

Tracy Louis

His Unknown Wife



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Содержание

CHAPTER I	5
CHAPTER II	12
CHAPTER III	18
CHAPTER IV	25
CHAPTER V	31
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	33

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CHAPTER I SHARP WORK

“Prisoner, attention! His excellency the President has permitted Señor Steinbaum to visit you.”

The “prisoner” was lying on his back on a plank bed, with his hands tucked beneath his head to obtain some measure of protection from the roll of rough fiber matting which formed a pillow. He did not pay the slightest heed to the half-caste Spanish jailer’s gruff command. But the visitor’s name stirred him. He turned his head, apparently to make sure that he was not being deceived, and rose on an elbow.

“Hello, Steinbaum!” he said in English. “What’s the swindle? Excuse this terseness, but I have to die in an hour, or even less, if a sunbeam hasn’t misled me.”

“There’s no swindle this time, Mr. Maseden,” came the guttural answer. “I’m sorry I cannot help you, but I want you to do a good turn for a lady.”

“A lady! What lady?”

“I don’t know.”

“If *you* don’t know the lady that is a recommendation in itself. At any rate, what sort of good turn can a man condemned to death do for any lady?”

“She wants to marry you.”

Then the man who, by his own showing, was rapidly nearing the close of his earthly career, sprang erect and looked so threatening that his visitor shrank back a pace, while the half-caste jailer’s right hand clutched the butt of a revolver.

“Whatever else I may have thought you, I never regarded you as a fool, Steinbaum,” he said sternly. “Go away, man! Have you no sense of decency? You and that skunk Enrico Suarez, have done your worst against me and succeeded. When I am dead the ‘state’ will collar my property – and I am well aware that in this instance the ‘state’ will be represented by Señor Enrico Suarez and Mr. Fritz Steinbaum. You are about to murder and rob me. Can’t you leave me in peace during the last few minutes of my life? Be off, or you may find that in coming here you have acted foolishly for once.”

“*Ach, was!*” sighed Steinbaum, nevertheless retreating another step towards the door and the watchful half-caste, who had been warned to shoot straight and quickly if the prisoner attacked the august person of the portly financier. “I tell you the truth, and you will not listen. It is as I say. A lady, a stranger, arrived in Cartagena last night. She heard of you this morning. She asked: ‘Is he married, this American?’ They said, ‘No.’ Then she came to me and begged me to use my influence with the President. She said: ‘If this American gentleman is to be shot, I am sorry; but it cannot matter to him if he is married, and it will oblige me very much.’ I told her – ”

The speaker’s voice grew husky and he paused to clear his throat. Maseden smiled wanly at the mad absurdity of it, but he was beginning to believe some part of Steinbaum’s story.

“And what did you tell her?” he broke in.

“I told her that you were Quixotic in some things, and you might agree.”

“But what on earth does the lady gain by it? Suarez and you will take mighty good care she doesn’t get away with my ranch and money. Does she want my name?”

“Perhaps.”

Maseden took thought a moment.

"It has never been dishonored during my life," he said quietly. "I would need to be assured that it will not be smirched after my death."

Steinbaum was stout. A certain anxiety to succeed in an extraordinary mission, joined to the warm, moist atmosphere of the cell, had induced a copious perspiration.

"*Ach, Gott!*" he purred despairingly. "I know nothing. She told me nothing. She offered to pay me for the trouble –"

"Ah!"

"Why not? I run some risk in acting so. She is American, like yourself. She came to me –"

"American, you say! Is she young?"

"I think so. I have not seen her face. She wears a thick veil."

Romance suddenly spread its fairy wings in that squalid South American prison-house. Maseden's spirit was fired to perform a last act of chivalry, of mercy, it might be, in behalf of some unhappy girl of his own race. The sheer folly of this amazing marriage moved him to grim mirth.

"Very well," he said with a half-hearted laugh. "I'll do it! But, as *you* are mixing the cards, Steinbaum, there must be a joker in the pack somewhere. I'm a pretty quick thinker, you know, and I shall probably see through your proposition before I die, though I am damned if I can size it up right off."

"Mr. Maseden, I assure you, on my – well, you and I never were friends and never will be, but I have told you the real facts this time."

"When is the wedding to take place?"

"Now."

"Great Scott! Did the lady come with you?"

"Yes. She is here with a priest and a notary."

Maseden peered over the jailer's shoulder into the whitewashed passage beyond the half-open door, as though he expected to find a shrouded figure standing there. Steinbaum interpreted his glance.

"She is in the great hall," he said. "The guard is waiting at the end of the corridor."

"Oh, it's to be a military wedding, then?"

"Yes, in a sense."

The younger man appreciated the nice distinction Steinbaum was drawing. The waiting "guard" was the firing-party.

"What time is it?" he demanded, so sharply that the fat man started. For a skilled intriguer Steinbaum was ridiculously nervous.

"A quarter past seven."

"Allow me to put the question as delicately as possible, but – er – is there any extension of time beyond eight o'clock?"

"Señor Suarez would not give one minute."

"He knows about the ceremony, of course?"

"Yes."

"What a skunk the man is! How he must fear me! Such Spartan inflexibility is foreign to the Spanish nature... By the way, Steinbaum, did you ever, in your innocent youth, hear the opera 'Maritana,' or see a play called 'Don Cesar de Bazan'?"

"Why waste time, Mr. Maseden?" cried the other impatiently. He loathed the environment of that dim cell, with its slightly foetid air, suggestive of yellow jack and dysentery. He was so obviously ill at ease, so fearful lest he should fail in an extraordinary negotiation, that, given less strenuous conditions, the younger man must have read more into the proposal than appeared on the face of it.

But the sands of life were running short for Maseden. Outwardly cool and imperturbably American, his soul was in revolt. For all that he laughed cheerfully.

“Waste time, indeed!” he cried. “I, who have less than forty-five minutes to live!.. Now, these are my terms.”

“There are no terms,” broke in Steinbaum harshly. “You oblige the lady, or you don’t. Please yourself.”

“Ah, that’s better. That sounds more like the hound that I know you are. Yet, I insist on my terms.

“I was dragged out of bed in my pajamas at four o’clock this morning, and not even permitted to dress. They hardly waited to get me a pair of boots. I haven’t a red cent in my pocket, which is a figure of speech, because I haven’t a pocket. If you think you can borrow from an old comedy just so much of the situation as suits your purpose and disregard the costume and appearance of the star actor, you’re mistaken.

“I gather from your furious grunts that you don’t understand me. Very well. I’ll come straight to the point. If I am to marry the lady of your choice, I demand the right to appear at the altar decently clad and with enough good money in my pocket to stand a few bottles of wine to the gallant blackguards who are about to shoot me.

“Those are my terms, Steinbaum. Take them or leave them! But don’t accuse *me* of wasting time. It’s up to you to arrange the stage setting. I might have insisted on a shave, but I won’t.

“The lady will not expect me to kiss her, I suppose?.. By gad, she must be a person of strange tastes. Why any young woman should want to marry a man because he’s going to be shot half an hour later is one of those mysteries which the feminine mind may comprehend, but it’s beyond me. However, that’s her affair, not mine.

“Now, Steinbaum, hurry up! *I’m* talking for the mere sake of hearing my own voice, but *you’re* keeping the lady in suspense.”

Maseden had indeed correctly described his own attitude. He was wholly indifferent to the personal element in the bizarre compact proposed by his arch-enemy, on whom he had turned his back while speaking.

The sight of a bloated, angry, perplexed face of the coarsest type was mentally disturbing. He elected rather to watch the shaft of sunlight coming through the long, narrow slit in a four-foot wall which served as a window. He knew that his cell was on the northeast side of the prison, and the traveling sunbeam had already marked the flight of time with sufficient accuracy since he was thrust into that dismal place.

He had been sentenced to death just one hour and a half after being arrested. The evidence, like the trial, was a travesty of justice. His excellency Don Enrico Suarez, elected president of the Republic of San Juan at midnight, and confirmed in power by the bullet which removed his predecessor, wreaked vengeance speedily on the American intruder who had helped to mar his schemes twice in two years.

There would be a diplomatic squabble about the judicial murder of a citizen of the United States, of course. The American and British consuls would protest, and both countries would dispatch warships to Cartagena, which was at once the capital of the republic and its chief port. But of what avail such wrangling after one was dead?

Dead, at twenty-eight, when the world was bright and fortune was apparently smiling! Dead, because he supported dear old Domenico Valdes, the murdered president, and one of the few honest, God-fearing men in a rotten little South American state which would have been swept out of putrid existence long ago were it not for the policy of the Monroe Doctrine. Maseden knew that no power on earth would save him now, because Suarez and he could not exist in the same community, and Suarez was supreme in the Republic of San Juan – supreme, that is, until some other cut-throat climbed to the presidency over a rival’s corpse. Steinbaum, a crafty person who played the game of high politics with some ability and seldom failed to advance his own and his allies’ interests, had backed Suarez financially and would become his jackal for the time.

It was rather surprising that such a master-plotter should have admitted a fore-knowledge of Maseden's fate, and this element in the situation suddenly dawned on Maseden himself. The arrest, the trial, and the condemnation were alike kept secret.

The American consul, a Portuguese merchant, possessed enough backbone to demand the postponement of the execution until he had communicated with Washington, and in this action he would have been supported by the representative of Great Britain. But he would know nothing about the judicial crime until it was an accomplished fact.

How, then, had some enterprising young lady —

“By the way, Steinbaum, you might explain — ”

Maseden swung on his heel; the matrimonial agent had vanished.

“The señor signified that he would return soon,” said the jailer.

“He's gone for the clothes!” mused Maseden, his thoughts promptly reverting to the fantastic marriage project. “The sly old fox is devilish anxious to get me spliced before my number goes up. I wonder why? And where in the world will he raise a suitable rig? Hang it all, I wish I had a little longer to live. This business becomes more interesting every minute!”

Though he was sure the attempt would be hopeless, Maseden resolved to make one last effort. He looked the half-caste squarely in the face.

“Get me out of this before Señor Steinbaum comes back and I'll give you twenty thousand dollars gold,” he said quietly.

