

JOHN BLOUNDELLE-BURTON

A BITTER HERITAGE

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A Bitter Heritage / A Modern Story of Love and Adventure

CHAPTER I

"YOU WILL FORGIVE?"

A young man, good-looking, with well-cut features, and possessing a pair of clear blue-grey eyes, sat in a first-class smoking compartment of a train standing in Waterloo Station—a train that, because there was one of those weekly race-meetings going on farther down the line, which take place all through the year, gave no sign of ever setting forth upon its journey. Perhaps it was natural that it should not do so, since, as the dwellers on the southern banks of the Thames are well aware, the special trains for the frequenters of race-courses take precedence of all other travellers; yet, notwithstanding that such is the case, this young man seemed a good deal annoyed at the delay. One knows how such annoyance is testified by those subjected to that which causes it; how the watch is frequently drawn forth and consulted, the station clock glanced at both angrily and often, the officials interrogated, the cigarette flung impatiently out of the window, and so forth; wherefore no further description of the symptoms is needed.

All things, however, come to an end at last, and this young man's impatience was finally appeased by the fact of the train in which he sat moving forward heavily, after another ten minutes' delay; and also by the fact that, after many delays and stoppages, it eventually passed through Vauxhall and gradually, at a break-neck speed of about ten miles an hour, forced its way on towards the country.

"Thank goodness!" exclaimed Julian Ritherdon, "thank goodness! At last there is a chance that I may see the dear old governor before night falls. Yet, what on earth is it that I am to be told when I do see him—what on earth does his mysterious letter mean?" And, as he had done half a dozen times since the waiter had brought the "mysterious letter" to the room in the huge caravansary where he had slept overnight, he put his hand in the breast pocket of his coat and, drawing it forth, began another perusal of the document.

Yet his face clouded—as it had done each time he read the letter, as it was bound to cloud on doing so! — at the first worst words it contained; words which told the reader how soon—very soon now, unless the writer was mistaken—he would no longer form one of the living human units of existence.

"Poor old governor, poor old dad!" Lieutenant Ritherdon muttered as he read those opening lines. "Poor old dad! The best father any man ever had—the very best. And now to be doomed; now—and he scarcely fifty! It is rough. By Jove, it is!"

Then again he read the letter, while by this time the train, by marvellous exertions, was making its way swiftly through all the beauty that the springtide had brought to the country lying beyond the suburban belt. Yet, just now, he saw nothing of that beauty, and failed indeed to appreciate the warmth of the May day, or to observe the fresh young green of the leaves or the brighter green of the growing corn—he saw and enjoyed nothing of all this. How should he do so, when the letter from his father appeared like a knell of doom that was being swiftly tolled with, for conclusion, hints—nay! not hints, but statements—that some strange secrets which had long lain hidden in the past must now be instantly revealed, or remain still hidden—forever?

It was not a long letter; yet it told enough, was pregnant with matter.

"If," the writer said, after the usual form of address, "your ship, the Caractacus, does not get back with the rest of the Squadron ere long, I am very much afraid we have seen the last of each other; that—and Heaven alone knows how hard it is to have to write such words! — we shall never

meet again in this world. And this, Julian, would make my death more terrible than I can bear to contemplate. My boy, I pray nightly, hourly, that you may soon come home. I saw the specialist again yesterday and he said-Well! no matter what he said. Only, only-time is precious now; there is very little more of it in this world for me."

Julian Ritherdon gazed out of the open window as he came to these words, still seeing nothing that his eyes rested on, observing neither swift flowering pink nor white may, nor budding chestnut, nor laburnum bursting into bloom, nor hearing the larks singing high up above the cornfields-thinking only again and again: "It is hard. Hard! Hard! To die now-and he not fifty!"

"And I have so much to tell you," he read on, "so much to-let me say it at once-confess. Oh! Julian, in my earlier days I committed a monstrous iniquity-a sin that, if it were not for our love for each other-thank God, there has always been that between us! – nothing can deprive the past of that! – would make my ending even worse than it must be. Now it must be told to you. It must. Already, because I begin to fear that your ship may be detained, I have commenced to write down the error, the crime of my life-yet-yet-I would sooner tell it to you face to face, with you sitting before me. Because I do not think, I cannot think that, when you recall how I have always loved you, done my best for you, you will judge me hardly, nor-"

The perusal of this letter came, perforce, to an end now, for the train, after running through a plantation of fir and pine trees, had pulled up at a little wayside station; a little stopping-place built to accommodate the various dwellers in the villa residences scattered all around it, as well as upon the slope of the hill that rose a few hundred yards off from it.

Here Julian Ritherdon was among home surroundings, since, even before the days when he had gone as a cadet into the Britannia and long before he had become a lieutenant in the Royal Navy, his father had owned one of those villas. Now, therefore, the station-master and the one porter (who slept peacefully through the greater part of the day, since but few trains stopped here) came forward to greet him and to answer his first question as to how his father was.

Nor, happily, were their answers calculated to add anything further to his anxiety, since the station-master had not "heard" that Mr. Ritherdon was any "wus" than usual, and the porter had "seed" him in his garden yesterday. Only, the latter added gruesomely, "he was that white that he looked like-well, he dursn't say what he looked like."

Mr. Ritherdon kept no vehicle or trap of any sort, and no cab was ever to be seen at this station unless ordered by an intending arrival or departing traveller on the previous day, from the village a mile or so off; wherefore Julian started at once to walk up to the house, bidding the porter follow him with his portmanteau. And since the villa, which stood on the little pine-wooded eminence, was no more than a quarter of a mile away, it was not long ere he was at the garden gate and, a moment later, at the front door. Yet, from the time he had left the precincts of the station and had commenced the ascent of the hill, he had seen the white face of his father at the open window and the white hand frequently waved to him.

"Poor old governor," he thought to himself, "he has been watching for the coming of the train long before it had passed Wimbeldon, I'll be sworn."

Then, in another moment, he was with his father and, their greeting over, was observing the look upon his face, which told as plainly as though written words had been stamped upon it of the doom that was about to fall.

"What is it?" he said a little later, almost in an awestruck manner. Awestruck because, when we stand in the presence of those whose sentence we know to be pronounced beyond appeal there falls upon us a solemnity almost as great as that which we experience when we gaze upon the dead. "What is it, father?"

"The heart," Mr. Ritherdon answered. "Valvular disease. Sir Josias Smith says. However, do not let us talk about it. There is so much else to be discussed. Tell me of the cruise in the Squadron, where you went to, what you saw-"

"But-your letter! Your hopes that I should soon be back. You have not forgotten? The-the-something-you have to tell me.

"No," Mr. Ritherdon answered. "I have not forgotten. Heaven help me! it has to be told. Yet-yet not now. Let us enjoy the first few hours together pleasantly. Do not ask to hear it now."

And Julian, looking at him, saw those signs which, when another's heart is no longer in its normal state, most of us have observed: the lips whitening for a moment, the left hand raised as though about to be pressed to the side, the dead white of the complexion.

"If," he said, "it pains you to tell me anything of the past, why-why-tell it at all? Is it worth while? Your life can contain little that must necessarily be revealed and-even though it should do so-why reveal it?"

"I must," his father answered, "I must tell you. Oh!" he exclaimed, "oh! if at the last it should turn you against me-make you-despise-hate-"

"No! No! never think that," Julian replied quickly, "never think that. What! Turn against you! A difference between you and me! It is impossible."

As he spoke he was standing by his father's side, the latter being seated in his armchair, and Julian's hand was on the elder man's shoulder. Then, as he patted that shoulder-once, too, as he touched softly the almost prematurely grey hair-he said, his voice deep and low and full of emotion:

"Whatever you may tell me can make no difference in my love and respect for you. How can you think so? Recall what we have been to each other since I was a child. Always together till I went to sea-not father and son, but something almost closer, comrades-"

"Ah, Julian!"

"Do you think I can ever forget that, or forget your sacrifices for me; all that you have done to fit me for the one career I could have been happy in? Why, if you told me that you-oh! I don't know what to say! how to make you understand me! – but, if you told me you were a murderer, a convict, a forger, I should still love you; love you as you say you loved the mother I never knew-"

"Don't! Don't! For Heaven's sake don't speak like that-don't speak of her! Your mother! I-I have to speak to you of her later. But now-now-I cannot bear it!"

For a moment Julian looked at his father, his eyes full of amazement; around his heart a pang that seemed to grip at it. They had not often spoken of his mother in the past, the subject always seeming one that was too painful to Mr. Ritherdon to be discussed, and, beyond the knowledge that she had died in giving birth to him, Julian knew nothing further. Yet now, his father's agitation-such as he had never seen before-his strange excitement, appalled, almost staggered him.

"Why?" he exclaimed, unable to refrain from dwelling upon her. "Why not speak of her? Was she-"

"She was an angel. Ah," he continued, "I was right-this story of my past must be told-of my crime. Remember that, Julian, remember that. My crime! If you listen to me, if you will hear me, as you must-then remember it is the story of a crime that you will learn. And," he wailed almost, "there is no help for it. You must be told!"

"Tell it, then," Julian said, still speaking very gently, though even as he did so it seemed as if he were the elder man, as if he were the father and the other the son. "Tell it, let us have done with vagueness. There has never been anything hidden between us till now. Let there be nothing whatever henceforth."

"And you will not hate me? You will-forgive, whatever I may have to tell?"

"What have I said?" Julian replied. And even as he did so, he again smoothed his father's hair while he stood beside him.

CHAPTER II

THE STORY OF A CRIME

The disclosure was made, not among, perhaps, surroundings befitting the story that was told; not with darkness outside and in the house-with, in truth, no lurid environments whatever. Instead, the elderly man and the young one, the father and son, sat facing each other in the bright sunny room into which there streamed all the warmth and brilliancy of the late springtide, and into which, now and again, a humble-bee came droning or a butterfly fluttered. Also, between them was a table white with napery, sparkling with glass and silver, gay with fresh-cut flowers from the garden. It is amid such surroundings that, nowadays, we often enough listen to stories brimful with fate-stories baneful either to ourselves or others-hear of trouble that has fallen like a blight upon those we love, or learn that something has happened which is to change forever the whole current of our own lives.

