

Bindloss Harold

The Coast of Adventure



Harold Bindloss
The Coast of Adventure

«Public Domain»

Bindloss H.

The Coast of Adventure / H. Bindloss — «Public Domain»,

Содержание

CHAPTER I	5
CHAPTER II	9
CHAPTER III	14
CHAPTER IV	18
CHAPTER V	23
CHAPTER VI	27
CHAPTER VII	32
CHAPTER VIII	36
CHAPTER IX	39
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	41

Bindloss Harold

The Coast of Adventure

CHAPTER I

FATHER AGUSTIN'S SHEEP

High on the sun-scorched hillside above the steamy littoral of the Caribbean Sea the Spanish-Indian town of Rio Frio lay sweltering in the heat of afternoon. The flat-topped, white houses surrounding the plaza reflected a dazzling glare, and the heat shimmered mercilessly upon the rough paving-stones. Flakes of plaster had fallen from the buildings; a few of them were mere ruins, relics of a past age; for the town had been built when *conquistadores* from Spain first plunged into the tropic forest to search for El Dorado. Here and there dilapidated green lattices shaded upper windows, and nearer the ground narrow openings were guarded by rusty iron bars; but some of the houses showed blank outer walls, and the plaza had rather an Eastern than an American look. Spain has set upon the New World the stamp the Moors impressed on her.

At one end of the plaza stood the Café Four Nations, a low, open-sided room, with a row of decaying pillars dividing it from the pavement. It was filled with flies, which stuck in black clusters to the papers hanging from the tarnished lamps and crawled about the dusty tables. The hot air was tainted with aniseed, picadura tobacco, and the curious musky smell which is a characteristic of ancient Spanish towns. On the right-hand side of the square rose the twin towers of the church of San Sebastian. Wide steps led up to the patch of shadow where a leather curtain left uncovered part of the door, and a niche above sheltered an image of the martyr with an arrow in his breast. The figure was well modeled and grimly realistic.

Opposite the café, the *calle Mercedes* cut a cool, dark gap through the dazzling town. On its outskirts, the hillside fell sharply to a wide, green level. Beyond this a silver gleam indicated the sea.

The café was in shadow, and at its inner end a number of citizens lounged, half asleep, in low cane chairs. The hour of the siesta had slipped away, but it was not yet time for dinner, and, having read the newspaper and guardedly discussed politics, the leading inhabitants of Rio Frio had nothing else to do. They were men with formal manners, a few dressed in rusty black, and some in white cotton, but all were not of pure European blood. One or two, indeed, plainly showed their Negro descent; others the melancholy of the Indian aboriginal.

Near the front pillars, a priest and two men of lighter color were seated at a table. Father Agustin wore a threadbare cassock and clumsy rawhide shoes, but he had an air of quiet dignity, and his sharply cut features were of the Gothic type, which is not uncommon in Spain. His accent was also clean Peninsular. James Grahame, who sat opposite across the chessboard, wore the same vague but recognizable stamp of breeding, though his duck suit was getting ragged and his red silk sash was obviously cheap. He had steady gray eyes, and light hair, a rather prominent nose and a firm mouth. He looked older than his thirty years. The lines on his forehead hinted at stern experience, and his alertness was partly masked by an easy self-control. Walthew was younger, and dressed with scrupulous neatness in duck, with smart tan shoes. His face was mobile, his glance quick but open, and his mouth sensitive; he had the look of an aristocratic American.

Father Agustin made a deprecatory gesture as his thin, long-nailed hand moved across the board, and Grahame smiled.

"Yes," he said, filling the tiny glass before the priest, "it is mate this time, *padre*. When you had made a few moves I foresaw defeat, but while the candle burns one plays out the game."

"It is so, but not with all," Father Agustin replied in his fine Castilian. "The losing game needs courage."

"Experience helps. Getting beaten does not hurt so much when one grows used to it."

"Ah!" said the priest, "that is the way to the greatest victory man can win. But I am your guest, and will not moralize. I must compliment you on the game you play. It is bold and well thought out, but perhaps somewhat lacking in finesse."

"I am afraid finesse is not a virtue of mine," Grahame smiled.

Father Agustin studied him quietly. When the Briton spoke he lost something of his reserve. His glance got keen, and his eyes had a curious hawk-like look. The priest could imagine him as swift and determined in action; quick to seize an advantage, but not a good plotter.

"For all that, it is a quality that is useful when one deals with the Latins, at Rio Frio, or elsewhere," the priest said.

"With apologies, *padre*, that is certainly true," Walthew agreed.

"So you have some business here? Perhaps, like the others, you seek a mineral concession."

"No. Our host, Don Martin, is of course out of office and doesn't deal in them."

"He never will," the priest said quietly. "The natural wealth of this country belongs to its people, but it is stolen from them, piece by piece, and given to foreigners."

"The foreigners pay for what they get."

"Yes," said the priest; "but where does the money go? If it were spent on the development of the country, one would not complain; but it is gamblers and courtezans who benefit. Those who hold office here fill their pockets from the public purse, and what is left when they are satisfied is needed to keep the Government in power."

"Then, why do you not reform your administration and put in straight men?"

Father Agustin indicated the drowsy group at the back of the café.

"These are our politicians! They meet every day and ruminate over the affairs of the nation. Think of it!"

"Well," said Walthew, "they do not look busy; but things do happen here now and then."

"It is true. A clique breaks up, there is a new coalition, and those who plotted each other's downfall are united again. We Latins have seldom a continuous policy. Sometimes there is a tumult in the streets and disaffection among the troops; then the man who rules us uses the whip. One hears of no trial, but a malcontent is missing, an officer's duty takes him to the fever jungles, where he cannot live. Sometimes, before the morning mist has lifted, one is wakened by a volley in the ditch behind the citadel."

"You are a patient race," Grahame remarked.

"Not so," said Father Agustin. "We often dream when we should act, but sometimes we act too soon. It is our misfortune that we do not know how to wait for the right moment." He paused and indicated the thinned-out ranks of pawns on the chessboard. "It is like that in the game of politics! The fight is between the greater pieces, but these others fall."

Grahame lighted a cigarette and glanced about the square, for Rio Frio was waking up. Here and there a woman of mixed blood crouched beside a cast-iron pot, fanning the handful of charcoal in it, ready for cooking the evening meal. A team of mules hauled a heavy load across the hot paving stones, a gaunt, dark-faced man in ragged cotton walking at the leaders' heads. Then came a pack train, with jingling bells, a cloud of flies following the burdened animals, and dusty, barefooted peasants plodding by their side. A group of women appeared from the mouth of a narrow street, their faces wet with perspiration and straps across their foreheads supporting the big cane baskets on their backs. After them came a negro with a great tray of fruit upon his head. Next, three or four lean, barefooted fellows with ragged palm-leaf hats seated themselves on the pavement in a strip of shadow. They sat there, silent and motionless, contemplating the scene with listless eyes. The crowd looked dully apathetic, there was languor in the air they breathed; but, after all, they claimed descent

from Spanish stock and Grahame thought they could be roused. It does not need much fanning to wake the smoldering fire in the Iberian's veins.

"My sheep!" said Father Agustin. "But they have other shepherds, who do not always lead them well."

"Shear the flock instead of guarding it? One would imagine that there is not much wool."

"None is so poor that he has nothing to give; if not goods, his voice, his sullen clamor and savage rage. The unthinking passion of the mob is terrible, but it is used by those who must answer for the deed some day. My people have their wrongs, but one cannot build the State on foundations of revenge and cruelty."

"But you have some honest men who hate the present Government."

"It is possible that their honesty lessens their influence. At Rio Frio one does not follow the ideal. It is remote and elusive; the feet get weary, and many things that please the eye lie nearer to hand." Father Agustin rose and bowed with grave courtesy. "And now I have talked enough and have some duties. I thank you and take my leave."

They watched him cross the plaza in his rusty cassock.

"Guess we've struck the wrong place," Walthew said. "We're more likely to find trouble than money here. Well, there's a prospect of new experiences and a little excitement; and, anyway, we can't go back on our bargain with Don Martin."

"I never quite understood what led you to join me," Grahame remarked. "You know the risk we run. If the Government catches us, we'll be hanged or shot – whichever suits their fancy."

Walthew laughed.

"That's the attraction. But we won't be caught. I guess my Yankee ingenuity will count for something. If these sleepy-looking dagoes should trap us, we can find a way to give 'em the slip."

"Optimism is a great asset," Grahame smiled; "but in this country it must have a handmaiden – a convenient revolver."

Walthew leaned forward on the table.

"We've gone into a risky business together. I know nothing about you except that you seem to understand these dagoes and are a handy man to have around when they pull their knives. You know almost nothing about me."

He paused and smiled, and Grahame stirred uneasily. Walthew looked so boyish when he smiled like that. Would he have that carefree look in, say, two months? At times, Grahame regretted letting the boy join him in a venture that might try the heart of even a very strong man.

"I say, old chap, you aren't listening!" Walthew expostulated. "I'm telling you that the pater's a money-making machine. When I left Harvard he was for working me up into a partnership in the Walthew factory. But I couldn't stand it – too monotonous. I took ten thousand dollars, instead, on condition that if I hadn't made good in my own way when two years were up, I'd go back and start as clerk."

"Well," Grahame returned with a smile, "I haven't much to tell. I have no family business to fall back on. As my means were not large enough to let me live as I liked at home, I went abroad to increase them. So far I haven't succeeded; but, on the whole, I've had a pretty good time, and I don't see much reason for grumbling about my luck."

This was correct, so far as it went, for Grahame did not think it worth while to explain that the fiery blood of the Borderers ran in his veins and his people had been soldiers and explorers until economic changes impoverished the family. Nor could he add that, because his name still counted for something in the North, he had left home to avoid being skilfully led into a marriage his friends thought suitable. He had, indeed, run away from a well-born girl with money, who, he suspected, was relieved to see him go. Since then he had known trouble, and it had hardened him. Yet he was honest and was marked by some polish.

At first sight, and by contrast with his comrade, Walthew looked callow, but he improved on acquaintance. It was not for nothing that he was the son of a shrewd manufacturer, who had built up a great business from a humble beginning. Walthew was cool in a crisis, and though outwardly careless, he was capable of looking ahead. So far, his talents were undeveloped, but Grahame suspected them.

While they sat talking, the scene in the square gained animation. Groups of men, moving quickly, emerged from the side streets; there was a murmur of voices; and a crowd began to gather. Women called from the flat housetops; doors were opened and naked, dark-skinned children dragged in from the pavement. The concourse thickened about the steps of the church; gesticulating men chattered in the native patois.

Grahame's eyes grew keen.

"Something's going to happen," he said quietly.

Then he pressed his comrade's arm as a man appeared on the highest step of the church, and the murmur of the crowd swelled into a roar:

"Viva Castillo! Viva el libertador!"

The tall figure bowed and held up a hand, and for a moment there was silence; then a clear voice rang out, and Grahame tried to catch the sonorous Castilian words. He was too far off, and some escaped him, but he heard enough to gather that it was a grim indictment of the rulers of the country. The man spoke with fire and passion, using lavish gestures, and the cries that answered showed that he could work upon the feelings of the crowd.

The café had emptied, and its stout proprietor lounged, napkin in hand, near Grahame's table.

"Sounds pretty drastic, if I heard him right," Walthew remarked. "It's obvious that the authorities don't use half-measures. Did he say they had the deputation arrested and its leader shot?"

"So I understood," said Grahame. "How did you come to learn Castilian?"

"A notion of the old man's; he made me study languages. It's his ambition to ship the Walthew manufactures all over the world, and he got a footing in Cuba some time ago."

They were silent for a few minutes, and then Grahame turned to the landlord.

"Are these things true?"

"It is possible," the other answered cautiously.

"Then are you not afraid of a revolution?"

"No, señor; why should I fear? When there is a revolution the wine trade is good."

"But suppose your customers get killed?"

The landlord smiled.

"They are philosophic politicians, señor. It is the untaught rabble that fights. These others drink their wine and argue over the newspapers. Besides, there will be no revolution yet. Some talk, perhaps; possibly a supporter of the Government stabbed in the dark."

"And that will be all?" Grahame asked with a keen glance.

"There will be nothing more. The President waits and watches until he knows his enemies. Then he gives an order and there is an end of them."