The man met his glance without flinching.

“I could not help you, señor, if you paid me a million dollars,” he answered. “It is your life or mine — those are my orders. And it is useless to think of attacking me,” he added, because for one moment black despair scowled menacingly from Maseden's strong features. “There are ten men at each door of the corridor ready to shoot you at the least sign of any attempt to escape.”

“The preparations for the wedding are fairly complete, then?”

Maseden spoke Spanish fluently, and the half-caste grinned at the joke.

“It will soon be over, señor,” was all he could find to say.

The condemned man knew that the fellow was not to be bribed at the cost of his own life. He turned again and grew interested once more in the shaft of sunlight. How quickly it moved! He calculated that before it reached a certain crack in the masonry he would have passed into “yesterday's seven thousand years.”

It was not a pleasing conceit. In self-defense, as it were, he bent his wits on to the proposed marriage. He was half inclined to regret the chivalrous impulse which spurred him to agree to it. Yet there was a spice of humor in the fact that a man who was regarded as an inveterate woman-hater by the dusky young ladies of San Juan should be led to the altar literally at the eleventh hour.

What manner of woman could this unknown bride be? What motive swayed her? Perhaps it was better not to ask. But if the knot were tied by a priest, a notary and a European financier, it was evidently intended to be a valid undertaking.

And why was Steinbaum so interested? Was the would-be Mrs. Maseden so well endowed with this world's goods that she spared no expense in attaining her object?

The most contrary emotions surged through Maseden's conscience. He was by turns curious, sympathetic, suspicious, absurdly eager to learn more.

In this last mood he resolved to have one straight look at the lady. Surely a man was entitled to see his bride's face! Yes, come what might, he would insist that she must raise the “thick, white veil” which had hitherto screened her features from Steinbaum's goggle eyes — supposing, that is, the rascal had told the truth.

A hinge creaked, and the half-caste announced that the señor was returning. In a few seconds Steinbaum panted in. He was carrying a gorgeous uniform of sky-blue cloth with facings of silver

braid. As he dumped a pair of brilliant patent-leather top-boots on the stone floor a glittering helmet fell from among the clothes and rolled to Maseden's feet.

"See here, Steinbaum, what tomfoolery is this?" cried the American wrathfully.

"It is your tomfoolery, not mine," came the heated retort. "Where am I to get a suit of clothes for you? These will fit, I think. I borrowed them from the President's *aide-de-camp*, Captain Ferdinando Gomez."

Maseden knew Captain Gomez – a South American dandy of the first water. For the moment the ludicrous side of the business banished all other considerations.

"What!" he laughed, "am I to be married in the giddy rig of the biggest ass in Cartagena? Well, I give in. As I'm to be shot at eight, Ferdinando's fine feathers will be in a sad mess, because I'll not take 'em off again unless I'm undressed forcibly. Good Lord! Does my unknown bride realize what sort of rare bird she's going to espouse?..

"Yes, yes, we're losing time. Chuck over those pants. Gomez is not quite my height, but his togs may be O. K."

As a matter of fact, Philip Alexander Maseden looked a very fine figure of a man when arrayed in all the glory of the presidential *aide-de-camp*. The only trouble was that the elegant top-boots were confoundedly tight, being, in truth, a size too small for their vain owner; but the bridegroom-elect put up with this inconvenience.

He had not far to walk. A few steps to the right lay the "great hall" in which, according to Steinbaum, the ceremony would take place. Very little farther to the left was the enclosed *patio*, or courtyard, in which he would be shot within thirty minutes!

"I'm dashed if I feel a bit like dying," he said, as he strode by Steinbaum's side along the outer corridor. "If the time was about fourteen hours later I might imagine I was going to a fancy dress ball, though I wouldn't be able to dance much in these confounded boots."

The stout financier made no reply. He was singularly ill at ease. Any critical onlooker, not cognizant of the facts, would take him and not Maseden to be the man condemned to death.

A heavy, iron-clamped door leading to the row of cells was wide open. Some soldiers, lined up close to it in the hall, were craning their necks to catch a first glimpse of the Americano who was about to marry and die in the same breath, so to speak.

Beyond, near a table in the center of the spacious chamber, stood a group that arrested the eye – a Spanish priest, in vestments of semi-state; an olive-skinned man whom Maseden recognized as a legal practitioner of fair repute in a community where chicanery flourished, and a slenderly-built woman of middle height, though taller than either of her companions, whose stylish coat and skirt of thin, gray cloth, and smart shoes tied with little bows of black ribbon, were strangely incongruous with the black lace mantilla which draped her head and shoulders, and held in position a double veil tied firmly beneath her chin.

Maseden was so astonished at discovering the identity of the lawyer that he momentarily lost interest in the mysterious woman who would soon be his wife.

"Señor Porilla!" he cried. "I am glad you are here. Do you understand – "

"It is forbidden!" hissed Steinbaum. "One more word, and back you go to your cell!"

"Oh, is that part of the compact?" said Maseden cheerfully. "Well, well! We must not make matters unpleasant for a lady – must we, Steinbaum?.. Now, madam, raise your veil, and let me at least have the honor of knowing what sort of person the future Mrs. Philip Alexander Maseden will be!"

The only answer was a stifled but quite audible sob, and Maseden had an impression that the lady might put a summary stop to the proceedings by fainting.

Steinbaum, however, had recovered his nerve in the stronger light of the great hall, especially since the soldiers had gathered around.

"The señora declines to unveil," he growled in Spanish. "Begin, *padre*! There is not a moment to spare."

The ecclesiastic opened a book and plunged forthwith into the marriage service. Maseden was aware that the shrinking figure by his side was trembling violently, and a wave of pity for her surged through his heart.

“Cheer up!” he whispered. “It’s only a matter of form, anyhow; and I’m glad to be able to help you. I don’t care a red cent what your motive is.”

Steinbaum gurgled ominously, and the bridegroom said no more. Clearly, though he had given no bond, he was imperiling the fulfillment of this unhappy girl’s desire if he talked.

But he kept his wits alert. It was evident that the lady understood little Latin and no Spanish. She was quite unable to follow the sonorous phrases. When the portly priest, who seemed to have small relish for the part he was compelled to play in this amazing marriage, asked Maseden if he would have “this woman” to be his wedded wife, the bridegroom answered “Yes,” in Spanish; but a similar question addressed to the bride found her dumb.

“Say ‘I will,’” murmured Maseden in her ear.

She turned slightly. At that instant their heads came close together, and the long, unfamiliar fragrance of a woman’s well-tended hair reached him.

It had an extraordinary effect. Memories of his mother, of a simple old-world dwelling in a Vermont village, rushed in on him with an almost overwhelming force.

His superb self-possession nearly gave way. He felt that he might break down under the intolerable strain.

He feared, during a few seconds of anguish, that he might reveal his heartache to these men of inferior races.

Then the pride of a regal birthright came to his aid, and a species of most vivid and poignant consciousness succeeded. He heard Steinbaum’s gruff sponsorship for the bride, obeyed smilingly when told to take her right hand in his right hand, and looked with singular intentness at the long, straight, artistic fingers which he held.

It was a beautifully modeled hand, well kept, but cold and tremulous. The queer conceit leaped up in him that though he might never look on the face of his wedded wife he would know that hand if they met again only at the Judgment Seat!

Then, in a dazed way which impressed the onlookers as the height of American nonchalance, he said, after the celebrant: “I, Philip Alexander, take thee, Madeleine – ”

Madeleine! So that was the Christian name of the woman whom he was taking “till death do us part,” for the Spanish liturgy provided almost an exact equivalent of the English service. Madeleine! He had never even known any girl of the name. Somehow, he liked it. Outwardly so calm, he was inwardly aflame with a new longing for life and all that life meant.

His jumbled wits were peremptorily recalled to the demands of the moment by the would-be bride’s failure to repeat her share of the marriage vow, when it became her turn to take Maseden’s hand.

The priest nodded, and Steinbaum, now carrying himself with a certain truculence, essayed to lead the girl’s faltering tongue through the Spanish phrases.

“The lady must understand what she is saying,” broke in Maseden, dominating the gruff man by sheer force of will.

“Now,” he said, and his voice grew gentle as he turned to the woman he had just promised “to have and to hold,” “to love and cherish,” and thereto plighted his troth – “when the priest pauses, I will translate, and you must speak the words aloud.”

He listened, in a waking trance, to the clear, well-bred accents of a woman of his own people uttering the binding pledge of matrimony. The Spanish sentences recalled the English version, which he supplied with singular accuracy, seeing that he had only attended two weddings previously, and those during his boyhood.

“Madeleine” – he would learn her surname when he signed the register – was obviously hard pressed to retain her senses till the end. She was sobbing pitifully, and the knowledge that her distress was induced by the fate immediately in store for the man whom she was espousing “by God’s holy ordinance” tested Maseden’s steel nerve to the very limit of endurance.

But he held on with that tenacious chivalry which is the finest characteristic of his class, and even smiled at Steinbaum’s fumbling in a waistcoat pocket for a ring. He was putting the ring on the fourth finger of his wife’s left hand and pronouncing the last formula of the ceremony, when he caught an agonized whisper:

“Please, *please*, forgive me! I cannot help myself. I am – more than sorry for you. I shall pray for you – and think of you – always!”

And it was in that instant, while breathlessly catching each syllable of a broken plea for sympathy and gage of lasting remembrance, that Maseden’s bemused faculties saw a means of saving his life.

Though a forlorn hope, at the best, with a hundred chances of failure against one of success, he would seize that hundredth chance. What matter if he were shot at quarter to eight instead of at eight o’clock? Steel before, he was unemotional as marble now, a man of stone with a brain of diamond clarity.

If events followed their normal and reasonable course, he would be free of these accursed walls within a few minutes. Come what might, he would strike a lusty blow for freedom. If he failed, and sank into eternal night, one or more of the half-caste hirelings now so ready to fulfill the murderous schemes of President Suarez and his henchman Steinbaum would escort an American’s spirit to the realm beyond the shadows.

