

REID MAYNE

THE FLAG OF DISTRESS:
A STORY OF THE SOUTH
SEA

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Story of the South Sea**

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Mayne Reid

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Chapter One. A Chase

In mid-ocean – the Pacific. Two ships within sight of one another, less than a league apart. Both sailing before the wind, running dead down it with full canvas spread – not side by side, but one in the wake of the other.

Is it a chase? To all appearance, yes; a probability strengthened by the relative size and character of the vessels. One is a barque, polacca-masted, her masts raking back with the acute shark's-fin set supposed to be characteristic of piratical craft. The other is a ship, square-rigged and full sized; a row of real, not painted, ports, with a gun grinning out of each, proclaiming her a man-of-war.

She is one – a frigate, as any seaman would say, after giving her a glance. And any landsman might name her nationality. The flag at her peak is one known all over the world: it is the ensign of England.

If it be a chase, she is the pursuer. Her colours might be accepted as surety of this, without regard to the relative position of the vessels; which show the frigate astern, the polacca leading.

The latter also carries a flag – of nationality not so easily determined. Still it is the ensign of a naval power, though one of little note. The five-pointed white star, solitary in a blue field, proclaims it the standard of Chili.

Why should an English frigate be chasing a Chilian barque? There is no war between Great Britain and this, the most prosperous of the South American republics; instead, peace-treaties, with relations of the most amicable kind. Were the polacca showing colours blood-red, or black, with death's-head and cross-bones, the chase would be intelligible. But the bit of bunting at her masthead has nothing on its field either of menace or defiance. On the contrary, it appeals to pity, and asks for aid; for it is an ensign reversed – in short, a *signal of distress*.

And yet the craft so signalling is on the scud before a stiff breeze, with all sail set, stays taut, not a rope out of place!

Strange this. So is it considered by every one aboard the man-of-war, from the captain commanding to the latest joined “lubber of a landsman” – a thought that has been in their minds ever since the chase commenced.

For it *is* a chase: that is, the frigate has sighted a sail, and stood towards it. This without changing course; as, when first espied, the stranger, like herself, was running before the wind. If slowly, the pursuer has, nevertheless, been gradually forging nearer the pursued; till at length the telescope tells the latter to be a barque – at the same time revealing her ensign reversed.

Nothing strange in this, of itself; unfortunately, a sight too common at sea. But that a vessel displaying signals of distress should be carrying all sail, and running away, or attempting to do so, from another making to relieve her – above all, from a ship bearing the British flag – this *is* strange. And just thus has the polacca been behaving – still is; sailing on down the wind, without slacking haulyards, or lessening her spread of canvas by a single inch!

Certainly the thing seems odd. More than that – mysterious.

To this conclusion have they come on board the warship. And, naturally enough; for there is that which has imbued their thoughts with a tinge of superstition.

In addition to what they see, they have something *heard*. Within the week they have spoken two vessels, both of which reported this same barque, or one answering her description: “*Polacca-masted, all sail set, ensign reversed.*”

A British brig, which the frigate’s boat had boarded, said: That such a craft had run across her bows, so close they could have thrown a rope to her; that at first no one was observed on board; but on her being hailed, two men made appearance, both springing up to the main-shrouds; thence answering the hail in a language altogether unintelligible, and with hoarse croaking voices that resembled the barking of muzzled mastiffs!

It was late twilight, almost night, when this occurred; but the brig’s people could make out the figures of the men, as these clung on to the ratlines. And what seemed as surprising as their odd speech was, that both appeared to be clothed in skin-dresses, covering their bodies from head to foot!

Seeing the signal of distress, the brig’s commander would have sent a boat aboard; but the barque gave no chance for this – keeping on without slacking sail, or showing any other sign of a wish to communicate!

Standing by itself, the tale of the brig’s crew might have been taken for a sailor’s yarn; and as they admitted it to be “almost night,” the obscurity would account for the skin-clothing. But coupled with the report of another vessel, which the frigate had afterwards spoken – a whaler – it seemed to receive full corroboration. The words sent through the whaler’s trumpet were: —

“*Barque sighted, latitude 10 degrees 22 minutes South, longitude 95 degrees West. Polacca-masted. All sail set. Ensign reversed. Chilian. Men seen on board covered with red hair, supposed skin-dresses. Tried to come up, but could not. Barque a fast sailer – went away down wind.*”

Already in receipt of such intelligence, it is no wonder that the frigate’s crew feel something more than mere curiosity about a vessel corresponding to the one of which these queer accounts have been given. For they are now near enough the barque to see that she answers the description: “Polacca-masted – all sail set – ensign reversed – Chilian.”

And her behaviour is as reported: sailing away from those who would respond to her appealing signal, to all appearance endeavouring to shun them!

Only now has the chase in reality commenced. Hitherto the frigate was but keeping her own course. But the signal of distress, just sighted through the telescope, has drawn her on; and with canvas crowded, she steers straight for the polacca.

The latter is unquestionably a fast sailer; but although too swift for the brig and whaler, she is no match for the man-of-war. Still she makes quick way, and the chase is likely to be a long one.

As it continues, and the distance does not appear very much, or very rapidly, diminishing, the frigate’s people begin to doubt whether she will ever be overtaken. On the fore-deck the tars stand in groups, mingled with marines, their eyes bent upon the retreating craft, making their comments in muttered tones, many of the men with brows o’ercast. For a fancy has sprung up around the fore-castle, that the chased barque is no barque at all, but a *phantom*! This is gradually growing into a belief; firmer as they draw nearer, and with naked eye note her correspondence with the reports of the spoken vessels.

They have not yet seen the skin-clad men – if men they be. More like, imagine some, they will prove *spectres*!

While on the quarterdeck there is no such superstitious thought, a feeling almost as intense agitates the minds of those there assembled. The captain, surrounded by his officers, stands glass in hand gazing at the sail ahead. The frigate, though a fine sailer, is not one of the very fastest, else she might long ago have lapped upon the polacca. Still has she been gradually gaining, and is now less than a league astern.

But the breeze has been also declining, which is against her; and for the last half-hour she has barely preserved her distance from the barque.

To compensate for this, she runs out studding-sails on all her yards, even to the royals; and again makes an effort to bring the chase to a termination. But again to suffer disappointment.

“To no purpose, now,” says her commander, seeing his last sail set. Then adding, as he casts a glance at the sky, sternwards, “The wind’s going down. In ten minutes more we’ll be becalmed.”

Those around need not be told this. The youngest reefer there, looking at sky and sea, can forecast a calm.

In five minutes after, the frigate’s sails go flapping against the masts, and her flag hangs half-folded.

In five more, the canvas only shows motion by an occasional clout; while the bunting droops dead downward.

Within the ten, as her captain predicted, the huge warship lies motionless on the sea – its surface around her smooth as a swan-pond.

Chapter Two.

A Call for Boarders

The frigate is becalmed – what of the barque? Has she been similarly stayed in her course?

The question is asked by all on board the warship, each seeking the answer for himself. For all are earnestly gazing at the strange vessel regardless of their own condition.

Forward, the superstitious thought has become intensified into something like fear. A calm coming on so suddenly, just when they had hopes of overhauling the chase! What could that mean? Old sailors shake their heads, refusing to make answer; while young ones, less cautious of speech, boldly pronounce the polacca to be a spectre!

The legends of the *Phantom Ship* and *Flying Dutchman* are in their thoughts, and on their lips, as they stand straining their eyes after the still receding vessel; for beyond doubt she is yet moving on with waves rippling around her!

“As I told ye, mates,” remarks an old tar, “we’d never catch up with that craft – not if we stood after her till doomsday. And doomsday it might be for us, if we did.”

“I hope she’ll hold her course, and leave us a good spell behind,” rejoins a second. “It was a foolish thing followin’ her; for my part, I’ll be glad if we never do catch up with her.”

“You need have no fear about it,” says the first speaker. “Just look! She’s making way yet! I believe she can sail as well without a wind as with one.”

Scarce are the words spoken, when, as if to contradict them, the sails of the chased vessel commence clouting against the masts; while her flag falls folded, and is no longer distinguishable either as signal of distress, or any other. The breeze that failed the frigate is also now dead around the barque, which, in like manner, has been caught in the calm.

“What do you make her out, Mr Black?” asks the frigate’s captain of his first, as the two stand looking through their levelled glasses.

“Not anything, sir,” replies the lieutenant; “except that she should be Chilian from her colours. I can’t see a soul aboard of her. Ah, yonder! Something shows over the taffrail! Looks like a man’s head! It’s down again – ducked suddenly.”

A short silence succeeds, the commanding officer, busied with his binocular, endeavouring to catch sight of the thing seen by his subordinate. It does not appear again.

“Odd!” says the captain, resuming speech; “a ship running up signals of distress, at the same time refusing to be relieved! Very odd, isn’t it, gentlemen?” he asks, addressing himself to the group of officers now gathered around; who all signify assent to his interrogatory.

“There must be something amiss,” he continues. “Can any of you think what it is?”

To this there is a negative response. They are as much puzzled as himself – mystified by the strange barque, and more by her strange behaviour.

There are two, however, who have thoughts different from the rest – the third lieutenant, and one of the midshipmen. Less thoughts than imaginings; and these so vague, that neither communicates them to the captain, nor to one another. And whatever their fancies, they do not appear pleasant ones; since on the faces of both is an expression of something like anxiety. Slight and little observable, it is not noticed by their comrades standing around. But it seems to deepen, while they continue to gaze at the becalmed barque, as though due to something there observed. Still they remain silent, keeping the dark thought, if such it be, to themselves.

“Well, gentlemen,” says the commanding officer to his assembled subordinates, “I must say this *is* singular. In all my experience at sea, I don’t remember anything like it. What trick the Chilian barque – if she be Chilian – is up to, I can’t guess; not for the life of me. It cannot be a case of piracy.

The craft has no guns; and if she had, she appears without men to handle them. It's a riddle all round; to get the reading of which, we'll have to send a boat to her."

"I don't think we'll get a very willing crew, sir," says the first lieutenant jestingly. "Forward, they're quite superstitious about the character of the stranger. Some of them fancy her the *Flying Dutchman*. When the boatswain pipes for boarders, they'll feel as if his whistle were a signal for them to walk the plank."

The remark causes the captain to smile, as also the other officers; though two of the latter abstain from such cheerful demonstration – the third lieutenant and midshipman, already mentioned, on both of whose brows the cloud still sits, seeming darker than ever.

"It's a very remarkable thing," observes the commander, musingly, "how that sort of feeling still affects the fore-castle! For your genuine British tar, who'll board an enemy's ship, crawling across the muzzle of a shotted gun, and has no fear of death in human shape, will act like a scared child when it threatens him in the guise of his Satanic majesty! I have no doubt, as you say, Mr Black, that our lads forward are a bit shy about boarding yonder vessel. Let me show you how to send their shyness adrift. I'll do that with a single word!"

The captain steps forward, his subordinates following him. When within speaking distance of the fore-deck, he stops, and makes sign he has something to say. The tars are all attention.

"Men!" he exclaims, "you see that barque we've been chasing; and at her masthead a flag reversed – which you know to be a signal of distress? That is a call never to be disregarded by an English ship, much less an English man-of-war. Lieutenant! order a boat lowered, and the boatswain to pipe for boarders. Those of you who wish to go, muster on the main-deck."

A loud "hurrah!" responds to the appeal; and, while its echoes are still resounding through the ship, the whole crew comes crowding towards the main-deck. Scores of volunteers present themselves, enough to man every boat in the frigate.

"So, gentlemen!" says the captain, turning to his officers with a proud expression on his countenance, "there's the British sailor for you. I've said he fears not man. And, when humanity makes call, as you see, neither is he frightened at ghost or devil!"

A second cheer succeeds the speech, mingled with good-humoured remarks, though not much laughter. The sailors simply acknowledge the compliment their commanding officer has paid them, at the same time feeling that the moment is too solemn for merriment; for their instinct of humanity is yet under control of the weird feeling.

As the captain turns aft to the quarter, many of them fall away toward the fore-deck, till the group of volunteers becomes greatly diminished. Still there are enough to man the largest boat in the frigate, or fight any crew the chased craft may carry, though these should prove to be pirates of the most desperate kind.

Chapter Three.

Forecastle Fears

“What boat is it to be, sir?”

This question is asked by the first lieutenant, who has followed the captain to the quarter.

“The cutter,” replies his superior; “there seems no need, Mr Black, to send anything larger, at least till we get word of what’s wanted. Possibly it’s a case of sickness – scurvy or something. Though that would be odd too, seeing how the barque keeps her canvas spread. Very queer altogether!”

“Is the doctor to go?”

“He needn’t, till we’ve heard what it is. He’d only have to come back for his drugs and instruments. You may instruct him to be getting them ready. Meanwhile, let the boat be off, and quick. When they bring back their report we’ll see what’s to be done. The cutter’s crew will be quite sufficient. As to any hostility from those on board the stranger, that’s absurd. We could blow her out of the water with a single broadside.”

“Who’s to command the boat, sir?”

The captain reflects, with a look cast inquiringly around. His eye falls upon the third lieutenant, who stands near, seemingly courting the glance.

It is short and decisive. The captain knows his third officer to be a thorough seaman; though young, capable of any duty, however delicate or dangerous. Without further hesitation he assigns him to the command of the cutter.

The young officer enters upon the service with alacrity – as if moved by something more than the mere obedience due to discipline. He hastens to the ship’s side to superintend the lowering of the boat. Nor does he stand at rest, but is seen to help and hurry it, with a look of restless impatience in his eye, and the shadow still observable on his brow.

While thus occupied, he is accosted by another officer, one yet younger than himself – the midshipman already mentioned.

“Can I go with you?” the latter asks, as if addressing an equal.

“Certainly, my dear fellow,” responds the lieutenant, in like familiar tone. “I shall be only too pleased to have you. But you must get the captain’s consent.”

The young reefer glides aft, sees the frigate’s commander upon the quarterdeck, and saluting, says:

“Captain, may I go with the cutter?”

“Well, yes,” responds the chief; “I have no objection.” Then, after taking a survey of the youngster, he adds, “Why do you wish it?”

The youth blushes, without replying. There is a cast upon his countenance that strikes the questioner, somewhat puzzling him. But there is no time either for further inquiry or reflection. The cutter has been lowered, and rests upon the water. Her crew is crowding into her; and she will soon be moving off from the ship.

“You can go, lad,” assents the captain. “Report yourself to the third lieutenant, and tell him I have given you leave. You’re young, and, like all youngsters, ambitious of gaining glory. Well; in this affair you won’t have much chance. I take it. It’s simply boarding a ship in distress, where you’re more likely to be a spectator to scenes of suffering. However, that will be a lesson for you; therefore you can go.”

Thus authorised, the mid hurries away from the quarterdeck, drops down into the boat, and takes seat alongside the lieutenant, already there.

“Shove off!” commands the latter; and with a push of boat-hook, and plashing of oars, the cutter parts from the ship’s side, cleaving the water like a knife.

The two vessels still lie becalmed, in the same relative position to one another, having changed from it scarce a cable's length. And stem to stern, just as the last breath of the breeze, blowing gently against their sails, forsook them.

On both, the canvas is still spread, though not bellied. It hangs limp and loose, giving an occasional flap, so feeble as to show that this proceeds not from any stir in the air, but the mere balancing motion of the vessels. For there is now not enough breeze blowing to flout the long feathers in the tail of the Tropic bird, seen soaring aloft.

Both are motionless; their forms reflected in the water, as if each had its counterpart underneath, keel to keel.

Between them, the sea is smooth as a mirror – that tranquil calm which has given to the Pacific its distinctive appellation. It is now only disturbed, where furrowed by the keel of the cutter, with her stroke of ten oars, five on each side. Parting from the frigate's beam, she is steering straight for the becalmed barque.

On board the man-of-war all stand watching her – their eyes at intervals directed towards the strange vessel. From the frigate's forward-deck, the men have an unobstructed view, especially those clustering around the head. Still there is nearly a league between, and with the naked eye this hinders minute observation. They can but see the white-spread sails, and the black hull underneath them. With a glass the flag, now fallen, is just distinguishable from the mast along which it clings closely. They can perceive that its colour is crimson above, with blue and white underneath – the reversed order of the Chilian ensign. Its single star is no longer visible, nor aught of that heraldry, which spoke so appealingly. But if what they see fails to furnish them with details, these are amply supplied by their excited imaginations. Some of them can make out men aboard the barque – scores, hundreds! After all, she may be a pirate, and the upside-down ensign a decoy. On a tack, she might be a swifter sailer than she has shown herself before wind; and, knowing this, has been but “playing possum” with the frigate. If so, God help the cutter's crew?

Besides these conjectures of the common kind, there are those on the frigate's fore-deck who, in very truth, fancy the polacca to be a spectre. As they continue gazing, now at the boat, now at the barque, they expect every moment to see the one sink beneath the sea; and the other sail off, or melt into invisible air! On the quarter, speculation is equally rife, though running in a different channel. There the captain still stands surrounded by his officers, each with glass to his eye, levelled upon the strange craft. But they can perceive nought to give them a clue to her character; only the loose flapping sails, and the furled flag of distress.

They continue gazing till the cutter is close to the barque's beam. For then do they observe any head above the bulwarks, or face peering through the shrouds!

The fancy of the fore-castle seems to have crept aft among the officers. They, too, begin to feel something of superstitious fear – an awe of the uncanny!

Chapter Four.

The Cutter's Crew

Manned by ten stout tars, and as many oars propelling her, the cutter continues her course with celerity. The lieutenant, seated in the stern-sheets, with the midshipman by his side, directs the movements of the boat; while the glances of both are kept constantly upon the barque. In their eyes is an earnest expression – quite different from that of ordinary interrogation.

