

Boothby Guy

The Kidnapped President



Guy Boothby

The Kidnapped President

«Public Domain»

Boothby G.

The Kidnapped President / G. Boothby — «Public Domain»,

Содержание

CHAPTER I	5
CHAPTER II	10
CHAPTER III	16
CHAPTER IV	22
CHAPTER V	28
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	29

Boothby Guy

The Kidnapped President

CHAPTER I

I suppose to every man, at some period in his life, there comes some adventure upon which, in after life, he is destined to look back with a feeling that is very near akin to astonishment. Somebody has said that adventures are to the adventurous. In my case I must confess that I do not see how the remark applies. I was certainly fourteen years at sea, but in all that time, beyond having once fallen overboard in Table Bay, and, of course, the great business of which it is the purpose of this book to tell you, I cannot remember any circumstance that I could dignify with the title of an adventure. The sailor's calling in these times of giant steamships is so vastly different from what it was in the old days of sailing ships and long voyages that, with the most ordinary luck, a man might work his way up the ratlines from apprentice to skipper with little less danger than would be met with in a London merchant's office. Though I was not aware of it, however, I was destined to have an adventure, stirring enough to satisfy the most daring, before my seafaring life came to an end.

How well I remember the day on which I was appointed fourth officer of the ocean liner *Pernambuco*, running from London to South America. I should here remark that I held a second officer's certificate, but I was, nevertheless, glad enough to take what I could get, in the hope of being able to work my way up to something better. It was not a bad rise, when all was said and done, to leave a ramshackle old tub of a tramp for the comparatively luxurious life of a mail boat; much jollier merely to run out to the Argentine and back, instead of dodging at a snail's pace from port to port all round the world. Then again there was the question of society. It was pleasanter in every respect to have pretty girls to flirt with on deck, and to sit beside one at meals, than to have no one to talk to save a captain who was in an intoxicated state five days out of seven, a grumpy old chief mate, and a Scotch engineer, who could recite anything Burns ever wrote, backwards or forwards, as you might choose to ask him for it. When I had been six months on board the *Pernambuco*, I was made third officer; at the end of the year I signed my name on the pay-sheet as second. Eventually I got my Master's Certificate, and became chief officer. Now everybody knows, or ought to know, that the duties of chief officer on board a big liner, and, for the matter of that, on any other boat, are as onerous as they are varied. In the first place, he is the chief executive officer of the ship, and is held responsible, not only for its appearance, but also for the proper working of the crew. It is a position that requires consummate tact. He must know when to see things and when not to see them, must be able to please the passengers, and yet protect the interests of his owners, must, and this is not the least important fact, be able to keep his men constantly employed, yet not earn for himself the reputation of being too hard a task-master. Finally, he has to see that all the credit for what he does is not appropriated by himself, but goes to increase the *kudos* of his commanding officer. If the latter is a gentleman, and can appreciate his officers' endeavours at their real value, matters will in all probability go smoothly; on the other hand, however, if the captain is a bully, then the chief officer is likely to wish himself elsewhere, or at least that he was the holder of some other rank. This was my case on my last and most memorable voyage in the service of a particular Company that every one knows, but which, for various reasons, shall be nameless.

I had never met Captain Harveston until he joined us in dock on the day previous to sailing, but I had heard some scarcely complimentary remarks about him from men who had sailed with him. I must confess, therefore, that I was prepared to dislike him. In appearance he was as unlike a sailor as a man could well be, was a great dandy in his dress, and evidently looked upon himself as an undoubted lady-killer. So far as I was concerned, he had hardly set foot on the vessel before he

commenced finding fault. A ship in dock, before the passengers come aboard, and while the thousand and one preparations are being made for a voyage, is seldom an example of tidiness. Surely a skipper, who had been at sea for thirty years, must have realized this; for some reason, however, best known to himself, it pleased Captain Harveston to inaugurate our acquaintance by telling me that he liked a "spic and span ship," and that he judged his officers by what he saw of their work.

"You shall have nothing to complain of as soon as I get the workmen out, sir," I replied, a bit nettled at being called over the coals upon such a trumpery matter.

"I trust I shall not," he answered superciliously, and then strutted down the bridge to his own cabin, which was just abaft the chart-room.

As it turned out, the Isle of Wight was scarcely astern before the trouble began. Young Herberts, our second officer, was the first to get a wiggling, and Harrison, the fourth, quickly followed suit. I felt sure my time would not be long in coming, and I was not wrong. On the second day out, and during my watch below, I was talking to the purser in his cabin, when the fourth officer appeared to inform me that the captain wished to see me on the promenade deck. Thither I made my way, to find him seated there with a number of lady passengers round him.

"Surely he is not going to be nasty before these ladies," I said to myself as I approached him.

I discovered, however, that this was exactly what he was going to do.

"Mr. Helmsworth," he began, "I am told that you have refused the passengers the use of the bull-board."

"Indeed, sir, I have not," I replied. "I informed one of the gentlemen who spoke to me about it that I would have it brought up directly we were clear of the Channel. As a rule we never produce it until we're out of the Bay. I had Captain Pomeroy's instructions to that effect."

"I am captain of this vessel now," he returned. "Please see that the board is brought on deck at once. I must ask you for the future to do all that lies in your power to promote the pleasure of the passengers. It is a duty I have a right to expect of my officers."

"Very good, sir," I answered and walked away.