He did not stop to think that an unknown woman’s strange whim should have made possible that which, without her presence in his prison-house, was absolutely impossible; still less did he trouble as to the future, immediate or remote. His mind’s eye was fixed on a sunbeam creeping stealthily towards a crack in the masonry of that detestable cell.

He meant to cheat that sunbeam, one way or the other!

CHAPTER II

TIME *VERSUS* ETERNITY

Henceforth Maseden concentrated all his faculties on the successful performance of the trick which might win him clear of the castle of San Juan. Nothing in the wide world mattered less to him than that the newly-made bride should stoop to sign the register after he had done so, or that by turning to address Steinbaum he was deliberately throwing away the opportunity thus afforded of learning her surname.

When an avowed enemy first broached the subject of this extraordinary marriage, he had made a bitter jest on the use in real life of a well-worn histrionic situation. And now, perforce, he had become an actor of rare merit. Each look, each word must lead up to the grand climax. The penalty of failure was not the boredom of an audience, but death; such a “curtain” would sharpen the dullest wits, and Maseden, if wholly innocent of stage experience hitherto, was not dull.

He scored his first point while the bride was signing her name. Beaming on Steinbaum, he said cheerfully:

“I bargained for money, Shylock. You’ve had your pound of flesh. Where are my ducats?”

Steinbaum produced a ten-dollar bill. He even forced a smile. Seemingly he was anxious to keep the prisoner in this devil-may-care mood.

“Not half enough!” cried Maseden, and he broke into Spanish.

“Hi, my gallant *caballeros*, isn’t there another squad in the *patio*?”

“*Si, señor!*” cried several voices.

Even these crude, half-caste soldiers revealed the Latin sense of the dramatic and picturesque. They appreciated the American’s cavalier air. That morning’s doings would lose naught in the telling when the story spread through the cafés of Cartagena.

And what a story they would have to tell! Little could they guess its scope, its sensations yet to come.

“Very well, then! At least another ten-spot, Steinbaum... But, mind you, sergeant, not a drop till the volley is fired! You might miss, you know!”

The man whom he addressed as sergeant eyed the two notes with an amiable grin.

“You will feel nothing, señor – we promise you that,” he said wondering, perhaps, why the prisoner did not bestow the largesse at once.

“Excellent! Lead on, friend! I want my last few minutes to myself.”

“There are some documents to complete,” put in Steinbaum hastily, with a quick hand-flourish to the notary.

Señor Porilla spread two legal-looking parchments on the table.

“These are conveyances of your property to your wife,” he explained. “I am instructed to see that everything is done in accordance with the laws of the Republic. By these deeds you – ”

“Hand over everything to the lady. Is *that* it? I understand. Where do I sign? Here? Thank you. And here? Nothing else ... Mrs. Maseden, I have given you my name and all my worldly goods. Pray make good use of both endowments... Now, I demand to be left alone.”

Without so much as a farewell glance at his wife, who, to keep herself from falling, was leaning on the table, he strode off in the direction of the corridor into which his cell opened. It was a vital part of his scheme that he should enter first.

The jailer would have left the door open. Maseden was determined that it should be closed.

Captain Gomez’s tight boots pinched his toes cruelly as he walked, but he recked little of that minor inconvenience at the moment. In four or five rapid paces he reached the doorway and passed

through it. There he turned with his right hand on the door itself, and his left hand, carrying the helmet, raised in a parting salute. He smiled most affably, and, of set purpose, spoke in Spanish.

“Good-by, señora!” he said. “Farewell, gentlemen! I shall remember this pleasant gathering as long as I live!”

The half-caste was at his prisoner’s side, and enjoying the episode thoroughly. He would swill his share of the wine, of course, and the hour of the *siesta* should find him comfortably drunk.

Maseden flourished his left hand again, and the plumed helmet temporarily obscured the jailer’s vision. The door swung on its hinges. The lock clashed. In the same instant the American’s clenched right fist landed on the half-caste’s jaw, finding with scientific accuracy the cluster of nerves which the world of pugilism terms “the point.”

It was a perfect blow, clean and hard, delivered by an athlete. Out of the tail of his eye, Maseden had seen *where* to hit. He knew *how* to hit already, and put every ounce of his weight, each shred of his boxing knowledge, into that one punch.

It had to be a complete “knock-out,” or his plan miscarried. A cry, a struggle, a revolver shot, would have brought a score of assailants thundering on each door.

As it happened, however, the hapless Spaniard collapsed as though he were struck dead by heart-failure or apoplexy. Maseden caught the inert body before it reached the stone floor, and carried it swiftly into the cell. Improvising a gag out of his discarded pajamas, he bound the half-caste’s hands and feet together behind his back, utilizing the man’s own leather belt for the purpose.

These things were done swiftly but without nervous haste. The very essence of the plan was the conviction that no forward step should be taken without making sure that the prior moves were complete and thorough.

He had detached from the jailer’s belt a chain carrying a bunch of keys and the revolver in its leather holster. Before slipping this latter over the belt he was wearing, he examined it. Though somewhat old-fashioned, it seemed to be thoroughly serviceable, and held six cartridges with bull-nose bullets of heavy caliber.

Then he searched the unconscious man’s pockets for cigarettes and matches. Here he encountered an unforeseen delay. Every Spaniard carries either cigarettes or the materials for rolling them, but this fellow seemed to be an exception.

Now, a cigarette formed an almost indispensable item in Maseden’s scheme; but time was even more precious, and he was about to abandon the search when he noticed that one button-hole of the jailer’s tunic was far more frayed than any other. He tore open the coat, and found both cigarettes and matches in an inside breast pocket.

Not one man in a million, in similar conditions, would have been cool-headed enough to observe such a trivial detail as a frayed button-hole.

Next he examined the bunch of keys, and came to the conclusion, rightly as it transpired, that the same large key fitted the locks of both doors; which, however, were heavily barred by external draw-bolts.

Jamming on the helmet – like the glittering boots, it was a size too small – he lowered the chin-strap, lighted a cigarette, and limped quickly along the corridor towards the *patio*, which filled a square equal in size to the area of the great hall.

As he left the cell he heard the half-caste’s breathing become more regular. The man would soon recover his senses. Would the gag prove effective? Maseden dared not wait to make sure.

He could have induced a more lasting silence, but even life itself might be purchased too dearly; he took the risk of a speedy uproar.

Unlocking the door, with a confident rattling of keys and chain, he shouted:

“Hi, guards! Draw the bolts!”

The soldiers in the *patio* were ready for some such summons, though the hour was slightly in advance of the time fixed for the American’s execution, so the order was obeyed with alacrity.

Maseden appeared in the doorway, taking care that the door did not swing far back. He blew a great cloud of smoke; growled over his shoulder: "I'll return in five minutes," pulled the door to, and swaggered past the waiting troops, not forgetting to salute as they shouldered their rifles.

A long time afterwards he learned that he actually owed his escape to Captain Ferdinando Gomez's tight boots. One of the men was observant, and inclined to be skeptical.

"Who's that?" he said. "Not el Capitan Ferdinando, I'll swear!"

"Idiot!" grinned another. "Look at his limp! He pinches his toes till he can hardly walk."

At the gateway, or porch, leading to the *patio*, stood a sentry, who, luckily, was gazing seaward. Maseden conserved the cigarette for another volume of smoke, and pulled down the chin-strap determinedly.

He got beyond this dragon without any difficulty. Indeed, the man was taken by surprise, and only noticed him when he had gone by.

Maseden was now in a graveled square. Behind him, and to the left, stood the time-darkened walls of the old Spanish fortress. In front, broken only by a line of trees and the squat humps of six antiquated cannons, sparkled the blue expanse of the Pacific. To the right lay the port, the new town, and such measure of freedom as he might win.

He had yet to pass the main entrance to the castle, where, in addition to a sentry, would surely be stationed some sharp-eyed servants, each and all on the *qui vive* at that early hour, and stirred to unusual activity by the morning's news, because Cartagena regarded a change of president by means of a revolution as a sort of movable holiday.

At this crisis, luck befriended him. In the shade of the trees opposite the main gate was an orderly holding a horse. The animal's trappings showed that it did not belong to a private soldier, and the fact that the man stood to attention as Maseden approached seemed to indicate that which was actually the fact – the charger belonged to none other than the president's *aide-de-camp*.

Fortune seldom bestows her favors in what the casino-jargon of Monte Carlo describes as "intermittent sequences," or, in plain language, alternate *coups* of red and black, successive strokes of good and bad luck. The fickle goddess rather inclines to runs on a color. Having brought Maseden to the very brink of the grave, she had decided to help him now.

As it turned out, Gomez's soldier servant had been injured during the overnight disturbance, and the deputy was a newcomer.

He saluted, held bridle and stirrup while Maseden mounted, and strolled casually across the square to inquire whether he ought to wait or go back to his quarters. He succeeded in puzzling the very sergeant who was mentally contriving the best means of securing the lion's, or sergeant's, share of twenty dollars' worth of wine.

"Captain Gomez has not gone out," snapped the calculator. "Get out of the way! Don't stand there like the ears of a donkey! I have occupation. The Señor Steinbaum is putting a lady into his car, and she is very ill."

So the trooper was unceremoniously brushed aside. A little later he might have reminded the sergeant of the folly of counting chickens before the eggs are hatched.

Maseden was a first-rate horseman, but, owing to the discomfort of excruciatingly tight boots and a wobbly helmet, he did not enjoy the first half mile of a fast gallop down the winding road which he was obliged to follow before he could strike into the country. Beneath, to the left, and on a plateau in front, were respectively the ancient and modern sections of Cartagena. But, having succeeded thus far, he had made up his mind inflexibly as to the course he would pursue.

He meant to reach his own ranch, twelve miles inland, within the hour. He reckoned that, in the easy-going South American way, it would not be occupied as yet by an armed guard. An officer had rummaged among his papers that morning, but came away with the others.

In any event, in that direction, and there only, lay any real chance of ultimate safety.

On his estate there were two men at least in whom he might place trust; and even if he could not enter the house, one of them might obtain for him the clothes and money without which he had not the remotest prospect of getting away alive from the Republic of San Juan.

