

WEBSTER-MAN'S MAN

CHAPTER XV.

Throughout the forenoon Webster and Dolores, from the deck of the steamer, watched the city. By ten o'clock the sounds of battle had swelled to a deeper, steadier roar, and refugees arriving brought various and fragmentary stories of the fighting. From this hodge-podge of misinformation, however, Webster decided that Ricardo's troops were forcing the issue with vim and determination, and since the most furious fighting was now well in toward the heart of the city, it seemed reasonable to presume the struggle was for possession of the arsenal and palace.

At noon the deep diapason of conflict began to slacken; by one o'clock it had dwindled considerably, and at two o'clock Webster, gazing anxiously cityward, observed Leber's launch coming rapidly out from shore. At the wheel stood Don Juan Cafetero; as the launch shot in under the vessel's side he looked up, searching for Webster's face among the curious throng that lined the rail.

"Who has won?" a voice called, and another, evidently a humorist and a shrewd judge of human nature, replied: "Why ask foolish questions? The rebels, of course. That fellow's Irish and the Irish are born rebels. Look at the scoundrel. He's black with gun grease and burned powder where he isn't red with blood. The butcher!"

"Faugh-a-ballagh!" he shrieked. "We've got the devils cornered now. 'Twill be over two hours hence."

Don Juan tied up the launch at the gangway and leaped up the ladder, three steps at a time. "Glory be to God," he panted and hurled himself into Webster's arms. "I was in it! I was. I got back in time to catch up wit' the lads at the warehouse an' they were the fine, fightin' devils, I'll gamble you. Och, 'twas a grand bit av a fight—whilst it lasted. They put me in the motor-truck, loadin' the belts wit' cartridges as fast as the gunners emptied them, but faith they couldn't keep me there. I got into the heart av the scrimmage in the yard av the arsenal an' 'twas well for that little Doctor Pacheco I did. 'Twas wurrik to me likin'. I'd a machete—"

"You bloodthirsty scoundrel!" Webster shook the war-mad son of Erin. "I told you not to mix in it, but to hang around on the fringe of the fight, and bring us early news. Suppose you'd been killed? Who would have come for us then? Didn't I tell you we had a dinner engagement in the palace?"

"Me on the fringes av a fight?" sputtered Don Juan, amazed and outraged. "Take shame for yerself, sor. There was niver the likes av me hung around the fringes av a fight, an' well ye know it."

"I'm amazed that you even remembered your instructions," Webster rasped at him.

"Sure, our division had cleaned up nicely an' I had nothin' else to do, God bless ye. They were besiegin' the palace when I left, an' small chance av takin' it for a couple av hours; what fightin' there was on the outside was street shootin'—an' not to me likin'."

"Is it quite safe to bring Miss Ruey ashore, John?"

"'Tis safe enough at the Hotel Mateo. We have the city for half a mile beyant, in the rear av them—an' they're not fightin' to get to the bay. The guards an' some av the Fifteenth infantry regiment are in the palace an' the quartet close by, an' 'thin that we failed to get in the arsenal have 'fined them. But the bulk av the Sarros army is thyrin' to break through to the south an' west, to get to the hills. D'ye mind the spur track that runs in a semi-circle around the city? Well, thin, the rebels are behint the embankment, takin' it easy. Have no worry, sor. Whin we've took the palace we'll move on an' drive the vagabonds from behint up to that railroad embankment, when General Ruey can bid them the time av day."

Webster turned to Dolores. "Do you wish to go ashore?"

"Hah! So here you are, my lamb," she greeted Dolores. "Right-o. Just where yer ought to be, Gor bless yer sweet face. Let these poor misfortunate lads see that the sister o' the new president ain't too proud to care for 'em. Ere, lass. 'Old up the 'ead o' this young cockerel with the 'ole in 'is neck. Ere, lad. Tyke a brace now! 'Ere's some o' your own people, not a lot o' bloomin' yeller bellies, come to put something else in yer neck—something that'll stimulate yer."

The "young cockerel," a blond youth of scarce 20 summers, twisted his head and grinned up at Dolores as she knelt beside him to lift him up. "Here, here, sister," he mumbled, "you'll get that white dress dirty. Never mind me. It's just a flesh wound, only my neck has got stiff and I'm weak from loss of blood."

Mother Jenks winked at Webster as she set a glass of brandy to the stricken

adventurer's lips. "I've found a job helping Mother Jenks. You and Don Juan may run along if you wish. I know you're as curious as children."

They were. It would have been impossible for any man with red corpuscles in his blood to harken to the shouting and shouts only three city blocks distant without yearning to see the fight itself.

"'Til return in 15 minutes, at the latest," he promised her, and with Don Juan Cafetero, who had helped Webster to a rifle and bayonet from one of the wounded, he turned the corner into the next street which they followed west through a block plentifully sprinkled with the dead of both factions.

Don Juan led the way through an alley in the rear of the Catedral de la Santa Cruz to the door of the sacristy; as he placed his hand on the latch three rifle bullets struck around them, showering them with fragments of falling adobe.