From that day forward I saw that my service under Captain Harveston was likely to be a short one, and, indeed, by the time we reached Buenos Ayres, I felt as if I could throw up my appointment altogether. He was never satisfied, never pleased, and did nothing but grumble and find fault from morning until night.

After the usual fortnight's stay at the capital of the Argentine, we commenced our homeward voyage. Our first port of call was Rio, where Harveston and the third officer came to loggerheads. By this time the whole ship's company had taken his measure, and I fancy he must have known it. Being of a petty disposition, he attributed this to me, and accordingly laid himself out to make my life aboard as disagreeable as it was possible for him to do. How bitterly I regretted the loss of my old skipper, who had been kindness and consideration itself, I must leave you to imagine.

And now I must turn from a narration of my own misfortunes during that miserable voyage to give you a description of a man, whose personality is destined to play such an important part in my narrative. He joined us at Rio, and was one of the last passengers to come aboard. He was a Spaniard, and, as could be seen at a glance, a well-bred one at that. He called himself Don Guzman de Silvestre. He was very tall; I should say some inches over six feet, with the darkest of dark eyes and hair, aquiline features, and a small pointed beard, that he had a habit of stroking when thinking. Taken altogether, a more romantic personality could scarcely be imagined, and as he came up the gangway, I told myself that he was the best figure of a man I had seen for some considerable time. When he asked me at what hour we should sail, I noticed that he spoke English perfectly, and in a musical voice that was very pleasant to listen to. Before we had been many days at sea, he and I had had several talks upon all sorts of subjects, considerably to Captain Harveston's annoyance, for the latter did not approve of his officers being on anything like friendly terms with the passengers.

Having no desire to quarrel with my chief, I endeavoured, as far as possible, to keep out of his way, but for some reason this only had the effect of incensing him more against me.

We were a full ship on the homeward voyage, and, as we generally did a lot of painting between Barbadoes and Madeira, I found my time pretty well taken up. It was in connection with this painting that the climax came. We had left the West Indies behind us, and at the time were steering a straight course for Madeira. The men, when the incident I am about to describe happened, were at work on the port rails of the promenade deck. One of them, who had been outside the rail, climbed over, pot in hand, to obey an order I had given him. At the moment that he did so, the long Atlantic swell caused the vessel to give a big roll, and before he could save himself, he was flying across the deck towards a chair in which a lady was seated. They came into violent collision, with the result that the pot of white paint was deposited in her lap. I hastened to her assistance, and did all that was possible at the moment to remedy the mishap. Fortunately for the man, who was overcome by the magnitude of the catastrophe, she took the accident in excellent part.

"You must not blame the man," she said to me. "It was not his fault. I shall have to sue the ocean for damages."

Then with a laugh she went below to change her attire.

As ill luck would have it, just after she had disappeared, the skipper emerged from the companion, and saw the splashes of paint.

"What's the meaning of this, sir?" he asked, turning on me angrily.

"One of the men met with an accident, sir," I replied. "The roll of the ship caused him to upset the paint-pot."

"You should not put that class of fellow to do such work," he returned, oblivious to the fact that he was committing the unpardonable sin of admonishing an officer before the men. "You seem to have no discrimination at all, Mr. Helmsworth."

With that he walked away, leaving me to chew my cud of humiliation in silence. After luncheon I received an order to go to the captain's cabin. I could see that I was in for more trouble, but could not guess what. One thing was very evident; he was in a towering rage.

"How is it, Mr. Helmsworth," he began, when I had entered the cabin and had closed the door, "that you deliberately kept things from me this morning that it was your duty to tell me?"

"I am not aware that I have kept anything back from you, sir," I replied, as civilly as I knew how, for I had no desire to lose my temper. "If it is with regard to the tiller of the port quarter boat –"

"It has nothing whatever to do with the port quarter boat," he answered savagely. "I want to know how it was that you did not tell me about that lady's dress being spoilt this morning. You should have reported the matter to me. Had it not been for my steward, I should have known nothing whatsoever about it."

"I did not think it worth while to trouble you with it, sir," I replied. "It was a pure accident, and Miss Burgess forgave the man, and admitted that he was not to blame."

"Accident or no accident," he retorted, "you should have informed me of the circumstance. I consider you sadly wanting in your duty, Mr. Helmsworth. Of late, your manner has been most disrespectful to me, and I tell you to your face, sir, that your ship is a disgrace to any chief officer."

"I am sorry you should say that," I answered, endeavouring to keep my temper; "I have always had the reputation of turning my ship out well. If you will point out anything that is wrong, I will at once have it rectified."

"Don't bandy words with me, sir," he stormed. "I am not used to it from my officers. I repeat that your ship is a disgrace to any chief officer, and I shall take care that the matter is duly reported to the Board as soon as we reach London."

"Perhaps you will be good enough to tell me what you consider wrong, sir?"

"Everything," he answered. "I thought yesterday I pointed out to you a hole in the after awning."

"You did, sir, and it has been repaired. I put the sail-maker on to it at once."

He rose from his chair with a look of triumph on his face.

"Kindly step aft with me," he said, "and let us examine it for ourselves."

Feeling confident that what I had said was correct, I gladly accompanied him, but to my horror, when we reached the place in question, there was the rent gaping at us without a stitch in it.

"I regret exceedingly that you should consider it necessary to cover your negligence by telling me what is not true," he said in a voice so loud that some of the second-class passengers could hear it.

This was more than I could swallow.

"I'll not be called a liar by you, Captain Harveston, or by any man living," I retorted, feeling that I would have given something to have been able to have knocked him down. "If you will send for the sail-maker, he will inform you that I gave him orders to do it this morning. It is no fault of mine that he has neglected his duty."