The men may not observe it; if they do, it is without comprehension of its meaning. They can but think of it as resembling their own, and proceeding from a like cause. For although with backs turned towards the barque, they cast occasional glances over their shoulders, in which curiosity is less observable than apprehension.

Despite their natural courage, strengthened by the late appeal to their humanity, the awe is strong upon them. Insidiously returning as they took their seats in the boat, it increases as they draw farther from the frigate and nearer to the barque. Less than half-an-hour has elapsed, and they are now within a cable's length of the strange vessel.

“Hold!” commands the lieutenant.

The oar-stroke is instantly suspended, and the blades held aloft. The boat gradually loses way, and at length rests stationary on the tranquil water.

All eyes are bent upon the barque; glances go searchingly along her bulwarks, from poop to prow.

No preparations to receive them! No one appears on deck – not a head raised over the rail!

“Barque ahoy!” hails the lieutenant.

“Barque ahoy!” is heard in fainter tone; but not in answer. Only the echo of the officer's voice, coming back from the hollow timbers of the becalmed vessel! There is again silence, more profound than ever. For the sailors in the boat have ceased talking; their awe, now intense, holding them speechless and as if spellbound!

“Barque ahoy!” again shouted the lieutenant, louder than before, but with like result. As before, he is only answered by echo. There is either nobody on board, or no one who thinks it worth while to make rejoinder.

The first supposition seems absurd, looking at the sails; the second equally so, regarding the flag at the main-royal masthead, and taking into account its character.

A third hail from the officer, this time vociferated in loudest voice, with the interrogatory added:

“Any one aboard there?”

To the question no reply, any more than to the hail.

Silence continues – stillness profound, awe-inspiring. They in the boat begin to doubt the evidence of their senses. Is there a barque before their eyes? Or is it all an illusion? How can a vessel be under sail – full sail – without sailors? And if any, why do they not show at her side? Why have they not answered the hail thrice given; the last time loud enough to be heard within the depths of her hold? It should have awakened her crew, even though all were asleep in the fore-castle!

“Give way again!” cries the lieutenant. “Bring up on the starboard side, coxswain! Under the forechains.”

The oars are dipped, and the cutter moves on. But scarce is she in motion, when once more the officer commands “Hold!”

With his voice mingle others, coming from the barque. Her people seem at length to have become aroused from their sleep, or stupor. A noise is heard upon her deck, as of a scuffle, accompanied by cries of strange intonation.

Presently two heads, apparently human, show above the bulwarks; two faces flesh-coloured, and thinly covered with hair! Then two bodies appear, also human-like, save that they are hairy all over – the hair of a foxy red! They swarm up the shrouds; and clutching the ratlines shake them, with quick violent jerks; at the same time uttering what appears angry speech in an unknown tongue, and harsh voice, as if chiding off the intruders. They go but a short way up the shrouds, just as far as they could spring from the deck, and only stay there for an instant; then dropping down again, disappear as abruptly and unceremoniously as they had presented themselves!

The lieutenant's command to "Hold!" was a word thrown away. Without it the men would have discontinued their stroke. They have done so: and sit with bated breath, eyes strained, ears listening, and lips mute, as if all had been suddenly and simultaneously struck dumb. Silence throughout the boat – silence aboard the barque – silence everywhere: the only sound heard being the "drip-drop" of the water as it falls from the feathered oar-blades.

For a time the cutter's crew remains mute, not one essaying to speak a word. They are silent, less from surprise than sheer stark terror. Fear is depicted on their faces and observable in their attitudes, as no wonder it should. What they have just seen is sufficient to terrify the stoutest hearts – even those of tried tars, as all of them are. A ship manned by hairy men – a crew of veritable Orsons! Certainly enough to startle the most phlegmatic mariner, and make him tremble as he tugs at his oar. But they have ceased tugging at their oars, and hold them, blades suspended. Almost the same is their breath. One alone, at length, musters sufficient courage to mutter:

"Gracious goodness, shipmates! what can it all mean?"

He receives no answer, though his question brings the silence to an end. It is now further broken by the voice of the lieutenant, as also that of the midshipman. They do not speak simultaneously, but one after the other. The superstitious fear pervading the minds of the men does not extend to them. They too have their fears, but of a different kind, and from a different cause. As yet neither has communicated to the other what he himself has been thinking; the thoughts of both being hitherto vague, though every moment becoming more defined. And the appearance of the red men upon the ratlines – strange to the sailors – seems to have made things more intelligible to them. Judging by the expression upon their faces, they comprehend what is puzzling their companions. And with a sense of anxiety more than fear – more of doubt than dismay.

The lieutenant speaks first, shouting in command:

"Give way! Quick! Pull in! Head on for the forechains!"

He acts in an excited manner, appearing nervously impatient. And, as if mechanically, the midshipman repeats the order, imitating the mien of his superior. The men execute it, but slowly, and with seeming reluctance. They know their officers to be daring fellows, both. But now they deem them rash, even to recklessness. For they cannot comprehend the motives urging them to action. Still they obey; and the prow of the boat strikes the barque abeam.

"Grapple on!" commands the senior officer soon as touching.

A boat-hook takes grip in the chains; and the cutter, swinging round, lies at rest alongside.

The lieutenant has already risen to his feet, as also the mid. Ordering only the coxswain to follow, they spring to the chains, lay hold, and lift themselves aloft.

Obedient to orders, the men remain in the boat, still keeping seat on the thwarts, in wonder at the bold bearing of their officers – at the same time admiring it.

Chapter Five.

A Feast Unfinished

Having gained the bulwarks, the two officers, balancing themselves on the rail, look down over the decks of the polacca. Their glances sweep these forward, aft, and amidships – ranging from stem to stern, and back again.

Nothing seen there to explain the strangeness of affairs; nothing heard. No sailor on the fore-deck, nor officer on the quarter! Only the two queer creatures that had shown themselves on the shrouds. These are still visible, one of them standing by the mainmast, the other crouching near the caboose. Both again give out their jabbering speech, accompanying it with gestures of menace.

Disregarding this, the lieutenant leaps down upon the deck, and makes towards them; the mid and coxswain keeping close after.

At their approach, the hirsute monsters retreat; not scared-like, but with a show of defiance, as if disposed to contest possession of the place. They give back, however, bit by bit, till at length, ceasing to dispute, they shuffle off over the quarter, and on to the poop.

Neither of the two officers pays any attention to their demonstrations; and the movement aft is not made for them. Both lieutenant and midshipman seem excited by other thoughts – some strong impulse urging them on. Alone is the coxswain mystified by the hairy men, and not a little alarmed; but, without speaking, he follows his superiors.

All continue on toward the quarterdeck, making for the cabin-door. Having boarded the barque by the forechains, they must pass the caboose going aft. Its sliding panel is open, and when opposite, the three come to a stand. They are brought to it by a faint cry, issuing out of the cook's quarters.

Looking in, they behold a spectacle sufficiently singular to detain them. It is more than singular – it is startling. On the bench, in front of the galley-fire – which shows as if long-extinguished – sits a man, bolt upright, his back against the bulkhead. Is it a man, or but the semblance of one? Certainly it is a human figure; or, speaking more precisely, a human skeleton with the skin still on; this black as the coal-cinders in the grate in front of it!

It is a man – a negro. And living; since at sight of them he betrays motion, and makes an attempt to speak.

Only the coxswain stays to listen, or hear what he has to say. The others hurry on aft, making direct for the cabin, which, being between decks, is approached by a stairway.

Reaching this, they rush down, and stand before the door, which they find shut. Only closed, not locked. It yields to the turning of the handle; and, opening, gives them admission.

They enter hastily, one after the other, without ceremony or announcement. Once inside, they as quickly come to a stop, both looking aghast. The spectacle in the caboose was nought to what is now before their eyes. That was but startling; this is appalling.

It is the main-cabin they have entered; not a large one, for the polacca has not been constructed to carry passengers. Still is it snug, and roomy enough for a table six feet by four. Such a one stands in the centre, its legs fixed in the floor, with four chairs around it, similarly stanchioned.

On the table there are decanters and dishes, alongside glasses and plates. It is a dessert service, and on the dishes are fruits, cakes, and sweetmeats, with fragments of the same on the plates. The decanters contain wines of different sorts; and there are indications of wine having been poured out into the glasses – some of them still containing it. There are four sets, corresponding to the four chairs; and, to all appearance, this number of guests have been seated at the table. But two of the chairs are empty, as if those who occupied them had retired to an inner state-room. It is the side-seats that are vacant, and a fan lying on one, with a scarf over the back of that opposite, proclaim their last occupants to have been ladies.

Two guests are still at the table; one at its head, the other at the foot, facing each other. And such guests! Both are men, though, unlike him in the caboose, they are white men. But, like him, they also appear in the extreme of emaciation: jaws with the skin drawn tightly over them, cheekbones prominent, chin protruding, eyes sunken in their sockets!

Not dead neither; for their eyes, glancing and glaring, still show life. But there is little other evidence of it. Sitting stiff in the chairs, rigidly erect, they made no attempt to stir, no motion of either body or limbs. It would seem as if from both all strength had departed, their famished figures showing them in the last stages of starvation. And this in front of a table furnished with choice wines, fruits, and other comestibles – in short, loaded with delicacies!

What can it mean?

Not this question, but a cry comes from the lips of the two officers, simultaneously from both, as they stand regarding the strange tableau. Only for an instant do they thus stand. Then the lieutenant, rushing up the stair, and on to the side, shouts out —

“Back to the ship, and bring the doctor! Row with all your might, men. Away!”

The boat’s people, obedient, pull off with alacrity. They are but too glad to get away from the suspected spot. As they strain at their oars, with faces now turned towards the barque, and eyes wonderingly bent upon her, they see nought to give them a clue to the conduct of their officers, or in any way elucidate the series of mysteries, prolonged to a chain and still continuing. One imbued with a belief in the supernatural, shakes his head, saying —

“Shipmates! we may never see that lieutenant again; nor the young reefer, nor the old cox — never!”

Chapter Six.

“A Phantom Ship – Sure!”

During all this while those on board the man-of-war have been regarding the barque – at the same time watching with interest every movement of the boat.

Only they who have glasses can see what is passing with any distinctness. For the day is not a bright one, a haze over the sea hindering observation. It has arisen since the fall of the wind, perhaps caused by the calm; and, though but a mere film, at such far distance interferes with the view through their telescopes. Those using them can just tell that the cutter has closed in upon the strange vessel, and is lying along under the foremast shrouds, while some of her crew appear to have swarmed up the chains. This cannot be told for certain. The haze around the barque is more dense than elsewhere, as if steam were passing off from her sides, and through it objects show confusedly.

While the frigate's people are straining their eyes to make out the movement of their boat, an officer, of sharper sight than the rest, cries out —

“See! the cutter coming back!”

All perceived this, and with some surprise. It is not ten minutes since the boat grappled on to the barque. Why returning from her so soon?

While they are conjecturing as to the cause, the same officer again observes something that has escaped the others. There are but *eight* oars, instead of ten – the regulation strength of the cutter – and ten men where before there were thirteen. Three of the boat's crew must have remained behind.

This causes neither alarm, nor uneasiness, to the frigate's officers. They take it that the three have gone aboard the barque, and for some reason, whatever it be, elected to stay there. They know the third lieutenant to be not only a brave man, but one of quick decision, and prompt also to act. He has boarded the distressed vessel, discovered the cause of distress, and sends the cutter back to bring whatever may be needed for her. Thus reasons the quarterdeck.

It is different on the fore, where apprehensions are rife about their missing shipmates – fears that some misfortune has befallen them. True, no shots have been heard nor flashes seen. Still they could have been killed without firearms. Savages might use other, and less noisy, weapons.

The tale of the skin-clad crew gives colour to this supposition. But then the “cutters” went armed – in addition to their cutlasses, being provided with pikes and boarding-pistols. Had they been attacked, they would not have retreated without discharging these last – less likely leaving three of their number behind. Besides no signs of strife or struggle have been observed upon the barque.

All the more mystery; and pondering upon it, the frigate's crew are strengthened in their superstitious faith. Meanwhile, the cutter is making way across the stretch of calm sea that separates the two ships, and although with reduced strength of rowers, cleaves the water quickly. The movements of the men indicate excitement. They pull as if rowing in a regatta! Soon they are near enough to be individually recognised, when it is seen that neither of the two officers is in the boat! Nor the coxswain – one of the oarsmen having taken his place at the tiller.

As the boat draws nearer, and the faces of the two men seated in the stern-sheets can be distinguished, there is observed upon them an expression which none can interpret. No one tries. All stand silently waiting till the cutter comes alongside, and sweeping past the bows, brings up on the frigate's starboard beam, under the main-chains.

The officers move forward along the gangway, and stand looking over the bulwarks; while the men come crowding aft, as far as permitted.

The curiosity of all receives a check – an abrupt disappointment. There is no news from the barque, save the meagre scrap contained in the lieutenant's order: “Back to the ship, and bring the doctor.”

Beyond this the cutter's crew only knew that they have seen the hairy men. Seen and heard them, though without understanding a word of what these said. Two had sprung upon the shrouds, and shouted at the cutter's people, as if scolding them off!

The tale spreads through the frigate, fore and aft, quick as a train of powder ignited. It is everywhere talked of, and commented on. On the quarter, it is deemed strange enough; while forward, it further intensifies the belief in something supernatural.

The tars give credulous ear to one who cries out: "That's a phantom ship – sure!"

Their other comrade repeats what he said in the boat, and in the self-same words:

"Shipmates, we may never see that lieutenant again, nor the young reefer, nor the old cox – never!"

The boding speech appears like a prophecy, on the instant realised. Scarce has it passed the sailor's lips, when a cry rings through the frigate that startles all on board, thrilling them more intensely than ever.

While the men have been commenting upon the message brought back from the barque, and the officers are taking steps to hasten its execution – the doctor getting out his instruments, with such medicines as the occasion seems to call for – the strange vessel has been for a time unthought of.

The cry now raised recalls her, causing all to rush towards the frigate's side, and once more bend their eyes on the barque.

No, not *on* her; only in the direction where she was last seen. For, to their intense astonishment, *the polacca has disappeared!*

Chapter Seven.

A Black Squall

The surprise caused by the disappearance of the strange vessel is but short-lived; explained by that very natural phenomenon – a fog. Not the haze already spoken of; but a dense bank of dark vapour that, drifting over the surface of the sea, has suddenly enveloped the barque within its floating folds.

It threatens to do the same with the frigate – as every sailor in her can perceive. But though their wondering is at an end, a sense of undefined fear still holds possession of them. Nor is this due to the fast approaching fog. That could not frighten men who have dared every danger of the deep, and oft groped their way through icy seas shrouded in darkness almost amorphous.

Their fears spring from the old fancy, that the other phenomena are not natural. The fog of itself may be; but what brings it on, just then, at a crisis, when they were speculating about the character of the chased vessel, some doubting her honesty, others sceptical of her reality, not a few boldly pronouncing her as a phantom? If an accident of nature, certainly a remarkable one.

The reader may smile at credulity of this kind; but not he who has mixed among the men of the forecandle, whatever the nationality of the ship, and whether merchantmen or man-of-war. Not all the training of naval schools, nor the boasted enlightenment of this our age, has fully eradicated from the mind of the canvas-clad mariner a belief in something more than he has seen, or can see – something *outside* nature. To suppose him emancipated from this would be to hold him of higher intelligence than his fellow-men, who stay ashore ploughing the soil, as he does the sea. To thousands of these he can point, saying: “Behold the believers in supernatural existences – in spirit-rappings – ay, in very ghosts; this not only in days gone by, but now – now more than ever within memory of man!” Then let not landsmen scoff at such fancies, not a whit more absurd than their own credence in spiritualism.

Aside from this sort of feeling in the warship, there is a real and far more serious cause for apprehension, in which all have a share – officers as men. A fog is before their eyes, apparently drifting towards them. It has curtained the other vessel, spreading over her like a pall, and will surely do the same with their own. They perceive, also, that it is not a fog of the ordinary kind, but one that portends storm, sudden and violent. For they are threatened by the *black squall* of the Pacific.

Enough in its name to cause uneasiness about the safety of their ship; though not of her are they thinking. She is a strong vessel, and can stand the sea’s buffetings. Their anxiety is more for their shipmates, whose peril all comprehend. They know the danger of the two vessels getting separated in a fog. If they should, what will be the fate of those who have gone aboard the barque? The strange craft had been signalling distress. Is it scarcity of provisions, or want of water? In either case she will be worse off than ever. It cannot be shortness of hands to work her sails, with these all set! Sickness then? Some scourge afflicting her crew – cholera, or yellow fever? Something of the kind seems probable, by the lieutenant sending back for the doctor – and the doctor only.

Conjecturing ends, and suddenly. The time for action has arrived. The dark cloud comes driving on, and is soon around the ship, lapping her in its damp murky embrace. It clings to her bulwarks, pours over her canvas still spread, wetting it till big drops clout down upon the deck.

It is no longer a question of the surgeon starting forth on his errand of humanity, nor the cutter returning to the becalmed barque. There would be no more likelihood of discovering the latter, than of finding a needle in a stack of straw. In such a fog, the finest ship that ever sailed sea, with the smartest crew that ever vessel carried, would be helpless as a man groping his way in dungeon darkness.

There is no more thought of the barque, and not much about the absent officers. Out of sight, they are for a time almost out of mind. For on board the frigate every one has enough to do looking after himself and his duties. Almost on the instant of her sails being enveloped in vapour, they are

struck by a strong wind, coming from a quarter directly opposite to that for which they have been hitherto set.

The voice of her commander, heard thundering through a trumpet, directs all canvas to be instantly taken in.

The order is executed with the promptness peculiar to a man-of-war; and soon after, the huge ship is tossing amid tempestuous waves, with only storm-sails set.