It was thus that Julian Ritherdon listened to the narrative his father now commenced to unfold; thus amid such environment, and with a freshly-lit cigarette between his lips.

"You do not object to this?" he asked, pointing to the latter; "it will not disturb you?"

"I object to nothing that you do," Mr. Ritherdon replied. "In my day, I have, as you know, been a considerable smoker myself."

"Yes, in the days, your days, that I know of. But-forgive me for asking-only-is it to tell me of your earlier years, those with which I am not acquainted, that you summoned me here and bade me lose no time in coming to you? – those earlier days of which you have spoken so little in the past?"

"For that," replied the other slowly, "and other reasons. To hear things that will startle and disconcert you. Yet-yet-they have their bright side. You are the heir to a great—"

"My dear father!"

"Your 'dear father'! Ay! Your 'dear father'!" Once more, nay, twice more, he repeated those words-while all the time the younger man was looking at him intently. "Your 'dear father.'" Then, suddenly, he exclaimed: "Come, let us make a beginning. Are you prepared to hear a strange story?"

"I am prepared to hear anything you may have to tell me."

"So be it. Pay attention. You have but this moment called me your 'dear father.' Well, I am not your father! Though I should have been had all happened as I once-so long ago-so-so long ago-hoped would be the case."

"*Not-my-father!*" and the younger man stared with a startled look at the other. "Not-my-father. You, who have loved me, fostered me, anticipated every thought, every wish of mine since the first moment I can recollect-not my father! Oh!" and even as he spoke he laid his hand, brown but shapely, on the white, sickly looking one of the other. "Don't say that! Don't say that!"

"I must say it."

"My God! who, then, are you? What are you to me? And-and-who-am-I? It cannot be that we are of strange blood."

And the faltering words of the younger man, the blanched look that had come upon his face beneath his bronze-also the slight tremor of the cigarette between his fingers would have told Mr. Ritherdon, even though he had not already known well enough that such was the case, how deep a shock his words had produced.

"No," he answered slowly, and on his face, too, there was, if possible, a denser, more deadly white than had been there an hour ago-while his lips had become even a deeper leaden hue than before. "No. Heaven at least be praised for that! I am your father's brother, therefore, your uncle."

"Thank Heaven we are so near of kin," and again the hand of the young man pressed that of the elder one. "Now," he continued, though his voice was solemn-hoarse as he spoke, "go on. Tell me all. Blow as this is-yet-tell me all."

"First," replied the other, "first let me show you something. It came to me by accident, otherwise perhaps I should not have summoned you so hurriedly to this meeting; should have restrained my impatience to see you. Yet-yet-in my state of health, it is best to tell you by word of mouth-better than to let you find out when-I-am-dead, through the account I have written and should have left behind me. But, to begin with, read this," and he took from his breast pocket a neatly bound notebook, and, opening it, removed from between the pages a piece of paper-a cutting from a newspaper.

Still agitated-as he would be for hours, for days hence! – at all that he had already listened to, still sorrowful at hearing that the man whom he loved so much, who had been so devoted to him from his infancy, was not his father, Julian Ritherdon took the scrap and read it. Read it hastily, while in his ear he heard the other man saying-murmuring: "It is from a paper I buy sometimes in London at a foreign newspaper shop, because in it there is often news of a-of Honduras, where, you know, some of my earlier life was passed."

Nodding his head gravely to signify that he heard and understood, Julian devoured the cutting, which was from the well-known New Orleans paper, the Picayune. It was short enough to be devoured at a glance. It ran:

Our correspondent at Belize informs us by the last mail, amongst other pieces of intelligence from the colony, that Mr. Ritherdon (of Desolada), one of the richest, if not the richest, exporters of logwood and mahogany, is seriously ill and not expected to recover. Mr. Ritherdon came to the colony nearly thirty years ago, and from almost the first became extremely prosperous.

"Well!" exclaimed Julian, laying down the slip. "Well! It means, I suppose-that-"

"He is your father? Yes. That is what it does mean. He is your father, and the wealth of which that writer speaks is yours if he is now dead; will be yours, if he is still alive-when he dies."

Because, when our emotion, when any sudden emotion, is too great for us, we generally have recourse to silence, so now Julian said nothing; he sitting there musing, astonished at what he had just heard. Then, suddenly, knowing, reflecting that he must hear more, hear all, that he must be made acquainted now with everything that had occurred in the far-off past, he said, very gently: "Yes? Well, father-for it is you whom I shall always regard in that light-tell me everything. You said just now we had better make a beginning. Let us do so."

For a moment Mr. Ritherdon hesitated, it seeming as if he still dreaded to make his avowal, to commence to unfold the strange circumstances which had caused him to pass his life under the guise of father to the young man who was, in truth, his nephew. Then, suddenly, nerving himself, as it seemed to Julian, he began:

"My brother and I went to British Honduras, twenty-eight years ago, three years before you were born; at a time when money was to be made there by those who had capital. And *he* had some-a few thousand pounds, which he had inherited from an aunt who died between his birth and mine. I had nothing. Therefore I went as his companion-his assistant, if you like to call it so. Yet-for I must do him justice-I was actually his partner. He shared everything with me until I left him."

"Yes," the other said. "Yes. Until you left him! Yet, in such circumstances, why-?"

"Leave him, you would say. Why? Can you not guess? Not understand? What separates men from each other more than all else, what divides brother from brother, what-"

"A woman's love, perhaps?" Julian said softly. "Was that it?"

"Yes. A woman's love," Mr. Ritherdon exclaimed, and now his voice was louder than before, almost, indeed, harsh. "A woman's love. The love of a woman who loved me in return. That was his fault-that for which, Heaven forgive me! – I punished him, made him suffer. She was my love-she loved me-that was certain, beyond all doubt! – and-she married him."

"Go on," Julian said-and now his voice was low, though clear, "go on."

"Her name was Isobel Leigh, and she was the daughter of an English settler who had fallen on evil days, who had gone out from England with her mother and with her-a baby. But now he had become a man who was ruined if he could not pay certain obligations by a given time. They said,

in whispers, quietly, that he had used other people's names to make those obligations valuable. And-and-I was away in New Orleans on business. You can understand what happened!"

"Yes, I can understand. A cruel ruse was practised upon you."

"So cruel that, while I was away in the United States, thinking always about her by day and night, I learnt that she had become his wife. Then I swore that it should be ruse against ruse. That is the word! He had made me suffer, he had broken, cursed my life. Well, henceforth, I would break, curse him! This is how I did it."

Mr. Ritherdon paused a moment-his face white and drawn perhaps from the emotion caused by his recollection, perhaps from the disease that was hurrying him to his end. Then, a moment later, he continued:

"There were those with whom I could communicate in Honduras, those who would keep me well informed of all that was taking place in the locality: people I could rely upon. And from them there came to New Orleans, where I still remained, partly on business and partly because it was more than I could endure to go back and see her his wife, the news that she was about to become a mother. That maddened me, drove me to desperation, forced me to commit the crime that I now conceived, and dwelt upon during every hour of the day."

"I begin to understand," Julian said, as Mr. Ritherdon paused. "I begin to understand." Then, from that time he interrupted the other no more-instead, both the narrative and his own feelings held him breathless. The narrative of how he, a newborn infant, the heir to a considerable property, had been spirited away from Honduras to England.

"I found my way to the neighbourhood of Desolada, stopping at Belize when once I was back in the colony, and then going on foot by night through the forest towards where my brother's house was-since I was forced to avoid the public road-forests that none but those who knew their way could have threaded in the dense blackness of the tropical night. Yet I almost faltered, once I turned back, meaning to return to the United States and abandon my plan. For I had met an Indian, a half-caste, who told me that she, my loved, my lost Isobel was dying, that-that-she could not survive. And then-then-I made a compact with myself. I swore that if she lived I would not tear her child away from her, but that, if-if she died, then he who had made me wifeless should himself be not only wifeless but childless too. He had tricked me; now he should be tricked by me. Only-if she should live-I could not break her heart as well.

"But again I returned upon my road: I reached a copse outside Desolada, outside the house itself. I was near enough to see that the windows were ablaze with lights, sometimes even I saw people passing behind the blinds of those windows-once I saw my brother's figure and that excited me again to madness. If she were dead I swore that then, too, he should become childless. Her child should become mine, not his. I would have that satisfaction at least.

"Still I drew nearer to the house, so near that I could hear people calling to each other. Once I thought-for now I was quite close-that I could hear the wailing of the negro women-servants-I saw a half-breed dash past me on a mustang, riding as for dear life, and I knew, I divined as surely as if I had been told, that he was gone for the doctor, that she was dying-or was dead. Your father's chance was past."

"Heaven help him!" said Julian Ritherdon. "Heaven help him. It was an awful revenge, taken at an awful moment. Well! You succeeded?"

"Yes, I succeeded. She *was* dead-I saw that when, an hour later, I crept into the room, and when I took you from out of the arms of the sleeping negro nurse-when, God forgive me, *I stole you!*"

CHAPTER III

"THE LAND OF THE GOLDEN SUN."

The mustang halted on a little knoll up which the patient beast had been toiling for some quarter of an hour, because upon that knoll there grew a clump of *gros-gros* and moriche palms which threw a grateful shade over the white, glaring, and dusty track, and Julian Ritherdon, dropping the reins on its drenched and sweltering neck, drew out his cigar-case and struck a light. Also, the negro "boy" – a man thirty years old-who had been toiling along by its side, flung himself down, crushing crimson poinsettias and purple dracæna beneath his body, and grunted with satisfaction at the pause.

"So, Snowball," Julian said to this descendant of African kings, "this ends your journey, eh? I am in the right road now and we have got to say 'Good-bye.' I suppose you don't happen to be thirsty, do you, Pompey?"