"It is the fault of no one else, sir," returned the captain. "If you kept the men up to their work, this would not have been left undone. I shall be careful to enter this occurrence in the log-book."

So saying he stalked majestically away, and I went in search of the sail-maker. The man, it appeared, had intended doing the work, but had been called away to something else, and had forgotten it. After that, I returned to my own cabin, and sat down to think the matter over. There could be no sort of doubt that I was in an exceedingly unenviable position. I could quite see that if Harveston reported me, the Board would be likely to believe his version of the story, and even if they did not consider me quite as negligent as he was endeavouring to make me, they would probably argue that I was not all I might be, on the basis that there can be no smoke without fire. Whatever else might be said, a reputation for slovenliness and untruthfulness would be scarcely likely to help me in my career. From that day forward matters went from bad to worse. It seemed impossible for me to do right, however hard I might try. What was more annoying, I began to feel that, not content with disliking me himself, the captain was endeavouring to set the passengers against me also.

During the run across the Atlantic I had, as I have said, several long talks with Don Guzman de Silvestre. The man interested me immensely. What his profession was I could not ascertain, but from numberless little remarks he let fall, I gathered that he was the possessor of considerable wealth. Certainly he had seen a variety of strange life. Were it not that he narrated his adventures with an air of truth that left no room for doubt, it would have been impossible to have believed him. He had seen fighting in Mexico, in Nicaragua, in Brazil, and with Balmaceda in Chili.

"I suppose in South America there will be Revolutions until the end of Time," I remarked one evening, as we sat talking together in my cabin.

"I should say it is more than likely," he answered, taking his cigar from his mouth and holding it between his long, slim fingers. "If you take specimens of all the most excitable races in the world and graft them on stock even more excitable than themselves, what can you expect? In such countries Might must always be Right, and the weakest will go to the wall."

"I shouldn't care much about being President in that description of place," I returned. "It's a case of being in power and popular to-day, unpopular and assassinated to-morrow."

"There is certainly a large amount of risk in this," the Don replied meditatively. "And yet men are always to be found desirous of taking up the reins of government."

I could not help wondering whether he had ever felt the ambition he spoke of.

"I remember meeting a man in Paris some years ago," he continued after a few moments' silence, "who was what one might call a world's vagabond. He had been a soldier in French Africa, a shearer in Australia, a miner at the Cape, a stockbroker in New York, and several other things. When I met him, he was, as I have said, in Paris, and practically starving. He could speak half the languages of the world well enough to be thought a native, was absolutely fearless; indeed, taken altogether he was about as devil-may-care a sort of fellow as I had ever met in my life. Three years later he was Dictator of one of the South American Republics we have been speaking of."

"And where is he now?"

"At the end of six months another man came upon the scene, won the favour of the Standing Army, and began to make trouble for those in power, with the result that my friend had to vacate his office, also the country, at remarkably short notice. Some day he will go back and endeavour to unseat the individual who supplanted him. The latter gained his place by treachery, but if he is not careful he will lose it by something else."

"Your friend is a man who does not forget an injury then?" I remarked, with a well-defined suspicion that he was speaking of himself.

"I rather fancy he is," he replied. "At any rate, I am quite certain he is not one who forgives."

Then he changed the conversation by inquiring how long I had been at sea, and what countries I had visited. With some of them he professed to be acquainted.

"It is rather impertinent of me to say so," he said, looking round to see that there was no one near the door, "but I am afraid you and your captain are not on the best of terms."

"I am sorry to say that we are not," I answered, and stopped there, for I had no desire to discuss the matter with him.

"You hold a Master's Certificate, do you not?" he inquired.

I answered in the affirmative, and once more he was silent.

"I suppose you would have no objection to shipping as captain," he went on after a long pause, "if the opportunity ever presented itself?"

"Most certainly I should not," I replied, with a laugh. "I fear, however, it will be some time before I shall have such an opportunity."

"In this line, perhaps," he said, "but I suppose, if you had an offer from another firm, you would accept it?"

"I should feel very much inclined to do so," I said, wondering at the same time what he was driving at.

"Are you married?"

"No," I replied, "but I hope to be as soon as I can afford it. So far as I can see, however, that event, like the captainship, is a long way off. The good old days when skippers made money are past, and now-a-days, what with entertaining and one thing and another, it's as much as a man can do to make both ends meet. Sometimes I'm afraid they don't meet at all. I wish some kind friend would come along and offer me a comfortable shore billet on anything like pay – it would do him good to see me jump at it."

"That may come yet," he replied, and then he rose and bade me good-night.

A few evenings later, and as we were approaching the English Channel, he again spoke to me on the subject. His persistent recurrence to it gave me a feeling that there was something behind it all. But what that something was I had no sort of idea. I was destined to find out, however, even sooner than I imagined.

CHAPTER II

Four days later we reached England, and one of the most unpleasant voyages I have ever made was at an end. Having seen everything right on board, I left the ship. Captain Harveston had not said good-bye to me, and for this reason I did not consider it necessary that I should go out of my way to be civil to him. That the man intended doing me a mischief I felt certain, but what form his enmity would take I could only conjecture. The entry was in the log-book, and some action would be taken of it without a doubt.