A ship under storm-canvas is a sight always melancholy to the mariner. It tells of a struggle with wind and wave, a serious conflict with the elements, which may well cause anxiety.

And such is the situation of the British frigate, soon as surrounded by the fog. The sea, lately tranquil, is now madly raging; the waves tempest-lashed, their crests like the manes of white horses going in headlong gallop. Amid them the huge war-vessel, but the moment before motionless – a leviathan, apparently the sea's lord – is now its slave, and soon may be its victim. Dancing like a cork, she is buffeted from billow to billow, or bounding into the trough between, as if cast there in scorn.

The frigate's crew is now fully occupied taking care of her, without time to think about any other vessel – even one flying a flag of distress. Ere long they may have to hoist the same signal themselves. But there are skilled seamen aboard, who well know what to do – who watch and ward every sea that comes sweeping along. Some of these tumble the big ship about, till the steersmen feel her going almost regardless of the rudder.

There are but two courses left for safety, and her captain weighs the choice between them. He must “lie to,” and ride out the gale, or “scud” before it. To do the latter may take him away from the strange vessel – now no longer seen – and she may never be sighted by them again. Ten chances to one if she ever would; for *she* may not elect to run down the wind. Even if she did, there would be but slight hope of overhauling her – supposing the storm to continue for any considerable time. The probabilities are that she will lie to. As the naval lieutenant will no doubt have control, he would order her sails to be taken in. Surely he will not think of parting from that spot.

Thus reflecting, the frigate's captain determines upon “lying to,” and keep as near the place as possible. Everything has been made snug, and the ship's head set close to wind.

Still, aboard of her, brave hearts are filled with fears and forebodings, not for themselves, but the safety of their shipmates on the barque. Both of the absent officers are favourites with their comrades of the quarter, as with the crew. So too the coxswain who accompanies them. What will be their fate?

All are thinking of it, though no one offers a surmise. No one can tell to what they have committed themselves. 'Tis only sure, that in the tempest now raging there must be danger to the stranger craft, without counting that signalled by the reversed ensign – without thought of the mystery already enwrapping her. The heart of every one on board the warship is beating with humanity, as pulsing with pent-up fear. And while the waves are pitching her almost on her beam-ends – while winds are rattling loud amidst her rigging – a yet louder sound mingles with their monotone. It is given out at regularly measured intervals: for it is the *minute-gun* which the frigate has commenced firing – not as a signal of distress, asking for assistance, but one of counsel and cheer, seeking to give it. Every sixty seconds, amidst the wild surging of waves, and the hoarse howling of winds, the louder boom of cannon breaks their harsh continuity.

The night comes down, adding to the darkness, though not much to the dilemma in which the frigate is placed. The fog and storm combined have already made her situation dangerous as might be; it could not well be worse.

Both continue throughout the night. And on through it all she keeps discharging her signal-guns, though no one thinks of listening for a response. In all probability there is no cannon aboard the barque – nothing that could give it.

Close upon the hour of morning, the storm begins to abate, and the clouds to dissipate. The fog seems to be lifting, or drifting off to some other part of the ocean.

And with hope again dawning comes the dawn of day. The frigate's people – every man of them, officers and tars – are upon deck. They stand along the ship's sides, ranged in rows by the bulwarks, looking out across the sea. There is no fog now – not the thinnest film. The sky is clear as crystal, and blue as a boat-race ribbon fresh unfolded; the sea the same, its big waves no longer showing sharp white crests, but rounded, and rolling lazily along. Over these the sailors look, scanning the surface. Their gaze is sent to every quarter – every point of the compass. The officers sweep the horizon with their glasses, ranging around the circle where the two blues meet. But neither naked eye nor telescope can discover aught there. Only sea and sky; an albatross with pinions of grand spread, or a tropic bird, its long tail-feathers trailing train-like behind it. No barque, polacca-rigged or otherwise – no ship of any kind – no sign of sail – no canvas except a full set of “courses” which the frigate herself has now set. She is alone upon the ocean – in the mighty Pacific – a mere speck upon its far-stretching illimitable expanse.

Every man upon the war-vessel is imbued with a strange sense of sadness. But all are silent – each inquiring of himself what has become of the barque, and what the fate of their shipmates.

One alone is heard speaking aloud, giving expression to a thought, seeming common to all. It is the sailor who twice uttered the prediction, which, for the third time, he repeats, now as the assertion of a certainty. To the group gathered around him he says: —

“Shipmates, we’ll never see that lieutenant again, nor the young reefer, nor the old cox – never!”

Chapter Eight.

A Fleet of many Flags

Scene, San Francisco, the capital of California. Time, the autumn of 1849; several weeks anterior to the chase recounted.

A singular city the San Francisco of 1849; very different from that it is to-day, and equally unlike what it was twelve months before the aforesaid date, when the obscure village of Yerba Buena yielded up its name, along with its site, entering on what may be termed a second genesis.

The little *pueblita*, port of the Mission Dolores, built of sun-dried bricks – its petty commerce in hides and tallow represented by two or three small craft annually arriving and departing – wakes up one morning to behold whole fleets of ships sailing in through the “Golden Gate,” and dropping anchor in front of its shingly strand. They come from all parts of the Pacific, from all the other oceans, from the ends of the earth, carrying every kind of flag known to the nations. The whalesman, late harpooning “fish” in the Arctic ocean, with him who has been chasing “cachalot” in the Pacific or Indian; the merchantman standing towards Australia, China, or Japan the traders among the South Sea Islands; the coasters of Mexico, Chili, Peru; men-o’-war of every flag and fashion, frigates, corvettes, and double-deckers; even Chinese junks and Malayan prahus are seen setting into San Francisco Bay, and bringing to beside the wharfless beach of Yerba Buena.

What has caused this grand spreading of canvas, and commingling of queer craft? What is still causing it; for still they come! The answer lies in a little word of four letters; the same that from the beginning of man’s activity on earth has moved him to many things – too oft to deeds of evil —*gold*. Some eighteen months before the Swiss emigrant Sutter, scouring out his mill-race on a tributary of the Sacramento River, observes shining particles among the mud. Taking them up, and holding them in the hollow of his hand, he feels that they are heavy, and sees them to be of golden sheen. And gold they prove, when submitted to the test of the alembic.

The son of Helvetia discovered the precious metal in grains, and nuggets, interspersed with the drift of a fluvial deposit. They were not the first found in California, but the first coming under the eyes of European settlers – men imbued with the energy to collect, and carry them to the far-off outside world.

Less than two years have elapsed since the digging of Sutter’s mill-race. Meantime, the specks that scintillated in its ooze have been transported over the ocean, and exhibited in great cities – in the windows of brokers, and bullion merchants. The sight has proved sufficient to thicken people the banks of the Sacramento – hitherto sparsely settled – and cover San Francisco Bay with ships from every quarter of the globe.

Not only is the harbour of Yerba Buena crowded with strange craft, but its streets with queer characters – adventurers of every race and clime – among whom may be heard an exchange of tongues, the like never listened to since the abortive attempt at building the tower of Babel.

The Mexican mud-walled dwellings soon disappear – swallowed up and lost amidst the modern surrounding of canvas tents, and weather-board houses, that rise as by magic around them. A like change takes place in their occupancy. No longer the tranquil interiors – the *tertulia*, with guests sipping aniseed, curacao, and Canario – munching sweet cakes and *confituras*. Instead, the houses inside now ring with boisterous revelry, with a perfume of mint and Monongahela; and although the guitar still tinkles, it is almost inaudible amid the louder strains of clarionet, fiddle, and French horn.

What a change in the traffic of the streets! No more silent, at certain hours deserted for the *siesta*, at others trodden by sandalled monks and shovel-hatted priests – both bold of gaze, when passing the dark-eyed damsels in high shell-combs and black silk mantillas; bolder still, saluting the brown-skinned daughters of the aboriginal wrapped in their blue-grey *rebozos*. No more trodden by

garrison soldiers in uniforms of French cut and colour; by officers glittering in gold lace; by townsmen in cloaks of broadcloth; by country gentlemen (haciendados) on horseback; and herdsmen, or small farmers (rancheros) in their splendid Californian costume.

True, some of these are still seen, but not as of yore, swaggering and conspicuous. Amid the concourse of new-comers they move timidly, jostled by rough men in red flannel shirts, buckskin and blanket coats, with pistols in their belts, and knives hanging handy along their hips. By others equally formidable, in Guernsey frocks, or wearing the dreadnought jacket of the sailor; not a few scarce clothed at all, shrouding their nakedness in such rags as remain after a long journey overland, or a longer voyage by sea.

In all probability, since its beginning, the world never witnessed so motley an assemblage of men, tramping through the streets of a seaport town, as those seen in Yerba Buena, rebaptised San Francisco, in the year of our Lord 1849.

And perhaps never a more varied display of bunting in one bay. In all certainty, harbour never held so large a fleet of ships with so few men to man them. At least one-half are crewless, and a goodly portion of the remainder almost so. Many have but their captains and mates, with, it may be, the carpenter and cook. The forecastle fellows are ashore, and but few of them intend returning aboard. They are either gone off to the gold-diggings, or are going. There has been a general *debandade* among the Jack-tars – leaving many a merry deck in forlorn and silent solitude.

In this respect there is a striking contrast between the streets of the town and the ships lying before it. In the former, an eager throng, pushing, jostling, surging noisily along, with all the impatience of men half-mad; in the latter, tranquillity, inaction, the torpor of lazy life, as if the vessels – many of them splendid craft – were laid up for good, and never again going to sea. And many never did – their hulks to this day, like the skeletons of stranded whales, are seen lying along that beach which was once Yerba Buena!

Chapter Nine.

A Brace of British Officers

Notwithstanding the abnormal condition of naval affairs above described, and the difficulties to be dealt with, not all the vessels in San Francisco Bay are crewless. A few still retain their full complement of hands – these being mostly men-of-war, whose strict discipline prevents desertion, though it needs strategy to assist. They ride at anchor far out, beyond swimming distance from the beach, and will not allow shore-boats to approach them. The tar who attempts to take French leave will have a severe swim for it; perchance get a shot sent after, that may send him to the bottom of the sea. With this menace constantly before their minds, even California's gold does not tempt many to run the dangerous gauntlet.

Among the craft keeping up this iron discipline is one that bears the British flag – a man-of-war, conspicuous by her handsome hull and clean tapering spars. Her sails are stowed snug, lashed neatly along the yards; in her rigging not a rope out of place. Down upon her decks, white as holystone can make them, the same regularity is observable; every rope coiled, every brace trimly turned upon its belaying-pin. It could not be otherwise with the frigate *Crusader*, commanded by Captain Bracebridge – a sailor of the old school, who takes a pride in his ship. He has managed to retain his crew – every man-Jack of them. There is not a name on the frigate's books but has its representative in a live sailor, who can either be seen upon her decks, or at any moment summoned thither by the whistle of the boatswain. Even if left to themselves, but few of the “crusaders” would care to desert. Gold itself cannot lure them to leave a ship where things are so agreeable; for Captain Bracebridge does all in his power to make matters pleasant, for men as well as officers. He takes care that the former get good grub, and plenty of it – including full rations of grog. He permits them to have amusements among themselves; while the officers treat them to *tableaux-vivants*, charades, and private theatricals. To crown all, a grand ball has been given aboard the ship, in anticipation of her departure from the port – an event near at hand – at which more than one of her officers have made acquaintances they would wish to meet again – two of them desiring this with longings of a special kind. These last have fallen in love with a brace of shore damsels, with whom they had danced, and done a little flirting at the ball.

It is the third day after, and these love-struck gentlemen are standing upon the poop-deck, conversing about it. They are apart from their comrades – purposely, since their speech is confidential. Both are young men; the elder, by name Crozier, being a year or two over twenty; while the younger, Will Cadwallader, is almost as much under it. Crozier has passed his term of probationary service, and is now “mate;” while the other is still but a “midshipmite.” And a type of this last, just as Marryat would have made him; bright face, light-coloured hair, curling over cheeks ruddy as the bloom upon a Ribston pippin. For he is Welsh, with eyes of that turquoise blue often observed in the descendants of the Cymri, and hair of aureous hue.

Quite different is Edward Crozier, who hails from an ancestral hall in the East Riding of York. His hair, also curling, is dark brown; his complexion in correspondence. Moustaches already well grown. An aquiline nose and broad jaw-blades denote resolution – a character borne out by the glance of an eye that shows no quailing. He is of medium size, with a figure denoting strength, and capable of great endurance – in short, carrying out any resolve his mind may make. In point of personal appearance he is the superior; though both are handsome fellows, each in his own style.

And as the styles are different, so are their dispositions – these rather contrasting. Crozier is of a serious, sedate turn and, though anything but morose, rarely given to mirth; while, from the countenance of Cadwallader the laugh is scarce ever absent, and the dimple on his cheek – to employ a printer's phrase – appears stereotyped. With the young Welshman a joke might be carried to extremes,

and he would only seek his *revanche* by a lark of like kind. But with him of Yorkshire, practical jesting would be dangerous.

Notwithstanding this difference of disposition, the two officers are fast friends; a fact perhaps due to the dissimilitude of their natures. When not separated by their respective duties, they keep habitually together on board the ship, and together go ashore. And now, for the first time in the lives of both, they have commenced making love together. Fortune has favoured them in this, that they are not in love with the same lady. Still further, that their sweethearts do not dwell apart, but live under the same roof, and belong to one family. They are not sisters, for all that; nor yet cousins, though standing in a certain relationship. One is the aunt of the other.

Such kinship might argue inequality of age. There is none, however, or only a very little: scarce so much as between the young officers themselves. The aunt is but a year or so the senior of her niece. And as Fate has willed, the lots of the lovers have been cast to correspond in proper symmetry and proportion. Crozier is in love with the former – Cadwallader with the latter.

Their sweethearts are both Spanish, of the purest blood, the boasted *sangre azul*. They are, respectively, daughter and grand-daughter of Don Gregorio Montijo, whose house can be seen from the ship: a mansion of imposing appearance, in the Mexican *hacienda* style, set upon the summit of a hill, at some distance inshore, and southward from the town.

While conversing, the young officers have their eyes upon it – one of the two assisting his vision with a telescope. It is Cadwallader who uses the instrument.

Holding it to his eye, he says:

“I think I can see them, Ned. At all events, there are two heads on the house-top, just showing over the parapet. I’ll take odds it’s them, the dear girls. I wonder if they see us.”

“I should say, not likely; unless, as yourself, they’re provided with a telescope.”

“By Jove! I believe they’ve got one. I see something glance. My Iñez has it to her eye, I’ll warrant.”

“More likely it’s my Carmen. Give me that glass. For all those blue eyes you’re so proud of, I can sight a sail farther than you.”

“A sail, yes; but not a pretty face, Ned. No, no; you’re blind to beauty; else you’d never have taken on to the old aunt, leaving the niece to me. Ha, ha, ha!”

“Old, indeed! She’s as young as yours, if not younger. One tress of her bright amber hair is worth a whole head of your sweetheart’s black tangle. Look at that!”

He draws out such a tress, and unfolding, shakes it tauntingly before the other’s eyes. In the sun it gleams golden, with a radiance of red; for it is amber colour, as he has styled it.

“Look at this!” cries Cadwallader, also exhibiting a lock of hair. “You thought nobody but yourself could show love-locks. This to yours, is as costly silk alongside cheap cotton.”

For an instant each stands caressing his particular favours; then both burst into laughter, as they return them to their places of deposit.

Crozier, in turn taking the telescope, directs it on the house of Don Gregorio; after a time saying:

“About one thing you’re right, Will: those heads are the same from which we’ve had our tresses. Ay, and they’re looking this way, through glasses; perhaps, expecting us soon. Well; we’ll be with them, please God, before many hours; or it may be minutes. Then, you’ll see how much superior bright amber is to dull black – anywhere in the world, but especially in the light of a Californian sun.”

“Nowhere, under either sun or moon. Give me the girl with the crow-black hair!”

“For me, her whose locks are red gold!”

“Well; *cada uno a su gusto*, as my sweetheart has taught me to say in her soft Andalusian. But now, Ned, talking seriously, do you think the governor will give us leave to go ashore?”

“He must; I know he will.”

“How do you know it?”

“Bah! *ma bohil*; as our Irish second would say. You’re the son of a poor Welsh squire – good blood, I admit. But I chance to be heir to twice ten thousand a year, with an uncle in the Admiralty. I have asked leave for both of us. So, don’t be uneasy about our getting it. Captain Bracebridge is no snob; but he knows his own interests, and won’t refuse such fair request. See! There he is – coming this way. Now for his answer – affirmative, you may rely upon it.”

“Gentlemen,” says the captain, approaching, “you have my permission to go ashore for the day. The gig will take you, landing wherever you wish. You are to send the boat back, and give the coxswain orders where, and when, he’s to await you on return to the ship. Take my advice, and abstain from drink – which might get you into difficulties. As you know, just now San Francisco is full of all sorts of queer characters – a very Pandemonium of a place. For the sake of the service, and the honour of the uniform you wear, steer clear of scrapes – and above all, give a wide berth to *women*.”

After thus delivering himself, the captain turns on his heel, and retires – leaving mate and midshipman to their meditations.

They do not meditate long; the desired leave has been granted, and the order issued for the gig to be got ready. The boat is in the water, her crew swarming over the side, and seating themselves upon the thwarts.

The young officers only stay to give a finishing touch to their toilet, preparatory to appearing before eyes whose critical glances both more fear than they would the fire of a ship’s broadside.

Everything arranged, they drop down the man-ropes and seat themselves in the stern-sheets; Crozier commanding the men to shove off.

Soon the little gig is gliding over the tranquil waters of San Francisco Bay; not in the direction of the landing-wharf, but for a projecting point on the shore, to the south of, and some distance outside, the suburbs of the town. For, the beacon towards which they steer is the house of Don Gregorio Montijo.