The man turned away, and when, shortly afterward, the plaza rang with fierce applause, a voice was raised in alarm. Others joined in, the crowd began to stream back from the steps, and the orator disappeared. Then the mass broke into running groups, and through the patter of their feet there came a steady, measured tread. It drew nearer; short, swarthy men in dirty white uniforms marched into the plaza, the strong light gleaming on their rifles. They wheeled and stopped in ranks extended across the square, and the rifles went up to their shoulders. Warning shouts fell from the roofs, the patter of feet grew faster, the shadowy streets were choked with fugitives, and the place was empty except for the line of quiet men. Then an officer laughed and called out, and the rifles came down with a clang.

"I suspect that we're up against a big man in the President," Walthew remarked. "Perhaps we'd better light out before these fellows ask us questions."

CHAPTER II

THE ADVENTURES BEGIN

A half moon hung over the flat roofs and the air was very still. Walthew and Grahame sat on a balcony surrounding the patio of Don Martin Sarmiento's house. The lattice windows that opened onto the balcony had old but artistic hinges of bronze, and the crumbling hardwood rails showed traces of skilful carving. Below, a small fountain splashed in a marble basin surrounded by palmettos, and a creeper covered a trellis with trails of dusky purple. A faint smell of decay mingled with the more pungent odors of garlic and olive oil from the kitchen in the courtyard, where a clatter was going on, but no sound from outside broke the silence. Rio Frio was very quiet now.

Cups of black coffee and a plate of fruit stood on a table in front of the men, and the señorita Blanca Sarmiento sat in a low chair opposite, with her duenna a few yards away. Blanca was then nineteen, and Walthew, watching her with unobtrusive admiration, wondered how it was that her relatives had not already arranged a marriage for her, unless, perhaps, her father's political opinions stood in the way. One ran a risk in opposing the Government at Rio Frio. The girl was attractive, with a finely molded figure, the grace of which was displayed by her languid pose. Her hair was dark and coiled in heavy masses on a small, well-shaped head; her lips were full and very red, but her eyes were a deep blue and her skin fairer than that of the Spanish-American women Walthew hitherto had met. Nor did she use the powder they lavishly employ.

With a crimson rose in her hair, and a fine black-lace mantilla draped about her shoulders and emphasizing the whiteness of her neck and half-covered arms, she reminded Walthew of Carmen. She had something of the latter's allurements, but he thought it was an unconscious attraction that she exercised. The art of the coquette was missing; the girl had a certain dignity, and there was no hint of sensuality in her beauty. She had, no doubt, Spanish fire in her blood, but the lad thought it burned with a clear and pure flame.

"How do you come to speak English so charmingly?" he asked, in the hope of satisfying his curiosity about her.

"Do I speak it charmingly?" She laughed prettily. "Well, the explanation is that it was my mother's tongue. She was Irish, you must know."

"Ah!" said Walthew. "Now I understand."

Blanca gave him a glance of languid amusement.

"Your interest is flattering, señor; but what is it you understand?"

"That's an awkward question," Walthew answered, grinning frankly. "Still, there's something about you that I haven't noticed in Spanish-American girls, charming as they are."

"I'm afraid you're evasive. Do you know many of my countrywomen?"

"I'd like to know more. But I believe I'm good at reading character. It is a gift I inherited. My father was never mistaken about a man, and he has made use of a good many."

Blanca studied him. He had a smooth, fresh face, and looked very young, but while she thought he was direct and perhaps impulsive, something suggested that he was shrewd.

"Women are supposed to be more puzzling," she answered. "Then the Sarmientos come from Andalusia, and the Peninsulares are complex people. On the surface, we are often cheerfully inconsequent, but underneath there's a strain of melancholy. We live in the shadow of a fatalism we got from the Moors." She glanced at Grahame. "I think you can understand."

Grahame made a sign of assent. Sitting thoughtfully silent, his lean but powerful frame displayed by the thin white duck, and his strong, brown face impassive, he had a somber look. The man was reckless and sparkled with gay humor now and then, but it was the passing brightness of the North.

"Yes," he said, "I understand. But the Irish are optimists, and you are Irish too."

"Then perhaps that's why I keep hopeful. It is not always easy at Rio Frio, and life was not very joyous when we were exiles in America."

"You know my country?" Walthew broke in.

"I know your Southern States. We lived there in poverty, wandering up and down. My father is what his friends call a patriot, and his enemies a dangerous agitator. He had to choose between ruin and acquiescence in corrupt tyranny, and his course was plain. But the seed he had sown sprouted, the dictator was driven out, and we came back to our own. Then, for a time, there was rest and safety, until the new ruler began to follow the old. He tried to bribe my father, who had helped to put him in power; but our honor was not for sale, and we had to leave the capital. There are men who trust my father, and look to him for help... But I think you know something of this."

"Yes," said Grahame. "This afternoon we heard Castillo speak in the plaza."

The girl's eyes flashed angrily.

"Castillo is a fool! He pulls down what others have carefully built up."

"Tries to fire the mine before things are ready?" Walthew suggested. "A premature explosion's apt to blow up the men who prepared it."

Blanca gave him a keen glance.

"That is what nearly happened this afternoon. I believe you are to be trusted, señores?"

Grahame bowed.

"I am an adventurer, not a patriot, and my partner is out for money, but we made a bargain with Don Martin and we keep our word."

"Then," said the girl quietly, "Castillo is hiding here."

"In the *casa Sarmiento*! Isn't that dangerous? Won't the President's friends suspect?"

"I think they do, but they are afraid of my father's hold on the people; and there is only a handful of troops. When it is late they may make a search, but Castillo will leave soon. It is possible that you are in some danger."

Walthew laughed.

"That makes things interesting; I've never been in serious danger yet. But I suppose you have Don Martin's permission to be frank with us?"

"You are shrewd," she answered, smiling. "He has some confidence in my judgment. I spent the years that should have been happiest in poverty and loneliness. Are you surprised that I'm a conspirator? If you value your safety, you will beware of me."

"You might prove dangerous to your enemies, but I believe you'd be very staunch to your friends."

"*Gracias, señor*. I'm sure I can at least hate well."

A mulatto boy came out on to the balcony, and the girl's stout duenna, who had been sitting silent and apparently half asleep, rose and approached the table.

"Don Martin is disengaged," she said to Blanca; and when the girl waited a moment Grahame imagined that something had been left for her to decide.

He did not see any sign exchanged, but he thought with some amusement that he and his companion had passed a test when the duenna said to them:

"Don Martin would speak with you."

Walthew turned to Blanca, saying in Castilian:

"Until our next meeting! I kiss your hands, señorita."

The girl rose with a grave curtsy and there was a touch of stateliness in her manner.

"May you go in safety, señores! We expect much from you."

The mulatto led them away, and, passing through the house, they found their host and another man sitting by a dim lamp in a room with the shutters carefully closed. Don Martin Sarmiento wore an alpaca jacket, a white shirt, and a black silk sash round the waist of his duck trousers. He was dark-

haired and sallow, lightly built and thin, but his expression was eager and his eyes were penetrating. One could have imagined that his fiery spirit had worn down the flesh.

The other man was of coarser type. His skin was very dark, his face hot and fleshy, and Grahame noticed that his hands were wet with perspiration. His glance was restless and he had a rather truculent air, though there was something in it that hinted at uneasiness. Grahame thought that while he might show a rash boldness now and then, his nerve was not very good.

"With your permission, I present my comrade, Señor Castillo," said Don Martin. "Should any disaster overtake me, Señor Castillo, or another whom he appoints, will carry out our contract. Our funds are in safe hands; the rifles will be paid for."

"They will be delivered," Grahame answered quietly.

"Good! The word of a gentleman is sufficient. And now there is something more to be said. My house is my friend's, particularly if he is in trouble, but one has higher duties than hospitality."

"Yes," agreed Grahame, turning to Castillo. "The interests of one's country come first. There are only three of us, and Don Martin is the head of an important organization."

"It was not for my personal safety that I came here," Castillo broke in hotly. "I carried papers; lists of names, compromising details. It was unthinkable that they should fall into the President's hands. They must be made safe, and then it does not matter what happens to me – though I may, perhaps, claim to have been of some help to the cause of freedom."

Grahame saw his host's half-impatient smile.

"And so you gave them to Don Martin!" he remarked dryly.

"He is not watched as I am," Castillo answered. "I am hunted among the sierras, I hide in the fever swamps; but where I pass I leave a spark that tyranny cannot trample out. It burns and spreads; by and by there comes the purging conflagration."

"Yes," said Grahame. "I'm told, however, that your President has a keen scent for smoke, and I don't mean to scatter more sparks than I can help." He turned to Don Martin. "Since our business is finished, we can leave Rio Frio in an hour."

"I, too!" exclaimed Castillo. "It is not good for the cause that the soldiers find me. But there are difficulties; the house may be watched."

Don Martin looked thoughtful, but not disturbed; and Grahame saw that he could calmly take a risk. Danger and his host obviously were old acquaintances.

"It is better that you go," he answered. "Sometimes I entertain an American traveler, and Englishmen now and then visit Rio Frio. I do not think you are suspected yet, and you may be able to help us by drawing off the watchers' attention when you leave. We will see what can be done, but it would be safer for Señor Castillo not to come with us."

He took the others to the roof, where he walked to the edge and looked over the low parapet. A narrow, dark street divided Sarmiento's house from the next, but a lattice in a high wall was open, and Grahame imagined that he made out a man's head, which was, however, promptly withdrawn.

"Once or twice a guest of mine has reached the *calle* by a rope, but the President's friends take precautions to-night," Don Martin remarked. "There remain the windows on the other side, but Castillo is heavy and fat. I think the door into the plaza would suit him best."

"Wouldn't the small one at the back be safer?" Walthew suggested.

"That will be watched, but it might be of some help if you went that way. Possibly you would not mind wearing a sombrero and a Spanish cloak."

"Not at all," Grahame assured him. "Still, there are two of us."

"That is an advantage. If one leaves shortly after the other, those who keep watch and expect a single man will be puzzled."

Walthew chuckled.

"Good! I'd a hankering after adventures, and now it looks as if I'd be gratified. But you had better not give us clothes with a name on them."

"In this country, people out of favor with the Government are modest about their names," Don Martin rejoined.

Ten minutes later Grahame, wearing a wide black hat and a dark Spanish cloak, stepped quietly out into the shadowy street. He had seen that his automatic pistol was ready to his hand, having had more than one experience of the half-breed's dexterity with the silent knife. For all that, his hurried, stealthy gait was assumed and not natural to the man, whose heart beat calmly, though he cast quick glances about. The houses were high, and the street seemed to get narrower and darker as he went on. Then he imagined he heard soft steps behind him. Walking faster, he stopped at a corner and listened. Somebody was certainly following him.

Grahame's first impulse was to hide in a dark doorway and wait for his pursuer, but he reflected that this would not fall in with his host's plan, and he went on, keeping in the shadow while he made for the hotel at which he had left his mules. There were, he imagined, two men following him now.

A few moments afterward he reached the end of the dark street, and the empty plaza lay before him. The moon shed a faint light upon the stones and the high, white walls, and Grahame was glad of this. Now, if it were needful, he could defend himself: the walk through the shadow had been trying. Still, he must not hurry, for he never promised more than he meant to perform, and he knew that Don Martin relied upon his playing out his part. Perhaps he overdid it when he stopped to light a cigarette, for, looking up as he dropped the match, he saw two dark figures stop at the corner he had left. Then there was a low whistle, and one of them disappeared. Grahame smiled, because he knew that Walthew had divided the attention of the spies. The remaining man, however, walked quickly after him, and when Grahame was half way across the plaza he waited. His pursuer seemed to hesitate, for he came on more slowly, and stopped a few yards off.

"The American!" he exclaimed.

"English," said Grahame calmly. "The difference is, no doubt, not important."

The man looked hard at him, and Grahame carelessly dropped his hand upon his pistol.

"I am going to the *fonda*; if you are going that way, I would rather you walked in front. One is careful at night, my friend."

Though the fellow had a sinister look, he smiled and went off with an apology, and Grahame, going on to the hotel, waited outside until Walthew came up. The boy looked hot and breathless, but Grahame noticed that he had a flower in his hand.

"I've been followed," Walthew laughed. "The fellows dropped back soon after I came into the moonlight. Guess they saw they were after the wrong man."

"Very possibly. It happened to me. I wonder whether Castillo got away?"

They listened, but the town was quiet. One or two citizens crossed the plaza, but no sound that indicated anything unusual going on rose from the shadowy streets.