"There's a house party in the neighborhood," yelled Don Juan and darted into the church, with Webster at his heels, just in time to escape another

fusillade. They walked through the sacristy and passed through a door into the great cathedral, with its high, carved, gothic-arched ceiling. Through the thick-closed doors of the main entrance, lost in the dimness of space out in front, the sounds of the battle half a block away seemed very distant, indeed.

They passed the altar and Don Juan genuflected and crossed himself reverently. "I'll be afther makin' me confession," he whispered to Webster. "Wait for me, sor."

He leaned his rifle against the altar railing, crossed the church and touched lightly on the shoulder a monk kneeling in prayer before the altar of the Virgin; the latter bent his head while Don Juan whispered; then he rose and both went into the confessional, while Webster found a bench along the wall and waited.

Presently Don Juan came forth, knelt on the red-tiled floor and prayed—something, Webster suspected, he had not done for quite a while. And when he had finished his supplication and procured his rifle, Webster joined him, the monk unbolted the door and from the quiet of the house of God they passed out into the street and the tumult of hell.

"I've been clost to death this day," Don Juan explained, "an' the day is not done. Be the same token, 'tis long since I'd made me last confession; sure, until you picked me out av the mire, sor, 'tis little thought I had for the hereafter."

From their place they could see a dozen or more of Ricardo's hired fighters crouched under the shelter of the palace walls across the street. "I think we'll be safer there," Webster cried, as a couple of bullets struck the stone steps at their feet and ricocheted against the cathedral door. "That rifle of yours is making you a marked man, Don Juan."

They ran across the street and joined the men under the palace wall. "What's this?" Don Juan demanded briskly. "Have ye not smoked them out yet?"

"Noddings doing," a young German answered. "Der chief has sent word we shall not artillery use on der balace. Men all around it we haf, mit a machine gun commanding each gate; most of der poys have chust moved out west in der rear of der government troops."

"Thee," Don Juan declared with con-

viction, "there'll be no messin' here to speak av, until later."

"Der is plenty of choy hunting snipers, mein freund. Der houses hereabouts vos filled mit dem."

"'Til have no cat fights in mine," Don Juan retorted. "Come wit' me, so, an' we'll be in at the death out beyant at the railroad embankment."

"Too late," Webster answered, for on the instant to the west the crackle of rifle and machine gun fire interluded with the staccato barks of a Maxim-Vickers broke out, swelling almost immediately to a steady outpouring of sound. "We'll stay here where we're safe for the finals. When General Ruey has cleaned up out there he'll come here to take command."

For half an hour the sounds of a brisk engagement to the west did not slacken; then with disconcerting suddenness the uproar died away fully 50 per cent.

"They're going in with the bayonet and machetes," somebody who knew remarked laconically. "Wait and you'll hear the cheering."

They waited fully ten minutes, but presently, as the firing gradually died away, they heard it, faint and indistinguishable at first, but gradually becoming nearer. And presently the trapped men in the palace heard it, too. "Viva Ruey! Viva! Viva Ruey!"

"All over but the shouting," Don Juan remarked disgustedly. "The lads in the palace will surrender now. Sure General Ruey was right afther all. For why should he shoot holes in the house he's goin' to live in, an' where, be the same token, he gives a dinner party this night?"

"I'm glad the end is in sight," Webster replied. "We have no interest in this revolution, John, and it isn't up to us to horn in on the play; yet if it went against the Ruey faction, I fear we'd be forced into active service in spite of ourselves. There is such a thing as fighting to save one's skin, you know."

Don Juan laughed pleasantly. "What a shame we missed the row out beyant at the railroad embankment," he declared.

"I wish you'd kept out of it, Don Juan. What business had you in the fight at the quartel? Suppose you'd been killed?"

"Small loss!" Don Juan retorted. "I should have mourned you nevertheless, John."

"Would you that same?" Don Juan's buttermilk eyes lighted with affection and pleasure. "Would it put a pang in the heart of you, sor, to see me stretched?"

"Yes, it would, John. You're a wild, impulsive, lunatic, worthless Irishman, but there's a broad vein of pay ore in you, and I want you to live until I can develop it. When Mr. Geary returns to operate the mine, he'll need a foreman he can trust."

"And do you trust me, sor?"

"Do indeed, John. By the way, you never gave me your word of honor to cut out red liquor for keeps. Up till today I've had to watch you—and I don't want to do that. It isn't dignified for either of us, and from today on you must be a man or a mouse. If you prove yourself a man, I want you in my business; if you prove yourself a mouse, somebody else may have you. How about you John? The cantinas will be open tonight, and fire water will be free to the soldiers of the new republic. Must I watch you tonight?"

Don Juan shook his reckless red head. "I'll never let a drop of liquor cross my lips without your permission, sor," he promised simply. "I am the man and you are the master."