From London I took the train to Salisbury, intending to walk out to my home at Falstead, one of the loveliest if not *the* loveliest of all the Wiltshire villages with which I am acquainted. It was delightful to think that in a few hours I should see Molly, my pretty sweetheart, again, and in her gentle company, and that of my dear old mother (my father had been dead many years), endeavour to forget for a fortnight the worries and troubles that had been my portion during the past two months. Molly, I must tell you, or Miss Mary Wharton, was a lady of much importance at Falstead. She was an orphan, and her father had been the Vicar of the hamlet for nearly fifty years. When her parents died she had received an offer of a home in London, but she could not find it in her heart to leave the place in which she had been born, so she remained on in the capacity of village schoolmistress and organist, loved by the children, consulted by the mothers, and respected by every one. My father had been the local medico, and I had known Molly all my life. We had played together as children, had received our first lessons together, had fallen in love later, and were engaged when I was twenty-three and she two years my junior.

It was nearly four o'clock when I reached Salisbury and started on my five miles' tramp to the village. My luggage I left to be brought on next day by the carrier, taking with me a small hand-bag containing sufficient for my immediate needs. I can remember the time when those five miles had seemed to me the longest walking in all the world; now, however, after so many weeks of sea, the green lanes, varied with open stretches of down, were beautiful beyond compare. Every turn of the road brought to light some spot of interest. I crossed the old stone bridge at the entrance to the village, and noted the place where I had caught my first trout, and further on, as I passed a certain stile, upon which hundreds of initials had been carved, recalled the fact that it was there I had fought Nathaniel Burse, the village bully, and, unlike the heroes of most romances, had received a sound drubbing for my pains.

About a quarter of a mile from my mother's cottage I overtook the worthy Vicar, who, as he informed me, had been to pay a visit to a farm on the Downs.

"Let me be the first to offer you a hearty welcome home," he said. "You seem to have been away for a shorter time than ever this voyage."

"It has certainly not seemed so to me," I answered, and with a considerable amount of truth. "I am the more glad to be back. How is the village?"

"By the village, I suppose you mean Miss Wharton, do you not?" said the old fellow with a chuckle. "She is wonderfully well, and I fancy is looking forward to your return. Your mother keeps well also, I saw her yesterday."

We walked on together until I could see ahead of us the little ivy-covered house in which I had been born. At the gate I bade the kindly old gentleman good-bye and entered, to be received on the threshold by Molly and my mother. For the next few minutes I had to submit, and I will leave you to imagine whether I did so willingly or not, to such a kissing and hugging as the average man seldom receives. Then I was escorted to the little drawing-room and given my favourite chair, while Molly made tea and my mother sat beside me and affectionately stroked my hand. Could you have seen Molly at that moment, you would have declared her to be the true picture of an English woman.

As you have probably observed by this time, I am not much of a hand at describing people, but I must endeavour to give you some idea of what my sweetheart was like. In the first place she was tall, possibly five feet nine inches. Her eyes were blue, and her hair a rich nut-brown. On the day of my arrival she was dressed in white, with a white belt round her shapely waist; while on the third finger of her left hand was the ring I had bought for her at Salisbury after our engagement was announced. Even now, though ten years have elapsed, I can feel the joy of that home-coming. I sat sipping my tea, and eating slice after slice of real Wiltshire bread-and-butter in a whirl of enchantment. Of course Molly remained to supper with us, and if afterwards we went for a stroll down the shadowy lanes as far as Bellam Woods, where you can stand on the hill and look down the valley to Salisbury, five miles away, who shall blame us?

The next three days were about as happy, so far as I am concerned, as a man could wish to spend. Fortunately it was holiday time with Molly, and in consequence she and I were inseparable from morning until night. We fished together, went for long walks together, and on the third day I borrowed the Vicar's pony-cart and drove her into Salisbury. Alas! however, that day was destined to end in very different fashion to what it had begun. Having returned the pony-cart to the vicarage, we strolled home together. My mother's maid-of-all-work had brought in the letters that had arrived by evening mail, and on the little table in the hall was one addressed to me. I turned it over, to discover upon the back of the envelope the monogram of the Company – my employers. With a heart full of forebodings I opened it. It was very brief, and read as follows —

"Dear Sir,

"I am desired by the Chairman to inform you that the Board will be glad if you will make it convenient to be present at their meeting on Friday next at three o'clock.

"I am,

"Yours very truly,

J. Hopkinson, Secretary."

"What does it mean, Dick?" Molly asked. "Why do they want to see you? I think it is very unkind of them to spoil your holiday by taking you away when you only have such a short time at home."

"I am afraid it means trouble," I answered. "Captain Harveston and I did not get on very well together, and I expect he has been making complaints against me at head-quarters. He threatened to do so."

"Then he is a very unjust man," said my sweetheart, her eyes flashing. "And I should like to tell him so!"

That the letter worried me a good deal I am not going to deny. My bread-and-butter depended upon the Company's good opinion, and if I lost that I should certainly lose my position too. On the appointed day I bade my dear ones farewell, walked into Salisbury, and caught the train to London, reaching the Company's offices, which were in Leadenhall Street, about a quarter of an hour before the meeting was due to take place. A liveried porter showed me into the waiting-room, where I remained for something like twenty minutes, kicking my heels impatiently, and wondering what the end of the business would be. Then the door opened and the Secretary entered.

"The Board will see you now, Mr. Helmsworth," he said, and I accordingly followed him to the room in which the meetings of the Company took place. There I discovered a full Meeting. The Chairman was seated at the head of the table – a dignified, portly personage – while on either side of him were ranged the Directors, who I could see regarded me with some curiosity as I entered.