Chapter Ten.

A Pair of Spanish Señoritas

Don Gregorio Montijo is a Spaniard, who, some ten years previous to the time of which we write, found his way into the Republic of Mexico, afterwards moving on to “Alta California.” Settling by San Francisco Bay, he became a *ganadero*, or stock-farmer – the industry in those days chiefly followed by Californians.

His grazing estate gives proof that he has prospered. Its territory extends several miles along the water, and several leagues backward; its boundary in that direction being the shore of the South Sea itself; while a thousand head of horses, and ten times the number of horned cattle, roam over its rich pastures.

His house stands upon the summit of a hill that rises above the bay – a sort of spur projected from higher ground behind, and trending at right angles to the beach, where it declines into a low-lying sand-spit. Across this runs the shore-road, southward from the city to San José, cutting the ridge midway between the walls of the house and the water’s edge, at some three hundred yards distance from each.

The dwelling, a massive quadrangular structure – in that Span-Moriscan style of architecture imported into New Spain by the *Conquistadores* – is but a single storey in height, having a flat, terraced roof, and inner court: this last approached through a grand gate entrance, centrally set in the front façade, with a double-winged door wide enough to admit the coach of Sir Charles Grandison.

Around a Californian country-house there’s rarely much in the way of ornamental grounds – even though it be a *hacienda* of the first-class. And when the headquarters of a grazing estate, still less; its inclosures consisting chiefly of “corrals” for the penning and branding of cattle, these usually erected in the rear of the dwelling. To this almost universal nakedness the grounds of Don Gregorio offer some exception. He has added a stone fence, which, separating them from the high road, is penetrated by a portalled entrance, with an avenue that leads straight up to the house. This, strewn with snow-white sea-shells, is flanked on each side by a row of *manzanita* bushes – a beautiful indigenous evergreen. Here and there a clump of California bays, and some scattered peach-trees, betray an attempt, however slight, at landscape gardening.

Taking into account the grandeur of his house, and the broad acres attached to it, one may safely say, that in the New World Don Gregorio has done well. And, in truth, so has he – thriven to fulness. But he came not empty from the Old, having brought with him sufficient cash to purchase a large tract of land, as also sufficient of horses and horned cattle to stock it. No needy adventurer he, but a gentleman by birth; one of Biscay’s bluest blood – *hidalgos* since the days of the Cid.

In addition to his ready-money, he also brought with him a wife – Biscayan as himself – and a daughter, at the time turned eight years old. His wife has been long ago buried; a tombstone in the cemetery of the old Dolores Mission commemorating her many virtues. Since, he has had an accession to his contracted family circle; the added member being a grand-daughter, only a year younger than his daughter, but equally well grown – both having reached the ripest age of girlhood. It is scarce necessary to add, that the young ladies, thus standing in the relationship of aunt and niece, are the two with whom Edward Crozier and Willie Cadwallader have respectively fallen in love.

And while mate and midshipman are on the way to pay them a promised visit – for such it is – a word may be said about their personal appearance. Though so closely allied, and nearly of an age, in other respects the two differ so widely, that one unacquainted with the fact would not suspect the slightest kinship between them.

The aunt, Doña Carmen, is of pure Biscayan blood, both by her father’s and mother’s side. From this she derives her blonde complexion, with that colour of hair so admired by Mr Crozier;

with the blue-grey eyes, known as “Irish” – the Basques and Celts being a kindred race. Her Biscayan origin has endowed her with a fine figure of full development, withal in perfect feminine proportions; while her mother has transmitted to her what, in an eminent degree, she herself possessed – beauty of face and nobleness of feature.

In the daughter neither has deteriorated, but perhaps improved. For the benignant clime of California has such effect; the soft breezes of the South Sea fanning as fair cheeks as were ever kissed by Tuscan, or Levantine wind.

A chapter might be devoted to the charms of Doña Carmen Montijo, and still not do them justice. Enough to say, that they are beyond cavil. There are men in San Francisco who would dare death for her sake, if sure of her smile to speak approval of the deed; ay, one who would for as much do murder!

And in that same city is a man who would do the same for Iñez Alvarez – though she has neither blonde complexion, nor blue eyes. Instead she is a *morena*, or brunette, with eyes and hair of the darkest. But she is also a beauty, of the type immortalised by many bards – Byron among the number, when he wrote his rhapsody on the “Girl of Cadiz.”

Iñez is herself a girl of Cadiz, of which city her father was a native. The Conde Alvarez, an officer in the Spanish army, serving with his regiment in Biscay, there saw a face that charmed him. It belonged to the daughter of Don Gregorio Montijo – his eldest and first-born, some eighteen years older than Carmen. The Andalusian count wooed the Biscayan lady, won, and bore her away to his home. Both have gone to their long home, leaving their only child inheritress of a handsome estate. From her father, in whose veins ran Moorish blood, Iñez inherits jet-black eyes, with lashes nearly half-an-inch in length, and above them brows shaped like the moon in the middle of her first quarter. Though in figure more slender than her aunt, she is quite Carmen’s equal in height, and in this may some day excel; since she has not yet attained her full stature.

Such are the two damsels, who have danced with the young British officers, and made sweet havoc in their hearts. Have the hearts of the *señoritas* received similar hurt in return? By listening to their conversation we shall learn.

Chapter Eleven.

Mutual Admissions

The dwelling of Don Gregorio Montijo, as already stated, is terrace-topped, that style of roof in Spanish countries termed *azotea*. This, surrounded by a parapet breast-high – beset with plants and flowering shrubs in boxes and pots, thus forming a sort of aerial garden – is reached by a stone stair, the *escalera*, which leads up out of the inner court, called *patio*. During certain hours of the day, the *azotea* is a favourite resort, being a pleasant place of dalliance, as also the finest for observation – commanding, as in this case it does, a view of the country at back, and the broad bay in front. To look upon this last have the two “señoritas,” on the same morning, ascended – soon after breakfast, which in all parts of Spanish America is eaten at the somewhat late hour of 11 a.m.

That they do not intend staying here long, is evident from the character of their dresses. Both are costumed and equipped for the saddle; having hats of vicuña wool on their heads, riding-whips in their hands, and spurs on their heels; while in the courtyard below stand four horses, saddled and bridled, champing their bits, and impatiently pawing the flagged pavement.

Since all the saddles are such as are usually ridden by men, it may be supposed only men are to be mounted, and that the ladies’ horses have not yet been brought out of the stable. This would naturally be the conjecture of a stranger to Spanish California. But one *an fait* to its fashions would draw deductions differently. Looking at the spurred heels upon the house-top, and the saddled horses below, he would conclude that two of the steeds were intended to be ridden by the ladies; in that style of equitation with which the famed Duchesse de Berri was accustomed to astonish the Parisians.

The other two horses, having larger and somewhat coarser saddles, are evidently designed for gentlemen; so that the cavalcade will be symmetrically composed – two and two of each sex.

The gentlemen have not yet put in an appearance; but who they are may be learnt from the dialogue passing between the two ladies. From their elevated, position they can see the rapidly growing city of San Francisco, and the shipping in its harbour – north-east, and a little to their left. But there are several vessels riding at anchor out in front of them; one a warship, towards which the eyes of both keep continuously turning, as though they expected a boat soon to put off from her side.

As yet none such has been seen; and, withdrawing her gaze from the warship, Iñez opens the conversation by a question —

“Is it really true that we’re going back to Spain?”

She has been in California only a short time, since the death of her father and mother, which placed her under the guardianship of Don Gregorio. But though here, lovers have been all the while sighing around her, she longs to return to her dear Andalusia. Therefore has she asked the question with more than a common interest.

“Quite true;” says Carmen, giving the answer, “and I’m sorry it is so.”

“Why should you be sorry?”

“There are many reasons.”

“Give one.”

“I could give twenty.”

“One will be sufficient – if good.”

“They’re all good.”

“Let me hear them, then.”

“First of all, I like California – I love it. Its fine climate, and bright blue sides.”

“Not a bit brighter, or bluer, than those of Spain.”

“Ten times brighter, and ten times bluer. The skies of the Old-World are to those of the New as lead to *lapis lazuli*. In that respect, neither Spain nor Italy can compare with California. Its seas, too,

are superior. Even the boasted Bay of Naples would be but a poor pond alongside that noble sheet of water, far-stretching before our eyes. Look at it!”

“Looking at it through *your* eyes, I might think so; not through mine. For my part, I see nothing in it to be so much admired.”

“But something *on* it; for instance, that grand ship out yonder. Come, now; confess the truth! Isn’t that something to admire?”

“But she don’t belong to your bay,” replies the Andalusian.

“No matter. There is on it now, and in it – the ship I mean – somebody who, if I mistake not, has very much interested somebody else – a certain Andalusian lady, by name Iñez Alvarez.”

“Your words will answer as well for a Biscayan lady – by name Carmen Montijo.”

“Suppose I admit it, and say yes? Well; I will. There *is* one in yonder ship who has very much interested me. Nay, more; I admire – ay, love him! You see I’m not ashamed to confess what the world affects to consider a weakness. We of the Celtic race don’t keep secrets as you of the further South; half Moors, as you are. For all, *sobrina*, you haven’t kept yours; though you tried hard enough. I saw from the first you were smitten with that young English officer, who has hair the exact colour of a carrot!”

“It isn’t anything of the kind. His hair is of a much more becoming hue than that of the other English officer, who’s taken your fancy, *tia*.”

“Nothing to compare with it. Look at this. There’s a curl; one of the handsomest that ever grew on the head of man! Dark and glossy, as the coat of the fur-seal. Beautiful! I could kiss it over, and over again!”

While speaking, she does so.

“And look at this!” cries the other, also drawing forth a lock of hair, and displaying it in the sunlight, “See how it shines – like tissue of gold! Far prettier than that you’ve got, and better worth kissing.”

Saying which she imitates the example set her, by raising the tress to her lips, and repeatedly kissing it.

“So, so, my innocent!” exclaims Carmen, “you’ve been stealing too?”

“As yourself!”

“And, I suppose, you’ve given him a love-lock in exchange?”

“Have you?”

“I have. To you, Iñez, I make no secret of it. Come, now! Be equally candid with me. Have you done so?”

“I’ve done the same as yourself.”

“And has your heart gone with the gift? Tell the truth, *sobrina*.”

“Ask your own, *tia*; and take its answer for mine.”

“Enough, then; we understand each other, and shall keep the secret to ourselves. Now let’s talk of other things; go back to what we began with – about leaving California. You’re glad we’re going?”

“Indeed, yes. And I wonder you’re not the same. Dear old Spain, the finest country on earth! And Cadiz the finest city.”

“Ah! about that we two differ. Give me California for a country, and San Francisco for a home; though it’s not much of a city yet. It will, ere long; and I should like to stay in it. But that’s not to be, and there’s an end of the matter. Father has determined on leaving. Indeed, he has already sold out; so that this house and the lands around it are no longer ours. As the lawyers have the deed of transfer, and the purchase money has been paid, we’re only here on sufferance, and must soon yield possession. Then, we’re to take ship for Panama, go across the Isthmus and over the Atlantic Ocean; once more to renew the Old-world life, with all its stupid ceremonies. How I shall miss the free wild ways of California – its rural sports – with their quaint originality and picturesqueness! I’m sure I shall die of *ennui*, soon after reaching Spain. Your Cadiz will kill me.”

“But, Carmen; surely you can’t be happy here – now that everything is so changed? Why, we can scarce walk out in safety, or take a promenade through the streets of the town, crowded with those rude fellows in red-shirts, who’ve come to dig for gold – Anglo-Saxons, as they call themselves.”

“What! You speaking against Anglo-Saxons! And with that tress treasured in your bosom – so close to your heart!”

“Oh! *he* is different. He’s not Saxon, but Welsh – and that’s Celtic, the same as you Biscayans. Besides, he isn’t to be ranked with that rabble, even though he were of the same race. The Señor Cadwallader is a born hidalgo.”

“Admitting him to be, I think you do wrong to these red-shirted gentry, in calling them a rabble. Rough as they may appear, they have gentle hearts under their coarse homespun coats. Many of them are true bred-and-born gentlemen; and, what’s better, behave as such. I’ve never received insult from them – not even disrespect – though I’ve been among them scores of times. Father wrongs them too: for it is partly their presence here that’s causing him to quit California – as also many others of our old families. Still, as we reside in the country, at a safe distance from town, we might enjoy immunity from meeting *los barbaros*, as our people are pleased contemptuously to style them. For my part, I love dear old California, and will greatly regret leaving it. Only to think; I shall never more behold the gallant *vaquero*, mounted on his magnificent steed, careering across the plain, and launching his lazo over the horns of a fierce wild bull, ready to gore him if he but miss his aim. Ah! it’s one of the finest sights in the world – so exciting in this dull prosaic age. It recalls the heroic days and deeds of the Great Conde, the Campeador, and Cid. Yes, Iñez; only in this modern transatlantic land – out here, on the shores of the South Sea – do there still exist customs and manners to remind one of the old knight-errantry and times of the troubadours.”

“What an enthusiast you are! But apropos of your knights-errant, yonder are two of them, if I mistake not, making this way. Now, fancy yourself on the donjon of an ancient Moorish castle, salute, and receive them accordingly. Ha, ha, ha!”

The clear ringing laugh of the Andalusian is not echoed by the Biscayan. Instead, a shadow falls over her face, as her eyes become fixed upon two mounted figures just distinguishable in the distance.

“True types of your Californian *chivalry*!” adds Iñez ironically.

“True types of Californian *villainy*!” rejoins Carmen, in serious earnest.

Chapter Twelve.

A Couple of Californian “Caballeros.”

The horsemen, so oddly commented upon, have just emerged from the suburbs of San Francisco, taking the road which leads southward along shore.

Both are garbed in grand style, in the national costume of that country, which, in point of picturesqueness is not exceeded by any other in the world.

They wear the wide trousers (*calzoneras*), along the outer seams lashed with gold lace, and beset with filigree buttons; the snow-white drawers (*calzoncillas*) here and there puffing out; below, *botas* and spurs – the last with rowels several inches in diameter, that glitter like great stars behind their heels. They have tight-fitting jackets of velveteen, closed in front, and over the bosom elaborately embroidered; scarfs of China crape round their waists, the ends dangling adown the left hip, terminating in a fringe of gold cord; on their heads *sombreros* with broad brim, and band of bullion – the *toquilla*. In addition, each has over his shoulders a *manga* – the most magnificent of outside garments, with a drape graceful as a Roman *toga*. That of one is scarlet-coloured, the other sky-blue. Nor are their horses less grandly bedecked. Saddles of stamped leather, scintillating with silver studs – their cloths elaborately embroidered; bridles of plaited horse-hair, jointed with tags and tassels; bits of the Mamaluke pattern, with check-pieces and curbs powerful enough to break the jaw at a jerk.

The steeds thus splendidly caparisoned are worthy of it. Though small, they are of perfect shape – pure blood of Arabian sires, transmitted through dams of Andalusia. They are descended from the stock transported to the New World by the *Conquistadores*; and the progenitor of one or other may have carried Alvarado or Sandoval – perhaps Cortez himself.

The riders are both men of swarthy complexion, with traits that tell of the Latinic race. Their features are Spanish; in one a little more pronounced than the other. He who wears the sky-coloured cloak has all the appearance of being Mexican born. The blood in his veins giving the brown tinge to his skin, is not Moorish, but more likely from the aborigines of California. For all this, he is not a true *mestizo*; only one among whose remote ancestry an Indian woman may have been numbered; since the family-tree of many a proud Californian has sprung from such root. He is of medium size, with figure squat and somewhat square, and sits his horse as though he were part of the animal. If seen afoot his legs would appear bowed, almost bandied, showing that he has spent the greater part of his life in the saddle. His face is flat, its outline rounded, the nose compressed, nostrils agape, and lips thick enough to suggest the idea of an African origin. But his hair contradicts this – being straight as needles, and black as the skin of a Colobus monkey. More like he has it from the Malays, through the Californian Indian – some tribes of which are undoubtedly of Malayan descent.

Whatever the mixture in his blood, the man is himself a native Californian, born by the shores of San Francisco Bay, on a *ganaderia*, or grazing estate. He is some twenty-six or seven years of age, his name Faustino Calderon – “Don” by ancestral right, and ownership of the aforesaid *ganaderia*.

He in the scarlet *manga*, though but a few years older, is altogether different in appearance, as otherwise; personally handsomer, and intellectually superior. His features better formed, are more purely Spanish; their outline oval and regular the jaws broad and balanced; the chin prominent; the nose high, without being hooked or beaked; the brow classically cut, and surmounted by a thick shock of hair, coal-black in colour, and waved rather than curling. Heavy moustaches on the upper lip, with an imperial on the under one – the last extending below the point of the chin – all the rest of his face, throat, and cheeks, clean shaven. Such are the facial characteristics of Don Francisco de Lara, who is a much larger, and to all appearance stronger, man than his travelling companion.

Calderon, as said, is a gentleman by birth, and a *ganadero*, or stock-farmer, by occupation. He inherits a considerable tract of pasture-land, left him by his father – some time deceased – along

with the horses and horned cattle that browse upon it. An only son, he is now owner of all. But his ownership is not likely to continue. He is fast relinquishing it, by the pursuit of evil courses – among them three of a special kind: wine, women, and play – which promise to make him bankrupt in purse, as they already have in character. For around San Francisco, as in it, he is known as *roué* and reveller, a debauchee in every speciality of debauch, and a silly fellow to boot. Naturally of weak intellect, and dissipation has made it weaker.

Of as much moral darkness, though different in kind, is the character of Don Francisco de Lara – “Frank Lara,” as he is familiarly known in the streets and saloons. Though Spanish in features, and speaking the language, he can also talk English with perfect fluency – French too, when called upon, with a little Portuguese and Italian. For, in truth, he is not a Spaniard, but only so by descent, being a Creole of New Orleans – that cosmopolitan city *par excellence* – hence his philological acquirements.