He had pocketed Steinbaum's twenty dollars in order to hire a horse, but the unwitting hospitality of Captain Gomez had provided him with a better animal than was to be picked up at the nearest *posada*. Indeed, with the exception of an automobile, a luxury that was few and far between in Cartagena, he could not have secured a swifter or more reliable conveyance than this very steed, which would cover the twelve miles in less than an hour, and had also saved him a quarter of an hour's running walk, an experience savoring of Chinese torture when undertaken in tight boots.

The notion of possible pursuit by a party of soldiers in a car had barely occurred to him when he heard the rapid panting of an automobile in the rear.

He slackened pace, took a shorter grip of the reins, and loosened the revolver in its case. Flight was ridiculous, unless he made across country; a last resource, involving a fatal loss of time.

He took nothing for granted. Steinbaum was one of the half-dozen car-owners in Cartagena, and this was surely he, escorting Señor Porilla and the lady back to the town.

They might pass him without recognition. If they didn't, he would shoot Steinbaum and put a bullet into a tire. There would be no half measures. Suarez and his ally had declared war on him to the death, and war they would have without stint or quarter.

It was a ticklish moment when the fast-running car drew near. Maseden affected to bend over and examine the horse's fore action, as though he suspected lameness or a loose shoe. He gave one swift underlook into the limousine as it sped by and fancied he saw Porilla, seated with his back to the engine, bending forward.

That was all. The car raced on and was speedily lost in a dust-cloud.

So far, so good. He was dodging peril in the hairbreadth fashion popularly ascribed to warriors on a stricken field. Yet his mount was hardly in a canter again before he was plunged without warning into the most ticklish dilemma of all.

Steinbaum's car had just turned to the left, where the road bifurcated a few hundred yards ahead, when another car came flying down the other road – that which the fugitive himself must take for nearly half a mile; and this second menace harbored no less a personage than Don Enrico Suarez, president of the Republic of San Juan!

It was an open car, too, and the president was seated alone in the tonneau.

Maseden jumped to the instant conclusion that his enemy was hurrying to witness his execution, probably to jeer at him for having ventured to cross the predestined path of a conqueror. But, even though he passed, Suarez would know that the gaily bedizened horseman was not his glittering *aide-de-camp*.

To permit the president to reach the Castle meant the beginning of an irresistible pursuit within five minutes. However, that consideration did not bother the Vermonter if for no better reason than that he was determined it should not come into play.

He smiled thoughtfully, adjusted the helmet once more, and voiced his sentiments aloud.

"Good!" he said. "This time, Enrico, you and I square accounts!"

Pulling up, he took the middle of the road, wheeling the horse "half left," and holding up his right hand. The chauffeur saw him, slackened speed, and finally halted within a distance of a few feet. From first to last, the man regarded the newcomer as being Captain Gomez. The wind-screen was up, and the roads were dust-laden, so he could not see with absolute accuracy. Moreover, events followed each other so rapidly that he was given no chance to correct an erroneous first impression.

The car being stopped, Maseden moved on, passing by the left. Drawing the revolver, he fired at the front right-hand tire at such close range that it was impossible to miss. The reports of the weapon and the bursting tube were simultaneous.

The next shot would have lodged in the president's heart if the startled horse had not swerved. As it was, quite a nasty hole was torn in the presidential anatomy; Suarez, himself fumbling for an automatic pistol, sank back in the tonneau a severely if not mortally wounded man.

For one fateful instant, the eyes of the two had met and clashed, and recognition was mutual.

A third bullet plowed through the back right-hand tire, and Maseden galloped off, the horse being only too eager to get away from the racket.

The American did not look behind to ascertain what the chauffeur was doing. It really did not matter a great deal. Speed and direction were the paramount conditions during the next fifty minutes. The die was cast now beyond all hope of revocation. He was at war with the Republic, and, although he had rendered its citizens a valuable service in shooting their rascally president, they might not regard the incident in its proper light until a period far too late to benefit the philanthropist.

As a matter of fact, interesting historically and otherwise, the chauffeur was convinced that Captain Ferdinando Gomez had assassinated his master, and said so, with many oaths, when he summoned assistance from a neighboring house. It may also be placed on record here that about the same time the gallant *aide-de-camp* had come to suspect that his beautiful uniform, if not returned promptly, might be sadly smirched by a score of bullets, with accessories; and was kicking up a fearful row because no one could get at the jailer and rescue that gala costume before the prisoner was led forth to execution.

In a word, the Republic's presidential affairs were greatly mixed, and remained in inextricable confusion until long after Maseden drew rein on a blown horse at the gate of his own *estancia*.

The ranch, known as Los Andes, and one of the finest estates in San Juan, provided the original bone of contention between Maseden and Suarez. It had been built up, during thirty lazy years, by a distant cousin of Suarez, an elderly bachelor, who grew coffee and maize, and reared stock in a haphazard way.

Seven years earlier he had met the young American in New York, took a liking to him, and offered to employ him as overseer while teaching him the business. The pupil soon became the instructor. Scientific methods were introduced, direct markets were tapped, and the produce of the estate was quadrupled within a few seasons.

Then the older man died, and left the ranch and its contents to his assistant. There was not much money – the capital was sunk in stock and improvement – so a number of free and independent burghers of Cartagena received smaller amounts than they expected.

Suarez was one of the beneficiaries, seven in all. Six took the situation calmly. He alone was irreconcilable, and blustered about legal proceedings, only desisting when persuaded that he had no case, even for the venal courts of San Juan.

And now, on that sultry January morning, the lawful owner of the Los Andes ranch, while awaiting the appearance of a peon, who, he knew, was tending some cattle in a byre behind the lodge, was wondering whether or not he might urge a tired charger into a final canter to the door of his own house without bringing about a pitched battle when he arrived there.

At last came Pedro – every second man in South America is named after the chief of the Apostles – a brown, lithe, Indian-looking person. But he was Spanish enough in the expression of his emotions.

“By the eleven thousand virgins!” he cried joyously, after a first stare of incredulity, for the eyes rolled in his head at sight of Maseden's garb, “it is not true, then, master, that you are a prisoner!”

“Who says that I am?” inquired Maseden.

“They say it up there at the *estancia*, señor,” and Pedro jerked a thumb towards an avenue of mahogany trees.

“They say? Who say?”

Pedro was scared, but Maseden had taught his helpers to answer truthfully.

“Old Lopez said it, señor. He told me the president’s men had charged him to touch nothing till they returned.”

Maseden’s heart throbbed more furiously at that reply than at aught which had befallen him during the few pregnant hours since dawn.

“Those rascals have gone, then?” he said, so placidly that the peon was bewildered.

“*Si, señor*. Did they not go with you?”

“Yes. I was not sure of all... Close and lock the gate, Pedro. Leave other things. Saddle your mustang and mount guard at the bend in the avenue, from which you can watch the Cartagena road. If you see horses, or an automobile, coming this way, ride to the house and tell me.”

“*Si, señor*.”

Pedro hurried off. Maseden rode on at the best pace the spent horse was capable of. He might lose a potential fortune – though the shooting of Suarez should remove the worst of the hostile influences arrayed against him – but surely he could now save his life.

He had never realized how dear life was at twenty-eight until that morning. Hitherto he had given no thought to it. Now he wanted to live till he was eighty!

CHAPTER III

ADIOS, SAN JUAN

Suarez was not dead. He was not even dangerously wounded. A two-ounce bullet had dealt an upper left rib a blow like the kick of a horse, but at such an angle that the bone deflected its flight. Consequently, a fractured sternal costa, loss of blood, and a most painful flesh wound formed for Suarez the collective outcome of Maseden's disturbed aiming.

In effect, the president regained consciousness about the time Captain Gomez had succeeded in persuading several members of the new government that it was not he, but an escaped prisoner, who had so grievously maltreated the head of the Republic.

A doctor announced that Señor Suarez must be given complete rest and freedom from public affairs during the ensuing week or ten days. Even the wrathful president himself, after making known the true identity of his assailant, felt that he had no option other than placing the affairs of the nation temporarily in the hands of his associates.

He made the best of an awkward situation, therefore, and issued a vainglorious decree announcing the change.

Now, even San Juan could not provide a second revolution within twelve hours. States, like human beings, can experience a surfeit of excitement; moreover, the next gang of office-seekers had not yet emerged from the welter of parties. Sometimes, too, in South America, a disabled president is preferable to an active one, because the heads of departments can do a little pilfering on their own account.

So San Juan became virtuously indignant over the "attempted assassination" of that renowned "liberator," Enrico Suarez. A hue and cry was raised for the scoundrelly American, several supporters of real law and order in the State were arrested, and cavalry and police rode forth on Maseden's trail.

This planning and scheming and explaining consumed valuable time, however. It was high noon when a party of horsemen, headed by a well-informed guide, in the person of the ranch superintendent, "old" Lopez, tore along the avenue of mahogany trees at Los Andes.

Lopez, a wizened, shrewd, and sufficiently trustworthy half-breed, was not betraying his employer. He was merely carrying out explicit instructions. Maseden had no desire to place his faithful servants in the power of the Cartagena harpies. He was literally fighting for his life now. He meant to meet violence with greater violence, guile with deeper guile.

When a Covenanter buckles on the sword, let professional swashbucklers take heed; when an honest man plots, let rogues beware. A clear-headed American, armed against oppression, can be at once a most lusty warrior and the astutest of strategists.

"It is the unexpected that happens," said Disraeli in one of his happiest epigrams. A few strenuous hours spent in the Republic of San Juan in Maseden's plight would have yielded the cynic material for a dozen like quips, if he had survived the experience.

When Maseden reached the *estancia* he was received by Lopez with even greater amazement than was displayed by the peon. Being a privileged person, the old fellow expressed himself in absolutely untranslatable language. After a lurid preamble, he went on:

"But, thanks to the heavenly ones, I see you again, señor, safe and sound, though in a strange livery. Is it true, then, that the president is dead?"

"Yes. Both of them, I believe."