"It seems likely," Walthew replied. "I don't think they could have arrested him without some disturbance. Why didn't they search Sarmiento's house?"

"Perhaps they were afraid of starting a riot that would spread. The President seems to be a capable man, and Don Martin obviously enjoys the confidence of the citizens. On the whole, I think he deserves it."

"So do I," Walthew agreed. "What do you think of the other fellow?"

"I wouldn't trust him. He's no doubt sincere, but I'm not sure of his nerve. But where did you get the rose?"

"On the pavement outside the *casa Sarmiento*," Walthew answered with some embarrassment.

"Mmm! Dropped from a window. Such things happen in Spanish-American towns, and it's possible that the President's spies have noted it against you. However, you'll be too busy to think of the señorita when we get back to the coast." Grahame paused and added: "It might be wise to remember that you're engaged in a dangerous business, and can't run the risk of any complications. Neither of us can indulge in philandering until this job's finished."

"I'll take no risk that could get us into difficulties, but that's all I'll promise," Walthew said quietly.

Grahame gave him a steady glance.

"Well, I suppose I must be satisfied."

They entered the hotel, and half an hour later they left Rio Frio and rode down the hillside toward the misty swamps that fringed the coast.

CHAPTER III

HIGH STAKES

The green shutters were half closed to keep the dazzling sunshine out of Henry Cliffe's private sitting-room at the smart Florida hotel, but the fresh sea breeze swept in and tempered the heat. The scent of flowers mingled with a delicate perfume such as fastidious women use, but Mrs. Cliffe was enjoying an afternoon nap and her daughter had gone out, so that Cliffe and Robinson had the room to themselves. They sat, opposite each other, at a small table on which stood a bottle and a cigar box, but there was only iced water in the tall glass at Cliffe's hand.

He had lunched sparingly, as usual, and now leaned back in his chair, looking thoughtful. His hair was turning gray, and his face was thin and lined, but there was a hint of quiet force about him. His dress was plain but in excellent taste, and he looked, what he was, a good type of the American business man, who had, however, as sometimes happens to his kind, sacrificed his health to commercial success. He was a financier and a floater of companies which generally paid.

Robinson was tall, with a high color, a prominent, hooked nose, and a face of Jewish cast. His clothes were well cut, but their adherence to the latest fashion was rather pronounced, and he wore expensive jewelry. He was favorably known on Wall Street and sometimes heard of when a corner was being manipulated in the Chicago wheat pit. Cliffe had proposed a joint venture, because he knew that Robinson did not fear a risk and he had learned that a Jew can generally be relied upon when the reckoning comes.

"Well," said Robinson, "I see a chance of trouble. If President Altiera goes down, we lose our money."

"A sure thing," Cliffe agreed. "It will be our business to keep him on his feet, and it may cost us something. In a way, that's an advantage. He must have our help, and is willing to bid high for it."

"The revolutionaries may beat him."

"If he's left alone; but a little money goes a long way in his country, and the dissatisfied politicians would rather take some as a gift than risk their lives by fighting for it. Altiera can buy up most of them if he has the means; and he's capable of quieting the rest in a more drastic way." Cliffe smiled as he continued: "It's not my habit to plan a deal without carefully considering what I may get up against."

"Then it's your honest opinion the thing's a good business chance?"

"I call it that. One gets nothing for nothing. If you expect a prize, you must put up the stakes."

"Very well. Suppose you get the concession? Is there gold worth mining in the country?"

"I can't tell," Cliffe answered frankly. "The Spaniards found a good deal three hundred years ago, and now and then a half-breed brings some out of the bush. Guess we could get enough to use as a draw in the prospectus."

"You'd have to make the prospectus good," Robinson said with a thoughtful air. "Not an invariable rule, of course, but our names stand for something with the investing public."

"I generally do make good. If we don't strike gold, there's rubber, and the soil will grow high-grade cane and coffee. Give me the concession and I'll make it pay."

Robinson nodded. Cliffe's business talent was particularly marked in the development of virgin territory, though he never undertook the work in person. He knew where to find the right men, and how far to trust them.

"I suppose we won't be required to meddle with dago politics?" Robinson suggested.

"Certainly not; that's Altiera's affair, and he's capable of looking after it. A number of his people are getting tired of him, but so long as he can pay his soldiers up to time and buy support where he can't use force, he'll keep control."

"A bit of a brute, I've heard."

"He's not a humanitarian," Cliffe agreed. "Still, countries like his need a firm hand."

"Guess that's so," said Robinson.

He and Cliffe were respected in business circles. They met their obligations and kept the rules that govern financial dealings. That they might now be lending their support to tyrannical oppression, and helping to stifle the patriotic aspirations of a downtrodden people, did not enter their minds. That was not their affair; they were out for money, and their responsibility ended with the payment of dividends to those who bought their stock. They would fulfill this duty if the thing were possible; although their standard of morality was not of the highest, they had prosperous rivals who fell short of it.

"I'll stand in," Robinson decided after a few moments' silence. "You can let me know how much you will need to carry you through when you get your plans worked out."

"Very well. It's over the first payments we take a risk. The money will, so to speak, vanish. We'll have nothing to show for it except the good will of the men in power. Some of it may even get into the wrong hands."

Robinson made a sign of comprehension. He knew something about official graft, for he now and then found it needful to smooth the way for a new venture by judicious bribery.

"There'll be no trouble after we've bought the concession," Cliffe continued. "The cash will then go to the treasury, and whichever party gets control will have to stand to the bargain. And now I guess we can let the matter drop until I fix things up."

They went out to a seat on the veranda, which looked across a row of dusty palmettos and a strip of arid lawn that the glistening showers from the sprinklers could not keep green. An inlet of blue water ran up to its edge, and beyond the curve of sheltering beach the long Atlantic swell rolled into the bay flecked with incandescent foam, for the sunshine was dazzling and the breeze was fresh. Two or three miles away there was a stretch of calmer water behind a long point on which the surf beat, and in the midst of this a small steamer gently rolled at anchor. Nearer the inlet, a little sailing-boat stood out to sea, her varnished deck and snowy canvas gleaming in the strong light.

"Miss Cliffe's boat, isn't it?" Robinson remarked. "Looks very small; I s'pose she's safe?"

"New York canoe club model," Cliffe replied. "Had her brought down on a freight-car. Evelyn's fond of sailing and smart at the helm. She's all right – though the breeze does seem pretty fresh."

While they talked about other matters, Evelyn Cliffe sat in the stern of the tiny sloop, enjoying the sense of control the grasp of the tiller gave her, and the swift rush of the polished hull through the sparkling foam. There was also some satisfaction in displaying her nerve and skill to the loungers on the beach, who were, for the most part, fashionable people from the Northern States. Among these was a young man upon whom Evelyn knew her mother looked with approval.

Though he had much to recommend him, and had shown a marked preference for her society, Evelyn had come to no decision about Reginald Gore, but she was willing that he should admire her seamanship, and it was, perhaps, in the expectation of meeting him afterward that she had dressed herself carefully. She wore well-cut blue serge that emphasized her fine pink-and-white color, and matched her eyes; and the small blue cap did not hide her red-gold hair.

As the breeze freshened, she forgot the spectators, and began to wish she had taken a reef in the mainsail before starting. Hitherto she had had somebody with her when it was necessary to shorten canvas; but it was unlike a sport to turn back because of a little wind. She would stand on until she had weathered the point and was out on the open Atlantic, and then run home. The strain on the helm got heavier, the foam crept level with the lee deck, and sometimes sluiced along it when the boat dipped her bows in a sea. Then the spray began to beat upon the slanted canvas, and whipped Evelyn's face as she braced herself against the tiller.

The boat was sailing very fast, plunging through the sparkling ridges of water; there was something strangely exhilarating in her speed and the way the foam swirled past. Evelyn had an

adventurous temperament, and, being then twenty-three, was young enough to find a keen relish in outdoor sport. Now she was matching her strength and skill against the blue Atlantic combers, which were getting steeper and frothing on their crests. The point was falling to leeward; it would be a fair wind home, and she determined to stand on a little longer. Casting a quick glance astern, she saw that the figures on the beach had grown indistinct and small. She felt alone with the sea at last, and the situation had its charm; but when she fixed her eyes ahead she wished that the rollers were not quite so large. She had to ease the boat over them; sometimes let the sheet run in the harder gusts, and then it was not easy to get the wet rope in.

When the point shut off the beach, she saw she must come round, and, after waiting for a patch of smooth water, put up the helm to jibe. The strain on the sheet was heavier than she thought; the rope bruised her fingers as it ran through them. The boat rolled wildly, and then the big sail swung over with a crash. Evelyn saw with alarm that the gaff along its head had stopped at an unusual angle to the canvas. Something had gone wrong. But her nerve was good. She could lower the mainsail and run home under the jib.

When she left the helm the boat shot up into the wind, with the long boom banging to and fro and the spray flying across her. Evelyn loosed the halyards, but found that the gaff would not come down. Its end worked upon a brass slide on the mast, and the grips had bent and jammed. Things now looked awkward. It was blowing moderately fresh, the sea was getting up, and the sail she could not shorten might capsize the boat.

With difficulty, she got the sloop round, but, as the gaff was jammed, she would not steer a course that would take her to the inlet, and Evelyn remembered with alarm that there was some surf on the beach. She could swim, but she shrank from the thought of struggling ashore from the wrecked craft through broken water. Still, it was some comfort to see the point drop astern and the beach get nearer; she was on the way to land, there were boats on the inlet, and somebody might notice that she was in difficulties. No boat came off, however, and she realized that from a distance nothing might appear to be wrong with the sloop. When she was near enough to signal for help it would be too late.

A small steamer lurched at anchor not far away; but Evelyn could not reach her: the sloop was like a bird with a broken wing and could only blunder clumsily, in danger of capsizing, before the freshening wind. In another quarter of an hour she would be in the surf, which now looked dangerously heavy.

While she was trying to nerve herself for the struggle to land, she saw a boat leave the steamer's side. It was a very small dinghy, and there was only one man on board, but he waved his hand as if he understood her peril, and then rowed steadily to intercept her. This needed judgment: if he miscalculated the distance it would be impossible for him to overtake the sloop. And Evelyn could do nothing to help. She must concentrate her attention upon keeping her craft before the wind. If she jibed, bringing the big sail violently over with its head held fast would result in a capsize.

Five minutes later she risked a glance. The dinghy was close at hand, lurching up and down, lost from sight at intervals among the combers. The man, coatless and hatless, seemed to be handling her with caution, easing her when a roller with a foaming crest bore down on him, but Evelyn thought he would not miss her boat. Her heart beat fast as she put the helm hard down. The sloop swung round, slackening speed as she came head to wind, there was a thud alongside, and the man jumped on board with a rope in his hand.

Then things began to happen so rapidly that the girl could not remember exactly what was done; but the man showed a purposeful activity. He scrambled along the narrow deck, got a few feet up the mast, and the sail came down; then he sprang aft to the helm, and the sloop headed for the steamer, with his dinghy in tow and only the jib set.

They were alongside in a few minutes, and he seized a rope that some one threw him.

"Our gig's hauled up on the beach for painting, and I'm afraid we couldn't reach the landing in the dinghy, now the sea's getting up," he said. "You'd better come on board, and I'll see if Macallister can put your gaff right."

Evelyn hesitated, for she suspected that it would take some time to mend the damaged spar. It was not an adventure her mother would approve of, but as she could see no way of reaching land, she let the man help her through the gangway.

CHAPTER IV

THE "ENCHANTRESS"

On reaching the steamer's deck, Evelyn glanced with curiosity at her rescuer. He was a tall, lightly built man, dressed in an old blue shirt, paint-stained duck trousers, and ragged canvas shoes, but he had an easy manner that was not in harmony with his rough clothes. Evelyn liked his brown face. It had a hint of force in it; though now he was watching her with a half-amused smile. He fell short of being handsome, but, on the whole, his appearance made a good impression on the girl.

Then she looked about the vessel. The deck, finely laid with narrow planks, was littered with odd spars, rusty chain, coal bags, and pieces of greasy machinery, as if repairs and refitting were going on. She was a very small, two-masted steamer, carrying some sail, for smoke-grimed canvas was furled along the booms, and Evelyn thought she had been built for a yacht. Her narrow beam, her graceful sweep of teakwood rail, and the long, tapering counter suggested speed. A low, lead-gray funnel stood just forward of the mainmast, and a teak house, rising three or four feet above the deck, occupied part of her length. The brass boss of the steering wheel bore the name *Enchantress*. The after end of the house, however, was built of iron, with raised lights in the top, and the hammering and the pointed remarks that came up indicated that somebody below was grappling with refractory metal. After one exclamation, Evelyn's companion walked to the skylights.