"We'll shake hands on that!" After the western habit of validating all verbal agreements with a hand shake, Webster thrust his hand out to his man, who took it in both of his and held it for half a minute. He wanted to speak, but couldn't; he could only bow his head as his eyes clouded with the tears of his appreciation. "Ah, sor," he bursted presently, "Ta die for ye an' welcome the chanst."

A wild yell of alarm broke out in the next block, at the north gate of the palace; there was a sudden flurry of rifle fire and cries of "Here they come! Stop them! Stop them! They're breaking out!"

Without awaiting orders the hired fighters along the wall—some 15 of them—leaped out into the street, forming a skirmish line, just as a troop of cavalry, with drawn sabers, swept around the corner and charged upon the devoted little line. "Sarros must be thyrin' to make his get-away," Don Juan Cafetero remarked coolly, and emptied a saddle. "They threw open the big palace gate, an' the guards are clearin' a way for him to the bay." He emptied another saddle.

In the meantime Ricardo's fire entered had not been idle. The instant the guards turned into the street a deadly magazine fire had been opened on them. They had already suffered heavily winning through the gate and past the besiegers in front of it, but once they turned the corner into the next street they had the fire of bur a handful of men to contend with. Nevertheless it was sufficiently deadly. Many of the horses in the front rank went down with their riders, forcing the

madened animals behind to clear their carcasses by leaping over them, which some did. Many, however, tripped and stumbled in their wild gallop, spilling their riders.

"Stay by the wall, you madman," Webster ordered. "There'll be enough left to ride down those men in the street and saber them!"

And there were! They died to a man, and the sadly depleted troop of guards galloped on, leaving Don Juan and Webster unscathed on the sidewalk, the only two living men unhurt in that shambles.

Not for long, however, did they have the street to themselves. Around the corner of the palace wall a limousine, with the curtains drawn, swung on two wheels, skidded, struck the carcass of a horse and turned over, catapulting the chauffeur into the middle of the street.

"Sarros!" shrieked Don Juan and ran to the overturned vehicle. It was quite empty.

"Bully boy, Senor Sarros," Webster laughed. "He's turned a pretty trick, hasn't he? Sent his guards out to hack a pathway for an empty limousine! That means he's hoping to draw the watchers from the other gate!"

But Don Juan Cafetero was not listening; he was running at top speed for the south gate of the palace grounds—and Webster followed.

As they swung into the street upon which this south gate opened, Webster saw that it was deserted of all save the dead, for Sarros' clever ruse had worked well and had had the effect of arousing the curiosity of his enemies; as to the cause of the uproar at the north gate, in consequence of which they had all scurried around the block to see what they could see, thus according Sarros the thing he desired, most—a fighting chance and a half minute to get through the gate and headed for the steamship landing without interference.

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"That's him. Shtop the devil!" screamed Don Juan. "They'll do the decent thing be me if I take him alive."

To Webster, who had acquired the art of snap shooting while killing time in many a lonely camp, the bay charger offered an easy mark. "Hate to do down that beautiful animal," he remarked—and pulled away.

The horse leaped into the air and came down stiff-legged; Sarros spurred it cruelly, and the gallant beast strove to gather itself into its stride, staggered and sank to its knees, as with a wild Irish yell Don Juan Cafetero reached the dictator's side.

Sarros drew a revolver, but before he could use it Don Juan tapped him smartly over the head with his rifle barrel, and the man toppled inertly to the ground beside his dying horse.

"More power to ye, sor," Don Juan called cheerily and turned to receive Webster's approval.

What he saw paralyzed him for an instant. Webster was standing beside the gate, firing into a dozen of Sarros' soldiery who were pouring out of a house just across the street, where for an hour they had crouched unseen and unheard by the Ruey men at the gate. They were practically out of ammunition and had merely been awaiting a favorable opportunity to escape before the rebels should enter the city in force and the house-to-house search for snipers should begin. They had been about to emerge and beat a hasty retreat, when Sarros rode out at the gate, and with a rush they followed, gaining the sidewalk in time to be witnesses to the dictator's downfall.

For a moment they had passed, huddled on the sidewalk behind their officer, who, turning to scout the street up and down, beheld John Stuart Webster standing by the gate with an automatic in his hand. At the same instant Webster's attention had been attracted to the little band on the sidewalk; in their leader he recognized not less a personage than his late acquaintance, the fire eating Capt. Jose Benavides. Coincidentally Benavides recognized Webster.

It was an awkward situation. Webster realized the issue was about to be decided, that if he would have it in his favor, he should wait not one split-second before killing the mercurial Benavides as the latter stood staring at him. It was not a question, now, of who should beat the other to the draw, for each had already filled his hand. It was a question, rather, as to who should recover first from his astonishment. If Benavides decided to let bygones be bygones and retreat without firing a shot, then Webster was quite willing to permit him to pass unmolested; indeed, such was his aversion to shooting any man, so earnestly did he hope the Sobrantean would consider that discretion was the better part of valor, that he resolved to inculcate that ideal in the Hotsbur.

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