Frank Lara is one of those children of chance, wanderers who come into the world nobody knows how, when, or whence; only, that they are in it; and while there, performing a part in accordance with their mysterious origin – living in luxury, and finding the means for it, by ways that baffle conjecture.

He is full thirty years of age; the last ten of which he has spent on the shores of San Francisco Bay. Landing there from an American whaling-vessel, and in sailor costume, he cast off his tarry “togs,” and took to land-life in California. Its easy idleness, as its lawlessness, exactly suited his natural inclinations.

Similar inclinings and pursuits, at an early period brought him and Calderon in contact; and certain relations have been established between them; in other words, they have become united in a business partnership – a *bank*; of that species known as “*monté*” bank.

Since the discovery of the gold *placers*, the streets of San Francisco have been crowded with men mad after the precious metal; among them some who do not desire to undergo the toil of sifting it out of sand, or washing it from river-mud. They prefer the easier, and cleaner, method of gathering it across the green baize of a gambling table.

To accommodate such gentry, Francisco de Lara has established a *monté* bank, Faustino Calderon being his backer. But though the latter is the moneyed man, and has supplied most of the cash to start with, he does not show in the transaction. He is only as the sleeping partner; De Lara, with less reputation at stake, being the active and ostensible one.

As yet Faustino Calderon has not come within the category of the professional gamester, and respectability does not repel him. His dissipated habits are far from exceptional, and his father’s good name still continues to throw its *aegis* over him. Under it he is eligible to Californian society of the most select kind, and has the *entrée* of its best circles.

And so also Don Francisco de Lara – in a different way. Wealth has secured him this; for although anything but rich, he has the repute of being so, and bears evidence of it about him. He is always stylishly and fashionably attired; his shirt of the finest linen, with diamond studs sparkling in its front. Free in dispensing gratuities, he gives to the poor and the priests – finding this last kind of largess a good speculation. For, in California, as in other Catholic countries, the dispenser of “Peter’s Pence” is sure of being held in high estimation. Frank Lara so dispenses with a liberal hand; and is therefore styled “Don” Francisco – saluted as such by the sandalled monks and shovel-hatted priests who come in contact with him.

In addition to all, he is good-looking and of graceful deportment, without being at all a dandy. On the contrary he carries himself with earnest air, calm and cool, while in his eyes may be read the expression —*noli me tangere*. A native of New Orleans, where duels occur almost daily, he is up in the *art d’escrime*; and since his arrival in California has twice called out his man – on the second occasion killing him.

Escroc as the French might call him; “blackleg” in the English vocabulary; “sport” in American phrase, Frank Lara is a man with whom no one who knows him likes to take liberties.

Such are the two men whom Iñez Alvarez has facetiously styled types of Californian “chivalry,” while Carmen Montijo has more correctly described them as typical of its “villainy.” And yet to make call on this very Iñez, and this same Carmen, the gentlemen so differently designated are now on their way!

Chapter Thirteen.

Confession of Fear

After having delivered their speeches, so nearly alike in sound, yet so opposed in sense, the two girls stand for a short time silent, their faces turned toward the approaching horsemen. These are still more than a mile off, and to the ordinary eye only distinguishable as mounted men wearing cloaks – one of scarlet colour, the other sky-blue. But despite the distance, the others easily identify them, simultaneously, and in tone contemptuous, pronouncing their names.

“Yes,” says Carmen, now speaking in full assurance, with a lorgnette raised to her eyes – hitherto bent upon the British warship, “in all California there are no truer types of what I’ve called them. Do you think they’re coming on to the house, Iñez?”

“Tis very likely; I should say, almost certain.”

“What can be bringing them?” mechanically queries Carmen, with an air of increased vexation.

“Their horses, aunt,” rejoins the niece, jestingly.

“Don’t jest, *niña*! It’s too serious.”

“What’s too serious?”

“Why, these fellows coming hither. I wonder what they can be wanting?”

“You needn’t wonder at that,” says Iñez, still speaking jocularly. “I can tell you what one of them wants, that one Don Francisco de Lara. He is desirous to have a look at the mistress of this mansion.”

“And Don Faustino Calderon is no doubt equally desirous to look at her niece,” retorts the other in like bantering tone.

“He’s quite welcome. He may look till he strains his ugly eyes out. It won’t make any impression on me.”

“I’m sorry I can’t say the same for Don Francisco. On me, his looks *do* make impression – far from pleasant.”

“It wasn’t always so, *tia*?”

“No, I admit. I only wish it had been.”

“But why?”

“Because, now I shouldn’t need to be afraid of him.”

“Afraid of him! Surely you are not that?”

“Well, no – not exactly afraid – still – ”

She speaks hesitatingly, and in disjointed phrases, her head drooping down. Then a quick change comes over her countenance, and, bending closer to the other, she asks, “Can I trust you with a confidence, Iñez?”

“Why need you ask that? You’ve already trusted me with one – in telling me you love Don Eduardo.”

“Now I give you another – by telling you I once loved Don Francisco.”

“Indeed!”

“No, no!” rejoins Carmen quickly, and as half-repenting the avowal. “Not *loved* him – that’s not true, I only *came near it*.”

“And now?”

“I hate him!”

“Why, may I ask? What has changed you?”

“That’s easily answered. When I first met him I was younger than now; a mere girl, full of girlish fancies – romantic, as called. I thought him handsome; and in a sense so he is. In person, you’ll admit, he’s all man may, or need, be – a sort of Apollo, or Hyperion. But in mind – ah, Iñez, that man is a very Satyr – in heart and soul a Mephistopheles.”

“But why should you be afraid of him?”

Carmen does not reply promptly. Clearly, she has not yet bestowed the whole of her confidence. There is something withheld.

Iñez, whose sympathies are now enlisted, presses for *the* explanation.

“Carmen – dear Carmen! tell me what it is. Have you ever given Don Francisco a claim to call you his *novia*?”

“Never! Neither that, nor anything of the kind. He has no claim, and I no compromise. The only thing I’ve reason to regret is, having listened to his flattering speeches without resenting them.”

“Pst! What does that signify? Why, Don Faustino has made flattering speeches to me – scores of them – called me all sorts of endearing names – does so whenever we two are together alone. I only laugh at him.”

“Ah! Faustino Calderon is not Francisco de Lara. They are men of very different dispositions. In the behaviour of your admirer there’s only a little of the ludicrous; in that of mine, there may be a great deal of danger. But let us cease discussing them. There’s no time for that now. The question is, are they coming to call on us?”

“I think there can be no question about it. Very likely they’ve heard that we’re soon going away, and are about to honour us with a farewell visit.”

“Supposing they should stay till our English friends arrive!”

“Let them – who cares? I don’t.”

“But I do. If papa were at home, I mightn’t so much mind it. But, just now, I’ve no desire to see Señor De Lara alone – still less while being visited by Eduardo. They’re both *demonios*, though in a different way.”

“Look yonder!” exclaims Iñez, pointing towards the British frigate, where a boat is in the water under her beam. The sun, reflected from dripping oar-blades, tells them to be in motion.

While the girls continue gazing, the boat is seen to separate from the ship’s side, and put shoreward, straight towards the sand-pit which projects in front of Don Gregorio’s dwelling. The rowers are all dressed alike, the measured stroke of their oars betokening that the boat belongs to the man-o’-war. But the young ladies do not conjecture about this; nor have they any doubt as to the identity of two of the figures seated in the stern-sheets. Those uniforms of dark blue, with the gold buttons, and yellow cap-bands, are so well known as to be recognisable at any distance to which love’s glances could possibly penetrate. They are the guests expected, for whom the spare horses stand saddled in the *patio*. For Don Gregorio, by no means displeased with certain delicate attentions which the young British officers have been paying to the female members of his family, has invited them to visit him – ride out along with the ladies, and, on return, stay to dinner. He knows that a treat of this kind will be pleasing to those he has asked; and, before leaving home, had given orders for the steeds to be saddled.

It is not the first time Crozier and Cadwallader have been to the Spaniard’s house, nor the first to stretch their limbs under his dining-table, nor the first for them to have held pleasant converse with the *señoritas*, and strolled along solitary paths, opportune for the exchange of those love-locks. But it may be the last – at least during their sojourn in California. For in truth is it to be a farewell visit.

But with this understanding, another has been entered into. The acquaintance commenced in California is to be renewed at Cadiz, when the *Crusader* goes thither, which she is ere long expected to do. But for such anticipation Carmen Montijo and Iñez Alvarez would not be so high-hearted at the prospect of a leave-taking so near. Less painful on this account, it might have been even pleasant, but for what they see on the opposite side – the horsemen approaching from the town. An encounter between the two pairs gives promise to mar the happy intercourse of the hour.

“They’ll meet – they must!” says Carmen, apprehensively.

“Let them!” rejoins Iñez, in a tone of nonchalance. “What if they do?”

“What! They may quarrel. I’m almost sure they will.”

“No fear for that; and, if they should, where’s the danger? You, such a believer in the romantic – stickler for old knight-errantry – instead of regretting it, should be glad! Look there! Lovers coming from all sides – suitors by land and suitors by sea! Knights terrestrial, knights aquatic. No lady of the troubadour times ever had the like; none ever honoured by such a rivalry! Come, Carmen, be proud! Stand firm on your castle-keep! Show yourself worthy to receive this double adoration!”

“Iñez, you don’t know the danger.”

“There is none. If they should come into collision, and have a fight, let them. I’ve no fear for mine. If Willie Cadwallader isn’t a match for Faustino Calderon, then he’s not match, or mate, for me – never shall be.”

“*Sobrina!* you shock me. I had no idea you were such a *demonia*. The Moorish blood, I suppose. Your words make me almost as wicked as yourself. It isn’t for that I’m afraid. I’ve as much confidence in my lover as you in yours. No fear that Señor Crozier will cower before Francisco de Lara. If he do, I shall take back my heart a second time, and carry it unscathed to Cadiz!”

Chapter Fourteen.

A Sweet Pair of Suitors

While the young ladies upon the house-top are discussing the characters of De Lara and Calderon, these worthies, in return, are conversing of them, and in a strain which bodes little good to Iñez, with much evil to Carmen. That the visit designed for them is of no ordinary nature, but for an all important purpose, can be gleaned from the speech passing between the two horsemen as they ride along the road.

De Lara commences it by remarking: —

“Well, friend Faustino, from something you said before setting out, I take it you’re going to Don Gregorio’s on an errand very similar to my own? Come, *camarado*! declare it!”

“Declare yours!”

“Certainly. I shall make no secret of it to you; nor need I. Why should there be any between us? We’ve now known one another long enough, and intimately enough, to exchange confidences of the closest kind. To-day mine is – that I mean proposing to Don Gregorio’s daughter – offering her my hand in marriage.”

“And I,” returns Calderon, “intend doing the same to his grand-daughter.”

“In that case, we’re both in the same boat; and, as there’s no rivalry between us, we can pull pleasantly together. I’ve no objection to being your uncle; even admitting you to a share in the old Spaniard’s property – proportioned to your claims of kinship.”

“I don’t want a dollar of the Don’s money; only his grand-daughter. I’m deeply in love with her.”

“And I,” continues De Lara, “am just as deeply in love with his daughter – it may be deeper.”

“You couldn’t. I’m half-mad about Iñez Alvarez. I could kill her – if she refuse me.”

“*I shall* kill Carmen Montijo – if she refuse *me*.” The two men are talking seriously, or seem so. Their voices, the tone, the flashing of their eyes, the expression upon their faces, with their excited gesticulation – all show them to be in earnest.

At the last outburst of passionate speech they turn in their saddles, and look each other in the face. De Lara continues the dialogue:

“Now, tell me, Faustino; what hope have you of success?”

“For that, fair enough. You remember the last *fandango* held at Don Gregorio’s – on the day of the cattle-branding!”

“Certainly I do. I’ve good reason to remember it. But go on.”

“Well, that night,” proceeds Calderon, “I danced twice with Iñez, and made many sweet speeches to her. Once I went farther, and squeezed her pretty little hand. She wasn’t angry, or at all events didn’t say or show it. Surely, after such encouragement, I may ask that hand in marriage – with fair presumption of not being refused. What’s your opinion?”

“Your chances seem good. But what about himself. He’ll have something to say in the matter.”

“Too much, I fear; and that’s just what I do fear. So long as his bit of grazing-land was worth only some thirty thousand dollars, he was amiable enough. Now that by this gold discovery it’s got to be good value for eight or ten times the amount, he’s become a different man, and in all likelihood will go dead against me.”

“Like enough; it’s the way of the world. And therefore, on that account, you needn’t have a special spite against the Señor Montijo. You’re sure no one else stands between you and your sweetheart? Or is there something in the shape of a rival?”

“Of course there is – a score of them, as you ought to know; same as with yourself, De Lara. Suitors have been coming and going with both, I suppose, ever since either was old enough to receive them. The last I’ve heard of paying attentions to Iñez is a young naval officer – a midshipman on

board a British man-of-war now lying in the harbour. Indeed there are two of them spoken of; one said to be *your* rival, as the other is mine. Shall I tell you what's been for some time the talk of the town? You may as well know it, if you don't already."

"What?" asks the Creole, excitedly.

"Why, that the one represented as your competitor has cut out all Carmen's other admirers – yourself among the rest."

Bitter words to the ear of Francisco de Lara, bringing the red colour to his cheeks, as if they had been smitten by a switch. With eyes flashing, and full of jealous fire, he exclaims:

"If that be so, I'll do as I've said – "

"Do what?"

"*Kill Carmen Montijo!* I swear it. I'm in earnest, Calderon, and mean it. If it be as you've heard, I'll surely kill her. I've the right to her life – by her giving me the right to her love."

"But did she do that? Has she ever confessed to loving you?"

"Not in words, I admit. But there are other signs of assent strong as speech, or the hand-squeezings you speak of. Carmen Montijo may be cunning. Some call her a coquette. All I know is, that she has led me to believe she loved me; and if she's been playing a false game, she shall rue it, one way or the other. This day I'm determined to ascertain the truth, by offering her my hand, as I've said, and asking hers. If she refuse it, then I'll know how things stand, and take steps for squaring accounts between us. She shall find that Frank Lara is not the sort of man to let one of womankind either laugh at, or play tricks with him."

"I admire your spirit, *amigo*. I catch courage from it, and will imitate your action. If it turn out that Iñez has been trifling with me, I'll – well, we must first find what answer there is for us; which we shall, I suppose, soon after ascending yonder hill. One of us may be accepted, the other rejected. In that case, one will be happy, the other wretched. Or both may be accepted, and then we'll both be blessed. Taking things at their worst, and that we both get refused – what then? Despair, and a speedy end, I suppose?"

"The last, if you like, but not the first. When despair comes to Frank Lara, death will come along with it, of soon after. But we waste time talking; let us forward and learn our fate!"

With stroke of spur, urging their horses into a gallop, the two hasten on; in the countenances of both a cast showing them half-hopeful, half-doubting – such as may be seen when men are about to make some desperate attempt, with uncertainty as to the result. On Calderon's, notwithstanding his assumed levity, the expression is almost despairing; on that of De Lara it is more defiant and demon-like.

Chapter Fifteen.

A Rude Rencontre

Having steeled themselves to the reception of their rival suitors, with brave words one supporting the other, the two girls remain upon the *azotea*. Meanwhile, the man-o'-war's boat has been drawing in towards the beach, heading for a little embayment, formed by the shore-line and the sand-bar already spoken of.

The horsemen advancing from the town-side do not see it; nor can the crew of the boat perceive them. The land-ridge is between the two parties, its crest concealing them from one another.

They are approaching it at a like rate of speed; for although the horses appear to be in a gallop, it is only a fancy gait fashionable among Spanish-Americans, its purpose to exhibit equestrian skill. For the two horsemen looking up the hill, have seen heads on the house-top, and know that ladies' eyes are upon them.

Surreptitiously goaded by the spur, their steeds plunge and curvet, apparently progressing at a rapid pace, but in reality gaining little ground.

After a time both parties disappear from the eyes of those on the *azotea*. They have gone under the brow of the hill, which, overhanging for a short distance, shuts out a view of the road, as also the sea-shore, along the sand-spit.

Unseen from above, the man-o'-war's boat beaches, and the two officers spring out upon the strand. One of them turning, says something to the coxswain, who has remained in the stern-sheets, with the tiller-ropes in hand. It is an order, with instructions about where and when he is to wait for them on return to the ship.

"At the new wharf in the harbour," Crozier is heard to say; for it is he who commands.

His order given, the boat shoves off, and is rowed back towards the ship; while the officers commence climbing the slope, to get upon the shore-road.

At the same time the horsemen are ascending from the opposite side.

Soon both parties are again within view of those on the house-top; though neither as yet sees the other, or has any suspicion of such mutual proximity. The crest of the ridge is still between, but in a few seconds more they will sight one another.

The men afoot are advancing at about the same rate of speed as those on horseback. The latter have ceased showing off, as if satisfied with the impression they must have made, and are now approaching in tranquil gait, but with an air of subdued triumph – the mock modesty of the *matador*, who, with blood-stained sword, bends meekly before the box where beauty sits smiling approbation.

The two pedestrians climb the hill less ceremoniously. Glad to stretch their limbs upon land – "shake the knots out of their knees," as Cadwallader gleefully remarks – they eagerly scale the steep. Not silent either, but laughing and shouting like a couple of schoolboys abroad for an afternoon's holiday.

Suddenly coming within view of the house, they bring their boisterous humour under restraint at sight of two heads above the parapet. For they know to whom these belong, and note that the faces are turned towards them.

At the same instant the horsemen also see the heads, and observe that the faces are *not* turned towards *them*. On the contrary, *from* them, the ladies looking in another direction.