"Mack," he said in a warning tone, "there's a lady on board."

"One o' they half-dressed hussies from the hotel? Man, I thought ye had mair taste," a hoarse voice replied.

Evelyn was glad that her boating costume was not in the extreme of fashion, for sleeves and skirts were severely curtailed then, but she waited with some amusement.

"Come up and don't talk!" said the man who had brought her on board. "Here's a job for you."

"That's one thing I'll never die for the want of," the voice below went on. "I've got jobs enough already, and no help wi' them. Ye cannot make a mechanic out o' a dago muleteer, and the gangrel son o' a rich American is no' much better. They're wrecking the bonny mill and when I had them strike at a bit forging the weariful deevils smashed my finger. I telt them –"

"It won't stand for repeating. Let up; you've the voice of a bull," somebody broke in. "Grahame's waiting with a lady. Can't you get a move on?"

"What's the lady wanting – is it her watch mending?" the Scot asked with a hint of eagerness. A passion for tampering with the works of watches not infrequently characterizes the marine engineer.

"Come and see!" called Evelyn's companion; and a few moments later the mechanic appeared.

He was big, rather gaunt, and very dirty; but he carried himself well, and had obviously just put on a smart blue jacket with brass buttons that bore the crest of an English mail line. Evelyn thought his age was between forty and fifty, but his eyes had a humorous twinkle and his air was rakish. Behind him came a much younger man in greasy overalls.

The engineer bowed to Evelyn with some grace.

"Ye'll be Miss Cliffe; I ken ye by sight," he said. "They telt me who ye were in the bar at the hotel."

"Do they talk about me in such places?" Evelyn asked with a touch of haughtiness.

"What would ye expect? When ye're born good-looking, ye must take the consequences. But, as Grahame has nae manners, I'll present myself – Andrew Macallister, extra chief's ticket, and noo, through speaking my mind to a director, engineer o' this barge." He indicated his greasy companion. "Mr. Walthew, who, though ye might not think it by his look, was taught at Harvard. If my temper stands the strain, I may make a useful greaser o' him yet. The other ye nae doot ken."

"No," said Evelyn, half amused. "He kindly came to my help when I was in trouble with my boat."

"Then he's skipper. They call him Grahame, and it's a good Scottish name. But I was hoping ye had maybe some difficulty with your watch."

"Why did you hope so?" Evelyn asked, laughing.

"On no account let him have it," Walthew interposed. "He brought back the last watch a confiding visitor left him with the gold case badly crushed. 'I had to screw her in the vice, but a bit rub with a file will smooth her off,' he told the owner."

"He was a fastidious beast o' a Custom House grafter," Macallister explained. "But if it's no' a watch, what way can I serve ye?"

Grahame took him to the sloop and showed him the gaff, and a few minutes later he came back with the bent jaws.

"It's no' a bad piece o' work; your people have an eye for design, but they make things too light," he said. "Noo I'll cut ye a new grip out o' solid brass, but it will take an hour."

"I suppose I must wait; there's no other way of getting back," Evelyn answered dubiously.

Macallister went below, and Grahame put a deck chair for Evelyn under the awning in the stern, where he sat down on a coil of rope, while Walthew leaned against the rail near by. The girl felt interested in them all. She had heard that Walthew had been to Harvard, and his appearance suggested that he belonged to her own world. If so, what was he doing in the *Enchantress's* engine room? Then, Macallister's random talk had some piquancy. His manners were not polished, but they were good in their way.

"The steamer is yours, I suppose?" she remarked.

"Yes," said Grahame. "We bought her cheap, and are getting her ready for sea. As I dare say you have noticed, she needs refitting."

"But wouldn't that have been easier at New Orleans or Galveston?"

"Perhaps, if we were able to hire professional assistance, but we have to do the work ourselves, and this place is quiet, and clean for painting."

"Aren't you painting her an unusual color? White would have been prettier than this dingy gray."

"White's conspicuous," Walthew answered, and Evelyn noticed Grahame's warning glance. "A neutral tint stands better, and doesn't show the dirt. You see, we have to think of our pockets."

"Then it isn't to be a pleasure trip. Where are you going?"

"Up the Gulf Stream. To Cuba first, and then south and west; wherever there's a chance of trade."

"But the boat is very small. What do you think of trading in?"

"Anything that comes along," Walthew answered with a thoughtful air. "We might catch turtles, for example."

"One understands that turtles are now farmed for the market."

"It would be cheaper to catch them. We might get mahogany."

"But mahogany logs are big. You couldn't carry many."

"We could tow them in a raft. Then the English and American tourists who come out in the mail boats might charter us for trips."

"I'm afraid you'd find them exacting. They'd expect nice berths and a good table. Do you carry a good cook?"

Grahame chuckled and Walthew grinned.

"Modesty prevents my answering, because my partners leave me to put up the hash. I'll admit it might be better; but our passengers wouldn't find that out until we got them away at sea."

Evelyn was frankly amused. She could not imagine his cooking very well, but she liked his humorous candor.

"Your plans seem rather vague," she said.

"They are, but one doesn't want a cut and dried program for a cruise about the Spanish Main. One takes what comes along; in the old days it used to be rich plate ships and windfalls of that kind, and I guess there's still something to be picked up when you get off the liners' track. One expects to find adventures on the seas that Drake and Frobisher sailed."

Evelyn mused. She was shrewd enough to perceive that the men were hiding something, and they roused her curiosity, but she thought Walthew was right. Romance was not dead, and the Spanish Main was a name to conjure with. It brought one visions of desolate keys where treasure was hidden, the rush of the lukewarm Gulf Stream over coral reefs, of palm-fringed inlets up which the pinnacles had crept to cut out Spanish galleons, and of old white cities that the buccaneers had sacked. Tragic and heroic memories haunted that blue sea, and although luxurious mail boats plowed it now, the passions of the old desperados still burned in the hearts of men.

Walthew was smooth-faced, somewhat ingenuous, and marked by boyish humor, but Evelyn had noticed his athletic form, and thought he could be determined. He was no doubt proficient in sports that demanded strength and nerve. For all that, it was Grahame and his hawk-like look that her thoughts dwelt most upon, for something about him suggested that he had already found the adventures his comrade was seeking. He was a soldier of fortune, who had taken wounds and perhaps still bore their scars. She remembered the cool judgment he had shown when he came to her rescue.

Walthew disturbed her reflections.

"It will be some time before Andrew fixes your gaff, and there's no use in trying to hurry him," he said. "He's an artist in metal, and never lets up until he's satisfied with a job. So, as you must wait and we have a kettle on the forge below, I can offer you some tea and I'd like your opinion of the biscuit I've been baking for supper."

Evelyn felt doubtful. She was spending the afternoon in a way her mother would certainly not approve of, but she could not get ashore until the gaff was mended. Besides, it was pleasant to sit under the awning with the fresh sea breeze on her face and listen to the splash of the combers on the bows. Then she was interested in her companions. They were different from the rather vapid loungers she would have been talking to had she stayed at the hotel.

She let Walthew go and then turned to Grahame.

"Have you known your partner long?" she asked.

"No; I met him for the first time in New Orleans a few months ago."

"I asked because he's a type that I'm well acquainted with," Evelyn explained.

"And you would not have expected to find him cooking and cleaning engines on a boat like this?"

"No; they're rather unusual occupations for a conventionally brought up young American."

Grahame smiled.

"I understand that Walthew might have enjoyed all the comforts your civilization has to offer, but he preferred the sea. Perhaps I'm prejudiced, but I don't blame him. There's a charm in freedom and the wide horizon."

"Yes," she agreed thoughtfully, looking across the blue water; "I suppose that's true. If a man has the courage to break away, he can follow his bent. It's different with women. We're securely fenced in; our corral walls are high."

"They keep trouble out. Hardship and danger aren't pleasant things, and after a time the romance of the free-lance's life wears off. One sometimes looks longingly at the sheltered nooks that men with settled habits occupy."

"And yet you follow your star!"

"Star's too idealistic; my bent is better. What's born in one must have its way. This is perhaps most convenient when it's an inherited genius for making money."

"It's useful to oneself and others," Evelyn agreed. "But do these talents run in the blood?"

"It seems so," Grahame answered, and was quiet for a time, languidly watching the girl and wondering how far his statement was true.

It might be argued that the strongest family strains must be weakened by marriage, and their salient characteristics disappear in a few generations, but he felt strangely akin to the mosstroopers of his name who scourged the Scottish Border long ago. Their restlessness and lust of adventure were his. This, however, was not a matter of much consequence. Chance had thrown him into the company of a pretty and intelligent girl, and he must try to entertain her.

"You're fond of the sea and adventurous, or you wouldn't have driven that little sloop so far out under full sail," he said.

"Oh," she admitted, smiling, "that was partly because I wanted to show my skill and was ashamed to turn back when the breeze freshened."

Grahame laughed. He liked her frankness.

"After all," he said, "it's a feeling that drives a good many of us on. A weakness, perhaps, but it may be better than excessive caution."

"A matter of opinion. Of course, if you determine never to do anything foolish, you're apt to do nothing at all. But I'm afraid I can't throw much light upon these subjects... Here comes our tea."

It was drinkable, but Evelyn thought the biscuit could undoubtedly have been better. For all that, she enjoyed the meal, and when it was over Macallister appeared with the mended gaff.

"I'm thinking you will never bend or jamb," he said, indicating the beautifully finished pieces of brass-work.

Evelyn thanked him, and soon afterward Grahame helped her into the boat and hoisted the reefed sail. The wind was still fresh, but the sloop ran shoreward safely, with the sparkling seas ranging up on her quarter, and Grahame admired the grace of the neat, blue-clad figure at the helm. The rushing breeze and the flying spray had brought a fine color into the girl's face and a brightness to her eyes.

As they neared the beach, a gasoline launch came plunging out to meet them, and Evelyn laughed as she turned to Grahame.

"I've been missed at last," she said. "That's my father coming to look for me."

The launch swung round close alongside and Grahame recognized that he was being subjected to a keen scrutiny by a man on board. The broken water, however, made explanations impossible, and the launch followed the sloop to the inlet, where Evelyn neatly brought the craft up to the landing. On getting ashore, she spoke to Cliffe, and he thanked Grahame and invited him to the hotel. Grahame politely declined, but agreed to borrow the launch to take him on board.

As he was leaving, Evelyn held out her hand.

"It was fortunate that my difficulties began when I was near your boat, and I don't altogether regret them. I have spent a pleasant afternoon," she said.

Grahame bowed and turned away; but somewhat to his surprise, he found his thoughts return to his guest as the launch carried him back to the steamer. The girl was cultured and intelligent, perhaps a little romantic, and unspoiled by luxury; but this was nothing to him. There were times when he felt lonely and outcast from his kind, for until he met Walthew his comrades had generally been rough and broken men. Some years ago he had been a favorite with well-bred women; but he never met them on terms of friendship now. He was poor, and would no doubt remain so, since he had not the gift of making money; but an untrammelled, wandering life had its advantages.

With a smile at his brief relapse into sentiment, he resolved to forget Miss Cliffe; but he found it strangely difficult to occupy his mind with calculations about stores for the coming voyage.

Evelyn related her adventure to her mother, who listened with strong disapproval. Mrs. Cliffe was a thin, keen-eyed woman, with social ambitions and some skill in realizing them.

"If you hadn't been so rash as to go out alone, this wouldn't have happened," she remarked. "You must really be more careful."

"I couldn't prevent the gaff's jamping," Evelyn replied.

"That is not what I meant. After all, nobody in the hotel knows much about the matter, and there is, of course, no need to do more than bow to the men if you meet them at the landing, though it would be better to avoid this, if possible. A small favor of the kind they did you does not justify their claiming your acquaintance."

"Father wanted to bring one of them here."

"Your father is a man of business, and has very little discretion in social matters," Mrs. Cliffe replied. "If Reggie cannot go with you, take the hotel boatman when you next go sailing."

Evelyn did not answer, but she disagreed with the views her mother had expressed, and she resolved to leave Reggie ashore. For one thing, he was not of much use in a boat. Yet it was curious that she had once been pleased to take him out.