"Hoop! Hoop!" grunted the negro, showing a set of ivories that a London belle would have been proud to possess, "always thirsty. Always hungry. Always want tobacco. Money, too."

"Do you!" exclaimed Julian. "By Jove! you'd make a living as a London johnny. That's what they always want. Pity you don't live in London, Hannibal. Well, let's see."

Whereon he threw his leg over the great saddle, reached the ground, and began opening a haversack, from which he took a bottle, a packet, and a horn cup.

"Luncheon time," he said. "Sun's over the foremast! Come on, Julius Cæsar, we'll begin."

After which he opened the packet, in which was a considerable quantity of rather thickly cut sandwiches, divided it equally, and then filled the horn cup with the liquid from the bottle, which, after draining, he refilled and handed to his companion.

"I'm sorry it isn't iced, my lily-white friend," he said; "it does seem rather warm from continual contact with the mustang's back, but I daresay you can manage it. Eh?"

"Manage anything," the negro replied firmly, his mouth full of sandwich, "anything. Always-"

"Yes, I know. 'Thirsty, hungry, want tobacco and money.' I tell you, old chap, you're lost in this place. London's the spot for you. You're fitted for a more advanced state of civilization than this."

"Hoop. Hoop," again grunted the negro, and again giving the huge smile-"want-"

"This is getting monotonous, Sambo," Julian exclaimed. "Come, let's settle up;" whereon he again replenished the guide's cup, and then drew forth from his pocket two American dollars, which are by now the standard coin of the colony. "One dollar was the sum arranged for," Julian said, "but because you are a merry soul, and also because a dollar extra isn't ruinous, you shall have two. And in years to come, my daisy, you can bless the name of Mr. Ritherdon as that of a man both just and generous. Remember those words, 'just and generous.'"

The negro of many sobriquets-at each of which he had laughed like a child, as in absolute fact the negro is when not (which is extremely rare!) a vicious brute-seemed, however, to be struck more forcibly by some other words than those approving ones suggested by Julian as suitable for recollection, and, after shaking his woolly head a good deal, muttered: "Ritherdon, Ritherdon," adding afterwards, "Desolada." Then he continued: "Hard man, Massa Ritherdon. Hard man, Massa Ritherdon. Hard man. Cruel man. Beat Blacky. Beat Whitey, too, sometimes. Hard man. Cruel man."

"Sambo," said Julian, feeling (even as he spoke still jocularly to the creature-a pleasant way being the only one in which to converse with the African) that he would sooner not have heard these remarks in connection with his father, "Sambo, you should not say these things to people about their relatives. *That* would not do for London;" while at the same time he reflected that it would be little use telling his guide of the old Latin proverb suggesting that one should say nothing but good of the dead.

"You relative of Massa Ritherdon!" the other grunted now, though still with the unfailing display of ivories. "You relative. Oh! I know not that. Now," he said, thinking perhaps it was time he departed,

and before existing amicable arrangements should be disturbed, "now, I go. Back to Belize. Good afternoon to you, sir. Good-bye. I hope you like Desolada. Fifteen miles further on;" and making a kind of shambling bow, he departed back upon the road they had come. Yet not without turning at every other three or four steps he took, and waving his hand gracefully as well as cordially to his late employer.

"A simple creature is the honest black!" especially when no longer a dweller in his original equatorial savagery.

"Like it," murmured Julian to himself, "Yes, I hope so. Since it is undoubtedly my chief inheritance, I hope I shall!"

He had left Belize that morning, by following a route which the negro knew of, had arrived in the neighbourhood of a place called Commerce Bight-a spot given up to the cultivation of the cocoanut-tree. And having proceeded thus far, he knew that by nightfall he would be at Desolada-the dreary *hacienda* from which, twenty-six years before, his uncle had ruthlessly kidnapped him from his father-the father who, he had learnt since he arrived in the colony, had been dead three months. Also he knew that this property called Desolada lay some dozen miles or so beyond a village named All Pines, and on the other side of a river termed the Sittee, and, as he still sat beneath the palm-trees on the knoll where they had halted for the midday meal, he wondered what he would find when he arrived there.

"It is strange," he mused to himself now, as from out of that cool, refreshing shade he gazed across groves upon groves of mangroves at his feet, to where, sparkling in the brilliant cobalt-coloured Caribbean Sea, countless little reefs and islets-as well as one large reef-dotted the surface of the ocean, "strange that, at Belize, I could gather no information of my late father. No! not even when I told the man who kept the inn that I was come on a visit to Desolada. Why, I wonder, why was it so? My appearance seemed to freeze them into silence, almost to startle them. Why? Why-this reticence on their part? Can it be that he was so hated all about here that none will mention him? Is that it? Remembering what the negro said of him, of his brutality to black and white, can that be it? Yet my uncle hinted at nothing of the kind."

Still thinking of this, still musing on what lay before him, he adjusted the saddle (which he had previously loosened to ease the mustang) once more upon the animal's back. Then, as his foot was in the stirrup there came, swift as a flash of lightning, an idea into his mind.

"I must be like him," he almost whispered to himself, "so like him, must bear such a resemblance to him, that they are thunderstruck. And, if any who saw me can recollect that, twenty-six years ago, his newborn child was stolen from him on the night his wife died, it is no wonder that they were thunderstruck. That is, if I do resemble him so much."

But here his meditations ceased, he understanding that his name, which he had inscribed in the visitor's book lying on the marble table of the hotel, would be sufficient to cause all who learnt it to refrain from speaking about the recently dead man-his namesake.

"Yet all the same," he muttered to himself, as now the mule bore him along a more or less good road which traversed copses of oleanders and henna plants, allamandas and Cuban Royal palms-the latter of which formed occasionally a grateful shade from the glare of the sun-"all the same, I wish that darkey had not spoken about my father's cruelty. I should have preferred never to learn that he bore such a character. He must have been very different from my uncle, who, in spite of the one error of his life, was the gentlest soul that ever lived."

All the way out from England to New Orleans, and thence to Belize by a different steamer, his thoughts had been with that dear uncle-who survived the disclosure he had made but eight days-he being found dead in his bed on the morning of the ninth day-and those thoughts were with him now. Gentle memories, too, and kindly, with in them never a strain of reproach for what had been done by him in his hour of madness and desire for revenge; and with no other current of ideas running through his reflections but one of pity and regret for the unhappiness his real father must have experienced

at finding himself bereft at once of both wife and child. Regret and sorrow, too, for the years which that father must have spent in mourning for him, perhaps in praying that, as month followed month, his son might in some way be restored to him. And now he-that son-was in the colony; here, in the very locality where the bereaved man must have passed so many sad and melancholy years! Here, but too late!

Ere he died, George Ritherdon had bidden his nephew make his way to British Honduras and proclaim himself as what he was; also he had provided him with that very written statement which he had spoken of as being in preparation for Julian's own information in case he should die suddenly, ere the latter returned home.

"With that in your possession," he had said, two days before his death actually occurred, "what's there that can stand in the way of your being acknowledged as his son? He cannot have forgotten my handwriting; and even if he has, the proofs of what I say are contained in the intimate knowledge that I testify in this paper of all our surroundings and habits out there. That paper is a certificate of who you are."

"Suppose he is dead when I get there, or that he should have married again. What then?"

"He may be dead, but he has not married again. Remember what I told you last night. I know my brother has remained a widower."

"I wonder the paper did not also say that his son was stolen from him many years ago, or that there was no heir to his property, or something to that effect."

"It is strange perhaps that such a state of things is not mentioned. Yet, the Picayune's correspondent may have forgotten it, or not known it, or not have thought it worth mention-or have had other news which required to be published. Half a hundred things might have occurred to prevent mention of that one."

"And," said Julian, "presuming I do go out to British Honduras if I can get leave from the Admiralty, on 'urgent private affairs'--"

"You *must* go out. It is a fortune for you. Your father cannot be worth less than forty thousand pounds. You *must* go out, even though you have to leave the navy to do so."

Julian vowed inwardly that in no circumstances should the latter happen, while, at the same time, he thought it by no means unlikely that the necessary leave would be granted. He had already fifty days' leave standing to his credit, and he knew that not only his captain, but all his superiors in the service, thought well of him. The "urgent private affairs," when properly explained to their lordships, would make that matter easy.

"When I go to British Honduras, then," said Julian, putting now the question which he had been about to ask in a slightly different form, but asking it nevertheless, "what am I to do supposing he is dead? I may have many obstacles to encounter-to overcome."

"There can be none-few at least, and none that will be insurmountable. I had you baptised at New Orleans as his son, and, with my papers, you will find the certificate of that baptism, while the papers themselves will explain all. Meanwhile, make your preparations for setting out. You need not wait for my death--"

"Don't talk of that!"

"I must talk of it. At best it cannot be far off. Let us face the inevitable. Be ready to go as soon as possible. If I am alive when you set out, I will give you the necessary documents; if I die before you start, they are here," and as he spoke he touched lightly the desk at which he always wrote.

CHAPTER IV

AN ENCOUNTER

And now Julian Ritherdon was here, in British Honduras, within ten or fifteen miles of the estate known as Desolada—a name which had been given to the place by some original Spanish settlers years before his father and uncle had ever gone out to the colony. He was here, and that father and uncle were dead; here, and on the way to what was undoubtedly his own property; a property to which no one could dispute his right, since George Ritherdon, his uncle, had been the only other heir his father had ever had.

Yet, even as the animal which bore him continued to pace along amid all the rich tropical vegetation around them; even, too, as the yellow-headed parrots and the curassows chattered above his head and the monkeys leapt from branch to branch, he mused as to whether he was doing a wise thing in progressing towards Desolada—the place where he was born, as he reflected with a strange feeling of incredulity in his mind.