"Mr. Helmsworth," said the Chairman, after the Secretary had returned to his place, "we have requested your presence to-day in order to inform you that Captain Harveston has felt it his duty to make a serious complaint to us of your conduct during the voyage which has just ended. To be candid, he charges you with general neglect of duty, of insulting conduct towards himself, and, I

regret to add, of untruthfulness. We thought it better that you should have an opportunity of hearing these charges, and giving you a chance of defending yourself, should you care to do so. It is needless for me to add how much the Board regrets that such a report should have been made against you. What have you to say?"

"All I can say, sir," I replied, advancing to the bottom of the table, and taking up my position there, "is that the report has not a word of truth in it. It is a malicious invention on the part of Captain Harveston, and, if he were here, I should tell him so."

"Come, come, Mr. Helmsworth, you must not talk like that," said the Chairman; "Captain Harveston has been a long time in our service, and we have never known him act unjustly to any one. Would it not be better to admit that there is *some* truth in what he says, and then to leave it to the clemency of the Board, to deal with as they may consider fair?"

"I am afraid, sir," I replied, "with all due respect to yourself and the Board, that I cannot submit to being declared neglectful of my duties, or allow myself to be called untruthful when I know the charge to be unjust. For some reason, I cannot say what, Captain Harveston took a dislike to me before the voyage commenced, and this report is the outcome of that dislike."

I then proceeded to explain what had happened; pointed out that while the dock workmen were engaged upon the ship, and she was of necessity in an untidy condition, Captain Harveston had complained of her lack of orderliness. I referred to the paint incident, and commented upon the fact that he had charged me with concealing what had happened from him. With regard to the ship being in an untidy state throughout the voyage, I stated that I was prepared to bring witnesses to prove that she was as perfect as it was possible for a ship to be. If a little of the gloss had worn off by the time we reached the Thames, I explained that it was due to the fact that we had experienced very rough weather in the Bay and also coming up Channel. The charge of untruthfulness I dismissed as being both petty and absurd. Towards the end of my remarks I had some difficulty in restraining my temper, for I could see that the Board was still inclined to side with the captain against me. Perhaps my manner was not submissive enough to please them. At any rate when they asked me to withdraw for a few minutes while they discussed the matter, I began to feel that my case was, so far as they were concerned, a hopeless one. After ten minutes' absence I was recalled.

"Mr. Helmsworth," the Chairman began in his dignified way, polishing his glasses with his pocket-handkerchief as he spoke, "we have most carefully gone into the matter, and have arrived at the conclusion that, taking into consideration the length of time you have been in the Company's service, and the fact that there have never been any complaints against you hitherto, we should be justified in permitting you an opportunity of retrieving any little error you may have committed. If, therefore, you will agree to apologize to Captain Harveston, and will promise to do your best in the future, I may say on behalf of the Board, that we are prepared to allow this most painful matter to drop."

This was more than I had bargained for. I had at least hoped that they would have given orders that I should be confronted with my accuser, and that I should be allowed to call witnesses in my own defence.

"With all due respect, gentlemen," I said, with perhaps more freedom than I should have used, "I cannot submit to such a thing. Captain Harveston has brought these charges against me for some reason best known to himself. It seems to me, if only in common fairness, that he should be called upon to prove them, and if he is unable to do so, to apologize to me for the wrong he has done me. I declare most emphatically that I am innocent, and, if you will allow me, I will prove it. I am sure my brother officers will be able to convince you as to my ability, and to the state of the ship. The Dock Superintendent should also be able to do the same."

"Unfortunately the Dock Superintendent has confirmed the captain's opinion," said the Chairman.

To my chagrin, I remembered then that the Dock Superintendent and I had had a quarrel some years before, and also that he was a great friend of the captain's. It was not likely, therefore, that he would side with me.

"If the Dock Superintendent says that, I suppose I must submit," I answered. "Nevertheless, I contend that neither he nor Captain Harveston is speaking the truth."

"Dear me, dear me," said one of the Directors, "this is really not the sort of behaviour to which we are accustomed. Why not take the Chairman's advice, Mr. Helmsworth, and apologize to your captain? I am quite sure that he would bear no malice to you, and the matter could then be amicably settled."

This had the same effect upon me as the waving of a red flag is said to have upon an angry bull.

"I shall certainly not apologize," I answered. "Captain Harveston is in the wrong, and I refuse to have anything more to do with him."

"In that case, I am afraid the consequences will be serious," said the Chairman. "We should be loath to lose your services, Mr. Helmsworth, particularly after your long service, but unless you apologize to Captain Harveston, we have no other course open to us."

"I shall not do that," I returned, "and in case of my dismissal I assure you I shall immediately take what proceedings the law allows me, in order to prove that I have been slandered most grossly."

The Board stared at me in amazement. Was it possible, they were doubtless asking themselves, that a miserable chief officer dared to beard them in this fashion?

"What proceedings you take against Captain Harveston are no concern of ours, after you have quitted our employment," said the Chairman, "but if you will be well advised, you will think twice before you invoke the assistance of the law."

"I am to understand, therefore," I said, "that I am dismissed."

"No, no," the Chairman replied; "we will not go as far as that, we will call it a resignation."

"Allow me then to wish you good-day, gentlemen," I said, and bowing I walked out of the room. "You will, doubtless, hear from me later."

"A pretty market I have brought my pigs to," I said to myself, as I walked down Leadenhall Street, after leaving the offices of the Company. "Poor little Molly, this will be a sad blow to her. It looks as if my marriage is now further off than ever."