Some chagrin in this. After all their grand caracoling, and feats of equitation, which must have been witnessed by the fair spectators.

At what are these now gazing? Is it a ship sailing up the bay, or something else on the water? No matter what, and whether on land, or water; enough for the conceited fellows to think they are being slightly received.

Disconcerted, they seek an explanation, mutually questioning one another. But before either can make answer in speech, they have it under their eyes – in the shape of a brace of British naval officers.

Like themselves, the latter have just reached the summit of the ridge, and are moving on towards Don Gregorio's gate. It is midway between; and keeping on at the same rate of speed, the two pairs will meet directly in front of it.

Before that moment, neither has ever set eyes on the other. Notwithstanding, there is an expression on the faces of all four, which tells of mutual recognition, and of no friendly nature.

Calderon whispers to De Lara:

"The English officers!"

Cadwallader says, *sotto-voce* to Crozier:

"The fellows we've heard about – our rivals, Ned, like ourselves, I suppose, going to visit the girls."

De Lara makes no response to Calderon. Neither does Crozier to Cadwallader. There is not time. They are now close up to the gate, and there is only its breadth between them.

They have arrived there at the same instant of time, and simultaneously make stop. Face to face, silence on both sides, neither word nor salute offered in exchange. But looks are quite as expressive – glances that speak the language of jealous rivalry – of rage with difficulty suppressed.

It is a question of precedence, as to who shall first pass into the entrance. Their hesitation was not from any courtesy, but the reverse. The men on horseback look down on those afoot contemptuously, scornfully. Threateningly, too; as though they had thoughts of riding over, and trampling them under the hoofs of their horses. No doubt they would like to do it, and might make trial, were the young officers unarmed. But they are not. Crozier carries a pistol – Cadwallader his midshipman's dirk, both weapons conspicuous outside their uniforms.

For a period of several seconds' duration, the rivals stand *vis-à-vis*, neither venturing to advance. Around them is a nimbus of angry electricity, that needs but a spark to kindle it into furious flame. A single word will do it. This word spoken, and two of the four may never enter Don Gregorio's gate – at least not alive.

It is not spoken. The only thing said is by Crozier to Cadwallader – not in a whisper, but aloud, and without regard to what effect it may have on the enemy.

"Come along, Will! We've something better to do than stand shilly-shallying here. Heave after me, shipmate!"

Crozier's speech cut the Gordian knot; and the officers, gliding through the gateway, advance along the avenue.

With faces now turned towards the house, they see the ladies still upon the *azotea*.

Soon as near enough for Carmen to observe it, Crozier draws out the treasured tress, and fastens it in his cap, behind the gold band. It falls over his shoulder like a cataract of liquid amber.

Cadwallader does likewise; and from his cap also streams a tress, black as the plumes of a raven.

The two upon the house-top appear pleased by this display. They show their approval by imitating it. Each raises hand to her riding-hat; and when these are withdrawn, a curl of hair is seen set behind their *toquillas* – one chestnut-brown, the other of yellowish hue.

Scarce is this love-telegraphy exchanged, when the two Californians come riding up the avenue, at full speed. Though lingering at the gate, and still far-off, De Lara had observed the affair of the tresses, clearly comprehending the symbolism of the act. Exasperated beyond bounds, he can no longer control himself, and cares not what may come.

At his instigation, Calderon spurs on by his side, the two tearing furiously along. Their purpose is evident: to force the pedestrians from the path, and so humble them in the eyes of their sweethearts.

On his side, Crozier remains cool, admonishing Cadwallader to do the same. They feel the power of possession: assured by those smiles, that the citadel is theirs. It is for the outsiders to make the assault.

“Give a clear gangway, Will!” counsels Crozier; “and let them pass. We can talk to the gentlemen afterwards.”

Both step back among the *manzanita* bushes, and the *ginetes* go galloping past; De Lara on Crozier’s side scowling down, as if he would annihilate the English officer with a look. The scowl is returned with interest, the officer still reserves speech.

On the other edge of the avenue the action is a little different. The midshipman, full of youthful freak, determines on having his “lark.” He sees the chance, and cannot restrain himself. As Calderon sweeps past, he draws his dirk, and pricks the Californian’s horse in the hip. The animal, maddened by the pain, springs upward, and then shoots off at increased speed, still further heightened by the fierce exclamations of his rider, and the mocking laughter of the mid.

Under the walls the two horsemen come to a halt, neither having made much by their bit of rude bravadoism. And they know they will have a reckoning to settle for it – at least De Lara does. For on the brow of Crozier, coming up, he can read a determination to call him to account. He is not flurried about this. On the contrary, he has courted it, knowing himself a skilled swordsman, and dead shot. Remembering that he has already killed his man, he can await with equanimity the challenge he has provoked. It is not fear has brought the pallor to his cheeks, and set the dark seal upon his brow. Both spring from a different passion: observable in his eyes as he turns them towards the house-top. For the ladies are still there, looking down.

Saluting, he says:

“Dona Carmen, can I have the honour of an interview?”

She thus interrogated does not make immediate answer. Spectator of all that has passed, she observes the hostile attitude between the two sets of visitors. To receive both at the same time will be more than embarrassing. With their angry passions roused to such a pitch, it must end in a personal encounter.

Her duty is clear. She is mistress of the house, representing her father, who is absent. The English officers are there by invitation. At thought of this she no longer hesitates.

“Not now, Don Francisco de Lara,” she says, replying to his question; “not to-day. I must beg of you to excuse me.”

“Indeed!” rejoins he sneeringly. “Will it be deemed discourteous in me to ask why I am denied?”

It is discourteous; and so Doña Carmen deems it. Though she does not tell him as much in words, he can take it from her rejoinder.

“You are quite welcome to know the reason. We have an engagement!”

“Oh! an engagement!”

“Yes, sir, an engagement,” she repeats, in a tone telling of irritation. “Those gentlemen you see are our guests. My father has invited them to spend the day with us.”

“Ah! your father has invited them! How very good of Don Gregorio Montijo, extending his hospitality to *gringos*! And Doña Carmen has added her kind compliments with earnest entreaties for them to come, no doubt?”

“Sir!” says Carmen, no longer able to conceal her indignation, “your speech is impertinent – insulting. I shall listen to it no longer.”

Saying which, she steps back, disappearing behind the parapet – where Iñez has already concealed herself, at the close of a similar short, but stormy, dialogue with Calderon.

De Lara, a lurid look in his eyes, sits in his saddle as if in a stupor. He is roused from it by a voice, Crozier’s, saying:

“You appear anxious to make apology to the lady? You can make it to *me*.”

“*Caraji!*” exclaims the gambler, starting, and glaring angrily at the speaker. “Who are you?”

“One who demands an apology for your very indecorous behaviour.”

“You’ll not get it.”

“Satisfaction, then.”

“That to your heart’s content.”

“I shall have it so. Your card, sir?”

“There; take it. Yours?”

The bits of cardboard are exchanged; after which De Lara, casting another glance up to the *azotea*— where he sees nothing but blank wall — turns his horse’s head; then spitefully plying the spur, gallops back down the avenue — his comrade close following.

Calderon has not deemed it incumbent upon him to demand a card from Cadwallader. Nor has the latter thought it necessary to take one from him; the mid is quite contented with that playful prod with his dirk.

The young officers enter the house, in cheerful confidence. They have lost nothing by the encounter, and those inside will still smilingly receive them — as indeed they do.

Chapter Sixteen.

A Ship without Sailors

Among the vessels lying in the harbour of San Francisco is one athwart whose stern is lettered the name *El Condor*.

She is a ship of small dimensions – some five or six hundred tons – devoted to peaceful commerce, as can be told by certain peculiarities of rig and structure, understood by the initiated in nautical affairs.

The name will suggest a South American nationality – Ecuadorian, Peruvian, Bolivian, or Chilian – since the bird after which she has been baptised is found in all these States. Columbia and the Argentine Confederation can also claim it.

But there is no need to guess at the particular country to which the craft in question belongs. The flag suspended over her taffrail declares it, by a symbolism quite intelligible to those who take an interest in national insignia.

It is a tricolour – the orthodox red, white, and blue – not, as with the French, disposed vertically, but in two horizontal bands; the lower one crimson red, the upper half-white, half-blue – the last contiguous to the staff, with a single five-pointed star set centrally in its field. This disposition of colours proclaims the ship that carries them to be Chilian.

She is not the only Chilian craft in the harbour of San Francisco. Several others are there showing the same colours; brigs, barques, schooners, and ships. For the spirited little South American Republic is as prosperous as enterprising, and its flag waves far and wide over the Pacific. With its population of skilled miners, it had been among the first of foreign states in sending a large representative force to “cradle” the gold *placers* of California, and not only are its ships lying in the bay, but its *guasos* and *gambusinos* in goodly number tread the streets of the town; while many of the dark-eyed damsels, who from piazzas and balconies salute the passer-by with seductive smiles, are those charming little Chileñas that make havoc with the heart of almost every Jack-tar who visits Valparaiso.

On the ship *El Condor* we meet not much that can be strictly called Chilian; little besides the vessel herself and the captain commanding her. Not commanding her sailors: since there are none upon her hailing from Chili or elsewhere. Those who brought the *Condor* into San Francisco Bay have abandoned her – gone off to the gold-diggings! Arriving in the heat of the *placer-fever*, they preferred seeking fortune with pick, shovel, and pan, to handling tarry ropes at ten dollars a month. Almost on the instant of the ship’s dropping anchor they deserted to a man, leaving her skipper to himself, or with only his cook for a companion.

Neither is the latter Chilian, but African – a native of Zanzibar. No more the two great monkeys, observed gambolling about the deck; for the climate of Chili, lying outside the equatorial belt, is too cold for indigenous *quadrumanas*.

Not much appearing upon the *Condor* would proclaim her a South American ship; and nothing in her cargo, for a cargo she carries. She has just arrived from a trading voyage to the South Sea Isles, extending to the Indian Archipelago, whence her lading – a varied assortment, consisting of tortoise-shell, spices, mother-of-pearl, Manilla cigars, and such other commodities as may be collected among the Oriental islands. Hence also the *myas* monkeys – better known as orang-outangs – seen playing about her deck. These she has brought from Borneo.

Only a small portion of her freight had been consigned to San Francisco; this long ago landed. The rest remains in her hold for further transport to Valparaiso.

How soon she may arrive there, or take departure from her present anchorage, is a question that even her skipper cannot answer. If asked, he would most probably reply, “*Quien sabe?*” and,

further pressed, might point to her deserted decks, offering that as an explanation of his inability to satisfy the inquirer.

Her captain – Antonio Lantanas by name – is a sailor of the Spanish-American type; and being this, he takes crosses and disappointments coolly. Even the desertion of his crew seems scarcely to have ruffled him; he bears it with a patient resignation, that would be quite incomprehensible to either English or Yankee skipper. With a broad-brimmed *jipi-japa* hat shading his swarth features from the sun, he lounges all day long upon the quarterdeck, his elbows usually rested upon the capstan-head; his sole occupation rolling and smoking paper cigarritos, one of which is usually either in his fingers, or between his lips. If he at any time varies this, it is to eat his meals, or to take a turn at play with his pet monkeys.

These creatures are male and female, both full of fun in their uncouth fashion; and Captain Lantanas takes it out of them by occasionally touching their snouts with the lit end of his cigarette, laughing to see them scamper off, scared at the (to them) singular, and somewhat painful, effect of fire.

His meals are served regularly three times a day, and his cook – the aforesaid negro, black as the tar upon the rattlin ropes – after having served them, returns to an idleness equalling his own. He too, has his diversion with the oranges, approaching much nearer to them in physical appearance, and for this reason, perhaps, a more congenial playmate.

Once a day the skipper steps into his gig, and rows himself ashore. But not to search for sailors. He knows that would be an idle errand. True, there are plenty of them in San Francisco; scores parading its streets, and other scores seated, or standing, within its taverns and restaurants. But they are all on the spree – all rollicking, and if not rich, hoping soon to be. Not a man of them could be coaxed to take service on board an outbound ship for wages less than would make the voyage little profitable to her owner.

As the Chilean skipper is not only master, but proprietor of his own craft, he has no intention to stir under the circumstances; but is contented to wait till times change, and tars become inclined again to go to sea. When this may be, and the *Condor* shall spread her canvas wings for a further flight to Valparaiso, he has not the remotest idea. When he enters the town, it is to meet other skippers with ships crewless as his own, and exchange condolences on their common destitution.

On a certain day – that on which we are introduced to him – he has not sculled himself ashore, but abides upon his vessel, awaiting the arrival of one who has sent a message forewarning him of an intended visit.

Although San Francisco is fast becoming transformed into an American city, and already has its half-dozen newspapers, there is among these a small sheet printed in Spanish, by name *El Diario*. In it Captain Lantanas has advertised his vessel, for freight or passage, bound for Valparaiso, and to call at intermediate ports – Panama among the number. The advertisement directs reference to be made to a shipping-agent, by name Don Tomas Silvestre.

In answer to it, the Chilean has received a letter from a gentleman who had already communicated with the agent, and who has promised to present himself on board the *Condor* by 12 mid-day of this same day.

Although a stranger to the port of San Francisco, Captain Lantanas has some knowledge of his correspondent; for Don Tomas has the day before informed him that a gentleman from whom he may expect to hear – the same whose name is signed to the letter – is a man of immense wealth; a landed proprietor, whose acres lie contiguous to the rising city of San Francisco, and for this reason enormously increased in value by the influx of gold-seeking immigrants. What this important personage may want with him, Lantanas cannot tell; for Silvestre himself has not been made aware of it – the gentleman declining to state his business to any other than the captain of the ship.

On the morning of the appointed day, leaning as usual against his capstan, and puffing his paper cigar, the Chilean skipper is not in a mood for playing with his monkey pets. His mind is given to

a more serious matter, his whole thoughts absorbed in conjecturing for what purpose his unknown correspondent may be seeking the interview.

He is not without surmises, in which he is assisted by something he has heard while mixing in Spanish circles ashore – this, that the landowner in question has lately sold his land, realising a very large sum – half a million dollars being the amount stated. Furthermore, that being a Peninsular Spaniard, and neither Mexican nor Californian, he is about to return to Spain, taking with him his household gods – Lares, Penates, and all.

These could not be stowed in a single state-room, but would require a whole ship, or a goodly portion of one. The *Condor* has still plenty of room to spare. Her hold is not half full; and her cabin has accommodation for one or two passengers. May it be on this business his correspondent is coming aboard.

So Captain Lantanas interrogates himself, while standing upon his quarterdeck, and with the glowing coal of his cigarrito sending off his hairy familiars, who, in their play, at times intrude upon him.

It pleases him to think he may have surmised correctly; and, while still indulging in conjectures, he sees that which puts an end to them – a shore-boat, with a single pair of rowers, and a gentleman – evidently a landsman – seated in the stern-sheets, to all appearance coming on for the *Condor*.

Captain Lantanas steps to the side of his ship; and, standing in her waist, awaits the arrival of his visitor.

As the boat draws near he makes out a man, dressed in semi-Californian costume, such as is worn by the higher class of *hacendados*. The skipper can have no doubts about who it is. If he has, they are soon set at rest; for the boat touching the ship's side is instantly made fast; the *hacendado* mounts the man-ropes; and, stepping down upon the deck, hands Captain Lantanas his card.

He who has thus presented himself is a man in years well up to sixty, and somewhat above medium height. Taller than he appears, through a slight stoop in the shoulders. His step, though not tottering, shows vigour impaired; and upon his countenance are the traces of recent illness, with strength not yet restored. His complexion is clear, rather rubicund, and in health might be more so; while his hair, both on head and chin – the latter furnished with a long flowing beard – is snow-white. It could never have been very dark, but more likely of the colour called sandy. This, with greyish-blue eyes, and features showing some points of Celtic conformation, would argue him either no Spaniard, or if so, one belonging to the province of Biscay.

This last he is; for the correspondent of Captain Lantanas is Don Gregorio Montijo.

Chapter Seventeen.

A Charter-Party

Soon, as assured – by a glance at the card given him – that his visitor is the gentleman who has written to appoint an interview, Captain Lantanas politely salutes; and *jipi-japa* in hand, stands waiting to hear what the *haciendado* may have to say.

The latter, panting after the effort made in ascending the man-ropes, takes a moment's time to recover breath. Then, returning the skipper's bow, he says, interrogatively: —

“Captain Lantanas, I presume?”

“Si, señor,” responds the master of the *Condor*, with a bow of becoming humility to one reputed so rich. Then adding: “*A disposicion de V.*”

“Well, captain,” rejoins Don Gregorio, “I shall take it for granted that you know who I am. Don Tomas Silvestre has informed you, has he not?”

“He has, señor.”

“And you received my letter?”

“Si, señor.”

“That's all right, then. And now to proceed to the business that has brought me aboard your ship. Having seen your advertisement in the *Diario*, I communicated with Don Tomas; but only so far as to get your correct address, with some trifling particulars. For the rest, I've thought it best to deal directly with yourself; as the matter I have in hand is too important to be entrusted to an agent. In short, it requires confidence, if not secrecy, and from what I've heard of you, Señor Lantanas, I feel sure I can confide in you.”

“You compliment me, Señor Montijo.”

“No, no; nothing of the kind. I but speak from the account Silvestre has given me of your character. But now to business. Your ship is advertised for freight, or passage?”

“Either, or both.”

“Bound for Valparaiso and intermediate ports?”

“Anywhere down the coast.”

“Have you passengers already engaged?”

“Not any as yet.”

“How many can you take?”

“Well, señor, to speak truth, my craft is not intended to carry passengers. She's a trading-vessel, as you see. But if you'll step down to the cabin, you can judge for yourself. There's a saloon – not very large, it is true – and sleeping accommodation for six – two snug staterooms that will serve, if need be, for ladies.”