"For suppose," he thought to himself, "that when I get to it I find it shut up or in the occupation of some other settler—what am I to do then? How explain my appearance on the scene? I cannot very well ride up to the house on this animal and summon the garrison to surrender, like some knight-errant of old, and I can't stand parleying on the steps explaining who I am. I believe I have gone the wrong way to work after all! I ought to have gone and seen the Governor or the Chief Justice, or taken some advice, after stating who I was. Or Mr. Spranger! Confound it, why did I not present that letter of introduction to him before starting off here?"

The latter gentleman was a well-known planter and merchant living on the south side of Belize, to whom Julian had been furnished with a letter of introduction by a retired post-captain whom he had run against in London prior to his departure, and with whom he had dined at a Service Club. And this officer had given him so flattering an account of Mr. Spranger's hospitality, as well as the prominent position which that personage held in the little capital, that he now regretted considerably that he had not availed himself of the chance which had come in his way. More especially he regretted it, too, when there happened to come into his recollection the fact that the gallant sailor had stated with much enthusiasm—after dinner—that Beatrix Spranger, the planter's daughter, was without doubt the prettiest as well as the nicest girl in the whole colony.

However, he comforted himself with the reflection that the journey which he was now taking might easily serve as one of inspection simply, and that, as there was no particular hurry, he could return to Belize and then, before making any absolute claim upon his father's estate, take the advice of the most important people in the town.

"All of which," he said to himself, "I ought to have thought of before and decided upon. However, it doesn't matter! A week hence will do just as well as now, and, meanwhile, I shall have had a look at the place which must undoubtedly belong to me."

As he arrived at this conclusion, the mustang emerged from the forest-like copse they had been passing through, and ahead of him he saw, upon the flat plain, a little settlement or village.

"Which," thought Julian, "must be All Pines. Especially as over there are the queer-shaped mountains called the 'Cockscomb,' of which the negro told me."

Then he began to consider the advisability of finding accommodation at this place for a day or so while he made that inspection of the estate and residence of Desolada which he had on his ride decided upon.

All Pines, to which he now drew very near, presented but a bare and straggling appearance, and that not a particularly flourishing one either. A factory fallen quite into disuse was passed by Julian as he approached the village; while although his eyes were able to see that, on its outskirts,

there was more than one large sugar estate, the place itself was a poor one. Yet there was here that which the traveller finds everywhere, no matter to what part of the world he directs his footsteps and no matter how small the place he arrives at may be-an inn. An inn, outside which there were standing four or five saddled mules and mustangs, and one fairly good-looking horse in excellent condition. A horse, however, that a person used to such animals might consider as showing rather more of the hinder white of its eye than was desirable, and which twitched its small, delicate ears in a manner equally suspicious.

There seemed very little sign of life about this inn in spite of these animals, however, as Julian made his way into it, after tying up his own mustang to a nail in a tree-since a dog asleep outside in the sun and a negro asleep inside in what might be, and probably was, termed the entrance hall, scarcely furnished such signs. All the same, he heard voices, and pretty loud ones too, in some room close at hand, as well as something else, also-a sound which seemed familiar enough to his ears; a sound that he-who had been all over the world more than once as a sailor-had heard in diverse places. In Port Said to wit, in Shanghai, San Francisco, Lisbon, and Monte Carlo. The hum of a wheel, the click and rattle of a ball against brass, and then a soft voice-surely it was a woman's! – murmuring a number, a colour, a chance!

"So, so!" said Julian to himself, "Madame la Roulette, and here, too. Ah! well, madame is everywhere; why shouldn't she favour this place as well as all others that she can force her way into?"

Then he pushed open a swing door to his right, a door covered with cocoanut matting nailed on to it, perhaps to keep the place cool, perhaps to deaden sound-the sound of Madame la Roulette's clicking jaws-though surely this was scarcely necessary in such an out-of-the-way spot, and entered the room whence the noise proceeded.

The place was darkened by matting and Persians; again, perhaps, to exclude the heat or deaden *sound*; and was, indeed, so dark that, until his eyes became accustomed to the dull gloom of the room-vast and sparsely furnished-he could scarcely discern what was in it. He was, however, able to perceive the forms of four or five men seated round a table, to see coins glittering on it; and a girl at the head of the table (so dark that, doubtless, she was of usual mixed Spanish and Indian blood common to the colony) who was acting as croupier-a girl in whose hair was an oleander flower that gleamed like a star in the general duskiness of her surroundings. While, as he gazed, she twirled the wheel, murmuring softly: "Plank it down before it is too late," as well as, "Make your game," and spun the ball; while, a moment later, she flung out pieces of gold and silver to right and left of her and raked in similar pieces, also from right and left of her.

But the sordid, dusty room, across which the motes glanced in the single ray of sunshine that stole in and streamed across the table, was not-it need scarcely be said-a prototype of the gilded palace that smiles over the blue waters of the Mediterranean, nor of the great gambling chambers in the ancient streets behind the Cathedral in Lisbon, nor of the white and airy saloons of San Francisco-instead, it was mean, dusty, and dirty, while over it there was the fœtid, sickly, tropical atmosphere that pervades places to which neither light nor constant air is often admitted.

Himself unseen for the moment-since, as he entered the room, a wrangle had suddenly sprung up among all at the table over the disputed ownership of a certain stake-he stared in amazement into the gloomy den. Yet that amazement was not occasioned by the place itself (he had seen worse, or at least as bad, in other lands), but by the face of a man who was seated behind the half-caste girl acting as croupier, evidently under his directions.

Where had he seen that face, or one like it, before? That was what he was asking himself now; that was what was causing his amazement!

Where? Where? For the features were known to him-the face was familiar, some trick or turn in it was not strange.

Where had he done so, and what did it mean?

Almost he was appalled, dismayed, at the sight of that face. The nose straight, the eyes full and clear, the chin clear cut; nothing in it unfamiliar to him except a certain cruel, determined look that he did not recognise.

The dispute waxed stronger between the gamblers; the half-caste girl laughed and chattered like one of the monkeys outside in the woods, and beat the table more than once with her lithe, sinuous hand and summoned them to put down fresh stakes, to recommence the game; the men squabbled and wrangled between themselves, and one pointed significantly to his blouse-open at the breast; so significantly, indeed, that none who saw the action could doubt what there was inside that blouse, lying ready to his right hand.

That action of the man-a little wizened fellow, himself half Spaniard, half Indian, with perhaps a drop or two of the tar-bucket also in his veins-brought things to an end, to a climax.

For the other man whose face was puzzling Julian Ritherdon's brain, and puzzling him with a bewilderment that was almost weird and uncanny, suddenly sprang up from beside, or rather behind, the girl croupier and cried-

"Stop it! Cease, I say. It is you, Jaime, you who always makes these disputes. Come! I'll have no more of it. And keep your hand from the pistol or-"

But his threat was ended by his action, which was to seize the man he had addressed by the scruff of his neck, after which he commenced to haul him towards the door.

Then he-then all of them-saw the intruder, Julian Ritherdon, standing there by that door, looking at them calmly and unruffled-calm and unruffled, that is to say, except for his bewilderment at the sight of the other man's face.

They all saw him in a moment as they turned, and in a moment a fresh uproar, a new disturbance, arose; a disturbance that seemed to bode ominously for Julian. For, now, in each man's hands there was a revolver, drawn like lightning from the breast of each shirt or blouse.

"Who are you? What are you?" all cried together, except the girl, who was busily sweeping up the gold and silver on the table into her pockets. "Who? One of the constabulary from Belize? A spy! Shoot him!"

"No," exclaimed the man who bore the features that so amazed Julian Ritherdon, "no, this is not one of the constabulary;" while, as he spoke, his eyes roved over the tropical naval clothes, or "whites," in which the former was clad for coolness. "Neither do I believe he is a spy. Yet," he continued, "what are you doing here? Who are you?"

Neither their pistols nor their cries had any power to alarm Julian, who, young as he was, had already won the Egyptian medal and the Albert medal for saving life; wherefore, looking his interrogator calmly in the face, he said-

"I am on a visit to the colony, and my name is Julian Ritherdon."

"Julian Ritherdon!" the other exclaimed, "Julian Ritherdon!" and as he spoke the owner of that name could see the astonishment on all their faces. "Julian Ritherdon," he repeated again.

"That is it. Doubtless you know it hereabouts. May I be so bold as to ask what yours is?"

The man gave a hard, dry laugh-a strange laugh it was, too; then he replied, "Certainly you may. Especially as mine is by chance much the same as your own. My name is Sebastian Leigh Ritherdon."

"What! Your name is Ritherdon? You a Ritherdon? Who in Heaven's name are you, then?"

"I happen to be the owner of a property near here called Desolada. The owner, because I am the son of the late Mr. Ritherdon and of his wife, Isobel Leigh, who died after giving me birth!"

CHAPTER V

"A HALF-BREED NAMED ZARA."

To describe Julian as being startled-amazed-would not convey the actual state of mind into which the answer given by the man who said that his name was Sebastian Leigh Ritherdon, plunged him.

It was indeed something more than that; something more resembling a shock of consternation which now took possession of him.

What did it mean? – he asked himself, even as he stood face to face with that other bearer of the name of Ritherdon. What? And to this question he could find but one answer: his uncle in England must, for some reason-the reason being in all probability that his hatred for the deceit practised on him years ago had never really become extinguished-have invented the whole story. Yet, of what use such an invention! How could he hope that he, Julian, should profit by such a fabrication, by such a falsehood; why should he have bidden him go forth to a distant country there to assert a claim which could never be substantiated?

Then, even in that moment, while still he stood astounded before the other Ritherdon, there flashed into his mind a second thought, another supposition; the thought that George Ritherdon had been a madman. That was-must be-the solution. None but a madman would have conceived such a story. If it were untrue!

Yet, now, he could not pursue this train of thought; he must postpone reflection for the time being; he had to act, to speak, to give some account of himself. As to who he was, who, bearing the name of Ritherdon, had suddenly appeared in the very spot where Ritherdon was such a well-known and, probably, such an influential name.