How little I guessed then that the interview I had just had, had brought it closer than if the trouble with Harveston had never occurred. Acting on the resolve I had made while waiting for the Board's decision, I made my way in the direction of High Holborn. The old lawyer who had conducted what little legal business my father had required, and who had arranged my mother's affairs after his death, had an office in one of the curious old Inns of Court in that neighbourhood. I determined to lay the case before him and to act according to the advice he gave me. On reaching the office I had the satisfaction of finding him at home. The clerk, who received me, was as old as his employer, and I believe had served him for upwards of forty years. His memory for faces must have been a good one, for he recognized me at once, although several years had elapsed since I had last called upon him.

"Mr. Winzor is in his office, Mr. Helmsworth," he said, "and, if you will be good enough to wait for a moment, I will place your name before him." He disappeared, and presently returned and requested me to follow him.

The old lawyer received me most cordially and invited me to take a seat. He asked after my mother's health, then took a pinch of snuff, looked at me fixedly, and then took another. After this he inquired in what way he could serve me. I thereupon placed the case before him.

"This is a matter," he said, after a pause of about a minute, "that will require very careful consideration. It is plain that the captain in question is a vindictive man. His reason for being so bitter against you is difficult to understand, but we have the best of evidence before us that it does exist. It's one thing, however, to be unjustly treated, and quite another to go to law about it. In a somewhat lengthy career, it has always been my endeavour to impress one thing upon my clients – Don't go to

law if you can possibly avoid it. Doubtless were you to take the case into court we could produce sufficient evidence from your brother officers and the petty officers of the ship to prove that you did your duty, and also that you were a conscientious officer. But, even supposing you won the day, how would you stand?"

"I should have reinstated my character," I replied somewhat sharply, for the old man's manner grated upon me.

"And apart from the question of character, how much better off would you be?" he asked. "The fact of your calling the officers of the ship would put the Company to a considerable amount of inconvenience and expense, which they would naturally resent. It would also have the effect of putting them in an antagonistic attitude towards yourself, which, at present, they do not appear anxious to take up. The case would attract some attention, the various shipping companies would read it, and, should you apply to them for a position, I fear you would find them averse to taking an officer who, you must forgive my plain speaking, was ready to invoke the aid of the law to settle his disputes with his captain and his employers. Do you see my contention?"

"Yes, I see it," I replied; "but, surely, you don't mean to say that I am to have this injustice done me and say nothing about it?"

"I am afraid I do not see what else to advise you to do," he replied. "I think you have been badly treated, but, upon my word, though if I were in your place I should doubtless feel as you do, I should drop the matter, and, to quote a familiar Stock Exchange expression, 'cut the losses.'"

This was not at all what I had expected, and boiling over as I was, the advice he gave me was most unpalatable. He must have seen this, for he tapped me gently on the arm.

"Master Richard," he said, as if he were talking to a school-boy, "I am an old man and you are a young one. Youth is proverbially hot-headed, while Age is apt to stand off, and looks at things from afar. I pledge you my word that, in giving you this advice, I am acting as I deem best for your welfare. There is an old saying to the effect that 'there are as good fish in the sea as ever came out of it,' and I fancy the same remark can be made to apply to the vessels sailing upon that sea. Now will you leave the matter in my hands?"

"Most willingly," I replied, "provided I am not going to continue to be suspected of being a malingerer and a liar."

"Sir Alexander Godfrey, the Chairman of the Company," he went on, "is a personal friend of my own, and if you will allow me, I will make a point of calling upon him to-morrow in order to have a chat with him upon the subject. I cannot promise, but I think I shall be able to induce him to persuade his brother Directors to either look over the matter, or at any rate to make sure that you leave the Company's service without any stain upon your character."

"But to do that I must be proved innocent."

The old man smiled a crafty smile.

"When you are as old as I am," he said, "you will have discovered that there are ways and ways of doing things. Leave it to me to arrange and I fancy you will be satisfied with the result."

"Let it be so, then," I replied.

"I am not a vain man," he said, "but I will say that I do not think you could do better. Now tell me how the pretty Miss Molly is."

"She is very well indeed," I replied, "but I fancy this news will be a disappointment to her."

"Not a bit of it," he answered. "It's just at such times as these that the real woman comes out. Egad! you youngsters think you understand women, but, bless my heart, you don't! And now you just trot back to Wiltshire, and give my kindest remembrances to your mother, and, well, if you like, you can give a kiss to Miss Molly for me. Tell her not to bother herself; that I will see you out of this affair all right. I am very glad, my lad, that you came to me. When you are in trouble I hope you will always do so. Your father and I were old friends, and – well, I am not going to say anything further, but I'll tell you this; if I had met your mother before your father did –"

He stopped suddenly and tapped his snuff-box upon the table, then he rose from his chair, shook me by the hand, and told me he would write me immediately he had anything of importance to tell me.

I took this as a signal for dismissal, and thanking him for his advice, left him. Twenty minutes later I caught the three o'clock express at Waterloo, and in something under two hours was back in Wiltshire once more.

Molly met me half-way out of Salisbury, and her loving sympathy cheered me more than anything else could have done.

"Don't be miserable about it," she said, when I had told her everything; "there are plenty of ships in the world, and lots of owners who will value your services more than this Company seems to have done. Remember, I believe in you with my whole heart, dear, and if it is decreed that we are not to be married for some time to come, then we must wait with all patience until that happy day shall dawn. When you've had a little more holiday, you can begin to look about you for something else."