CHAPTER V

THE CALL OF THE UNKNOWN

The sea breeze had fallen, and the air was hot and still. A full moon rested low in the eastern sky, and against its light the tops of the royal palms cut in feathery silhouette. Evelyn was sitting in the hotel garden with Reginald Gore. A dusky rose arbor hid them from the veranda, where a number of the guests had gathered, but Evelyn imagined that one or two of the women knew where she was and envied her. This once would have afforded her some satisfaction, but it did not matter now, and although the spot seemed made for confidential talk, she listened quietly to the rollers breaking on the beach. The roar of the surf had a disturbing effect; she felt that it called, urging her to follow her star and launch out on the deep. Her companion was silent, and she wondered what he was thinking about, or if, as seemed more likely, his mind was vacant. She found him irritating to-night.

Gore was the finished product of a luxurious age: well-bred, well-taught, and tastefully dressed. His father had made a fortune out of railroad stock, and although Reginald had not the ability to increase it, he spent it with prudence. He had a good figure, and a pleasant face, but Evelyn suspected that his highest ambition was to lounge through life gracefully.

Evelyn knew her mother's plans regarding him, and had, to some extent, fallen in with them. Reggie had much that she valued to offer, but she now and then found him tiresome. He stood for the luxurious, but, in a sense, artificial life, with which she was growing dissatisfied. She felt that she wanted stirring, and must get into touch with the real things.

"You're not talkative," she remarked, watching the lights of the *Enchantress* that swung and blinked with the tossing swell.

"No," he agreed good-humoredly. "Doesn't seem to be much to talk about."

There was silence for a few moments; then Evelyn put into words a train of thoughts that was forming indistinctly in her mind.

"You have never done anything very strenuous in life. You have had all the pleasure money can provide one. Are you content?"

"On the whole, yes. Aren't you?"

"No," said Evelyn thoughtfully. "I believe I haven't really been content for a long time, but I didn't know it. The mind can be doped, but the effect wears off and you feel rather startled when you come to yourself."

Gore nodded.

"I know! Doesn't last, but it's disturbing. When I feel like that, I take a soothing drink."

Evelyn laughed, for his answer was characteristic. He understood, to some extent, but she did not expect him to sympathize with the restlessness that had seized her. Reggie would never do anything rash or unconventional. Hitherto she had approved his caution. She had enjoyed the comfortable security of her station, had shared her mother's ambitions, and looked upon marriage as a means of rising in the social scale. Her adventurous temperament had found some scope in exciting sports and in an occasional flirtation that she did not carry far; but she was now beginning to feel that life had strange and wonderful things to offer those who had the courage to seize them. She had never experienced passion – perhaps because her training had taught her to dread it; but her imagination was now awake.

Her visit to the *Enchantress* had perhaps had something to do with these disturbing feelings, but not, she argued, because she was sentimentally attracted by her rescuer. It was the mystery in which Grahame's plans were wrapped that was interesting. He was obviously the leader of the party and about to engage in some rash adventure on seas the buccaneers had sailed. This, of course, was

nothing to her; but thinking of him led her to wonder whether she might not miss much by clinging too cautiously to what she knew was safe.

With a soft laugh she turned to Gore.

"Tell me about the dance they're getting up. I hear you are one of the stewards," she said.

It was a congenial topic, and as she listened to her companion's talk Evelyn felt that she was being drawn back to secure, familiar ground.

Cliffe, in the meanwhile, had come out in search of her and, seeing how she was engaged, had strolled into the hotel bar. A tall, big-boned man, dressed in blue serge with brass buttons on his jacket, was talking at large, and Cliffe, stopping to listen, thought the tales he told with dry Scottish humor were good.

"You are the engineer who mended the gaff of my daughter's boat," Cliffe said. "I must thank you for that; it was a first-rate job."

"It might have been worse," Macallister modestly replied. "Are ye a mechanic then?"

"No; but I know good work when I see it."

"I'm thinking that's a gift, though ye may not use it much. It's no' good work the world's looking for."

"True," agreed Cliffe; "perhaps we're too keen on what will pay."

"Ye mean what will pay the first user. An honest job is bound to pay somebody in the end."

"Well, I guess that's so. You're a philosopher."

Macallister grinned.

"I have been called worse names, and maybe with some cause. Consistency gets monotonous. It's better to be a bit of everything, as the humor takes ye."

"What kind of engines has your boat?" Cliffe asked. He was more at home when talking practical matters.

"As fine a set o' triples as I've clapped my eyes upon, though they have been shamefully neglectit."

"And what speed can you get out of her?"

"A matter o' coal," Macallister answered with a twinkle. "A seven-knot bat will suit our purse best."

Cliffe saw that further questions on this point would be injudicious, but the man interested him, and he noted the flag on his buttons.

"Well," he said, "the *Enchantress* must be a change from the liners you have sailed in."

"I find that. But there's aye some compensation. I have tools a man can work with, and oil that will keep her running smooth. Ye'll maybe ken there's a difference in engine stores."

"I've heard my manufacturing friends say something of the kind."

Cliffe ordered refreshment, and quietly studied his companion. The man had not the reserve he associated with the Scot, but a dash and a reckless humor, which are, nevertheless, essentially Scottish too. Cliffe wondered curiously what enterprise he and his companions were engaged upon, but he did not think Macallister would tell him. If the others were like this fellow, he imagined that they would carry out their plans, for he read resolution as well as daring in the Scot's character; besides, he had been favorably impressed by Grahame.

After some further talk, Macallister left, and Cliffe joined his wife and daughter.

The next morning, Evelyn, getting up before most of the other guests, went out on the balcony in front of her room and looked across the bay. The sun was not yet hot, and a fresh breeze flecked the blue water with feathery streaks of white, while the wet beach glistened dazzlingly. There was a refreshing, salty smell, and for a few minutes the girl enjoyed the grateful coolness; then she felt that something was missing from the scene, and noticed that the *Enchantress* had vanished. The adventurers had sailed in the night. On the whole she was conscious of relief. They had gone and she could now get rid of the restlessness that their presence had caused. After all, there was peril in the

longing for change; it was wiser to be satisfied with the security and solid comfort which surrounded her.

Looking down at a footstep, she saw Gore strolling about the lawn, faultlessly dressed in light flannel, with a Panama hat. There was not a crease in his clothes that was out of place; the color scheme was excellent – even his necktie was exactly the right shade. He stood for all her mother had taught her to value: wealth, leisure, and cultivated taste. Reggie was a man of her own kind; she had nothing in common with the bronzed, tar-stained Grahame, whose hawk-like look had for the moment stirred her imagination.

"You look like the morning," Gore called up to her. "Won't you come down and walk to the beach? The sun and breeze are delightful, and we'll have them all to ourselves."

Evelyn noticed the hint of intimacy, but it did not jar upon her mood, and she smiled as she answered that she would join him.

A few minutes later, they walked along the hard, white sand, breathing the keen freshness of the spray.

"What made you get up so soon?" Evelyn asked.

"It's not hard to guess. I was waiting for my opportunity. You're in the habit of rising in good time."

"Well," she said with a bantering air, "I think waiting for opportunities is a habit of yours. Of course, you have some excuse for this."

Gore looked puzzled for a moment and then laughed.

"I see what you mean. As a rule, the opportunities come to me."

"Don't they? I wonder whether you're much happier than the men who have to make, or look for, them."

"I can't say, because I haven't tried that plan. I can't see why I should look for anything, when I don't have to. Anyway, I guess I'm a pretty cheerful person and easy to get on with. It's the strivers who're always getting after something out of reach that give you jars."

"You're certainly not a striver," Evelyn agreed. "However, you seem to have all a man could want."

"Not quite," he answered. "I'll confess that I'm not satisfied yet, but I try to make the most of the good things that come along – and I'm glad I got up early. It's a glorious morning!"

Evelyn understood. Reggie was not precipitate and feared a rebuff. She believed that she could have him when she liked, but he would look for some tactful sign of her approval before venturing too far. The trouble was that she did not know if she wanted him.

She changed the subject, and they paced the beach, engaged in good-humored banter, until the breakfast gong called them back to the hotel.

In the afternoon, however, Evelyn's mood changed again. The breeze died away and it was very hot. Everybody was languid, and she found her friends dull. Although Gore tried to be amusing, his conversation was unsatisfactory; and the girls about the hotel seemed more frivolous and shallow than usual. None of these people ever did anything really worth while! Evelyn did not know what she wished to do, but she felt that the life she led was unbearably stale.

When dark fell and the deep rumble of the surf filled the air, she sat with her father in a quiet corner of the garden.

"Didn't you say you might make a short business trip to the West Indies?" she asked him.

"Yes; I may have to spend a week in Havana."

"Then I wish you would take me."

"It might be arranged," said Cliffe. He seldom refused her anything. "Your mother wouldn't come, but she has plenty of engagements at home. Why do you want to go?"

Evelyn found this hard to answer, but she tried to formulate her thoughts.

"Cuba is, of course, a new country to me, and I suppose we all feel a mysterious attraction toward what is strange. Had you never a longing for something different, something out of the usual run?"

"I had when I was young."

"But you don't feel it now?"

"One learns to keep such fancies in their place when business demands it," Cliffe answered with a dry smile. "I can remember times when I wanted to go off camping in the Canadian Rockies and join a canoe trip on Labrador rivers. Now and then in the hot weather the traffic in the markets and the dusty offices make me tired. I'll confess that I've felt the snow-peaks and the rapids call."

"We went to Banff once," said Evelyn. "It was very nice."

"But not the real thing! You saw the high peaks from the hotel garden and the passes from an observation car. Then we made one or two excursions with pack-horses, guides, and people like ourselves, where it was quite safe to go. That was as much as your mother could stand for. She'd no sympathy with my hankering after the lone trail."

Evelyn could see his face in the moonlight, and she gave him a quick look. Her father, it seemed, had feelings she had never suspected in him.

"But if you like the mountains, couldn't you enjoy them now?"

"No," he said, rather grimly. "The grip of my business grows tighter all the time. It costs a good deal to live as we do, and I must keep to the beaten tracks that lead to places where money is made."

"I sometimes think we are too extravagant and perhaps more ostentatious than we need be," Evelyn said in a diffident tone.

"We do what our friends expect and your mother has been accustomed to. Then it's my pleasure to give my daughter every advantage I can and, when the time for her to leave us comes, to see she starts fair."

Evelyn was silent for a few moments, feeling touched. She had formed a new conception of her father, who, she had thought, loved the making of money for its own sake. Now it was rather startling to find that in order to give her mother and herself all they could desire, he had held one side of his nature in subjection and cheerfully borne a life of monotonous toil.

"I don't want to leave you," she said in a gentle voice.

He looked at her keenly, and she saw that her mother had been speaking to him about Gore.

"Well," he responded, "I want to keep you as long as possible, but when you want to go I must face my loss and make the best of it. In the meanwhile, we'll go to Cuba if your mother consents."

Evelyn put her hand affectionately on his arm.

"Whatever happens," she said softly, "you won't fail me. I'm often frivolous and selfish, but it's nice to know I have somebody I can trust."

CHAPTER VI ON THE SPANISH MAIN

There had been wind, but it had fallen toward evening, and the *Enchantress* rolled in a flat calm when her engines stopped. As she swung with the smooth undulations, blocks clattered, booms groaned, and the water in her bilges swirled noisily to and fro. It was difficult to move about the slanted deck, and two dark-skinned, barefooted seamen were seated forward with their backs against the rail. A comrade below was watching the engine fires and, with the exception of her Spanish helmsman, this was all the paid crew the *Enchantress* carried.

She drifted east with the Gulf Stream. Around her there hung a muggy atmosphere pervaded with a curious, hothouse smell. Grahame stood in the channels, heaving the lead. He found deep water, but white patches on the northern horizon, where the expanse of sea was broken by spouts of foam, marked a chain of reefs and keys that rose a foot or two above the surface. A larger streak of white was fading into the haze astern, but Grahame had carefully taken its compass bearings, because dusk, which comes suddenly in the Bahama Channel, was not far away. He dropped the lead on deck, and joined Macallister, who stood in the engine-room doorway rubbing his hands with cotton waste.

"No sign o' that steamboat yet?" the Scot asked.

"It's hazy to the east," said Grahame. "We mightn't see her until she's close if they're not making much smoke. Still, she ought to have turned up last night."