"I never knew," the man who had announced himself as being the heir of the late Mr. Ritherdon was saying now, "that there were any other Ritherdons in existence except my late father and myself; except myself now since his death. And," he continued, "it is a little strange, perhaps, that I should learn such to be the case here in Honduras. Is it not?"

As he spoke to Julian, both his tone and manner were such as would not have produced an unfavourable impression upon any one who was witness to them. At the gaming-table, when seated behind the half-caste girl, his appearance would have probably been considered by some as sinister, while, when he had fallen upon the disputatious gambler, and had commenced-very roughly to hustle him towards the door, he had presented the appearance of a hectoring bully. Also, his first address to Julian on discovering him in the room had been by no means one that promised well for the probable events of the next few moments. But now-now-his manner and whole bearing were in no way aggressive, even though his words expressed that a certain doubt in his mind accompanied them.

"Surely," he continued, "we must be connections of some sort. The presence of a Ritherdon in Honduras, within an hour's ride of my property, must be owing to something more than coincidence."

"It is owing to something more than coincidence," Julian replied, scorning to take refuge in an absolute falsehood, though acknowledging to himself that, in the position in which he now found himself-and until he could think matters out more clearly, as well as obtain some light on the strange circumstances in which he was suddenly involved-diplomacy if not evasion-a hateful word! – was necessary.

"More than coincidence. You may have heard of George Ritherdon, your uncle, who once lived here in the colony with your father."

"Yes," Sebastian Ritherdon answered, his eyes still on the other. "Yes, I have heard my father speak of him. Yet, that was years ago. Nearly thirty, I think. Is he here, too? In the colony?"

"No; he is dead. But I am his son. And, being on leave from my profession, which is that of an officer in her Majesty's navy, it has suited me to pay a visit to a place of which he had spoken so often."

As he gave this answer, Julian was able to console himself with the reflection that, although there was evasion in it, at least there was no falsehood. For had he not always believed himself to be George Ritherdon's son until a month or so ago; had he not been brought up and entered for the navy as his son? Also, was he sure now that he was *not* his son? He had listened to a story from the dying man telling how he, Julian, had been kidnapped from his father's house, and how the latter had been left childless and desolate; yet now, when he was almost at the threshold of that house, he found himself face to face with a man, evidently well known in all the district, who proclaimed himself to be the actual son—a man who also gave, with some distinctness in his tone, the name of Isobel Leigh as that of his mother. She Sebastian Ritherdon's mother! the woman who was, he had been told, his own mother: the woman who, dying in giving birth to her first son, could consequently have never been the mother of a second. Was it not well, therefore, that, as he had always been, so he should continue to be, certainly for the present, the son of George Ritherdon, and not of Charles? For, to proclaim himself here, in Honduras, as the offspring of the latter would be to bring down upon him, almost of a surety, the charge of being an impostor.

"I knew," exclaimed Sebastian, while in his look and manner there was expressed considerable cordiality; "I knew we must be akin. I was certain of it. Even as you stood in that doorway, and as the ray of sunlight streamed across the room, I felt sure of it before you mentioned your name."

"Why?" asked Julian surprised; perhaps, too, a little agitated.

"Why! Can you not understand? Not recognise why—at once? Man alive! *We are alike!*"

Alike! Alike! The words fell on Julian with startling force. Alike! Yes, so they were! They were alike. And in an instant it seemed as if some veil, some web had fallen away from his mental vision; as if he understood what had hitherto puzzled him. He understood his bewilderment as to where he had seen that face and those features before! For now he knew. He had seen them in the looking-glass!

"No doubt about the likeness!" exclaimed one of the gamblers who had remained in the room, a listener to the conference; while the half-breed stared from first one face to the other with her large eyes wide open. "No doubt about that. As much like brothers as cousins, I should say."

And the girl who (since Julian's intrusion, and since, also, she had discovered that it was not the constabulary from Belize who had suddenly raided their gambling den), had preserved a stolid silence—glancing ever and anon with dusky eyes at each, muttered also that none who saw those two men together could doubt that they were kinsmen, or, as she termed it, *parienti*.

"Yes," Julian answered bewildered, almost stunned, as one thing after another seemed—with crushing force—to be sweeping away for ever all possibility of George Ritherdon's story having had any foundation in fact, any likelihood of being aught else but the chimera of a distraught brain; "yes, I can perceive it. I—I wondered where I had seen your face before, when I first entered the room. Now I know."

"And," Sebastian exclaimed, slapping his newly found kinsmen somewhat boisterously on the back, "and we are cousins. So much the better! For my part I am heartily glad to meet a relation. Now—come—let us be off to Desolada. You were on your way there, no doubt. Well! you shall have a cordial welcome. The best I can offer. You know that the Spaniards always call their house 'their guests' house.' And my house shall be yours. For as long as you like to make it so."

"You are very good," Julian said haltingly, feeling, too, that he was no longer master of himself, no longer possessed of all that ease which he had, until to-day, imagined himself to be in full possession of. "Very good indeed. And what you say is the case. I was on my way—I had a desire to see the place in which your and my father lived."

"You shall see it, you shall be most welcome. And," Sebastian continued, "you will find it big enough. It is a vast rambling place, half wood, half brick, constructed originally by Spanish settlers, so that it is over a hundred years old. The name is a mournful one, yet it has always been retained."

And once it was appropriate enough. There was scarcely another dwelling near it for miles-as a matter of fact, there are hardly any now. The nearest, which is a place called 'La Superba,' is five miles farther on."

They went out together now to the front of the inn-Julian observing that still the negro slept on in the entrance-hall and still the dog slept on in the sun outside-and here Sebastian, finding the good-looking horse, began to untether it, while Julian did the same for his mustang. They were the only two animals now left standing in the shade thrown by the house, since all the men-including he who had stayed last and listened to their conversation-were gone. The girl, however, still remained, and to her Sebastian spoke, bidding her make her way through the bypaths of the forest to Desolada and state that he and his guest were coming.

"Who is she?" asked Julian, feeling that it was incumbent on him to evince some interest in this new-found "cousin's" affairs; while, as was not surprising, he really felt too dazed to heed much that was passing around him. The astonishment, the bewilderment that had fallen on him owing to the events of the last half-hour, the startling information he had received, all of which tended, if it did anything, to disprove every word that George Ritherdon had uttered prior to his death-were enough to daze a man of even cooler instincts than he possessed.

"She," said Sebastian, with a half laugh, a laugh in which contempt was strangely discernible, "she, oh! she's a half-breed-Spanish and native mixed-named Zara. She was born on our place and turns her hand to anything required, from milking the goats to superintending the negroes."

"She seems to know how to turn her hand to a roulette wheel also," Julian remarked, still endeavouring to frame some sentences which should pass muster for the ordinary courteous attention expected from a newly found relation, who had also, now, assumed the character of guest.

"Yes," Sebastian answered. "Yes, she can do that too. I suppose you were surprised at finding all the implements of a gambling room here! Yet, if you lived in the colony it would not seem so strange. We planters, especially in the wild parts, must have some amusement, even though it's illegal. Therefore, we meet three times a week at the inn, and the man who is willing to put down the most money takes the bank. It happened to me to-day."

"And, as in the case of most hot countries," said Julian, forcing himself to be interested, "a servant is used for that portion of the game which necessitates exertion. I understand! In some tropical countries I have known, men bring their servants to deal for them at whist and mark their game."

"You have seen a great deal of the world as a sailor?" the other asked, while they now wended their way through a thick mangrove wood in which the monkeys and parrots kept up such an incessant chattering that they could scarcely hear themselves talk.

"I have been round it three times," Julian replied; "though, of course, sailor-like, I know the coast portions of different countries much better than I do any of the interiors."

"And I have never been farther away than New Orleans. My mother ca-my mother always wanted to go there and see it."

"Was she-your mother from New Orleans?" Julian asked, on the alert at this moment, he hardly knew why.

"My mother. Oh! no. She was the daughter of Mr. Leigh, an English merchant at Belize. But, as you will discover, New Orleans means the world to us-we all want to go there sometimes."

CHAPTER VI

"KNOWLEDGE IS NOT ALWAYS PROOF."

If there was one desire more paramount than another in Julian's mind-as now they threaded a campeachy wood dotted here and there with clumps of cabbage palms while, all around, in the underbrush and pools, the Caribbean lily grew in thick and luxurious profusion-that desire was to be alone. To be able to reflect and to think uninterruptedly, and without being obliged at every moment to listen to his companion's flow of conversation-which was so unceasing that it seemed forced-as well as obliged to answer questions and to display an interest in all that was being said.

Julian felt, perhaps, this desire the more strongly because, by now, he was gradually becoming able to collect himself, to adjust his thoughts and reflections and, thereby, to bring a more calm and clear insight to bear upon the discovery-so amazing and surprising-which had come to his knowledge but an hour or so ago. If he were alone now, he told himself, if he could only get half-an-hour's entire and uninterrupted freedom for thought, he could, he felt sure, review the matter with coolness and judgment. Also, he could ponder over one or two things which, at this moment, struck him with a force they had not done at the time when they had fallen with stunning-because unexpected-force upon his brain. Things-namely words and statements-that might go far towards explaining, if not towards unravelling, much that had hitherto seemed inexplicable.

Yet, all the same, he was obliged to confess to himself that one thing seemed absolutely incapable of explanation. That was, how this man could be the child of Charles Ritherdon, the late owner of the vast property through which they were now riding, if his brother George had been neither demented nor a liar. And that Sebastian should have invented his statement was obviously incredible for the plain and simple reasons that he had made it before several witnesses, and that he was in full possession, as recognised heir, of all that the dead planter had left behind.

