMILTON, 15th JANUARY, 1869

EL TORO NEGRO.

FOR THE CRAFTSMAN.

The chapter of history which I open here, has, so far as I know, been left unturned by other hands. It is a black and bloody episode of an evil race and a fierce soil, and, except that it presents fairly the true characteristics of a strange society, carries but little claim to Anglo-Saxon attention. As little, that is, as may be involved in any record of atrocious crime, or any reference to the most wholesale Murder of our age.

I narrate it in these pages, because, in the whole abominable story there is present one single gleam of light—Light such as Craftsmen honour. It tells a forbidding story of profane iniquity and treachery—of itself of interest insufficient to gain for it admittance here. But it tells also how far Masonry was instrumental in alleviating some share of its grim horror, and goes to prove, I think, that the influence we wield is not a wholly selfish one; but may be directed here and there in the broad service of humanity—without as well as within the pale.

So, with no further introduction I write it down as briefly as I am able, and as faithfully as my memory will serve me as to the events of years long gone by.

“Hush! For the love of the blessed Virgin, silence!”

It was in the *patio* of one of the huge dilapidated old houses of the Plaza Santa Anna that I was stooping down to select the covenanted number of francs in payment of his services, by the light of a tallow candle, when I felt his hand heavy on my arm and heard his deep whisper in my ear as the light was noiselessly extinguished.

It was close upon midnight and dark as pitch. The streets were utterly deserted, and the slight shiver of one of the horses standing beside us was the only sound that for some seconds broke upon my perception of the silence. But presently I became aware of marching footsteps in the next street, and my heart began to beat strangely as I felt the column wheeling round the corner of the church, and advancing straight down our side of the square.

All this time his hand was heavy on my arm, and as the men moved down the middle of the street, within twenty feet of us, the gripe tightened into pain. More than half the company had passed when my unlucky horse, pony, mule, or whatever it was, which it had been most difficult to arouse from lethargy along the road, fired with præter-natural energy, struck the marble pavement with a ringing hoof that sent its echoes unmistakably distinct through the sultry calm of the quiet night.

“Halt! Who goes there?” There were some other words of hoarse Castillian command and the muskets dropped with a hollow rattle. It scarcely needed the final turn of the vice upon my shoulder to give point to the hissing words, “Advance and speak to him;” and scarcely knowing what I was about to say or do, I crossed the threshold of the gateway.

I could just make out the figure of the officer who,

standing in some perplexity, sword in hand, was repeating his challenge, and the notion flashed upon me that I recognized him. Trusting to the chance, I accosted him with the first words that came uppermost.

“Ah Senor Bermudez, who should have thought of meeting you here at this hour? Just in the nick of time too, when I have been for ten minutes trying to coax a light for my cigarito out of the matches that are always damp in this charming country of yours”—he had recognized me by this time, and with the grave courtesy of the Spaniard had handed me his fire, but I still spoke nervously—“I had expected to find you at pool or in bed, instead of rambling about at this hour with no better company than your men to talk to.”

“And you, Senor? They told me at the hotel that you had been out all day; but I was not aware upon horseback. You English are perfect Centaurs. But it is scarcely prudent to be quite alone even if one is brave. I can spare you a file as far as home if you like.”

“Thanks, Comandante, I will try to take care of myself without your heroes. But this is late duty, is it not? Nothing unusually wrong in the town to-night, I hope?”

“Senor, you are English, and do not trouble yourself about our little affairs. But the Isthmus is in a very disturbed state, and soldiering is not always the holiday work that you may fancy. You won't have the men then? I will call in and take my revenge when this is over. *Manana*. Forward there! march!” and the dainty little man had disappeared in the blackness before I had recovered from my bewilderment.

It was with an uneasy sense of having indefinitely compromised myself that I turned inwards, and proffered the stipulated remuneration to my guide. The footsteps had quite died out now, but he spoke still only in hushed tones, as he respectfully, but firmly, put aside my hand.

“No money from you, Senor. You have held my life in your hands to-night, and you have saved it. And even we who are not white,” and he seemed to draw himself up half defiantly, “know how to feel grateful to our preservers. Catarina will pray the holy Virgin for your fortune, and I—there is not much that I can do just now, but there may come a day before very long when, even an Englishman may have worse friends in Panama than El Toro Negro.”

I have always believed that it was a tear—the first perhaps that El Toro had ever shed,—that struck upon my hand as he kissed it. I left him there all alone, between the horses, in the centre of his enemies' power, and when the darkness had speedily swallowed him, I had seen him alive for the last time.

I had picked him up eight miles from town in a *ranch* in the centre of the Savannah, in which I had lost my way towards nightfall, in the course of a lonely walk homewards from the ruins of Panama Viejo. Although not unarmed I had entered the hut doubtfully, and only under the pressure of imperious necessity, and the swagger and truculence of the three negroes I found therein had done little to reassure me. But these three were not its only occupants, and with Catarina, whom I surprised, crooning a barbaric lullaby by the grass hammock