Maseden laughed wearily. He was tired, and the day was only beginning. He knew, of course, that Lopez meant Valdez, having probably, as yet, not so much as heard of Suarez as chief of the Republic.

"I'll explain matters," he said. "Stand by to catch me if I fall when I dismount. The devil take all dudes and their vanities! These boots have nearly killed me."

In a minute the offending jack boots were off and flung into the veranda, the helmet after them. The horse was given over to the care of a peon, and Maseden went to his bedroom.

A glance at a big safe showed that the letter lock had defied curiosity, and no serious attempt had been made to force it. He saw that the drawers in a bureau in the adjoining room had been ransacked hastily. Probably, the new president's emissaries were instructed to look for a list of "conspirators" – of well-affected citizens, that is – who meant to support the honorable *régime* of Valdez.

"Now, listen while I talk," said Maseden, tearing open the tight-fitting blue coat. "I can put faith in you, I suppose?"

"Señor –"

"Yes, I take it for granted. Besides, if you stick to me you may come out on top yourself. Valdez is dead. He was murdered last night, and Enrico Suarez stepped into his shoes... Oh, I know Enrico's real name, but I haven't a second to spare. I was sentenced to death early this morning, and married about an hour ago, just before being taken out to be shot... Well, I got away; how – is of no concern to you. In fact, it is better that you shouldn't know.

"A lady will come into possession here. She will call herself the Señora Maseden. Señor Porilla will introduce her. She and the lawyer are playing some game to suit Suarez and Steinbaum, the German consul at Cartagena. My escape may bother them a bit, but I cannot guess just how things will work out. What orders did Enrico's lieutenant give you?"

The foreman's wits were rather mixed by his master's extraordinary budget of news, but he answered readily.

"He told me, señor, if I valued my life, to see that nothing was disturbed in the *estancia* till the president came or sent a representative."

"I thought so. That gives me a sporting chance."

Maseden had changed rapidly into his own clothes, an ordinary riding costume suitable to a tropical climate. He opened the safe, stuffed some papers into his pockets, also a quantity of gold, silver, and notes.

Then he wrote a letter, and filled in a check. Having addressed and stamped the envelope, he handed it to his assistant.

"In five minutes or less, you will be riding at a steady gallop towards Cartagena," he said. "If possible, deliver that letter yourself to Señor Peguero, the American consul. By 'possible' I mean if you are not held up by soldiers or police on the way. Otherwise, keep it concealed, and post it when the opportunity serves."

Lopez knew the pleasant methods of his fellow-republicans.

"They may search me, señor," he said.

"Not if you do as I tell you. Curse me fluently enough, and they'll look on you as their best friend."

"Señor!" protested the old man.

"Yes. I mean it. Call me all the names you can lay tongue to. When I leave this room I'll follow you, revolver in hand. Be careful to scowl and act unwillingly. I want some food and a couple of bottles of wine, also a leather bottle full of water and a tin cup. Saddle the Cid, and see that three or four good measures of corn are put in the saddle-bags with the other things.

"When I vanish rush to the stables, pick out a good mustang, and be in Cartagena within the hour. If not interfered with, take the letter to Señor Peguero. Don't wait for an answer, but hurry at top speed to the Castle, where you must tell some one that I came back to the ranch and ordered you about at the muzzle of a revolver.

“Lead the soldiers straight here. If Captain Gomez is in command, assure him that you rescued his uniform, and he’ll be your friend forever. Should you meet them on the way, turn back with them. You understand? You’re for the president and against me.”

Lopez smiled till his face was a mass of wrinkles. He was beginning to see through the scheme, and was Spaniard enough to appreciate the haven of intrigue.

“But when and where shall I find you, señor, if you are taking a long journey?” he said, still grinning.

“Not a mile away, if all goes well. Soon after dusk come to the Grove of the Doves at sunset. I’ll turn up. If you are delayed, and it is dark, hoot like an owl, and I’ll answer. If you don’t come at all I’ll know it’s too dangerous, and will be there again at dawn, at noon, and at sunset to-morrow. Pick up some news in Cartagena. You will be told, of course, that I have shot Suarez. Be careful to show your horrified surprise, and ask if the dear man is really dead. If he is, try and find out who is in power. Of course there’s a bare chance that Porilla may be made president, in which case I might be given a fair trial when an American man-of-war is anchored in the roads... Oh, by the way, you might find out who the lady is I married this morning.”

“Señor!” gasped Lopez, in sheer bewilderment.

“I haven’t the remotest notion who she is, or even what she looks like,” laughed Maseden. “Now, there’s no more time for talk,” and he raised his voice. “Obey me at once, you lazy old hound, or I’ll blow your brains out! Send a peon for the Cid. Fail me in one single thing, and I’ll put a bullet through your head!... Margarita! Some bread and meat, quick! I’ll soon show you who is master in this house. Suarez may give orders in Cartagena, but I give them here!”

Lopez hurried out, wringing his hands. Maseden followed, brandishing the revolver. Some timid servants, who had gathered in the *patio* at the news of their employer’s return, made as though they would run, but he stopped them with a fierce threat, and, while munching the food brought by an aged housekeeper, behaved and spoke so outrageously that they thought he was mad.

Poor creatures! They had served him well in the past. Now he was trying to save their lives by giving them something to say against him when questioned by the president’s henchmen.

Meanwhile, he had a sharp ear for the hoof-beats of a galloping horse. Pedro, knowing nothing of the scene in the *estancia*, was still on guard at the bend in the avenue, and might be trusted to give warning of the enemy’s approach. But Maseden was allowed to eat his fill.

A very terrified Lopez brought a hardy-looking mustang to the gateway, and his master saw a repeating rifle slung to the saddle. That was a thoughtful thing. Such a weapon might be exceedingly useful.

“Where are the cartridges?” he thundered.

“Here, most excellent one,” stammered the other, producing a bandolier.

The American swung into the saddle, swore at his co-conspirator heartily, and was off.

So Lopez had a fine tale to tell when his mustang loped up to the entrance of the Castle of San Juan. He had a fine tale to hear, too, as he rode back to the ranch with a body of horse led by the fastidious and color-loving Ferdinando Gomez.

The servants, of course, bore out the superintendent’s story of Maseden’s extraordinary behavior. Obviously, no one at the *estancia* was to blame for this daring prisoner’s second escape. The officer who had arrested him at daybreak should have left a guard in charge, but the plain truth was that the Cartagena men had been so anxious to take part in the stirring doings anticipated at the capital that no heed was given to this flaw in the procedure.

That night, however, when Maseden met Lopez at the rendezvous, the Spaniard’s account of events was not reassuring.

Suarez was living, and not very badly hurt, it was true; but every man’s hand seemed to be against the foreigner who had tried to kill him. Maseden was puzzled, at first, by this excess of patriotism on the part of the citizens of Cartagena and San Juan generally.

“What do they think has become of me?” he inquired.

“They argue, señor, that you have ridden into the interior, and telegrams have been sent to all the inland towns ordering your instant arrest. If you resist you are to be shot dead, and a reward of one thousand dollars will be paid when you are identified.”

“Do they pay for me dead only?”

“They offer two thousand for you alive, señor.”

“Just to have the pleasure of potting me as per schedule... Any fear that you have been followed to-night, old friend?”

“None, señor. The soldiers at the *estancia* believe you are many miles away. Moreover, I have put good wine on the table.”

“Who is in charge there? Captain Gomez?”

“No, señor, a stranger. *El capitán* went back to Cartagena. He nearly wept when he saw his boots. You had split them.”

“You gave the consul my letter?”

“I dropped it in his box, señor. I thought that was wiser.”

“So it was. I should have remembered that. What of the lady?”

“The lady you married, señor?”

“Of course. You wouldn’t have me interested in some other lady on my wedding day, you old reprobate?”

The half-breed laughed softly.

“Even that wouldn’t be so strange a thing as what has really happened, señor. No one knows who the lady is. One man, a distant cousin of mine, told me he heard she landed from a ship only late last night.”

“Great Scott!” muttered Maseden in English, “what a Sphinx-like person! She must be descended from the Man in the Iron Mask.” Then he went on:

“Didn’t your cousin know where she was staying in Cartagena? Surely there must have been a good deal of public curiosity about her. Twenty people were present at the marriage. It was no secret.”

“I understand that she had gone to Señor Steinbaum’s house. She fainted after the ceremony, my cousin said, and had to be carried into an automobile, but he knew nothing more.”

The veiled Madeleine had felt the strain, then! Somehow the knowledge of her collapse touched a chord of sentiment in Maseden’s heart, but his own desperate plight effectually banished all other considerations at the moment.

True, he was safe for the night, and for many days to come, if the foreman’s fidelity remained unshaken. The ranch was called Los Andes because it contained a chain of little hills all covered with valuable timber, among which he could hide without real difficulty.

But of what avail this precarious lurking on his own estate? He must take speedy and effectual steps to get clear of San Juan altogether until such time as he could secure adequate protection, and have his case thrashed out by a tribunal to whose decision even Enrico Suarez, the president of the Republic, must bow.

One thing was quite certain – never again could he settle down in unmolested possession of his property. Though the shooting of Suarez was an unfortunate necessity, its effect would be enduring and disastrous.

He had thought out every phase of the problem during the long, hot hours beneath the trees, and the half-breed’s account of the trend of public feeling decided his adoption of the boldest course of all. He would go to Cartagena, where he was hardly known, save to a few merchants and shopkeepers, a banker and one or two members of the Consular community, and board some outward-bound vessel.

Fortunately, he had plenty of money, and, glory be, could speak both Spanish and the San Juan patois like a native. If his luck held, he would cheat Suarez yet.

“Lopez,” he said, after a long pause, “I must leave the ranch for many a day, probably forever. If I stay here I’ll only plunge you into trouble and get myself captured. Now, do me one last service. Have you any clothes belonging to that *vaquero* nephew of yours who broke his neck in a race last Easter?”

“I have his overalls, a *fiesta* jacket, some shirts and a sombrero, señor.”

“Bring them, and speedily. I’ll give you a good price.”

“They are yours for nothing, señor.”

“I don’t deal on those terms, Lopez. Off with you. I’ll wait here.”