"She'll come. A tornado wouldna' stop her skipper when he had freight to collect; but ye were wise in no' paying it in advance."

"You haven't seen the fellow."

"I've seen his employers," Macallister replied with a chuckle. "Weel I ken what sort o' man would suit them. Gang canny when ye meet him, and see ye get the goods before ye sign the bill o' lading."

"I mean to take precautions. No first-class firm would touch our business."

"Verra true. And when ye find men who're no' particular about one thing, ye cannot expect them to be fastidious about another. When I deal wi' yon kind, I keep my een open."

"Where's Walthew?"

Macallister grinned.

"Asleep below, wi' his hair full o' coal-dust, looking more like a nigger than the son o' a rich American. Human nature's a verra curious thing, but if he can stand another month, I'll hae hope o' him."

"I think the lad's right. He wants to run his life on his own lines, and he is willing to pay for testing them by experience."

Grahame, glancing forward, suddenly became intent, for in one spot a dingy smear thickened the haze. It slowly grew more distinct, and he gave a seaman a quick order before he turned to his companion.

"That must be the *Miranda*. You can start your mill as soon as we have launched the dinghy."

By the time the boat was in the water the steamer had crept out of the mist. She came on fast: a small, two-masted vessel, with a white wave beneath her full bows and a cloud of brown smoke trailing across the sea astern. She was light, floating high above the water, which washed up and down her wet side as she rolled. A few heads projected over the iron bulwark near the break of the forecastle, and two men in duck stood on the bridge. Studying them through the glasses, Grahame saw they had an unkempt appearance, and he was not prepossessed in favor of the one whom he took to be the captain.

He rang the telegraph, and when the engines stopped he jumped into the dinghy with Walthew and one of the seamen. Five minutes later, they ceased rowing close to the steamer's side, which towered high above them, red with rust along the water-line. The black paint was scarred and peeling higher up, the white deckhouses and boats had grown dingy, and there was about her a poverty-stricken look. The boat swung sharply up and down a few lengths away, for the sea broke about the descending rows of iron plates as the vessel rolled.

"*Enchantress*, ahoy!" shouted one of the men on her bridge. "This is the *Miranda*. S'pose you're ready for us?"

"We've been ready for you since last night," Grahame replied.

"Then you might have got your gig over. We can't dump the stuff into that cockleshell."

"You can't," Grahame agreed. "The gig's hardly big enough either, and I won't risk her alongside in the swell that's running."

"Then what do you expect me to do? Wait until it's smooth?"

"No," said Grahame; "we'll have wind soon. You'll have to take her in behind the reef, as your owners arranged. It's not far off and you'll find good anchorage in six fathoms."

"And lose a day! What do you think your few cases are worth to us?"

"The freight agreed upon," Grahame answered coolly. "You can't collect it until you hand our cargo over. I'll take you in behind the reef and bring you out in three or four hours. There'll be a good moon."

The skipper seemed to consult with the man beside him, and then waved his hand.

"All right! Go ahead with your steamer and show us the way."

"I'd better come on board," Grahame answered. "It's an awkward place to get into, but I know it well."

A colored seaman threw them down a rope ladder, and, pulling in cautiously, Grahame waited until the rolling hull steadied, when he jumped. Walthew followed, and in a few moments they stood on the *Miranda's* deck. Walthew had been wakened when the boat was launched, and he had not had much time to dress, but he wore a fairly clean duck jacket over his coaly shirt. His bare feet were thrust into greasy slippers, and smears of oil darkened the hollows round his eyes.

One or two slouching deckhands watched the new arrivals with dull curiosity, and a few more were busy forward opening the hatch. Grahame thought the vessel a rather unfavorable specimen of the small, cheaply run tramp, but when he reached the hatch the skipper came up. He was a little man with a bluff manner, a hard face, and cunning eyes.

"They'll have the cover off in a minute and you can see your stuff," he said, and called to a man with a lantern: "Stand by with the light!"

When the tarpaulin was rolled back, Grahame went down with a mate and counted the wooden cases pointed out to him. After this, he examined their marks and numbers and, going up, declared himself satisfied.

"Now," said the skipper, "you can take us in; the sooner the better, because it will be dark before long. Would you like a drink before you start?"

Grahame said that he would wait until he had finished his work. He followed the skipper to the bridge, and rang the telegraph.

The *Miranda* went ahead, her propeller hurling up the foam as it flapped round with half the blades out of the water, while the *Enchantress* crept slowly up her froth-streaked wake. Grahame, standing at the wheel-house door, was glad that Walthew had come with him, although this reduced his vessel's crew. Macallister, however, was capable of managing his engines without assistance, for a time, and could be trusted to take charge of the *Enchantress* if necessary, for Grahame did not think the hands would give him trouble. One was a Canary Spaniard, whom they had picked up at Matanzas, a very simple and, Grahame thought, honest fellow; the other three were stupid but apparently good-humored half-breeds. Grahame would have preferred white seamen but for the danger of their getting

into trouble in parts where wine was cheap and perhaps betraying the object of the voyage in drunken boasts. His business would not bear talking about – and that was why he distrusted the *Miranda's* captain.

The moon rose before the short twilight had changed to dark, and the steamer moved on across the dimly glittering sea, until a long white line grew plainer ahead. As they drew near, the line could be seen to waver, gaining breadth and distinctness and then fading, while a dull roar which had a regular beat in it mingled with the thud of the engines. Though the *Miranda* rolled and plunged, the surface of the water was smooth as oil, and in the deep calm the clamor of the surf had an ominous sound. Then another white patch appeared to starboard, and a few moments later, a third to port.

The captain was pacing up and down his bridge.

"It's a puzzling light," he said, stopping near Grahame with a frown. "I suppose you do know the place?"

"Oh, yes," said Grahame carelessly. "We made a rough survey and took soundings. But slow her down and use your lead if you like."

"That's what I mean to do," the captain replied.

He rang the telegraph, and when the beat of engines slackened a man stood on a footboard outside the bridge, where a broad canvas belt was fastened round his waist. Whirling the heavy plummet round his head, he let it shoot forward to the break of the forecastle, and steadied the line a moment when it ran vertically up and down.

"By the deep, eight!" he called.

"Starboard!" said Grahame, and there was silence except for the rumble of the surf, while the quartermaster turned his wheel in the glass-fronted house.

In a few minutes the lead plunged down again.

"By the mark, seven!" was announced.

The captain gave Grahame a quick glance, and then looked ahead, where there was something to occupy him, for at regular intervals the sea was torn apart and a spout of foam and a cloud of spray shot up. Moreover, the vessel was heading directly toward the dangerous spot. It was not needful for Grahame to take her so close as he meant to do, but he had reasons for letting the nearness of the reef appeal to the captain's imagination.

"And a quarter six!" the leadsman called.

The captain grasped the telegraph.

"If you mean to go any closer, I'll stop her and back out!" he said. "Then you can tranship your goods outside or I'll take them on, as you like."

"We can let her come round now," Grahame answered, and beckoned to the quartermaster. "Starboard. Steady at that!"

The *Miranda* swung until the frothy confusion on the reef, where the swell broke in cascades of phosphorescent flame, bore abeam, and then a similar troubled patch grew plain on the opposite bow. There was, however, a smooth, dark strip between, and she followed it, shouldering off a spangled wash, with the propeller beating slow. Ahead, a low, hazy blur rose out of the sea, and when Grahame spoke to the captain the windlass began to clank and indistinct figures became busy on the forecastle. Then a gray strip of sand came into sight, and Grahame nodded to the anxious captain.

"You can let go here, but don't give her much cable."

The anchor splashed from the bows, there was a roar of running chain, the throb of the screw slowly turning astern, and a screaming of startled birds. She brought up, the noise died away, and the silence was emphasized by the clamor of the surf on the opposite shore of the key. The captain looked about with a frown, for the desolation of the spot and the nearness of the reefs had their effect on him.

"Hail them to get your gig over at once, and then we'll have a drink," he said.

Macallister answered Grahame's shout, for the *Enchantress* had anchored close astern, and the boat was hanging from her davits when he followed the captain into his room. The vessels rolled

lazily and the swell broke with a languid splash upon the beach, for the bight was sheltered by the reefs. The small room was lighted by an oil lamp and was very hot. A pilot coat, damp with salt, and a suit of oilskins swung to and fro across the bulkhead, and a pair of knee-boots stood in a corner. Two or three bad photographic portraits were tacked against the teakwood paneling, but except for these, all that the room contained suggested stern utility.

Unlocking a cupboard, the captain took a bottle and some glasses from a rack, and Walthew coughed as he tasted the fiery spirit.

"That's powerful stuff, but the flavor's good," he said with an attempt at politeness.

A big, greasy man who the captain informed the others was Mr. James, his chief engineer, came in. He sat down with his feet on the locker, and helped himself liberally to the spirits. In the meanwhile the captain put an inkstand on the small folding table.

"You have the bill of lading; endorse it that you've got delivery, and I'll give you a receipt for the freight."

Grahame glanced at Walthew, who sat nearest the door, and the lad looked out.

"The gig's alongside, ready for the cases," he said.

"We'll heave them up as soon as we've finished this business," the captain replied.

Grahame wrote a check and put it on the table with some American paper currency.

"Your owners have satisfied themselves that this will be met; I thought I'd better keep the other amount separate."

"That's all right," the captain returned; "but you're a hundred dollars short."

"I guess you're mistaken," Walthew said. "We've paid the freight, and a bonus to yourself, as we promised because it was an awkward job. What else do you want?"

"A bonus for the engineer," the greasy mechanic answered with a grin.

"Precisely," said the captain.

"Then I'm afraid you'll be disappointed," Grahame said, and Walthew picked up the check, which still lay on the table.

There was silence for a few moments while the *Miranda's* officers looked hard at their visitors. Grahame's face was impassive, but there was a gleam of amusement in Walthew's eyes.

"Now, you listen to me," said the captain. "Mr. James is entitled to his share, and he means to get it. You don't suppose he'd take a hand in a risky job like this entirely for the benefit of the owners?"

"Mr. James," said Walthew, "runs no risk that I can see. However, if you think he has a right to something, you can divide with him."

"No, sir! What you have given me is mine. But there's another point you've overlooked. The crew expect a few dollars, and it might be wise to satisfy them."

Grahame smiled.

"They certainly struck me as a hard crowd; but seamen don't rob cargo-shippers nowadays. Then it's difficult to imagine that you told them what's in the cases. In fact, the way they obeyed your mate suggested that there's not much liking between men and officers on board this packet. If there was any trouble, I don't know that they'd take your side."

The captain frowned; and James drained his glass again and then struck the table.

"Think something of yourselves, I reckon, but we've come out on top with smarter folks than you. Put down your money like gentlemen, and say no more."

"It's good advice," the captain added meaningly.

"Guess we disagree," Walthew said, putting the check into his pocket. "You haven't got your freight payment yet."

"Do you think you can keep that check?"

"Well," said Walthew coolly, "we could cable the bank to stop payment from the nearest port. For that matter, I'm not certain that you could take it back."

"We're willing to try," the big engineer scowled.

"And you don't get the goods until we're satisfied," the captain added.

"May I ask what you would do with the cases? They're consigned to us, and you'd have some trouble in passing them through a foreign customs house. They open things and inspect the contents when the duty's high."

"We could dump them overboard. Better do the fair thing by us and get delivery."

"I don't think we're unfair," Walthew replied. "We engaged with your owners to pay a stipulated freight, and added a bonus for the skipper. Now we put down the money and want our goods."

"The winch that heaves them up doesn't start without my order," James said with an ugly laugh. Grahame turned to the captain with a gesture of weariness.

"We don't seem to get much farther! I suspect you've forgotten something. How much a day does it cost you to run this ship?"

"What has that got to do with it?" the captain asked curtly.

"Well," said Grahame coolly, "there's a risk of your stopping here for some time. It's an awkward place to get out of unless you know it well; particularly when it's blowing fresh. The Northers hardly reach so far, but they unsettle the weather, and when the wind's from seaward a strong eddy stream runs through the bight. Perhaps you may have noticed that the glass is falling fast."

The captain looked disturbed; but he was not to be beaten so easily.

"You don't get back on board your boat until you've taken us out!" he threatened.

"I can take you out to-night, but if you miss your chance and have to wait we can afford it best. Our expenses aren't heavy, but you'll have to account to your owners for the delay that won't cost us much. Besides, you'd be forced to keep steam up in case she dragged; it's bad holding ground."