“That'll do. Now about the freight. Don Tomas tells me you have some cargo aboard.”

“A portion of my ship is already occupied.”

“That won't signify to me. I suppose there's enough room left for something that weighs less than a ton, and isn't of any great bulk. Say it will take a score or two of cubic feet. You can find stowage for that?”

“Oh, yes, that and much more.”

“So far good. And you can accommodate three passengers: a gentleman and two ladies? In short, myself and the female members of my family – my daughter and grand-daughter?”

“Will the Señor Montijo step into the *Condor's* cabin, and see for himself?”

“By all means.”

Captain Lantanas leads down the stairway, his visitor following.

The saloon is inspected; after it the sleeping-rooms, right and left.

“Just the thing,” says Don Gregorio, speaking as in soliloquy, and evidently satisfied. “It will do admirably,” he adds, addressing himself to the skipper. “And now about terms. What are they to be?”

“That, señor, will depend on what is wanted. To what port do you wish me to take you?”

“Panama. ’Tis one of the ports mentioned in your advertisement?”

“It is, señor.”

“Well, for this freight – as I’ve told you, about a ton, with some trifling household effects – and the three passengers, how much?”

“The terms of freight, as you may be aware, are usually rated according to the class of goods. Is it gold, señor? From your description. I suppose it is.”

The skipper has guessed aright. It is gold, nearly a ton of it, accruing to Don Gregorio from the sale of his land, for which he has been paid in dust and nuggets, at that time the only coin in California – indeed, the only circulating medium, since notes were not to be had.

“Suppose it to be gold,” he answers guardedly, “how much then?”

The *ex-ganadero* is by no means a niggardly man; still, he would like to have his treasure transported at a rate not exorbitant. And yet he is anxious about its safety; and for this reason has resolved to ship it with secrecy in a private trading-vessel, instead of by one of the regular liners, that have already commenced plying between San Francisco and Panama. He has heard that these are crowded with miners returning home; rough fellows, many of them queer characters – some little better than bandits. He dislikes the idea of trusting his gold among them, and equally his girls, since no other ladies are likely to be going that way. He has full faith in the integrity of Captain Lantanas; knows the Chilian to be a man of gentle heart – in fact, a gentleman. Don Tomas has told him all this.

Under the circumstances, and with such a man, it will not do to drive too hard a bargain; and Don Gregorio, thus reflecting, at length confesses his freight to be gold bullion, and asks the skipper to name his terms.

Lantanas, after a moment spent in mental calculation, says:

“One thousand dollars for the freight, and a hundred each for the three passages. Will that satisfy you, señor?”

“It seems a large sum,” rejoins Don Gregorio. “But I am aware prices are high just now; so I agree to it. When will you be ready to sail?”

“I am ready now, señor – that is, if – ”

“If what?”

Lantanas, remembering his crewless ship, does not make immediate answer.

“If,” says the Spaniard, noticing his hesitation, and mistaking the reason – “if you’re calculating on any delay from me, you needn’t. I can have everything on board in three or four days – a week at the utmost.”

The skipper is still silent, thinking of excuses. He dislikes losing the chance of such a profitable cargo, and yet knows he cannot name any certain time of sailing, for the want of hands to work his vessel.

There seems no help for it but to confess his shortcomings. Perhaps Don Gregorio will wait till the *Condor* can get a crew. The more likely, since every other vessel in port is in a similar predicament.

“Señor,” he says at length, “my ship is at your service; and I should be pleased and proud to have you and your ladies as my passengers. But there’s a little difficulty to be got over before I can weigh anchor.”

“Clearance duties – port dues to be paid. You want the passage-money advanced, I presume? Well, I shall not object to prepaying it in part. How much will you require?”

“*Mil gracias*, Señor Montijo. It’s not anything of the kind. Although far from rich, thank Heaven, neither I nor my craft is under embargo. I could sail out of San Francisco in half-an-hour, but for the want of – ”

“Want of what?” asks Don Gregorio in some surprise.

“Well, señor – sailors.”

“What! Have you no sailors?”

“I am sorry to say, not one.”

“Well, Captain Lantanas, I thought it strange observing nobody aboard your ship – except that black fellow. But I supposed your sailors had gone ashore.”

“So have they, señor; and intend staying there. Alas! that’s the trouble. They’ve gone off to the gold-diggings – every one of them, except my negro cook. Likely enough, I should have lost him too, but he knows that California is now part of the United States, and fears that some speculating Yankee might make a slave of him, or that perchance he might meet his old master: for he has had one.”

“How vexatious all this!” says Don Gregorio. “I suppose I shall have to look out for another ship.”

“I fear you’ll not find one much better provided than mine – as regards sailors. In that respect, to use a professional phrase, we’re all in the same boat.”

“You assure me of that!”

“I do, señor.”

“I can trust you, Captain Lantanas. As I have told you, I’m not here without knowing something of yourself. You have a friend in Don Tomas Silvestre?”

“I believe I have the honour of Don Tomas’s friendship.”

“Well, he has recommended you in such terms that I can thoroughly rely upon you. For that reason, I shall now make more fully known to you why I wish to travel by your ship.”

The Chilian skipper bows thanks for the compliment, and silently awaits the proffered confidence.

“I’ve just sold my property here, receiving for it three hundred thousand dollars in gold-dust – the same I intended for your freight. It is now lying at my house, some three miles from town. As you must be aware, captain, this place is at present the rendezvous of scoundrels collected from every country on the face of the habitable globe, but chiefly from the United States and Australia. They live, and act, almost without regard to law; such judges as they have being almost as great criminals as those brought before them. I feel impatient to get away from the place; which under the circumstances, you won’t wonder at. And I am naturally anxious about my gold. At any hour a band of these lawless ruffians may take it into their heads to strip me of it – or, at all events, attempt to do so. Therefore, I wish to get it on board a ship – one where it will be safe, and in whose captain I can thoroughly confide. Now, you understand me?”

“I do,” is the simple response of the Chilian. He is about to add that Don Gregorio’s property, as his secret, will be safe enough, so far as he can protect it, when the latter interrupts him by continuing:

“I may add that it is my intention to return to Spain, of which I am a native – to Cadiz, where I have a house. That I intended doing anyhow. But now, I want to take departure at once. As a Spaniard, señor, I needn’t point out to you, who are of the same race, that the society of California cannot be congenial – now that the rowdies of the United States have become its rulers. I am most anxious to get away from the place, and soon as possible. It is exceedingly awkward your not having a crew. Can’t something be done to procure one?”

“The only thing is to offer extra pay. There are plenty of sailors in San Francisco; for they’ve not all gone to gather gold. Some are engaged in scattering it. Unfortunately, most are worthless, drunken fellows. Still it is possible that a few good men might be found, were the wages made sufficiently tempting. No doubt, an advertisement in the *Diario*, offering double pay, might attract as many as would be needed for working my ship.”

“How much would it all amount to?”

“Possibly an extra thousand dollars.”

“Suppose I pay that, will you engage the whole ship to me? That is, take no other passengers, or wait for any more freight, but sail at once – soon as you’ve secured a crew? Do you agree to these terms?”

“Si, señor; they are perfectly satisfactory.”

“I’ll be answerable for the extra wages. Anything to get away from this Pandemonium of a place.”

“In that case, señor, I think we’ll have no great difficulty in procuring hands. You authorise me to advertise for them?”

“I do,” answers Don Gregorio.

“Enough!” rejoins the skipper. “And now, Señor Montijo, you may make your preparations for embarking.”

“I’ve not many to make; nearly all has been done already. It’s only to get our personal baggage aboard, with the freight safely stowed. By the way,” adds the Biscayan, speaking *sotto-voce*, “I wish to ship the gold as soon as possible, and without attracting attention to it. You understand me, captain?”

“I do.”

“I shall have it brought aboard at night, in a boat which belongs to Silvestre. It will be safer in your cabin than anywhere else – since no one need be the wiser about the place of deposit.”

“No one shall, through me.”

“That I feel certain of, Señor Lantanas. Don Tomas is your endorser; and would be willing to be your bondsman, were it needed – which it is not.”

Again the *Condor*’s captain bows in acknowledgment of the confidence reposed in him; and after some further exchange of speech, respecting the shipment of the treasure, and the writing out an advertisement, which Don Gregorio is to *get* inserted in the *Diario*, the latter returns to his boat, and is rowed back to the shore; while the Chilian lights a fresh cigarette, and with elbows rested on the capstan-head, resumes his customary attitude of *insouciance*, from which he had been temporarily roused.

Chapter Eighteen.

In Search of a Second

Just about the time Don Gregorio is taking leave of Captain Lantanas, the two unwelcome, as unreceived, visitors are turning their backs upon his house.

De Lara feels his discomfiture the keenest. His heart is harrowed with mingled emotions – passions of varied complexion, all evil. His lips are livid with rage, his brow black with chagrin, while his eyes fairly scintillate with unsatisfied vengeance.

While returning along the avenue he neither looks back, nor up. Not a syllable escapes him; with glance upon the ground, he rides in sullen silence.

After clearing the entrance-gate, and again upon the outside road, he turns face toward the dwelling whose hospitality has been so insultingly denied him. He sees nought there to soothe, but something which still further afflicts him. Four horses are filing out through the front gate, conducted by grooms. They are saddled, bridled, ready for being mounted. To his practised eye, their caparison tells that they are intended only for a short excursion, not a journey. And though their saddles are in shape nearly alike, he knows that two of them are to be mounted by men, the other two to carry ladies.

“The señoritas are going out for a ride – a *paseo de campo*– accompanied by their English guests,” observes Calderon.

Simultaneously, as instinctively, de Lara arrives at this conclusion. Both now know why they were not received; a knowledge which, instead of tranquillising their chafed spirits, but maddens them the more. The thought of their sweethearts being escorted by these detested rivals, riding along wild unfrequented paths, through trees overshadowing, away from the presence of spying domestics, or the interference of protecting relatives, beyond the eyes and ears of every one – the thought that Carmen Montijo and Iñez Alvarez are setting out on an excursion of this kind, is to Francisco de Lara and Faustino Calderon bitter as deadliest poison.

And reflection embitters it the more. The excursionists will have every opportunity of wandering at will. They will become separated; and there can be no doubt as to how the partition will be made; the older of the two officers will pair off with Doña Carmen, the younger with Doña Iñez. Thus, they will ride unmolested, unobserved; converse without fear of being overheard; clasp hands without danger of being seen – perhaps exchange kisses! Oh, the dire, desperate jealousy! Even the dull brain and cold heart of Calderon are fired by these reflections. They sting him to the quick. But not as De Lara; for not as De Lara does he love.

After gazing for a while at the house – at the horses and grooms – at the preparations that are being made for mounting – noting their magnificent style – with a last glance such as Satan gave when expelled from Paradise, the Creole drives the spur deep into his horse’s ribs, and dashes off down the hill the Californian after.

At its bottom they again come to a halt, being now out of sight of the house. Facing toward his companion, De Lara says:

“We’re in for a fight, Faustino; both of us.”

“Not both. I don’t think I’m called upon to challenge that youngster. He’s but a boy.”

“He’s been man enough to insult you; and, if I mistake not, you’ll find him man enough to meet you.”

“I don’t see that he *did* insult me.”

“Indeed; you don’t? Sticking your horse, as if it were a pig, and sending him off in a stampede that well nigh dismounted you; all before the face of your lady-love – right under her eyes! You don’t deem that an insult, eh?”

“But you must remember I gave him provocation. At your bidding, I all but rode over him. Looking at it in that light, he’s in a sense excusable for what he did. Besides, he only meant it as a joke. Didn’t you see, when it was all over, how he laughed at it?”

“Not at *it*, but at *you*. So did your sweetheart, *amigo*. As we reined up under the walls, I could see her long lashes drooping down, the eyes looking disdain at you, with her pretty lips pouting in very scorn. You’re evidently out of her good graces, and you’ll have to do something ere you can reinstate yourself.”

“Do you really think so?”

“I am sure of it. Never surer of anything in my life.”

“But what would you have me to do?”

“You ought to know without asking me. Call out the cub, and *kill* him – if you can. What I design doing with my gentleman.”

“Ah! you’re a dead shot; and that makes all the difference. These Anglo-Saxons always use pistols; and if I challenge him, he’ll have the choice of weapons.”

“Quite true. With me it will be different. I took care to *give* the affront, and you should have done the same. Seeing you got the worst of it, you ought to have followed up your first dash at him by something besides – a slap across the cheek, or a cut with your whip.”

“I’m sorry now I didn’t give him one or the other.”

“Well, you may find an opportunity yet. For my quarrel, I don’t care a toss whether it be settled with swords or pistols. We Creoles of Louisiana are accustomed to the use of either weapon. Thanks to old Gardalet of the Rue Royale, I’ve got the trick of both; and am equally ready to send a half-ounce of lead, or twelve inches of steel, through the body of this Britisher. By the way, what’s his name?”

The speaker pulls out the card given him by the English officer, and glancing at it, answers his own question: “Edward Crozier, H.M.S. *Crusader*.”

“Ha! Mr Ned Crozier!” he exclaims, speaking in plain English, the sight of the card seemingly giving a fresh fillip to his spleen; “you’ve had your triumph to-day. ’Twill be mine to-morrow. And, if my fortune don’t fail me, there’ll be an empty seat at the mess-table of the ship *Crusader*.”

“You really intend fighting him?”

“Now, Don Faustino Calderon, why do you ask that question?”

“Because I think all might be arranged without – ”

“Without what? Speak out, man!”

“Why, without any spilling of blood.”

“You may arrange it that way, if you like. Your quarrel is a distinct one, and I’ve nothing to do with it – having my own hands full. Indeed, if they were empty, I’m not so sure I should be your second – talking as you do. However, that’s not the purpose now. In answer to your first question, I can only say what I’ve said before. I not only intend fighting this Crozier, but *killing* him. True, I may fail in my intention; if so, there’s an end of it, and of *me*. For, once on the ground, I don’t leave it a living man, if he do. One or both of us shall stay there, till we’re carried off – feet-foremost.”

“*Carramba!* your talk gives one the trembles. It’s not pleasant to think of such things, let alone doing them.”

“Think your own way, and welcome. To me it would be less pleasant to leave them undone; less now, than ever in my life. After what I’ve gone through, I don’t care much for character – in truth, not a straw. That’s all stuff and pretension. Money makes the man, and without it he’s nothing; though he were a saint. Respectability – bah! I don’t value it a *claco*. But there’s a reputation of another kind I *do* value, and intend to preserve. Because in my world it counts for something – has counted already.”

“What is that?”

“Courage. Losing it, I should lose everything. And in this very city of San Francisco, I’d be only a hound where I’m now a hunter; barked at by every cur, and kicked by every coward who choose to pick a quarrel with me.”

“There’s no danger of that, Don Francisco. All who have had dealings with you know better. There’s little fear of any one putting a slight upon *you*.”

“There would be, if I refused to fight this fellow. Then you’d see the difference. Why, Faustino Calderon. I couldn’t sit at our monté table, and keep the red-shirts from robbing us, if they didn’t know ’twould be a dangerous game to play. However, it isn’t *their* respect I value now, but that of one very different.”

“Of whom?”

“Again you ask an idle question; so idle, that I don’t believe you care a straw for Iñez Alvarez – or know what love is.”

“What has she to do with it?”

“She – nothing. That’s true enough. I don’t care aught for her, or what she might think of me. But I do care for Carmen Montijo; above all things I value her good opinion. At least, so far, that she sha’n’t think me either a fool or a coward. She may be fancying me the first; but if so, she’ll find herself mistaken. At all events, she’ll get convinced I’m not the last. And if it be as rumour reports, and as you say you’ve heard, that she’s given her heart to this *gringo*, I’ll take care she don’t bestow her *hand* upon him – not while I live. When I’m dead, she can do as she likes.”

“But after what’s passed, will you ever speak to her again?”

“Ay, that will I – in a way that’ll make her listen to me.”

“But, surely, you don’t still intend proposing to her?”

“Perhaps. Though not till I’ve finished this affair with the fellow who interrupted me. Yes; I’ll give her every chance to save herself. She shall say yea, or nay, in straight speech, and in so many words. After that, I’ll understand how to act. But come! we’re wasting time. A duel’s a thing won’t do to dally over. Do you intend to meet your man, or not?”

“I’d rather not,” replies the poltroon, hesitatingly; “that is, if the thing can be arranged. Do you think it can, De Lara?”

“Of course, it can; your *thing*, as you call it; though not without disgrace to you. You should fight him, Faustino.”

“Well; if you say I should, why, I suppose I must. I never fired a pistol in my life, and am only second-rate with the sword. I can handle a *macheté*, or a *cuchilla*, when occasion calls for it; but these weapons won’t be admitted in a duel between gentlemen. I suppose the sailor fellow claims to be one?”

“Undoubtedly he does, and with good reason. An officer belonging to a British man-of-war would call you out for questioning his claim to the epithet. But I think you underrate your skill with the small-sword. I’ve seen you doing very well with that weapon – at Roberto’s fencing-school.”

“Yes; I took lessons there. But fencing is very different from fighting.”

“Never mind. When you get on the duelling-ground, fancy yourself within the walls of Roberto’s shooting-gallery, and that you are about to take a fresh lesson in the *art d’escrime*. About all, choose the sword for your weapon.”

“How can I, if I am to be the challenger?”

“You needn’t be. There’s a way to get over that. The English officers are not going straight back to their ship; not likely before a late hour of the night. After returning from their ride, I take it they’ll stay to dinner at Don Gregorio’s; and with wine to give them a start, they’ll be pretty sure to have a cruise, as they call it, through the town. There, you may meet your man; and can insult him, by giving him a cuff, spitting in his face – anything to put the onus of challenging upon him.”

“*Por Dios!* I’ll do as you say.”