Could any man have wished for a braver sweetheart? Alas! however, matters were not destined at first to turn out as happily as she had prophesied. I applied to firm after firm, but my efforts in every case were entirely unsuccessful. At last I began to think that if my luck did not mend very soon, I should have to pocket my pride and ship as second or third officer, hoping by perseverance and hard work to get back to my old position later on. This eventually I decided to do, but even then I was not successful. The only line which could offer me anything was in the Russian grain trade, and the best berth they had vacant was that of third officer. As may be supposed, this was a bit of a come-down for my pride, and before accepting it, for I had run up to London to interview the firm in question, I returned to Falstead to talk it over with my sweetheart. On my reaching home my mother greeted me with an air of importance.

"A gentleman has been to see you this afternoon," she said, "a tall, handsome man. He did not leave his name, but he said you would probably remember him, as he had met you on board the *Pernambuco*. He is staying at the George, and is most anxious to see you."

"I met a good many people on board the *Pernambuco*," I said a little bitterly. "A lot of them were tall and handsome. I wonder who he can be?"

She shook her head.

"You say that he is staying at the George," I continued. "Very well, when I have had my tea, I will go down and find out who he is."

In due course I reached the little inn at the end of the village street. The proprietress, old Mrs. Newman, had known me since I was so high, and upon my entering her carefully-sanded parlour, she bustled out of her little room at the back to greet me. I inquired whether she had a strange gentleman staying in the house, and she answered in the affirmative.

"He is smoking a cigar in the bower at the end of the garden," she answered. "If you want to see him you will find him there."

I knew the place in question, and, passing through the house, made my way down the garden towards the little summer-house in question. Seated in it, looking just the same as when I had last seen him, was the Spaniard, Don Guzman de Silvestre.

CHAPTER III

On seeing me Don Guzman sprang to his feet and held out his hand.

"My dear friend," he cried, "it is very good of you to come here. I called at your house this afternoon, to learn that you were in London, but that you were expected back this evening. Doubtless you are surprised at seeing me, but when I tell you everything, I fancy your wonderment will cease. Won't you sit down and let me offer you a cigar? A more delightful spot than your village I have never met with."

I accepted his cigar, and seated myself in the wicker chair he pushed forward for my accommodation. What he was doing in our quiet neighbourhood I could not for the life of me imagine. But when I remembered the questions he had put to me on board the *Pernambuco*, I began to feel my hopes rising. It would be a stroke of luck indeed if he were to offer me a good berth, just at the moment when I needed it so badly.

"And so our mutual acquaintance, Captain Harveston, played you a shabby trick after all?" he remarked after a short pause.

"He could not very well have done me a greater injury," I replied. "What is worse, I fear he has not only lost me my berth, but that he has prejudiced other owners against me. Did the ship strike you as being in a badly-kept condition when you were on board?"

"I never saw one better managed in my life," he answered. "At the same time I must confess that I am not sorry that Harveston has got you your discharge."

"As matters stand with me just now, that's not a particularly civil thing to say, is it?" I inquired with some asperity, for, if the truth must be confessed, I was not in a very good humour.

"My friend, I mean it in all kindness," he answered, "and presently I will tell you why. Do you remember that story I told you on board, about my acquaintance who had played the vagabond all over the world?"

"The man who was President of one of the Republics of South America?" I inquired.

"Exactly, the same man."

"I recollect the story perfectly," I replied. "But what makes you speak of that man?"

"Well, what I am going to say to you concerns that man. He has a very strong notion that if he could only get his rival out of the country in question, he might manage to win his way back to his old position."

"But will the other allow himself to be enticed out of the country? That seems to me to be the question. Besides, it's one of the rules of the game, is it not, that the President shall never cross the Border?"

"That is certainly so, but circumstances alter cases. In this affair, if the man cannot be induced to go out of his own free-will, others must make him do so."

"Rather a risky concern, I should fancy."

"Everything in this world possesses some element of risk," he replied, "whether it is a question of buying Mexican Rails or English Consols, backing a racehorse, or going a long railway journey. In this affair there is a little more than usual, perhaps; at the same time the reward is great."

"On the other hand, supposing you fail," I returned, "what then? You would probably find yourself, in a remarkably short space of time, standing against a wall, with your eyes bandaged, and half-a-dozen rifles preparing to pump lead into you. Have you taken that fact into your calculations?"

"I have not omitted to think of it," he replied gravely, as if it were a point worthy of consideration. "Still, that is not what I am concerned about just at present."

"But what have I to do with this?" I inquired, for, though it seems wonderful now that I should not have thought of it, I had not the very faintest notion of what he was driving at then.

"If you like, you can have a good deal to do with it," he answered, blowing a cloud of smoke into the air, and bestowing an approving glance at his exquisitely made boots. "I think when I had the pleasure of meeting you on board the *Pernambuco*, you told me that you were engaged to be married?"

"I certainly am *engaged*," I answered, "but when I shall be able to get married is another and a very different matter. I've lost my position, and with it has gone my hope of soon being made a skipper. I can't very well risk matrimony on the pay of a third officer of a grain boat, can I?"

"I should say that it would hardly be prudent," he answered. "May I ask what capital you would require to start married life upon?"

"I should be perfectly happy if I had three hundred a year," I replied. "I'm not a man with big notions, and I fancy that sum would meet our wants."

"Capitalized at three per cent., shall we say ten thousand pounds? You are certainly not of a grasping nature, Mr. Helmsworth!"