“Anything else, señor?”

“Yes. I was nearly forgetting. Bring his saddle, too. My own saddle might be recognized. I have a long ride before me, so hurry.”

Within half an hour the good-hearted old foreman was richer by five hundred dollars, while Maseden, a dashing cowboy, though unkempt as to face and hands, was riding across country by starlight.

He did not tell Lopez his real objective. There was no need. The old fellow occasionally indulged in a burst of dissipation, and if his tongue wagged then he might blurt out some boastful phrase which would bring down on him the merciless wrath of the authorities.

At dawn the fugitive received another slice of real luck. He had just entered a main road leading from San Luis, a town thirty miles from Cartagena, when he came upon a cowherd sitting by the roadside and bemoaning his misfortunes. The man was commissioned to drive some cattle to a sale-ring in the city, and had scratched an ankle rather badly while whacking one of the steers out of a bed of thorns.

Such an incident was common enough in his life, but on this occasion either the thorn was poisonous or some foreign matter had lodged in the wound, because the limb had swollen greatly and was so painful that he could hardly walk.

Maseden played the Good Samaritan. He ascertained the drover’s name, his master’s, and the address of the salesman; the rest was easy. Helping the sufferer into a wayside hovel, he promised to send back a messenger later with an official receipt, took charge of the animals himself, and reached Cartagena as Ramon Aliones, the accredited representative of a San Luis rancher.

The sale-ring was near the harbor, and he mounted a man on his own broncho to deliver the drover’s voucher for the safe arrival of the herd at its destination. He asked for, and obtained, a duplicate, which he kept. This same emissary readily disposed of the horse and saddle at a ruinous price when told that the newcomer was not only thirsty, but meant to see the sights of the capital.

A cheap restaurant, some wineshops, and a vile billiard saloon provided shelter for the rest of the day. Before night fell, Maseden had ascertained three things: He was supposed to be riding hard into the interior; the lady he had married was really a stranger and was Steinbaum’s guest, and a large steamer, the *Southern Cross*, flying the Stars and Stripes, was due to leave port at midnight.

She should have sailed some hours earlier, but the drastic changes in the marine department entailed by the day’s happenings had delayed certain formalities connected with her manifests.

“For a time, señor,” explained the ship’s chandler who gave him this latter information, “no one would sign anything. You see, a name on a paper would prove conclusively which president you favored. You understand?”

Maseden understood perfectly.

“It is well that you and I, señor, have no truck with these presidents, or we might be in trouble,” he laughed. “As it is, another bottle, and to the devil with all politicians!”

Under cover of the darkness the American slipped away from his boon companions, now comfortably drunk at his expense. Having no luggage, he bought a second-hand leather trunk and some cheap underclothing, such as a muleteer might reasonably possess. He also secured the repeating rifle and cartridges which he had left in a restaurant, and, thus reinforced, made for the Plaza, where

Cartagenians of both sexes and all ages were gathered to enjoy the cool breeze that comes from the Pacific with sunset.

From that point he knew he could see the *Southern Cross* lying at anchor in the roadstead. She was there, sure enough, nearly a mile out, and he was puzzling his wits for a pretext to hire a boat and board her without attracting notice when chance solved the problem for him.

Two men passed. They were talking English, and he heard one addressing the other by name.

"Tell you what, Sturgess," the speaker was saying, "I'd be hull down on Cartagena to-night if the skipper would only bring up at Valparaiso. But his first port of call is Buenos Ayres, and I've got to make Valparaiso before I see good old New York again, so here I'm fixed till a coasting steamer comes along. Great Cæsar's ghost, I wish I were going with you!"

The second man, Sturgess, was carrying a suitcase, and the two were evidently making for a short pier which supplied landing places for small craft at various stages of the tide.

Maseden quickened his pace, overtook them, and said in Spanish that he wished to book a passage to Buenos Ayres on the *Southern Cross*, and, if the Señor Americano would permit him to board the vessel in his boat, he (Maseden) would gladly carry the bag to the pier.

Sturgess evidently did not understand Spanish, and asked his companion to interpret. He laughed on hearing the queer offer.

"Guess I can handle the grip myself, and the gallant *vaquero* is pretty well loaded with his own outfit," he said, "but he is welcome to a trip on my catamaran, if it's of any service."

Maseden, however, insisted on giving some return for the favor, and secured the suitcase. Now, if any sharp-eyed watcher on the pier saw him, he would pass as the traveler's servant.

Within half an hour he was aboard the ship, and had bargained for a spare berth in the forecabin with the crew. He would be compelled to rough it, and remain as dirty and disheveled as possible until the ship reached Buenos Ayres. Obviously, no matter what his personal wrongs might be, he could not make the captain of the *Southern Cross* a party to the escape from Cartagena of the man who had nearly succeeded in ridding the republic of its president.

But the prospect of hard fare and worse accommodations did not trouble him at all. He had nearly ten thousand dollars in his pockets. If the note sent through Lopez to the American Consul was acted on promptly, a further sum of fifteen thousand dollars lying to his credit in a local bank was now in safe keeping.

Really, considering that he had been so near death that morning, he had a good deal to be thankful for if he never saw Cartagena or the Los Andes ranch again.

As for the marriage, what of it? A knot so easily tied could be untied with equal readiness. He hadn't the least doubt but that an American court of law would declare the ceremony illegal.

At any rate, he could jump that fence when he reached it. At present, in sporting phrase, he was going strong with a lot in hand.

He kept well out of sight when a government launch came off, and a port official boarded the vessel.

He never knew what a narrow escape he had when the chief steward who acted as purser, was asked if any new addition had been made to the passenger list. The ship's officer was not a good Spanish scholar. He thought the question applied to the cargo, and answered "no."

Then, after a wait that seemed interminable, the snorting and growling of a steam winch and the unwilling rasp of the anchor chain chanted a symphonic chorus in Maseden's ears. Those harsh sounds sang of freedom and life, of golden years on a most excellent earth instead of an eternity in the grave. He came on deck to watch the Castle of San Juan dwindle and vanish in the deep, blue glamour of a perfect tropical night.

He was standing on the open part of the main deck, close to the fore hold, when he heard English voices from the promenade deck high above his head.

A man's somewhat querulous accents reached him first.

“Well, at this time two days ago, I little thought I’d be on a steamer going south to-night,” said the speaker.

There was no answer, though it was evident that the petulant philosopher was not addressing the silent air.

“I suppose you girls are still mooning about that fellow getting away from the Castle?” grumbled the same voice. “I tell you he has no earthly chance of winning clear. Steinbaum will see to that. His record is none too good, and a question in the American Senate would just about finish him, even in San Juan. So Mr. Philip Alexander Maseden might just as well have been shot yesterday morning as to-day or to-morrow. They’re hot on his track now, Steinbaum told me —

“Eh? Yes, I know he did *me* a good turn, but, damn it all, that was merely because he was going to die, not because he was a first-rate life for an insurance office. It was no business of mine that he and Suarez couldn’t agree... Oh, let’s go to our cabins! Tears always put my nerves on a raw edge! Anyone would think you had lost a real husband on your wedding day!”

There was a movement of shadowy forms. Maseden thought he could distinguish a woman’s white hand rest for an instant on the ship’s rail. Was that the hand he thought he would remember until the Day of Judgment? He could not say.

The one fact that lifted itself out of the welter of incoherent fancies whirling in his mind was an almost incontrovertible one. If his ears had not deceived him, he and his unknown but lawful wife were fellow-passengers on board the *Southern Cross*!

CHAPTER IV

“FIND THE LADY”

A slight mist hung over the sea – sure outcome of the tremendous range of the thermometer between noon and midnight in a tropical clime. The sky was cloudless, and the stars clustered in myriads.

Though the Southern Hemisphere falls far short of the glory of the north in constellations of the first magnitude, the extraordinary clearness of the upper air near the equator enhances the stellar display. It would almost seem that nature knows she may veil her ample splendors in the north, but must make the most of her scantier charms in the south.

Maseden, swinging on his heel in sheer bewilderment, suddenly found himself face to face with the Southern Cross, hanging low above the horizon. Had an impossible meteor flamed forth from the familiar cluster of stars and shot in awe-inspiring flight across the whole arc of the heavens northward to the line, it would not have surprised him more than the discovery that his “wife” was on board the ship.

That was a stupendous fact before which the whirl of adventure of the long day now drawing to a close subsided into calm remoteness.

“Madeleine,” the woman he had married, was his fellow-passenger! He would surely see her many times during the voyage to Buenos Ayres! He would hear her voice, which he could not fail to recognize.

She, on her part, would probably identify him at the first glance. How would she handle an extraordinary situation? Would she claim him as her husband, repudiate him scornfully, or utterly ignore him? He could not even guess.

There was no telling what a woman would do who had elected to marry a man whom she had never met, whose very name, in all likelihood, she had never heard, merely because he happened to be a prisoner condemned to speedy death.

Yet she could not be a particularly cold-blooded person. She had wept for him, had whispered her heartfelt grief; had promised to pray for and think of him always. Even the man with the high-pitched voice of a hypochondriac – presumably, from the manner of his address, her father – had hinted that her suffering had already passed the bounds set for one who, to serve her own ends, had gone through that amazing ceremony.

Maseden did not actually marshal his thoughts thus clearly. If compelled to bend his wits to the task, he might have spoken or written in such wise. But an active brain has its own haphazard methods of weighing a new and distracting problem; it will ask and answer a dozen startling questions simultaneously.

In the midst of Maseden’s strange and formless imaginings the ship’s course was changed a couple of points to the southward, and the Southern Cross was shut out of sight by the fore-castle head. Then, and not until then, did the coincidence of the vessel’s name with that of the constellation occur to his bemused wits.

He laughed cheerfully.

“By gad!” he said, “all the signs of the zodiac must have clustered about my horoscope on this 15th of January. When I get ashore I must find an astrologer and ask him to expound.”

The sound of his own voice brought a belated warning to Maseden of the folly he had committed in speaking aloud.