It was impossible, however, that he could meditate-and, certainly, he could not follow any train of thought-amid the unfailing flow of conversation in which his companion indulged. That flow gave him the impression, as it must have given any other person who might by chance have overheard it, that it was conversation made for conversation's sake, or, in other words, made with a determination to preclude all reflection on Julian's part. From one thing to another this man, called Sebastian Ritherdon, wandered-from the trade of the colony to its products and vegetation, to the climate, the melancholy and loneliness of life in the whole district, the absence of news and of excitement, the stagnation of everything except the power of making money by exportation. Then, when all these topics appeared to be thoroughly beaten out and exhausted, Sebastian Ritherdon recurred to a remark made during the earlier part of their ride, and said:

"So you have a letter of introduction to the Sprangers? Well! you should present it. Old Spranger is a pleasant, agreeable man, while as for Beatrix, his daughter, she is a beautiful girl. Wasted here, though."

"Is she?" said Julian. "Are there, then, no eligible men in British Honduras who could prevent a beautiful girl from failing in what every beautiful girl hopes to accomplish-namely getting well settled?"

"Oh, yes!" the other answered, and now it seemed to Julian as though in his tone there was something which spoke of disappointment, if not of regret, personal to the man himself. "Oh, yes! There are such men among us. Men well-to-do, large owners of remunerative estates, capitalists employing a good deal of labour, and so forth. Only-only-

"Only what?"

"Well-oh! I don't know; perhaps we are not quite her class, her style. In England the Sprangers are somebody, I believe, and Beatrix is consequently rather difficult to please. At any rate I know she has rejected more than one good offer. She will never marry any colonist."

Then, as Julian turned his eyes on Sebastian Ritherdon, he felt as sure as if the man had told him so himself that he was one of the rejected.

"I intend to present that letter of introduction, you know," he said a moment later. "In fact I intended to do so from the first. Now, your description of Miss Spranger makes me the more eager."

"You may suit her," the other replied. "I mean, of course, as a friend, a companion. You are a naval officer, consequently a gentleman in manners, a man of the world and of society. As for us, well, we may be gentlemen, too, only we don't, of course, know much about society manners."

He paused a moment-it was indeed the longest pause he had made for some time; then he said, "When do you propose to go to see them?"

"I rather thought I would go back to Belize to-morrow," Julian answered.

"To-morrow!"

"Yes. I-I-feel I ought not to be in the country and not present that letter."

"To-morrow!" Sebastian Ritherdon said again. "To-morrow! That won't give me much of your society. And I'm your cousin."

"Oh!" said Julian, forcing a smile, "you will have plenty of that-of my society-I'm afraid. I have a long leave, and if you will have me, I will promise to weary you sufficiently before I finally depart. You will be tired enough of me ere then."

To his surprise-since nothing that the other said (and not even the fact that the man was undoubtedly regarded by all who knew him as the son and heir of Mr. Ritherdon and was in absolute fact in full possession of the rights of such an heir) could make Julian believe that his presence was a welcome one-to his surprise, Sebastian Ritherdon greeted his remark with effusion. None who saw his smile, and the manner in which his face lit up, could have doubted that the other's promise to stay as his guest for a considerable time gave him the greatest pleasure.

Then, suddenly, while he was telling Julian so, they emerged from one more glade, leaving behind them all the chattering members of the animal and feathered world, and came out into a small open plain which was in a full state of cultivation, while Julian observed a house, large, spacious and low before them.

"There is Desolada-the House of Desolation as my poor father used to call it, for some reason of his own-there is my property, to which you will always be welcome."

His property! Julian thought, even as he gazed upon the mansion (for such it was); his property! And he had left England, had travelled thousands of miles to reach it, thinking that, instead, it was *his*. That he would find it awaiting an owner-perhaps in charge of some Government official, but still awaiting an owner-himself. Yet, now, how different all was from what he had imagined-how different! In England, on the voyage, the journey from New York to New Orleans, nay! until four hours ago, he thought that he would have but to tell his story after taking a hasty view of Desolada and its surroundings to prove that he was the son who had suddenly disappeared a day or so after his birth: to show that he was the missing, kidnapped child. He would have but to proclaim himself and be acknowledged.

But, lo! how changed all appeared now. There was no missing, kidnapped heir-there could not be if the man by his side had spoken the truth-and how could he have spoken untruthfully here, in this country, in this district, where a falsehood such as that statement would have been (if not capable of immediate and universal corroboration), was open to instant denial? There must be hundreds of people in the colony who had known Sebastian Ritherdon from his infancy; every one in the colony would have been acquainted with such a fact as the kidnapping of the wealthy Mr. Ritherdon's heir if it had ever taken place, and, in such circumstances, there could have been no Sebastian. Yet here

he was by Julian's side escorting him to his own house, proclaiming himself the owner of that house and property. Surely it was impossible that the statement could be untrue!

Yet, if true, who was he himself? What! What could he be but a man who had been used by his dying father as one who, by an imposture, might be made the instrument of a long-conceived desire for vengeance—a vengeance to be worked out by fraud? A man who would at once have been branded as an impostor had he but made the claim he had quitted England with the intention of making.

Under the palms—which grew in groves and were used as shade-trees—beneath the umbrageous figs, through a garden in which the oleanders flowered luxuriously, and the plants and mignonette-trees perfumed deliciously the evening air, while flamboyants-bearing masses of scarlet, bloodlike flowers—allamandas, and temple-plants gave a brilliant colouring to the scene, they rode up to the steps of the house, around the whole of which there was a wooden balcony. Standing upon that balcony, which was made to traverse the vast mansion so that, no matter where the sun happened to be, it could be avoided, was a woman, smiling and waving her hand to Sebastian, although it seemed that, in the salutation, the newcomer was included. A woman who, in the shadow which enveloped her, since now the sun had sunk away to the back, appeared so dark of complexion as to suggest that in her veins there ran the dark blood of Africa.

Yet, a moment later, as Sebastian Ritherdon presented Julian to her, terming him "a new-found cousin," the latter was able to perceive that the shadows of the coming tropical night had played tricks with him. In this woman's veins there ran no drop of black blood; instead, she was only a dark, handsome Creole—one who, in her day, must have been even more than handsome—must have possessed superb beauty.

But that day had passed now, she evidently being near her fiftieth year, though the clear ivory complexion, the black curling hair, in which scarcely a grey streak was visible, the soft rounded features and the dark eyes, still full of lustre, proclaimed distinctly what her beauty must have been in long past days. Also, Julian noticed, as she held out a white slim hand and murmured some words of cordial welcome to him, that her figure, lithe and sinuous, was one that might have become a woman young enough to have been her daughter. Only—he thought—it was almost too lithe and sinuous: it reminded him too much of a tiger he had once stalked in India, and of how he had seen the striped body creeping in and out of the jungle.

"This is Madame Carmaux," Sebastian said to Julian, as the latter bowed before her, "a relation of my late mother. She has been here many years—even before that mother died. And—she has been one to me as well as fulfilling all the duties of the lady of the house both for my father and, now, for myself."

Then, after Julian had muttered some suitable words and had once more received a gracious smile from the owner of those dark eyes, Sebastian said, "Now, you would like to make some kind of toilette, I suppose, before the evening meal. Come, I will show you your room." And he led the way up the vast campeachy-wood staircase to the floor above.

Tropical nights fall swiftly directly the sun has disappeared, as it had now done behind the still gilded crests of the Cockscomb range, and Julian, standing on his balcony after the other had left him and gazing out on all around, wondered what was to be the outcome of this visit to Honduras. He pondered, too, as he had pondered before, whether George Ritherdon had in truth been a madman or one who had plotted a strange scheme of revenge against his brother; a scheme which now could never be perfected. Or—for he mused on this also—had George Ritherdon spoken the truth, had Sebastian—

The current of his thoughts was broken, even as he arrived at this point, by hearing beneath him on the under balcony the voice of Sebastian speaking in tones low but clear and distinct—by hearing that voice say, as though in answer to another's question:

"Know—of course he must know! But knowledge is not always proof."

CHAPTER VII

MADAME CARMAUX TAKES A NAP

On that night when Sebastian Ritherdon escorted Julian once more up the great campeachy-wood staircase to the room allotted to him, he had extorted a promise from his guest that he would stay at least one day before breaking his visit by another to Sprangers.

"For," he had said before, down in the vast dining-room-which would almost have served for a modern Continental hotel-and now said again ere he bid his cousin "good-night," "for what does one day matter? And, you know, you can return to Belize twice as fast as you came here."

"How so?" asked Julian, while, as he spoke, his eyes were roaming round the great desolate corridors of the first floor, and he was, almost unknowingly to himself, peering down those corridors amid the shadows which the lamp that Sebastian carried scarcely served to illuminate. "How so?"

"Why, first, you know your road now. Then, next, I can mount you on a good swift trotting horse that will do the journey in a third of the time that mustang took to get you along. How ever did you become possessed of such a creature? We rarely see them here."

"I hired it from the man who kept the hotel. He said it was the proper thing to do the journey with."

"Proper thing, indeed! More proper to assist the bullocks and mules in transporting the mahogany and campeachy, or the fruits, from the interior to the coast. However, you shall have a good trotting Spanish horse to take you into Belize, and I'll send your creature back later."

Then, after wishing each other good-night, Julian entered the room, Sebastian handing him the lamp he had carried upstairs to light the way.

"I can find my own way down again in the dark very well," the latter said. "I ought to be able to do so in the house I was born in and have lived in all my life. Good-night."

At last Julian was alone. Alone with some hours before him in which he could reflect and meditate on the occurrences of this eventful day.

He did now that which perhaps, every man, no matter how courageous he might have been, would have done in similar circumstances. He made a careful inspection of the room, looking into a large wardrobe which stood in the corner, and, it must be admitted, under the bed also; which, as is the case in most tropical climates, stood in the middle of the room, so that the mosquitoes that harboured in the whitewashed walls should have less opportunity of forcing their way through the gauze nets which protected the bed. Then, having completed this survey to his satisfaction, he put his hand into his breast and drew from a pocket inside his waistcoat that which, it may well be surmised, he was not very likely to be without here. This was an express revolver.

"That's all right," he said as, after a glance at the chambers, he laid it on the table by his side. "You have been of use before, my friend, in other parts of the world and, although you are not likely to be wanted here, you don't take up much room."