There was silence for a few moments, and then the captain made a sign of surly acquiescence.

"Very well; we won't argue about the bonus. Give me the check."

"I think we'll wait until the cases are transhipped," Walthew said with a smile.

"Give them steam for the winch, Mr. James," the captain ordered; and the engineer slouched away.

The winch began to rattle and an hour or two later Grahame went up to the bridge while the anchor was broken out. When the men were stowing it the engines throbbed and the *Miranda* turned her head toward open water. In another half hour the propeller stopped and the captain turned to his guests with a grin as the *Enchantress's* gig came alongside.

"I expect the dagoes you're shipping those rifles for will find you hard to beat," he said.

CHAPTER VII

MANGROVE CREEK

There was not a ripple on the sea when the *Enchantress*, steaming slowly, closed with the coast. The glittering water broke with a drowsy murmur at her bows and turned from silver to a deep blue in the shadow of the hull; her wake was marked by silky whirls on the back of the swell. It was four o'clock in the afternoon, the sea flung back a dazzling light, and Grahame's eyes ached as he searched the approaching land with his glasses.

Far back, blue mountains loomed through haze and the foreground was blurred and dim. One could not tell where the low expanse began or ended, though a broad, dark fringe, which Grahame knew was forest, conveyed some idea of distance. In one or two spots, a streak of white indicated surf upon a point, but the picture was flooded with a glare in which separate objects lost distinctness. Blue and gray and silver melted into one another without form or salient line.

Grahame put down the glasses and turned to the seaman near him. Miguel was getting old, but his tall figure was strong, and he stood, finely posed, with a brown hand on the wheel. His face was rugged, but he had clear, blue eyes that met one with a curious child-like gaze. He was barefooted and his thin cotton trousers and canvas jacket were spotlessly clean, though Grahame imagined he had made the latter out of a piece of old awning they had meant to throw away.

"You come from the Canaries, don't you, Miguel?" Grahame asked in Castilian. "It is not so hot there."

"From San Sebastian, señor, where the trade-breeze blows and the date-palms grow. My house stands among the tuna-figs beside the mule-track to the mountains."

"Then you have a house? Who takes care of it while you are away?"

"My señora. She packs the tomatoes they send to England. It is hard work and one earns a peseta a day."

"Then why did you leave her?" Grahame asked, for he knew that a peseta, which is equal to about twenty cents, will not buy much of the coarse maize-flour the Canary peasants live upon.

"There came a great tempest, and when my three boats were wrecked something must be done. My sons were drawn for the navy; they had no money to send. For years, señor, I was captain of a schooner fishing *bacalao* on the African coast, and when I came home to catch tunny for the Italian factory things went very well. Then the gale swept down from the peaks one night and in the morning the boats were matchwood on the reef."

"Ah!" said Grahame. He could sympathize, for he too had faced what at the time had seemed to be overwhelming disaster. "So you sailed to look for better fortune somewhere else? You hope to go back to San Sebastian some day?"

"If my saint is kind. But perhaps it is well that he is a very great angel, for fortune is not always found when one looks for it at sea."

There was no irony in Miguel's answer; his manner was quietly dignified. Indeed, though he had been taught nothing except rudimentary seamanship, he had the bearing of a fine gentleman.

"Wages are good in English and American ships," Grahame resumed, feeling that he was guilty of impertinence. "Sometimes you are able to send the señora a few dollars?"

"I send all but a little to buy clothes when I go where it is cold, and my señora buries the money to buy another boat if it is permitted that I return. Once or twice a year comes a letter, written by the priest, and I keep it until I find a man who can read it to me."

Grahame was touched. There was something pathetic in the thought of this untaught exile's patiently carrying the precious letters until he met somebody who could read his language.

"Well," he said, "if things go well with us, you will get a bonus besides your wages, which should make it easier for you to go home. But you understand there is danger in what we may have to do."

Miguel smiled.

"Señor, there is always danger on the sea."

Grahame turned and saw Walthew standing in the engine-room door. He wore dirty overalls and a singlet torn open at the neck, there was a smear of oil across his face, and his hands were black and scarred.

"What on earth have you been doing?" Grahame asked.

"Lying on my back for two hours, trying to put a new packing in the gland of a pump."

"Well, who would have predicted a year ago that you would be amusing yourself this way now!"

Walthew laughed.

"Do you know where we are?" he asked.

"I imagine we're not far off the creek; in fact, we might risk making the signal smoke. It will be dark enough to head inshore in a few hours."

"Then we'll get to work with the fires," said Walthew, promptly disappearing below.

Soon afterward, a dense black cloud rose from the funnel and, trailing away behind the *Enchantress*, spread across the sky. Grahame knew that it might be seen by unfriendly watchers, but other steamers sometimes passed the point for which he was steering. After a while he signaled for less steam, and only a faint, widening ripple marked the *Enchantress's* passage through the water as she closed obliquely with the land. It was still blurred, and in an hour Grahame stopped the engines and took a cast of the lead. Dark would come before long, when, if they had reached the right spot, signals would be made. In the meanwhile it would be imprudent to venture nearer.

Walthew and one of the seamen set out a meal on deck and when it was eaten they lounged on the stern grating, smoking and waiting. There was dangerous work before them; and, to make things worse, it must be done in the dark, because the moon now shone in the daytime. It was very hot, and a steamy, spicy smell drifted off the coast, which grew less distinct as the darkness settled down. A faint rumble of surf reached them from an unseen beach, rising and falling with a rhythm in it. The black smoke had been stopped and thin gray vapor rose straight up from the funnel. The quietness and the suspense began to react upon the men's nerves; they felt impatient and highly strung, but they talked as carelessly as they could.

Then in the quietness the roar of the sea on sandy shoals reached them ominously clear. Grahame glanced shoreward, but could see nothing, for the sun had gone and a thin mist was spreading across the low littoral.

"We're drifting inshore," he said. "As soon as I get four fathoms we'll steam out. Try a cast of the lead."

Walthew swung the plummet and they heard it strike the sea.

"Half a fathom to the good," he called as he coiled up the wet line. Then he stopped, looking toward the land. "What's that?" he said. "Yonder, abreast of the mast?"

A twinkling light appeared in the mist and grew brighter.

"A fire, I think," Grahame answered quietly. "Still, one's not enough."

A second light began to glimmer, and soon another farther on.

Macallister chuckled.

"Ye're a navigator. Our friends are ready. I've seen many a worse landfall made by highly-trained gentlemen with a big mail company's buttons."

"A lucky shot; but you had better stand by below. Start her easy."

He blew three blasts on the whistle, and the fires went out while the *Enchantress* moved slowly shoreward through the gloom. Miguel held the wheel and Grahame stood near by, watching the half-breed who swung the lead. Presently another light twinkled, and, listening hard, Grahame heard the splash of paddles. Stopping the engines, he waited until a low, gray object crept out of the mist and

slid toward the steamer's side. Ropes were thrown and when the canoe was made fast the first of the men who came up ceremoniously saluted Grahame.

"You bring the goods all right?" he asked.

"They're ready. If it makes no difference, I'd rather wait until to-morrow before delivering them. I understand the beach is mostly mangrove swamp, and it's a dark night to take the steamer up the creek."

"To-morrow she be seen; the coast is watch by spy," said the other in his quaint English; then indicated his companion. "Dese man he takes her anywhere."

Grahame hesitated.

Secrecy was essential, and if he waited for daylight and was seen by watchers who had noticed the smoke in the afternoon he might not have an opportunity for landing another cargo. For all that, knowing nothing about his pilot's skill, he imagined he ran some risk of grounding if he took the steamer in. Risks, however, could not be avoided.

"Very well," he decided. "Send him to the wheel."

He kept the lead going as the *Enchantress* crept forward, and was relieved to find that the water got no shallower. It looked as if the pilot were following a channel, for the wash of the sea on hidden shoals began to rise from both sides. Except for this and the measured throb of the engines, there was deep silence, but after a while the vessel, which had been rolling gently, grew steady, and Grahame thought he could hear the water she threw off splash upon a beach. He looked about eagerly, but there was nothing to be seen. This creeping past invisible dangers was daunting, but he felt comforted as he glanced at the motionless, dark figure at the helm. The fellow showed no hesitation; it was obvious that he knew his business.

Through the darkness low trees loomed up ahead, and shortly afterward another clump abeam. Mist clung about them, there was not much space between, and the absence of any gurgle at the bows indicated that the *Enchantress* was steaming up the inlet with the tide. The lead showed sufficient water, but Grahame had misgivings, for the creek seemed to be getting narrower. It was, however, too late to turn back; he must go on and trust to luck.

Some time later a light appeared among the trees, and the pilot ordered the engines to be stopped. Then he pulled the helm over and waved his hand as the *Enchantress* swung inshore.

"*La ancla!*" he cried. "Let her go!"

There was a splash and a sharp rattle of chain, and when the *Enchantress* stopped the beat of paddles came out of the gloom. Then the cargo-lamp was lighted and in a few minutes a group of men climbed on board. Some were dusky half-breeds, but two or three seemed to be of pure Spanish extraction. Grahame took these below, where they carefully examined the cases. When they were satisfied they followed him to the deck-cabin, and Walthew brought them some wine. One man gave Grahame a check on an American bank, and shortly afterward the work of getting up the cargo began.

Everybody became suddenly busy. Shadowy figures dragged the cases about the shallow hold and fixed the slings. Dark-skinned men, dripping with perspiration, slackened guys and swung the derrick-boom while canoes crept into the light of the cargo-lamp and vanished, loaded, into the dark. The stir lasted for some time, and then, after the cases had all been hoisted over the side, the white men among the shore party shook hands with their hosts.

"It is all right," said the spokesman. "We are ready for the next lot when you get back."

"I suppose your man will be here in the morning to take us out?" Grahame asked, because he had been told that it was too late to leave the creek that tide.

"If nothing is happen, he certainly come."

The visitors got on board their canoe, and it slid off into the mist. When the splash of paddles died away, an oppressive silence settled down on the vessel, and the darkness seemed very thick, for the big cargo-lamp had been put out. After the keen activity a reaction had set in: the men were tired and felt the heat.

"It's lonesome," Macallister remarked, and sniffed disgustedly. "Like a hothouse in a botanic garden when they've full steam on, with a dash o' Glasgow sewer thrown in. In fact, ye might call the atmosphere a wee bit high."

"I don't suppose you found it very fresh in West Africa," Walthew replied.

"I did not. That's maybe the reason the ague grips me noo and then. Ye'll learn something about handling engines when it takes me bad. This is a verra insidious smell."

"The mosquitos are worse," Grahame said. "I wonder whether there are many of them about? Anyway, I'd like a warp taken out and made fast to the trees. There's not much room to swing, and though the flood generally runs harder than the ebb in these places, one can't count on that."

Walthew got into the boat with Miguel and one of the crew, and came back half an hour later, smeared with mire and wet to the waist.

"We've made the rope fast, but this creek has no beach," he said. "The trees grow out of the water, and you slip off their roots into holes filled with slime. Couldn't feel any bottom in one or two, and I was mighty glad I caught a branch. In fact, we've had a rather harrowing experience."

"Get your wet clothes off and take some quinine before you go to sleep," Grahame advised; and when Walthew left him he watched the men heave the warp tight.

Soon afterward the crew went below, except for one who kept anchor-watch. The ebb tide was running strong, and Grahame was not quite satisfied about the way the vessel was moored. It was, however, impossible to make her more secure in the dark, and, getting sleepy presently, he left his seat on the stern grating and went to his berth.

CHAPTER VIII

THE TRAITOR

Grahame was awakened by a crash. Springing half asleep from his berth, he scrambled out on deck. Thick darkness enveloped the steamer and at first he could see nothing. Then as his eyes grew accustomed to the gloom, he made out indistinct black trees in the mist. They were sliding past and he knew the warp had broken and the *Enchantress* would swing inshore before her cable brought her up. This must be prevented, if possible, for the creek was narrow and shoal.

Jumping on the stern grating he gave his orders, and they were obeyed. He saw Macallister, in pajamas, dive into the engine-room, and the screw began to throb; then barefooted men sprang into the boat alongside, and a heavy rope ran out across the rail. There was nothing more to be done for a few moments and, lashing the wheel, Grahame hurriedly lighted a pyrotechnic flare. The strong blue radiance drove back the gloom, and the water glittered among cakes of floating scum. Then the bright beam picked out the boat, with Walthew toiling, half-naked, at an oar, and Miguel's tall figure bending to and fro as he sculled astern. Another man was rowing forward, and his tense pose told of determined effort, but he vanished as the light moved on.