There was no other occupant of the fore deck at the moment. A look-out man in the bows could not possibly have overheard, because of the whistling of the breeze created by the ship’s momentum

and the splash of the curved waves set up by the cut-water, and it was highly improbable that words uttered in a conversational tone would have reached the bridge.

But behind him rose the three decks of the superstructure, and there might be eavesdroppers on the promenade deck or in one of the two dark gangways running aft.

He glanced over his shoulder to right and left. Apparently he had escaped this time. No matter what developments took place in the near future, he was by no means anxious as yet to reveal his nationality. Each hour brought home, more and more forcibly, the misfortune of the chance which left him no alternative but the shooting of Suarez that morning.

The act was absolutely essential to his own safety, but it put him clearly out of court. At any rate, the authorities of no South American state would listen to a recital of his earlier wrongs. If, as was highly probable, a sensational account of the attempted assassination of the new president had been tacked on to the telegrams announcing the *coup d'état* in San Juan, and he, Maseden, were painted as a desperado of mark, it might even be feared that the settled and respectable Argentine Republic would arrest him and endeavor to send him back to San Juan for trial.

Of course, the United States Consul in Buenos Ayres would have something to say about it, but there was a very real danger of consular efforts being overruled. No matter how distasteful the rôle, Philip Alexander Maseden must continue to masquerade as Ramon Aliones, *vaquero*, until he could leave the ship and assume another alias.

It was soon borne in on him how narrow was the margin which still separated him from disaster. He had gone to his berth, an unsavory hutch next to a larger cabin tenanted by deck-hands, when the door was thrust wide (he had left it half open while undressing, there being no electric switch within) and a lamp flashed in his eyes.

A short, stockily-built man, whom Maseden rightly took for the captain, stood there, accompanied by another man, seemingly a Spanish steward.

"Now, then," came the gruff question, "what's this I hear about your speaking English to yourself? Who are you? What's your name?"

Luckily, Maseden was so surprised that he did not answer. The swarthy steward, a thin, lantern-jawed person, grinned. Maseden saw that the man was wearing canvas shoes with india-rubber soles, and guessed the truth instantly.

His nerve had been tested many times that day; nor did it fail him now. Gazing blankly at the captain, he said, in Spanish, that he did not understand.

"Tell him, Alfonso, that you heard him speaking English a few minutes since... Hi, you! Stop that! No smoking in your berth."

Maseden was rolling a cigarette in true Spanish style. The captain was obviously suspicious, so the situation called for a touch of stage artistry.

Alfonso translated, pricking his ears for Maseden's reply. But he hailed from the east coast, whereas Maseden used the *patois* of San Juan.

"You made a natural mistake, señor," said the American easily. "I was talking to the stars, a habit of mine when alone on the *pampas*, and their names would sound somewhat like the words of a barbarous tongue."

"And a foolish habit, too!" commented the captain when he heard the explanation. "Do you know any of 'em?" and he glanced up at the strip of sky visible from where he stood.

The smiling *vaquero* stepped out on to the open deck. Oh, yes, all the chief stars were old friends of his. He pointed to the "Sea-serpent," the "Crow," and the "Great Dog," giving the Spanish equivalents.

The steward, of course, densely ignorant in such things, and already half convinced that he had blundered, was only anxious now to avoid being rated by the captain for having gone to him with a cock-and-bull story. Somehow, Maseden sensed this fact, and made smooth the path.

"They are strange names," he said with a laugh, "but we of the plains often have to find the way on land as a sailor on the sea."

"Has he any papers?" demanded the captain, apparently satisfied that the passenger was really acquainted with the chief star-groups.

Maseden produced that thrice-fortunate duplicate of the receipt for cattle brought from the San Luis ranch to Cartagena by Ramon Aliones that very day. The captain examined it, and turned wrathfully on the steward.

"Be off to the devil!" he growled. "Find some other job than bothering me with your fool's tales!"

When Alfonso had vanished, he added, seemingly as an afterthought:

"If I was a *vaquero* with a dirty face, I wouldn't worry about clean fingernails or wear silk underclothing, and I'd do my star-gazing in dumb show!"

With that he, too, strode away. Undoubtedly, the captain of the *Southern Cross* was no fool.

Five minutes later the silk vest and pants which Maseden had not troubled to change while donning the gay attire of old Lopez's nephew, went into the Pacific through the small port-hole which redeemed the cabin's otherwise stuffy atmosphere. Happily the bunk, though crude, was clean, and long enough to hold a tall man.

Maseden fancied he would lie awake for hours. In reality, he was dead tired, and slept the sleep of sheer exhaustion until wakened by a loud-voiced intimation that all crimson-hued Dagoes must rouse themselves if they didn't want to be stirred up by a hose-pipe.

Now, if there was one thing more than another that Maseden liked when on board ship, it was a cold salt-water bath. But he dared neither take a bath nor wash his face. Personal cleanliness is not a marked characteristic of South American cowboys. That he should display close-cropped hair instead of an abundance of oiled and curly tresses was a fact singular enough in itself, without inviting attention by the use of soap and water.

Perforce, he remained filthy. The captain's hint was very much to the point.

The *Southern Cross* was not a regular passenger boat. Primarily a trader, carrying nitrate or grain to home ports, and coal thence to various points on the southern or western seaboard of South America, she was equipped with a few cabins, about a dozen all told, on the upper deck.

The so-called second-class accommodation was several degrees worse than the steerage on a crack Atlantic liner. That is to say, the human freight ranked a long way after cargo. The food was plentiful, though rough. Even for saloon passengers there was neither stewardess nor doctor.

As a matter of course, a passenger list would be an absurdity. The chief steward acted as purser, and knew the names of all on board after five minutes' study of his ledger. Passengers and ship's officers soon became acquainted. Within twenty-four hours Maseden had ascertained that a Mr. James Gray, with his two daughters, occupied staterooms; but, for the life of him, he could not learn the ladies' Christian names.

He cudgelled his brains to try and remember whether or not his "wife" had signed the register as Madeleine Gray; but the effort failed completely. He knew why, for the best of reasons; yet the knowledge did not render failure less tantalizing.

It is one thing to be dazzled by the prospect of escape from the seeming certainty of death within a few minutes, but quite another to be on the same ship as the lady you have married two days earlier, yet neither know her name nor be positive as to her identity.

This, however, was literally Maseden's predicament when chance favored him with a long, steady look at the Misses Gray. He could not be mistaken, because there were no other ladies on board.

Thus when a very pretty girl, wearing a muslin dress and hat of Leghorn straw, appeared at the forward rail of the promenade deck and gazed wistfully out over the sea, Maseden's heart fluttered more violently than he would have thought possible as the effect of a casual glance at any woman.

So, then, this fair, slim creature, whose unheeding eyes had dwelt on him for a fleeting second ere they sought the horizon, was his wife! It was an extraordinary notion; fantastic, yet not wholly unpleasing. It would be rather a joke, if opportunity offered, to flirt with her. He had never flirted with any girl, and hardly knew how to begin; but much reading had taught him that the lady herself might prove an admirable coach if so minded.

Of course, there was room for error in one respect. He might have married the sister, who, thus far, nearly midday, had not been visible during daylight. He calculated the pros and cons of the situation. If his “wife” was feeling the strain of that unnerving experience in the great hall of the Castle of San Juan, she might now be resting in her stateroom. But why should the sister, on whose shoulders, one would suppose, sat no such heavy load of care, come on deck alone and scan the blue Pacific with that dreamy air?

Yes, by Jove, this really must be his wife! Somehow, poetic justice demanded that she, and not her sister, should meet him thus unconsciously.

In covert fashion he began to study her. The deck on which she stood was fully twenty feet above him, and she was still further separated from him by some thirty feet of the fore hatch, but he noted that her eyes were of the Parma violet tint so frequently met with in the heroines of fiction, yet all too seldom seen in real life. Being a mere man, he was not aware that blue eyes in shadow assume that exact tint. At any rate, as eyes, they were more than satisfactory.

Her nose was well modeled, with broad, flexible nostrils, unfailing sign of good health and an equable disposition. Her lips were prettily curved, and the oval face, framed in a cluster of brown hair, was poised on a perfectly molded neck. She owned shapely arms; he had already had occasion to admire her hands; a small, neatly-shod foot was visible under the lowest rail as the girl leaned on her elbows in an attitude of unstudied grace.

Altogether, Mr. Maseden liked the looks of Mrs. Maseden!

He was beginning to revel in sentiment when the edifice of seemingly substantial fact so swiftly constructed by a fertile imagination was dissipated into space by hearing a voice —*the* voice, he was sure – coming from some unseen part of the upper deck.

“Ah! There you are, Nina!” it said. “I’ve been looking for you everywhere! How long have you been here?”

Nina! So this fairy was only the *sister*. Maseden smiled grimly behind a cloud of cigarette smoke because of the absurd shock which the words administered. He was sharply aware of a sense of disappointment, a feeling so far-fetched as to be almost ludicrous.

What in the world did it matter to which of these two he was married? In all probability he would never exchange a word with either, and his first serious business on reaching a civilized country would be to get rid of the incubus with which a set of phenomenal circumstances alone had saddled him.

At last, however, he would really see his wife, and thus end one phase of a curious entanglement. Nina had half turned. Evidently she realized that Madeleine meant to join her. Maseden leaned back against the external paneling of his cubby-hole and looked aloft now with curiosity at once quickened and undisguised.

But he was fated to suffer many minor shocks that day. Madeleine appeared, and presented such an exact replica of Nina that, at first sight, and in the strong shadows cast by the canvas screen which alone rendered that portion of the deck habitable while the sun was up, it was practically impossible for a stranger to differentiate between them.

Maseden discovered later that Madeleine was twenty-two and Nina nearly twenty-four; but the marked resemblance between the pair, accentuated by their trick of dressing alike, led people to take them for twins. Moreover, each so admirably duplicated the other in voice and mannerisms that only near relatives or intimate friends could be certain which was speaking if the owner of the voice remained invisible.

For a little while, too, Maseden's mind was reduced to chaos by hearing Nina address her sister as "Madge." He was vouchsafed the merest glimpse of Madge's face, because, after a quick, heedless look at him and at a half-caste sailor readjusting the hatches covering the fore hold, she turned her back to the rail and said something that Maseden could not overhear.