"Now," he went on to himself, "for a good long think, as the paymaster of the Mongoose always used to say before he fell asleep in the wardroom and drove everybody else out of it with his snores. Only, first there are one or two other little things to be done."

Whereon he walked out on to the balcony-the windows of course being open-and gave a long and searching glance around, above, and below him. Below, to where was the veranda of the lower or ground floor, with, standing about, two or three Singapore chairs covered with chintz, a small table and, upon it, a bottle of spirits and some glasses as well as a large carafe of water. All these things were perfectly visible because, from the room beneath him, there streamed out a strong light from the oil lamp which stood on the table within that room, while, even though such had not been the case, Julian was perfectly well aware that they were there.

He and Sebastian had sat in those chairs for more than an hour talking after the evening meal, while Madame Carmaux, whose other name he learnt was Miriam, had sat in another, perusing by the light of the lamp the Belize Advertiser. Yet, now and again, it had seemed to Julian as though, while those dark eyes had been fixed on the sheet, their owner's attention had been otherwise occupied, or else that she read very slowly. For once, when he had been giving a very guarded description of George Ritherdon's life in England during the last few years, he had seen them rest momentarily upon his face, and then be quickly withdrawn. Also, he had observed, the newspaper had never been turned once.

"Now," he said again to himself, "now, let us think it all out and come to some decision as to what it all means. Let us see. Let me go over everything that has happened since I pulled up outside that inn-or gambling house!"

He was, perhaps, a little more methodical than most young men; the habit being doubtless born of many examinations at Greenwich, of a long course in H.M.S. Excellent, and, possibly, of the fact that he had done what sailors call a lot of "logging" in his time, both as watchkeeper and when in command of a destroyer. Therefore, he drew from his pocket a rather large, but somewhat unbusinesslike-looking pocketbook-since it was bound in crushed morocco and had its leaves gilt-edged-and, ruthlessly tearing out a sheet of paper, he withdrew the pencil from its place and prepared to make notes.

"No orders as to 'lights out,'" he muttered to himself before beginning. "I suppose I may sit up as long as I like."

Then, after a few moments' reflection, he jotted down:

"S. didn't seem astonished to see me. (Qy?) Ought to have done so, if I came as a surprise to him. Can't ever have heard of me before. Consequently it was a surprise. Said who he was, and was particularly careful to say who his mother was, viz. I. S. R. (Qy?) Isn't that odd? Known many people who tell you who their father was. Never knew 'em lug in their mother's name, though, except when very swagger. Says Madame Carmaux relative of his mother, yet Isobel Leigh was daughter of English planter. C's not a full-bred Englishwoman, and her name's French. That's nothing, though. Perhaps married a Frenchman."

These little notes-which filled the detached sheet of the ornamental pocketbook-being written down, Julian, before taking another, sat back in his chair to ponder; yet his musings were not satisfactory, and, indeed, did not tend to enlighten him very much, which, as a matter of fact, they were not very likely to do.

"He must be the *right* man, after all, and I must be the wrong one," he said to himself. "It is impossible the thing can be otherwise. A child kidnapped would make such a sensation in a place like this that the affair would furnish gossip for the next fifty years. Also, if a child was kidnapped, how on earth has this man grown up here and now inherited the property? If I was actually the child I certainly didn't grow up here, and if he was the child and did grow up here then there was no kidnapping."

Indeed, by the time that Julian had arrived at this rather complicated result, he began to feel that his brain was getting into a whirl, and he came to a hasty resolution. That resolution was that he would abandon this business altogether; that, on the next day but one, he would go to Belize and pay his visit to the Sprangers, while, when that visit was concluded, he would, instead of returning to Desolada, set out on his return journey to England.

"Even though my uncle-if he was my uncle and not my father-spoke the truth and told everything exactly as it occurred, how is it to be proved? How can any legal power on earth dispossess a man who has been brought up here from his infancy, in favour of one who comes without any evidence in his favour, since that certificate of my baptism in New Orleans, although it states me to be the son of the late owner of this place, cannot be substantiated? Any man might have taken any child and had such an entry as that made. And if he-he my uncle, or my father-could conceive such a scheme as he revealed to me-or *such a scheme as he did not reveal to me*-then, the entry at New

Orleans would not present much difficulty to one like him. It is proof-proof that it be-" He stopped in his meditations-stopped, wondering where he had heard something said about "proof" before on this evening.

Then, in a moment, he recalled the almost whispered words; the words that in absolute fact were whispered from the balcony below, before he went down to take his seat at the supper table; the utterance of Sebastian:

"Know-of course he must know. But knowledge is not always proof."

How strange it was, he thought, that, while he had been indulging in his musings, jotting down his little facts on the sheet of paper, he should have forgotten those words.

"Knowledge is not always proof." What knowledge? Whose? Whose could it be but his! Whose knowledge that was not proof had Sebastian referred to? Then again, in a moment-again suddenly-he came to another determination, another resolve. He did possess some knowledge that this man, Sebastian could not dispute-for it would have been folly to imagine he had been speaking of any one else but him-though he had no proof. So be it, only, now, he would endeavour to discover a proof that should justify such knowledge. He would not slink away from the colony until he had exhausted every attempt to discover that proof. If it was to be found he would find it.

Perhaps, after all, his uncle was his uncle, perhaps that uncle had undoubtedly uttered the truth.

He rose now, preparing to go to bed, and as he did so a slight breeze rattled the slats of the green persianas, or, as they are called in England, Venetian blinds-a breeze that in tropical land often rises as the night goes on. It was a cooling pleasant one, and he remembered that he had heard it rustling the slats before, when he was engaged in making his notes.

Yet, now, regarding those green strips of wood, he felt a little astonished at what he saw. He had carefully let the blinds of both windows down and turned the laths so that neither bats nor moths, nor any of the flying insect world which are the curse of the tropics at night, should force their way in, attracted by the flame of the lamp; but now, one of those laths was turned-turned, so that, instead of being downwards and forming with the others a compact screen from the outside, it was in a flat or horizontal position, leaving an open space of an inch between it and the one above and the next below. A slat that was above five feet from the bottom of the blind.

He stood there regarding it for a moment; then, dropping the revolver into his pocket, he went towards the window and with his finger and thumb put back the lath into the position he had originally placed it, feeling as he did so that it did not move smoothly, but, instead, a little stiffly.

"There has been no wind coming up from the sea that would do that," he reflected, "and, if it had come, then it would have turned more than one. I wonder whether," and now he felt a slight sensation of creepiness coming over him, "if I had raised my eyes as I sat writing, I should have met another pair of eyes looking in on me. Very likely. The turning of that one lath made a peep-hole."

He pulled the blind up now without any attempt at concealing the noise it caused-that well-known clatter made by such blinds as they are hastily drawn up-and walked out on to the long balcony and peered over on to the one beneath, seeing that Madame Carmaux was asleep in the wicker chair which she had sat in during the evening, and that the newspaper lay in her lap. He saw, too, that Sebastian Ritherdon was also sitting in his chair, but that, aroused by the noise of the blind, he had bent his body backwards over the veranda rail and, with upturned face, was regarding the spot at which Julian might be expected to appear.

"Not gone to bed, yet, old fellow," he called out now, on seeing the other lean over the balcony rail; while Julian observed that Madame Carmaux opened her eyes with a dazzled look-the look which those have on their faces who are suddenly startled out of a light nap.

And for some reason-since he was growing suspicious-he believed that look to have been assumed as well as the slumber which had apparently preceded it.

CHAPTER VIII

A MIDNIGHT VISITOR

"Not yet," Julian called down in answer to the other's remark, "though I am going directly. Only it is so hot. I hope I am not disturbing the house."

"Not at all. Do what you like. We often sit here till long after midnight, since it is the only cool time of the twenty-four hours. Will you come down again and join us?"

"No, if you'll excuse me. I'll take a turn or two here and then go to bed."

Whereon as he spoke, he began to walk up and down the balcony.

It ran (as has been said of the lower one on which Sebastian and Madame Carmaux were seated) round the whole of the house, so that, had Julian desired to do so, he could have commenced a tour of the building which, by being continued, would eventually have brought him back to the spot where he now was. He contented himself, however, with commencing to walk towards the right-hand corner of the great rambling mansion, proceeding as far upon it as led to where the balcony turned at the angle, then, after a glance down its-at that place-darkened length, he retraced his steps, meaning to proceed to the opposite or left-hand corner.

Doing so, however, and coming thus in front of his bedroom window, from which, since the blind was up, the light of his lamp streamed out on to the broad wooden floor of the balcony, he saw lying at his feet a small object which formed a patch of colour on the dark boards. A patch which was of a pale roseate hue, the thing being, indeed, a little spray, now dry and faded, of the oleander flower. And he knew, felt sure, where he had seen that spray before.

"I know now," he said to himself, "who turned the slat-who stood outside my window looking in on me."

Picking up the withered thing, he, nevertheless, continued his stroll along the balcony until he arrived at the left angle of the house, when he was able to glance down the whole of that side of it, this being as much in the dark and unrelieved by any light from within as the corresponding right side had been. Unrelieved, that is, by any light except the gleam of the great stars which here glisten with an incandescent whiteness; and in that gleam he saw sitting on the floor of the balcony-her back against the wall, her arms over her knees and her head sunk on those arms-the half-caste girl, Zara, the croupier of the gambling-table to which Sebastian had supplied the "bank" that morning at All Pines.

"You have dropped this flower from your hair," he said, tossing it lightly down to her, while she turned up her dark, dusky eyes at him and, picking up the withered spray, tossed it in her turn contemptuously over the balcony. But she said nothing and, a moment later, let her head droop once more towards her arms.

"Do you pass the night here?" he said now. "Surely it is not wholesome to keep out in open air like this."

"I sit here often," she replied, "before going to bed in my room behind. The rooms are too warm. I disturb no one."