“That’s right. Now let us think of what’s before us. As we are both to be principals, we can’t stand seconds to one another. I know who’ll act for me. Have you got a friend you can call upon?”

“Don Manuel Diaz. He’s the only one I can think of.”

“Don Manuel will do. He’s a cool hand, and knows all the regulations of the *duello*. But he’s not at home to-day. As I chance to know, he’s gone to a *funcion de gallos* at Punta Pedro; and by this time should be in the cock-pit.”

“Why can’t we go there? Or had we better send?”

“Better send, I think. Time’s precious – at least mine is. As you know, I must be at the *monté* table soon as the lamps are lit. If I’m not, the bank will go begging, and we may lose our customers. Besides, there’s my own second to look up, which must be done this day before I lay a hand upon the cards. What hour is it? I’ve not brought my timepiece with me.”

“Twelve o’clock, and a quarter past,” answers Calderon, after consulting his watch.

“Only that! Then we’ll have plenty of time to get to Punta Pedro, and witness a main. Don Manuel has a big bet on his *pardo*. I’d like myself to stake a doubloon or two on that bird. Yes, on reflection, we’d better go to the *pelea de gallos*. That will be the surest way to secure the services of Diaz. *Vamonos!*”

At this the two intending duellists again set their steeds in motion; and, riding for a short distance along the shore-road, turn into another, which will take them to Punta Pedro.

With jealous anger still unappeased, they urge their horses into a gallop, riding as if for life, on an errand whose upshot may be death – to one or both of them.

Chapter Nineteen.

A “Paseo de Caballo.”

The promontory called Punta Pedro is not in San Francisco Bay, but on the outside coast of the Pacific. To reach it from the former, it is necessary to traverse the dividing ridge between the two waters – this a spur of the “Coast Range,” which, running higher as it trends southward, is known to Spanish Californians as the San Bruno Mountains.

Punta Pedro abuts from their base into the ocean; the coast in this quarter being bold and picturesque, but almost uninhabited. Here and there only the solitary hut of a seal-hunter, or fisherman, with a small collection of the same near the point itself, bearing its name, and a somewhat indifferent reputation. The Anglo-Saxon gold-seekers do not go there; it is only frequented by the natives.

From San Francisco to Punta Pedro the road runs past Dolores – an ancient mission of the Franciscan monks, whose port was, as already stated, Yerba Buena, previous to becoming re-christened San Francisco.

This route De Lara and Calderon have taken, getting into it by a cross-cut; and along it they continue to ride, still at a gallop, with faces set for Dolores.

They are not the only equestrians moving along that road. The dust kicked up by their horses hoofs has just settled down when a second party appears, going in the same direction, though at a gentler gait; for it is a cavalcade composed partly of ladies.

It is a quartette, two of each sex; and as the horses are the same already seen standing saddled in the courtyard of Don Gregorio’s house, it is not necessary to give the names of the riders. These can be guessed.

Doña Carmen is carrying out the instructions left by her father, who, Californian fashion, supposed he could give his sailor-guests no greater treat than a *paseo de caballo*, including an excursion to the old Dolores Mission, without a visit to which no exploration of the country around San Francisco can be considered complete. It is not the least of California’s “lions.”

Like most Spanish-American ladies, Don Gregorio’s daughter takes delight in the saddle, and spends some part of each day in it. An accomplished *equestrienne*, she could take a five-barred gate, or a bullfinch, with any of the hunting Dianas of England; and, if she has not ridden to hounds, she has chased wild horses, mounted on one but little less wild. That on which she now sits seems but half-tamed. Fresh from the stable, he rears and pitches, at times standing erect on his hind legs. For all, his rider has no fear of being unhorsed. She only smiles, pricks him with the spur, and regardlessly cuts him with her *cuarto*.

Much after the same fashion acts Iñez, for she, too, has learned the Californian style of equitation.

The two present a picture that, to the eye unaccustomed to Mexican habits, might seem somewhat *bizarre*. Their mode of mount – as already said, *à la Duchesse de Berri* – their half-male attire, hats of vicuña wool, *calzoncillas* lace-fringed over their feet, buff boots, and large rowelled spurs – all these give them an air of *bizarrerie*, at the same time a pleasing picturesqueness; and, if appearing bold, still beautiful, as the South Sea wind flouts back the limp brims of their sombreros, and tosses their hair into dishevelment, while the excitement of the ride brings the colour to their cheeks – with flashes, as of fire, from their eyes.

The young English officers regard them with glances of ardent admiration. If they have been but smitten before, they are getting fast fixed now; and both will soon be seriously in love. The *paseo de caballo* promises to terminate in a proposal for a longer journey in companionship – through life, in pairs.

They are thus grouped: Crozier alongside Carmen – Cadwallader with Iñez. The officers are in their uniforms – a costume for equestrian exercise not quite shipshape as they would phrase it. On horseback in a naval uniform! It would not do riding thus on an English road; there the veriest country lout would criticise it. But different in California, where all ride, gentle or simple, in dresses of every conceivable cut and fashion, with no fear of being ridiculed therefor. None need attach to the dress worn by Edward Crozier. His rank has furnished him with a frock-coat, which, well-fitting, gives a handsome contour to his person. Besides, he is a splendid horseman – has followed hounds before he ever set foot aboard a ship. Carmen Montijo perceives this; can tell it with half a glance; and it pleases her to reflect that her escorting cavalier is equal to the occasion. She believes him equal to anything.

With the other pair the circumstances are slightly different. Will Cadwallader is no horseman, having had but scant practice – a fact patent to all – Iñez as the others. Besides, the mid is dressed in a pea-jacket; which, although becoming enough aboard ship, looks a little *outré* in the saddle, especially upon a prancing Californian steed. Does it make the young Welshman feel ashamed of himself? Not a bit. He is not the stuff to be humiliated on the score of an inappropriate costume. Nor yet by his inferiority in horsemanship, of which he is himself well aware. He but laughs as his steed prances about – the louder when it comes near pitching him.

How does he appear in the eyes of Iñez Alvarez? Does she think him ridiculous? No. On the contrary, she seems charmed, and laughs along with him – delighted by his *naïveté*, and the courage he displays in not caring for consequences. She knows he is out of his own element – the sea. She believes that on it he would be brave, heroic; among ropes the most skilled of reefers; and if he cannot gracefully sit a home, he could ride big billows, breasting them like an albatross.

Thus mutually taking each other's measure, the four equestrians canter on, and soon arrive at the mission.

But they do not design to stay there. The ride has *been* too short, the sweet moments have flown quickly; and the summit of a high hill, seen far beyond, induces them to continue the excursion.

They only stop to give a glance at the old monastery, where Spanish monks once lorded it over their copper-skinned neophytes; at the church, where erst ascended incense, and prayers were pattered in the ears of the aborigines – by them ill understood.

A moment spent in the cemetery, where Carmen points out the tomb enclosing the remains of her mother, dropping a tear upon it – perhaps forced from her by the reflection that soon she will be far from that sacred spot – it may be, never to revisit it!

Away from it now; and on to that hill from which they can descry the Pacific!

In another hour they have reined up on its summit, and behold the great South Sea, stretching to far horizon's verge, to the limit of their vision. Before them all is bright and beautiful. Only some specks in the dim distance – the lone isles of the Farrallones. More northerly, and nearer, the "Seal" rocks and that called *Campana*– from its arcade hollowed out by the wash of waves, giving it a resemblance to the belfry of a church. Nearer still, below a belt of pebbly beach, a long line of breakers, foam-crested, and backed by a broad reach of sand-dunes – there termed *medanos*.

Seated in the saddle, the excursionists contemplate this superb panorama. The four are now together, but soon again separate into pairs, as they have been riding along the road. Somehow or other, their horses have thus disposed themselves: that ridden by Crozier having drawn off with the one carrying Carmen; while the steed so ill-managed by Cadwallader has elected to range itself alongside that of Iñez.

Perhaps the pairing has not been altogether accidental. Whether or no, it is done; and the conversation, hitherto general, is reduced to the simplicity of dialogue.

To report it correctly, it is necessary to take the pairs apart, giving priority to those who by their years have the right to it.

Crozier, looking abroad over the ocean, says —

"I shall ere long be upon it." He accompanies the speech with a sigh.

“And I, too,” rejoins Carmen, in a tone, and with accompaniment, singularly similar.

“How soon do you think of leaving California?” queries the young officer.

“Oh, very soon! My father is already making arrangements, and hopes being able to set sail in a week, if not less. Indeed, he has this day been to see about taking passages to Panama. That’s why he was not at home to receive you; leaving me to do the honours of the house, and apologise for his seeming rudeness.”

For that not much apology was needed, thinks Crozier, who is for a time silent, not knowing what next to say. Love, reputed eloquent, is oft the reverse; and though opening the lips of a landsman, will shut those of men who follow the sea. There is a remarkable modesty about the latter more than the former – in the presence of women. Why, I cannot tell; only knowing that as a rule it is so; and certainly in the case of Edward Crozier.

In time he gets over his embarrassment, so far as to venture upon an interrogatory, not very pertinent —

“I suppose, Doña Carmen, you are very happy at the prospect of returning to Spain?”

“No, indeed,” answers Don Gregorio’s daughter. “On the contrary, it makes me rather melancholy. I love dear California, and could live in it all my life. Couldn’t you?”

“Under certain circumstances, I could.”

“But you like the country, don’t you?”

“I do, now. In ten days from this time, I shall no longer care for it – not three straws.”

“Why do you say that, Don Eduardo? There’s an enigma in your words. Please explain them?”

While asking the question, her grey-blue eyes gaze into his, with an expression of searching eagerness – almost anxiety.

“Shall I tell you why, señorita!”

“I have asked you, señor.”

“Well, then, I like California now, because it contains the fairest object on earth – to me the dearest – the woman I love. In ten days or less, by her own showing, she will be away from it; why should I care for it then? Now, Doña Carmen, I’ve given you the key to what you’ve called an enigma.”

“Not quite. Perhaps you will pardon a woman’s curiosity, if I ask the name of the lady who thus controls your likes and dislikes.”

Crozier hesitates, a red spot flushing out upon his cheek. He is about to pronounce a name – perhaps make a speech, the most important he has ever made in his life – because laden with his life’s happiness, or leading to the reverse. What if it should be coldly received?

But no; he cannot be mistaken. Her question, so quaintly, yet so impressively put – surely courts the answer he intends giving? And he gives it without further reflection – her own name, not an added word.

“*Carmen Montijo.*”

“Eduardo,” she asks, after a pause, dropping the Don, “are you in earnest? Can I take this as true? Do not deceive me – in honour do not! To you – and I truly tell you – I have surrendered all my heart. Say that I have yours!”

“I have said it, Carmen,” he too adopting the familiar language of love. “Have I not?”

“Sincerely?”

“Look in my eyes for the answer.”

She obeys; and drawing closer, tiny gaze into one another’s eyes; the flashes from the blue crossing and commingling with those from the brown. Neither could mistake the meaning of the glance, for it is the true light of love, pure as passionate.

Not another word passes between them. The confession, with its dreaded crisis, is passed; and, with hearts quivering in sweet content, they turn their thoughts to the future, full of pleasant promise.

Near by are two other hearts, quite as happy as theirs; though after a scene less sentimental, and a dialogue that, to a stranger overhearing it, might appear to be in jest. For all, in real earnest,

and so ending – as may be inferred from the young Welshman’s final speech, with the reply of his Andalusian sweetheart:

“Iñez, you’re the dearest girl I’ve met in all my cruisings. Now, don’t let us beat about any longer, but take in sail, and bring the ship to an anchor. Will you be mine, and marry me?”

“I will.”

No need to stay longer there – no object in continuing to gaze over the ocean.

The horses seem instinctively to understand this; and, turning together, set their heads for home.

Chapter Twenty.

Pot Valiant

The bright Californian sun is declining towards the crest of the Coast Range, when two horsemen, coming from the Pacific side, commence ascending the ridge.

As the sultry hours have passed, and a chill breeze blows from the outside ocean, they have thrust their heads through the central slits of their cloaks – these being *mangas*– leaving the circular skirts to droop down below their knees – while draping back, cavalry fashion, over the hips of their horses. The colours of these garments – one scarlet, the other sky-blue – enable us to identify the wearers as Don Francisco de Lara and Don Faustino Calderon; for in truth it is they, returning from the *pelea de gallos* at Punta Pedro.

They have seen Diaz, and arranged everything about the duel. Faustino has finally determined upon fight. Instigated by his more courageous confederate, and with further pressing on the part of Diaz – a sort of Californian bravo – his courage has been at length screwed up to the necessary pitch; and kept there by the potent spirit of Catalonian brandy, found freely circulating around the cock-pit.

A flask of the *Catalan* he has brought away with him, and at intervals takes a pull from it, as he rides along the road. Under its influence he becomes pot valiant; and swears, if he can but again set eyes upon the English *guardia-marina*, he will affront him in such fashion as to leave him no loophole of escape from being the challenger. *Carrai!* he will do as De Lara has recommended: cuff the young officer, kick him, spit in his face, anything to provoke the *gringo* to a fight – that yellow-haired cub without *bigots* or beard. And if the cur won't fight, then he shall apologise – get down upon his knees, acknowledge him, Faustino Calderon, the better man, and for ever after surrender all claim to the smiles, as to the hand, of Iñez Alvarez!

With such swaggering talk he entertains his companion, as the two are returning to town.

De Lara, less noisy, is nevertheless also excited. The fiery alcohol has affected him too. Not to strengthen his courage; for of this he has already enough; but to remove the weight from off his soul, which, after the scene at Don Gregorio's, had been pressing heavily upon it. Six hours have since elapsed, and for the first three he had been brooding over his humiliation, his spirit prostrate in the dust. But the *Catalan* has again raised it to a pitch of exultation; especially when he reflects upon the prospect of the sure and speedy vengeance he is determined to take.

It does not occur to him to doubt of success. With thorough reliance on his skill as a swordsman, he feels sure of it. Though also a good shot, he prefers the steel for his weapon; like most men of the southern Latinic race, who believe Northerners to be very bunglers at sword-play, though admitting their superiority in the handling of the pistol. As things stand, unlike his comrade Calderon, he will have the choice of weapons. His intended antagonist was the first to demand the card, and must needs be challenger.

As the two ride on, they talk alternately, both giving vent to their spleen – the man of courage, as the coward. If not so loud, or boastingly, as his companion, De Lara expresses himself with a more spiteful and earnest determination; repeating much of what he has already said at an earlier hour, but with added emphasis. Once he sees the English officer at his rapier's point, he will show him no mercy, but run him through, without the slightest compunction. In vain may his adversary cry "Quarter." There can be none conceded, after what has that day passed between them.

"*Maldita!* it shall be a duel to the death!" he exclaims, after having given way to a series of threats, the words pronounced with an *empressement* that tells him to be truly, terribly in earnest.

They have been carrying on this excited dialogue, as their horses climbed the slope from the Pacific side, its steepness hindering them from going at their usual gait – a gallop. On rising the ridge's crest, and catching sight of San Francisco, with its newly painted white walls, and shining tin roofs,

reflected red in the rays of the setting sun, De Lara, suddenly remembering the pressure upon him as to time, strikes the spur sharp against his horse's ribs, and puts the animal to speed. The other imitating his example, they dash on towards Dolores.

They have no intention to make stop at the mission; but, on reaching it, they draw up; obedient to the hail of a man seen standing in the door of a little tavern, or *tinacal*, frequented by the lower class of native Californians.

A rough, swarthy-skinned fellow, in a garb that proclaims his calling to have connection with the sea, though not that of a sailor. He may be a shore-boatman – perhaps a *piscador* – though, judging by his general appearance, and the uncanny cast of his countenance, he might well pass for a pirate.

Stepping a few paces out from the *tinacal*, he salutes the two horsemen, who have halted in the middle of the road to await his approach. Despite his coarse, brutal aspect, and common habiliments, he is evidently on terms of familiarity with both – the style of his salutation showing it. It is with De Lara, however, his business lies, as signified by his saying:

“I want a word with you, Don Francisco.”

“What is it, Rocas?” asks the Creole. “Anything about *seal-skins*?” laying a significant emphasis on the last word.

“*Carramba*! No. Something of more importance than that.”

“Money, then?”

“Money.”

“Do you wish our speech to be private?”

“Just now, yes. Perhaps, in time, Don Faustino – ”

“Oh!” interrupts the *ganadero*, “don't let me stand in the way. I'll ride slowly on; you can overtake me, Don Francisco.”

“Do,” says De Lara, at the same time stooping down in his saddle, and continuing the conversation with Rocas, in tone so low as to prevent their speech being overheard by other queer-looking customers who have just stepped out of the *tinacal*, and stand loitering at its door.

Whatever Rocas may have said, it appears to make a vivid impression on the gambler. His eyes kindle up with a strange light, in which surprise is succeeded by an expression of cupidity; while his manner proclaims that the revelation made to him is not only important, as he has been forewarned, but also pleasing.

Their muttered dialogue is of brief duration; ending with a remark which shows it to be only preliminary to a further and more prolonged conference.

“I shall be with you to-morrow, by mid-day.” It is De Lara who has said this; after which adding: “*Adios, Don Rafael! Hasta mañana!*” he gives his horse the spur, and gallops to overtake his travelling companion; Rocas sauntering back towards the *tinacal*.

Chapter Twenty One.

A “Golpe de Caballo.”

On coming up with the *ganadero*, De Lara rides on silently by his side, without exhibiting any desire to satisfy the other's curiosity. He but piques it by saying, that Rocas has made communication of an intensely interesting kind; which he will impart to him, Faustino, in due time; but now there are other matters of more importance to be attended to. The fighting is before them; and that cannot be set aside.

Calderon wishes it could: for the flask has been for a time forgotten, and the spirit has been getting cold within him.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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