The rope the crew were taking out fixed Grahame's attention. It crawled through the water in heavy coils, like a snake, holding the boat back while the stream swept her sideways. He did not think she could reach the opposite bank, though the *Enchantress* was sheering that way to help her. Then the light forced up a patch of greasy mud in which crawling things wriggled, and, passing on, picked out foul, dark caves among the mangrove roots. After that, it touched the rows of slender trunks and was lost in impenetrable gloom.

A few moments later the flare, burning low, scorched Grahame's fingers and he flung it over the rail. It fell with a hiss into the creek and bewildering darkness shut down. There was now no guide but the strain on the helm, and Grahame began to be afraid of breaking out the anchor. For a time the splash of oars continued, telling of the tense struggle that went on in the gloom, but it stopped suddenly and he knew the men were beaten. Ringing off the engines, he ran forward with a deckhand to drop the kedge anchor. It was heavy, an arm was foul of something, and they could not drag it clear, until a dim object appeared close by.

"Heave!" cried a breathless voice. "Handy, noo! Away she goes!"

There was a splash and a rattle as the chain ran out, a thud as the returning boat came alongside, and then the vessel quivered, listed down on one side, and became motionless.

"I'm thinking she's hard and fast, but we'll try to shake her off," Macallister said and vanished, and soon the engines began to turn.

The *Enchantress* trembled, straining hard and rattling, but when somebody lighted the cargo-lamp, which still hung from a boom, it could not be seen that she moved. The light showed a narrow stretch of water, sliding past, blotched with foul brown foam. Then it fell upon the boat's crew, who had come on board, and Grahame saw that Walthew was gasping for breath. His flushed face was wet and drawn with effort, and his bare arms and neck were marked by small red spots.

"Sorry we couldn't manage to reach the bank," he panted. "Warp kept getting across her and the stream was running fast. But I'd better help Mack."

"Sit still a minute," Grahame said. "What are those marks on your neck?"

"Mosquito bites, I guess. Hadn't time to swat the brutes; they were pretty fierce."

The deck was now slanting steeply, and Grahame, looking over the rail, saw a wet strip a foot broad between the dry planks and the water.

"You can tell Mack to shut off steam," he said. "She's here until next tide and I'm not certain we can float her then."

The engines stopped, there was by contrast a curious stillness, and the men went below; but Grahame spent some time studying a chart of the coast and a nautical almanac before he went to sleep.

When the cases had been safely landed, the little group of Spaniards and half-breeds separated, some following the coastline going south, others finding a narrow path that led through the jungle beyond the mangrove-trees. Bio, the peon pilot, lingered behind. There was no moon, but the night was not really dark, for the sky was jeweled with stars which covered the earth with a soft, mystic radiance.

When the footsteps of the others had died away and the night was quiet, Bio started slowly down the jungle path. It opened out into a flat stretch of sandy land and then was lost in a plantation of coffee-trees. Beyond the coffee plantation was an uncultivated space known to the natives as *La colina del sol* (The Hill of the Sun) because of the many broad rocks upon which the sun beat down in all its intensity. Here and there a wild date-palm grew, and an occasional clump of bananas; but except for that the hill was covered with low shrubbery and a blanket of trailing vines, which now were wet with the dew.

Bio went directly to one of the rocks and stood upon it looking upward at the stars. The warmth that still remained in the rock was pleasant to his damp, bare feet. The air about him was filled with the soft flutter of moths and other honey-seekers; the heavy perfume of a white jasmine came to him, mingled with the sweet odor of the night-blooming cereus. At his side an insect chirped, and above him a whistling frog gave answer.

These wild night sounds found quick response in Bio's Indian blood. With an odd little smile of content, he stretched out on the rock to listen – and to sleep. At high tide he would have to return to take the boat out of Mangrove Creek; what better place to wait than *La colina del sol*?

He awakened shortly after daybreak, very hungry; but he knew where he could get a pleasant breakfast before returning to the boat. With a comfortable yawn and stretch, he left the rock and pattered off down the hill to a path that led to the main road. A half mile down this stood a little adobe house owned by a Spaniard who was suspected of sympathizing with the revolutionists although he had many friends among the *rurales*.

When Bio reached the house he gave his customary signal – a stick drawn harshly across the iron gratings at the window; and the door was soon opened by Filodomo himself. A hasty conversation followed, and Bio went back to the kitchen while Filodomo aroused his daughter. And when the black-eyed Rosita came tripping out, with the flush of sleep still on her, Bio all but forgot the *yanqui señores* and their boat which waited in Mangrove Creek.

He was enjoying his breakfast so much, indeed, that he did not hear Filodomo talking loudly in the front room. Rosita was more alert. She paused a moment to listen, and then the laughter in her eyes changed to quick alarm.

"*Los rurales!*" she whispered.

Bio was on his feet instantly. The *rurales* had several counts against him, and he knew what his life would be worth if he were caught. Rosita, too, seemed to know. She led him quickly to the low window and pointed to a narrow path that led through a field of cane. Bio lost no time. As he disappeared among the green stalks, the girl gave a sigh of relief; and then hurried into the front room to put the *rurales* off his path.

Bio made his way quickly but cautiously through the cane-field, meaning to double back to *La colina del sol*; but as he left the cane and rounded a gigantic calabash-tree he ran directly into the arms of two young *rurales*.

"Not so fast, my friend," said one of them, grabbing him.

"Bio!" exclaimed the other.

And Bio knew there was no hope of escape. The *rurales* were only too eager for the credit of capturing him and taking him to headquarters.

Four days later he found himself in a military camp and was led at once to the officer in charge. During all the questions of the *rurales* he had maintained a sullen silence; but now he was forced to speak.

"We are told that the revolutionists are getting rifles from a little boat that lands them at impossible places," the officer said. "Only a pilot with your knowledge of the coast could bring in such a boat. Tell us what you know!"

Bio did not answer.

The officer leaned forward threateningly.

"We have enough charges against you to warrant our shooting you on the spot," he said. "You will never see another sunrise, unless you tell us – and tell us quickly, and truthfully!"

A gleam of hope crept into Bio's eyes.

"And if I tell you – all?"

"Then, if I believe you, you will be set at liberty."

There was a sneer in the conditional clause that made Bio's blood run cold for an instant; but it seemed his only chance of escape, and he began haltingly but in a tone that they could not doubt was the truth.

"I left the boat far up in Mangrove Creek," he ended. "I think the *yanqui* señores cannot take her out."

"Tell Morales to have the mules ready at once!" the officer ordered. "The quickest road?" he asked Bio.

The pilot answered without faltering. The road he told them was twice as far as over *La colina del sol* and through the jungle path.

The officer consulted a few moments with the *rurales* who had brought Bio in, and then gave his decision.

"My men will not need you. You will be held in camp for one day and then set at liberty. I am a man of my word!"

Bio could hardly believe his good luck, although he frowned anxiously at that one day's detention. Silently he followed his guards; but, as he expected, he found them very lax after the first hour or two. Long before midnight he was snaking his way noiselessly through the underbrush that surrounded the camp.

And in the meantime the *rurales* were riding furiously along the road that led to Mangrove Creek.

CHAPTER IX

STRANDED

The sun was high above the mangroves when Walthew joined Grahame and Macallister at breakfast the morning after they landed the rifles. No wind entered the gap in the forest, the smoke went straight up from the slanted funnel, and the air was still and sour. The steamer lay nearly dry among banks of mire, though a narrow strip of dazzling water sluggishly flowed inland past her. Fifty yards outshore, there was a broader channel and beyond it the dingy, pale-stemmed mangroves rose like a wall. Some were strangely spotted, and Walthew glanced at them with disgust as he drank his coffee.

"I guess I've never seen such repulsive trees," he said. "This place takes away one's appetite. Even the coffee's bitter; you've been doctoring it."

"It's weel to take precautions," Macallister replied. "Ye got a few nibbles last night from a dangerous bit beastie they ca' *anopheles*."

"I suppose it doesn't manufacture the malaria germ, and from the looks of the place one wouldn't imagine there was anybody else about for it to bite."

"That's what we're hoping. We're no' anxious for visitors, but when ye meet a smell like what we noo enjoy, ye take quinine till it makes ye hear church bells ringing in your head."

Walthew turned to Grahame.

"Can you get her off?"

"We'll try. The sooner we get out the better; but the tides are falling."

"Do you reckon the half-breed pilot meant to pile her up?"

"No," said Grahame thoughtfully. "For one thing, it would be a dangerous game, because his employers wouldn't hesitate about knifing him. They gave us a check which I've reason to believe will be honored and they wouldn't have wasted their money if they'd meant treachery. I imagine they're all too deep in the plot to turn informer."

"Do you think the pilot will turn up to take us out then?"

"I believe he'll be here at high-water, unless he's prevented."

"What could prevent him?"

"It's possible that our friends have been followed by the opposition's spies. The man who rules this country is not a fool."

"Then it seems to me we must do our best to heave the boat off this tide."

"Mack and I agree with you," Grahame said meaningly.

Breakfast was soon finished, for nobody had much appetite, and they sat, smoking, in the thin shade while the water got deeper in the creek. When the *Enchantress* slowly rose upright, Macallister went down to stir the fires; but though the others listened anxiously no splash of paddles broke the silence.

"Our pilot's not coming," Grahame said at last. "I'll try to take her out if we can get her afloat."

"What's likely to happen to him if he's been corralled by the dictator's rural-guards?"

"On the whole," said Grahame, "I'd rather not speculate. They have a drastic way of dealing with rebels here."

An hour later the screw shook the vessel, while the windlass strained at the cable. Once or twice a few links of chain ran in and she moved, but the mud had a firm hold and she stuck fast again. Then the water began to fall and Grahame reluctantly told Macallister to draw the fires.

"We're here for the next six days," he said.

"It's to be hoped the Government's spies don't find us out before we get her off," Walthew remarked.

"We could put the coal and heavier stores ashore, if ye can find a bit dry beach to land them on," Macallister suggested. "It would lighten her."

"I thought of that," Grahame answered. "On the other hand, it might be safer to keep them on board as long as possible. We could strip her and land everything in a day."

Macallister agreed, and for four days they lounged in such shade as they could find. It was fiercely hot, not a breath of wind touched the dazzling creek, and the sun burned through the awning. The pitch bubbled up from the deck-seams, the water in the tanks was warm, and innumerable flies came off from the mangroves and bit the panting men. To make things worse, there was no coolness after sunset, when steamy mist wrapped the vessel in its folds, bloodthirsty mosquitos came down in swarms, buzzing insects dimmed the lamps, and the smell of festering mire grew nauseating. Sleep was out of the question, and when the mosquitos drove them off the deck the men lay in their stifling berths and waited drearily for another day of misery to begin.

Among other discomforts, Walthew, who was not seasoned to the climate, was troubled by a bad headache and pains in his limbs, but he said nothing about this and accompanied Grahame when the latter took the soundings in the dinghy. At last they rose at daybreak one morning to lighten the vessel, and although he felt shaky and suffered from a burning thirst, Walthew took charge of the gig, which was to be used for landing coal.

The work was hard, for when they reached a sand bar up the creek they were forced to wade some distance through mud and shallow water with the heavy bags on their backs, while the perspiration soaked their thin clothes and the black dust worked through to their skin. At noon they stopped for half an hour and Walthew lay in the stern-sheets of the gig where there was a patch of shade. He could not eat, and after drinking some tea tried to smoke, but the tobacco tasted rank and he put his pipe away. Up to the present his life had been luxurious. He had been indulged and waited on, and had exerted himself only in outdoor sports. Now he felt very sick and worn out, but knew that he must make good. Having declined to enter his father's business, he must prove his capacity for the career he had chosen. Moreover, he suspected that Macallister and Grahame were watching him.

When the clatter of the winch began again he hid the effort it cost him to resume his task and stubbornly pulled his oar as the gig floated up the creek with her gunwale near awash. His back hurt him almost unbearably when he lifted a heavy bag, and it was hard to keep upon his feet while he floundered through the mire. Sometimes his head reeled and he could scarcely see. The blisters on his hands had worked into bleeding sores. This, however, did not matter much by comparison with the pain in his head.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.