For a moment he felt disposed to say that it would disturb him if she should again take it into her head to turn his blinds, but, on second considerations, he held his peace. To know a thing and not to divulge one's knowledge is, he reflected, sometimes to possess a secret-a clue-a warning worth having; to possess, indeed, something that may be of use to us in the future if not now, while, for the rest-well! the returning of the spray to her had, doubtless, informed the girl sufficiently that he was acquainted with the fact of how she had been outside his window, and that it was she who had opened his blind wide enough to allow her to peer in on him.

"Good-night," he said, turning away. "Good-night," and without waiting to hear whether she returned the greeting or not, he went back to the bedroom. Yet, before he entered it, he bent over the

balcony and called down another "good-night" to Sebastian, who, he noticed, had now been deserted by Madame Carmaux.

For some considerable time after this he walked about his room; long enough, indeed, to give Sebastian the idea that he was preparing for bed, then, although he had removed none of his clothing except his boots, he put out the lamp.

"If the young lady is desirous of observing me again," he reflected, "she can do so. Yet if she does, it will not be without my knowing it. And if she should pay me another visit-why, we shall see."

But, all the same, and because he thought it not at all unlikely that some other visitor than the girl might make her way, not only to the blind itself but even to the room, he laid his right arm along the table so that his fingers were touching the revolver that he had now placed on that table.

"I haven't taken countless middle watches for nothing in my time," he said to himself; "another won't hurt me. If I do drop asleep, I imagine I shall wake up pretty easily."

He was on the alert now, and not only on the alert as to any one who might be disposed to pay him a nocturnal visit, but, also, mentally wary as to what might be the truth concerning Sebastian Ritherdon and himself. For, strange to say, there was a singular revulsion of feeling going on in his mind at this time; strange because, at present, scarcely anything of considerable importance, scarcely anything sufficiently tangible, had occurred to produce this new conviction that Sebastian's story was untrue, and that the other story told by his uncle before his death was the right one.

All the same, the conviction was growing in his mind; growing steadily, although perhaps without any just reason or cause for its growth. Meanwhile, his ears now told him that, although Madame Carmaux was absent when he glanced over the balcony to wish Sebastian that last greeting, she undoubtedly had not gone to bed. From below, in the intense stillness of the tropic night-a stillness broken only occasionally by the cry of some bird from the plantation beyond the cultivated gardens, he heard the soft luscious tones of the woman herself-and those who are familiar with the tones of southern women will recall how luscious the murmur can be; he heard, too, the deeper notes of the man. Yet what they said to each other in subdued whispers was unintelligible to him; beyond a word here and there nothing reached his ears.

With the feeling of conviction growing stronger and stronger in his mind that there was some deception about the whole affair-that, plausible as Sebastian's possession of all which the dead man had left behind appeared; plausible, too, as was his undoubted position here and had been from his very earliest days, Julian would have given much now to overhear their conversation-a conversation which, he felt certain, in spite of it taking place thirty feet below where he was supposed to be by now asleep, related to his appearance on the scene.

Would it be possible? Could he in any way manage to thus overhear it? If he were nearer to the persianas, his ear close to the slats, his head placed down low, close to the boards of the room and of the balcony as well-what might not be overheard?

Thinking thus, he resolved to make the attempt, even while he told himself that in no other circumstances would he-a gentleman, a man of honour-resort to such a scheme of prying interference. But-for still the certainty increased in his mind that there was some deceit, some fraud in connection with Sebastian Ritherdon's possession of Desolada and all that Desolada represented in value-he did not hesitate now. As once he, with some of his bluejackets, had tracked slavers from the sea for miles inland and into the coast swamps and fever-haunted interior of the great Black Continent, so now he would track this man's devious and doubtful existence, as, remembering George Ritherdon's story, it seemed to him to be. If he had wronged Sebastian, if he had formed a false estimate of his possession of this place and of his right to the name he bore, no harm would be done. For then he would go away from Honduras for ever, leaving the man in peaceable possession of all that was rightly his. But, if his suspicions were not wrong-

He let himself down to the floor from the chair on which he had been sitting in the dark for now nearly an hour, and, quietly, noiselessly, he progressed along that solid floor-one so well laid

in the past that no board either creaked or made any noise-and thus he reached the balcony, there interposing nothing now between him and it but the lowered blind.

Then when he had arrived there, he heard their voices plainly; heard every word that fell from their lips-the soft murmur of the woman's tones, the deeper, more guttural notes of the man.

Only-he might as well have been a mile away from where they sat, he might as well have been stone deaf as able to thus easily overhear those words.

For Sebastian and his companion were speaking in a tongue that was unknown to him; a tongue that, in spite of the Spanish surroundings and influences which still linger in all places forming parts of Central America, was not Spanish. Of this language he, like most sailors, knew something; therefore he was aware that it was not that, as well as he was aware that it was not French. Perhaps 'twas Maya, which he had been told in Belize was the native jargon, or Carib, which was spoken along the coast.

And almost, as he recognised how he was baffled, could he have laughed bitterly at himself. "What a fool I must have been," he thought, "to suppose that if they had any confidences to make to each other, any secrets to talk over in which I was concerned they would discuss them in a language I should be likely to understand."

But there are some words, especially those which express names, which cannot be translated into a foreign tongue. Among such, Ritherdon would be one. Julian, too, is another, with only the addition of the letter "o" at the end in Spanish (and perhaps also in Maya or Carib), and George, which, though spelt Jorge, has, in speaking, nearly the same pronunciation. And these names met his ear as did others: Inglaterra-the name of the woman Isobel Leigh, whom Julian believed to have been his mother, but whom Sebastian asserted to have been his; also the name of that fair American city lying to the north of them-New Orleans-it being referred to, of course, in the Spanish tongue.

"So," he thought to himself, "it is of me they are talking. Of me-which would not, perhaps, be strange, since a guest so suddenly received into the house and having the name of Ritherdon might well furnish food for conversation. But, when coupled with George Ritherdon, with New Orleans, above all with the name of Isobel Leigh-"

Even as that name was in his mind, he heard it again mentioned below by the woman-Madame Carmaux. Mentioned, too, in conjunction with and followed by a light, subdued laugh; a laugh in which his acuteness could hear an undercurrent of bitterness-perhaps of derision.

"And she was this woman's relative," he thought, "her relative! Yet now she is jeered at, spoken scornfully of by-"

In amazement he paused, even while his reflections arrived at this stage.

In front of where his eyes were, low down to the floor of the balcony, something dark and sombre passed, then returned and stopped before him, blotting from his eyes all that lay in front of them-the tops of the palms, the woods beyond the garden, the dark sea beyond that. Like a pall it rested before his vision, obscuring, blurring everything. And, a moment later, he recognised that it was a woman's dress which thus impeded his view, while, as he did so, he heard some five feet above him a light click made by one of the slats.

Then, with an upward glance of his eyes, that glance being aided by a noiseless turn of his head, he saw that a finger was holding back the lath, and knew-felt sure-that into the darkness of the room two other eyes were gazing.

CHAPTER IX

BEATRIX

Thirty-six hours later Julian Ritherdon sat among very different surroundings from those of Desolada; certainly very different ones from those of his first night in the gloomy, mysterious house owned by that other man who bore his name.

He was seated now in a wicker chair placed beneath the cool shadow cast by a vast clump of "shade-trees," as the royal palm, the thatch palm, and, indeed, almost every kind and species of that form of vegetation are denominated. These shade-trees grew in the pretty and luxuriant garden of Mr. Spranger's house on the southern outskirts of Belize, a garden in which, for some years now, Beatrix Spranger had passed the greater part of her days, and sometimes when the hot simoon was on, as it was now, and the temperature scarcely ever fell below 85°, a good deal of the early part of her nights.

She, too, was seated in that garden now, talking to Julian, while between them there lay two or three books and London magazines (three or four months old), a copy of the Times of the same ancient date, and another of the Belize Advertiser fresh from the local press. Yet neither the news from London which had long since been published, nor that of the immediate neighbourhood, which was quite new but not particularly exciting, seemed to have been able to secure much of their attention. And this for a reason which was a simple one and easily to be understood. All their attention was at the present moment concentrated on each other.

"You cannot think," Beatrix Spranger was saying now, "what a welcome event the arrival of a stranger is to us here, who regard ourselves more or less as exiles for the time being. Moreover," she continued, without any of that false shame which a young lady at home in England might have thought necessary to assume, even though she did not actually feel it, "it seems to me that you are a very interesting person, Lieutenant Ritherdon. You have dropped down into a place where your name happens to be extremely well known, yet in which no one ever imagined that there was any other Ritherdon in existence anywhere, except the late and the present owners of Desolada."

"People, even exiles, have relatives sometimes in other parts of the world," Julian murmured rather languidly-the effect of the heat and the perfume of the flowers in the garden being upon him-"and you know-"

"Oh! yes," the girl said, with an answering smile. "I do know all that. Only I happen to know something else, too. You see we-that is, father and I-are acquainted with your cousin, and we knew his father before him. And it is a rather singular thing that they have always given us to understand that, so far as they were aware, they hadn't a relation in the world."

"They had, though, you see, all the same. Indeed, they had two until a short time ago; namely, when my father, Mr. George Ritherdon, was alive."

"Mr. Ritherdon, Sebastian's father, hadn't seen him for many years, had he? He didn't often speak of him, and always gave people the idea that his brother was dead. I suppose they had not parted the best of friends?"

"No," Julian answered quietly, "I don't think they had. As a matter of fact, my-George Ritherdon-was almost, indeed quite, as reticent about his brother Charles as Charles seems to have been about him." Then, suddenly changing the subject, he said: "Is Sebastian popular hereabouts. Is he liked?"

"No," the girl replied, rather more frankly than Julian had expected, while, as she did so, she lifted a pair of beautiful blue eyes to his face. "No, I don't think he is, since you ask me."

"Why not? You may tell me candidly, Miss Spranger, especially as you know that to-night I am going to have a rather serious interview with your father, and shall ask him for his advice and assistance on a matter in which I require his counsel."

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