A man joined the two girls, whereupon Nina also faced aft. The newcomer, standing well away under the screen, could not be seen at all, and Maseden thought it must be Mr. Gray, the querulous person whose outspoken utterances had first warned Maseden that his wife was on board.

But he erred again. Some comment passed by Nina raised a laugh, and Maseden recognized the voice of Mr. Sturgess, whose baggage he had carried overnight.

"I guess *not*!" he was saying, with a humorous stress on each word. "As a summer resort, San Juan disagreed with my complaint, Miss Gray."

"Have you been ill, then?" came the natural query.

"No, but I might have been had I remained there too long," was the answer. "A change of president in one of these small republics is like a bad railroad smash – you never know who'll get hurt. I've a notion that Mr. Gray must have felt sort of relieved when he brought you two young ladies safe and sound aboard this ship."

"We didn't see anything specially alarming," said Nina. "Madge went out twice during the day with Mr. Steinbaum, a trader, and the streets were very quiet, she thought."

Madge! Was "Madge" a family diminutive for Madeleine? Maseden neither knew nor cared. Nina's harmless chatter had told him the truth. Madge most certainly did find the streets quiet, if the story brought by Lopez from Cartagena was correct; namely, that she had been carried out of the Castle in a dead faint.

And now the heartless creature was actually laughing!

"One cannot take a South American revolution quite seriously – it always has something comical about it," she cried, and it was astounding how closely the one sister's voice resembled the other's. "I understand that some poor people were shot the night before last, but I saw a man who keeps a restaurant opposite Mr. Steinbaum's house produce a device with flags and a scroll. On the scroll was painted 'Long Live Valdez.' He drew some fresh letters over the first part of the name, dabbed on plenty of black and white paint, and the new legend ran 'Long Live Suarez.' The whole thing was done, and the flags were out, in less than five minutes."

Sturgess evidently asked for and obtained permission to smoke. He came to the rail. Both girls faced forward again, and Maseden was free to compare them.

Madge, or Madeleine, as he preferred to style her, seemed to be a trifle paler than Nina. Otherwise, her likeness to her sister was almost uncanny, if that ill-omened word might be applied to two remarkably pretty girls. Neither of the girls wore gloves, but Maseden looked in vain for the heavy gold wedding-ring which Steinbaum's thoroughness had supplied when wanted.

At that moment an officer appeared on the main deck. The fore hold had to be opened, it seemed. A quartermaster, summoned from the fore-castle, hoisted a block and tackle to a derrick. The noise effectually drowned the talk of the trio on the upper deck until the tackle was rigged, and a couple of hatches were removed. The half-caste sailor was about to descend into the hold just as Sturgess's somewhat staccato accents reached Maseden clearly again.

"Say, did you ladies hear of the American who was to be shot early yesterday morning? A most thrilling yarn was spun by a friend of mine who knows Cartagena from A to Z. He said –"

Maseden was on the alert to detect the slightest variation of expression on Madeleine's face. She bent forward, her hands tightly clutching the rail, and darted a piteous under look at her sister. Thus it happened that Maseden alone was gazing upward, and he saw, out of the tail of his eye, the heavy block detaching itself from the derrick and falling straight on top of the sailor, who had a leg over the coaming of the hatch and a foot on the first rung of the iron ladder leading down into the hold.

With a quickness born of many a tussle with a bucking broncho, Maseden leaped, caught the rope held by the quartermaster, and jerked it violently. The block missed the half-caste by a few inches, and clanged in the hold far beneath.

The tenth part of a second decided whether the sailor should be dashed headlong into the depths or left wholly unscathed. As it was, he and every onlooker realized that the rakish-looking *vaquero* had saved his life.

In the impulsive way of his race, the man darted forward, threw his arms around Maseden's neck, and kissed him. To his very great surprise, his rescuer thrust him off, and said angrily:

"Don't be such a damn fool!"

An exclamation, almost a slight scream, came from the upper deck. Maseden knew in an instant that this time he had blundered beyond repair. Madeleine had heard his voice, and had recognized him. Moreover, the officer, the quartermaster, even the grateful Spaniard, were eyeing him with unmixed amazement.

The fat *was* in the fire this time! In another moment would come denunciation and arrest, and then – back to the firing squad! What should he do?

CHAPTER V

ROMANCE RECEIVES A COLD DOUCHE

But none of these thoughts showed in Maseden's face. He laughed easily and explained in voluble Spanish that he swore in English occasionally, having picked up the correct formula from an American señor with whom he once took a hunting trip into the interior.

The sailor, hearing this flow of a language he understood, and not able to measure the idiomatic fluency of Maseden's English, accepted the story without demur, but the fourth officer and quartermaster, both Americans, were evidently puzzled.

He soon got rid of the too-effusive half-caste, and retired to his berth. Thank goodness, since the one person on board mainly concerned was perforce aware of his identity, he was free to wash his face and take a bath! To oblige a lady he would have remained unwashed all the way to Buenos Ayres; now, every other consideration might go hang.

Finding a steward, he gave further cause for bewilderment by asking to be allowed to use a bath-room.

Greatly to Maseden's relief, his lapse into the vernacular seemed to evoke little or no comment subsequently. The captain heard of it, but was far too irritated by the faulty behavior of a ring-bolt (examination showed a bad flaw in the metal) to pay any special heed. As for the half-caste sailor, his gratitude to Maseden took the form of describing him admiringly as "the *vaquero* who could swear like an *Americano*," an equivocal compliment which actually fostered the belief that Maseden was what he represented himself to be – a vagabond cowboy migrating from one coast of the great South American continent to the other.

His peculiar habits, therefore, shown in such trivial details as a desire for personal cleanliness and a certain fastidiousness at table, were attributed to the same exotic tutelage. Of course, when he spoke any intelligent Spaniard could have detected faults in phrase or pronunciation, but he had a ready resource in the *patois* of San Juan, and no man on board was competent to assess him accurately by both standards.

He settled down quickly to the exigencies of life at sea. Five days after leaving Cartagena he was an expert in the matter of keeping his feet when the vessel was rolling or pitching, or performing a corkscrew movement which combined the worst features of each.

When the *Southern Cross* entered more southerly latitudes her passengers were given ample opportunity to test their skill in this respect. The weather grew colder each day, and with the drop in the thermometer came gray skies and rough seas.

There are two tracks for ocean-going steamers bound down the west coast. The open Pacific offers no hindrance to safe navigation, except an occasional heavy gale. The inner course, through Smyth's Channel, is sheltered but tortuous, and the commander of the *Southern Cross* elected to save time by heading direct for the Straits of Tierra del Fuego. The ship was speedy and well-found. A stiff nor'wester tended rather to help her along, and she should reach Buenos Ayres within fifteen days.

Maseden contrived to buy a heavy poncho, or cloak, from one of the crew. Wrapped in this useful garment, he patrolled the small space of deck at his disposal, and kept an unfailing eye for the reappearance at the for'ard rail of one or other of the Misses Gray; yet day after day slipped by and they remained obstinately hidden.

Once or twice, when the weather permitted, he climbed to the fore deck, whence he could scan a large part of the promenade deck on both the port and starboard sides. On the port side, however, a wind-screen intervened.

Twice he thought he saw Madeleine Gray leaning on the port rail, talking to Sturgess – and wearing the very dress in which she was married! Either by accident or design she vanished almost instantly on each occasion.

It was nonsensical, of course, but he began to harbor a sentiment of annoyance with Sturgess, who, by some queer contriving of fortune, seemed to be drawn rather to the company of Madeleine than of sister Nina. Any real feeling of jealousy would have been absurd, almost ludicrous, under the circumstances.

For all that, Maseden couldn't understand why the fellow apparently devoted himself to the company of one sister to the neglect, or intentional exclusion, of the other; while the lady's behavior, assuming that she knew of the presence of her "husband" within a few yards, was, to say the least, reprehensible if not provocative.

By this time, Maseden was fully convinced that his wife had recognized him. Oddly enough, the somewhat bizarre costume he wore would help in betraying him to her eyes. She had seen him only when arrayed in even more startling guise. Her memory of him, therefore, would depend wholly on his features and physique, and the incongruity of an unmistakably American voice coming from a *vaquero* could not fail to be enhanced by the gala attire affected by that erstwhile gay spark, old Lopez's nephew.

Moreover, Maseden had bribed the forecastle steward to find out from one of the saloon attendants what had happened to the two ladies on the promenade deck when the pulley fell. One of them, the man said, was so startled that she nearly fainted, and the American señor had carried her to a chair.

Obviously, on an American vessel, with American officers, engineers, and quartermasters, for one whose only tongue was Spanish it was difficult to extract information. The Spanish-speaking members of the crew knew little or nothing of the passengers, while Maseden's part of the ship was as completely shut off from the saloon as are the dwellings of the poor from the palaces of the rich.

Many times was he tempted to change his quarters, and thus tacitly admit his identity; but cold prudence as often forbade any such folly. Even if the full extent of his adventures in Cartagena were unknown on board, it was a quite certain thing that the story must have reached Buenos Ayres long ago.

Bad as was the odor of the republic in the outer world, it still possessed the rights of a sovereign state, and the last thing Maseden desired was an enforced return to the Castle of San Juan, there to stand his trial anew for conspiracy, plus an undoubted attempt to murder the president! That would be a stiff price to pay merely in order to sate his curiosity as to the motive underlying a woman's strange whim.

On the sixth night of the voyage the opportunity for which he was looking was offered as unexpectedly as it had been persistently withheld earlier.

After a very unpleasant day of wind and rain the weather improved markedly. True, the sky had not cleared, and the darkness which fell swiftly over a leaden sea was of a quality almost palpable.

Had he troubled to recall the sealore gleaned from many books of travel, Maseden would have known that such a change was by no means indicative of smoother seas and days of sunshine in the near future. The ship was merely crossing the center of a cyclonic area. Ere morning she would probably meet a fiercer gale than that through which she had just passed.

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