"It would be all the same if I were," I answered. "At the present moment I stand as much chance of getting ten thousand pounds as I do of getting a million."

"I am not quite so sure of that," he said, speaking very slowly. Then he looked at me out of half-closed eyes, and eventually added: "What if I were in a position to put in your way the sum you want?"

I stared at him in surprise. Then I grew distrustful. Experience has taught me that our fellow-man does not pay away ten thousand pounds unless he is very certain of getting a good return for his generosity.

"I should be inclined to think that you were jesting with me," I replied, when I had recovered from the astonishment his remark had caused me.

"No, no; don't say that," he answered. "I assure you I am not jesting at all. I very rarely do so. I say definitely that it is in my power to put that sum of money in your way. That is, of course, provided you care to earn it."

"How am I to do that? That may make all the difference."

"Oh, you needn't look so scared," he returned; "the matter is a very simple one. All I require in exchange for the ten thousand pounds is your co-operation in a certain political act."

"Ah, I understand," I replied, as the truth dawned upon me. "The ex-President of the South American Republic, whom you call your friend, is in reality yourself, and you want me to help you get back your position. Is that not so?"

He nodded.

"Yes," he answered, "and I pay you the compliment of saying that I think you are just the man to bring that result about. I have not arrived at this decision haphazard. I watched you very closely on board the *Pernambuco*, and I have made inquiries about you since. It is a piece of my usual good fortune that you should happen to be disengaged at this particular time. Had you not been, I should have made you an offer, in the hope of having been able to induce you to leave the Company's service, and to join me. That would have been unfortunate, and it might very probably have given rise to suspicion, and suspicion is the one thing of all others I am naturally anxious to avoid. In England they do not appreciate the subtleties of South American politics, and in consequence they are apt to look at things in a wrong light. Would you have any objection to assisting me to regain my former position?"

"It all depends upon what you want me to do," I replied. "I have had no experience in such affairs, and am afraid I should make a poor conspirator."

"There is no need for you to be a conspirator at all," he said, with one of his quiet laughs, "that is to say, not in the sense you mean. All I am going to ask of you is the exercise of a little diplomacy, and some of that nautical skill which I am so well aware you possess."

"In other words, you want me to assist in the deportation of your rival from the country, whose chief he at present is."

"You've hit the mark exactly," he returned. "That is just what I *want* you to do, and it is for this that I am willing to pay the sum of ten thousand pounds, which will enable you to marry the girl of your heart. Now let me hear what you think."

"I scarcely know what answer to give you," I replied. "I have never dreamt that I should be asked such a question. It is all so unexpected."

"Is there not an English saying to the effect that it is the unexpected always happens?" he inquired. "I want to have your decision as quickly as possible, for the reason that, if you don't like the thought of taking on the work, I must find somebody else who does. I think I know your character as well as any man can do, and I am certain I can trust you."

I thanked him for the compliment he paid me, and then informed him that, before I could give him a definite answer, I must hear more of his scheme.

"I am afraid it would take rather too long to tell you just now," he replied, when he had consulted his watch. "Won't you dine with me? We could talk the matter over more thoroughly afterwards. I suppose the landlady can give us some sort of a meal?"

As it was the evening on which Molly had her choir practice, and I knew that I should not see her until ten o'clock, I accepted his invitation, on the condition that I should be allowed to go home first in order to acquaint my mother of my intention. He agreed to this, and I thereupon left him and went off on my errand. As I walked down the quiet little street, I thought of the curious proposal the Don had made to me. It seemed almost impossible that I, quiet Dick Helmsworth, should be asked to undertake the abduction of a South American President. So far, I knew next to nothing of Don Guzman's scheme; but I had a very fair idea of the risk I should be called upon to run. Ten thousand pounds was a very large sum; but would it be large enough to compensate me for what I should have to undergo, should my attempt prove unsuccessful, and I find myself in captivity? Then there was another question. What would Molly say when she heard of it? Would she approve, or should I refrain from telling her anything about it? This was a point I felt that demanded most earnest consideration. Entering the house, I informed my mother of the invitation I had received to dine with Don Guzman.

"It will do you good, my boy," she said instantly. "You want a little cheering up after the troubles you have had lately. Who is the gentleman?"

I informed her that I had met him on my last voyage, that he was a Spaniard, and also that he was presumably very wealthy.

"I have only known one Spaniard in my life," the old lady continued, "and I cannot say that I liked him. Your father did not consider him trustworthy. But there, your gentleman may be quite a different sort of person."

On my way back to the inn I pondered over my mother's words. She had all an old Englishwoman's innate distrust of foreigners; but her innocent little remark had set my imagination working. What if Don Guzman should be hoodwinking me, and that there was more behind his offer than I imagined? I then and there made up my mind not to take a step forward until I should be thoroughly convinced as to his *bonâ fides*.

On reaching the inn, I was informed by Mrs. Newman that the Don, or the foreign gentleman, as she styled him, was awaiting me in the coffee-room. Thither I repaired, to discover the table laid and my host standing at the window looking out upon the garden. He received me with much politeness, and we presently sat down to our meal together. During its progress nothing was said regarding the scheme we had discussed an hour before. The Don did the honours of the table with the greatest courtesy, and in numerous little ways showed me that whatever else he might be, he was certainly a keen judge of Human Character. As I have already remarked, he had travelled in well-nigh every country, and if his own accounts were to be believed, he had met with some strange people, and some still stranger adventures.

Our meal at an end, he proposed that we should go for a stroll, and to this I assented. We accordingly left the inn, and walked down the main street past the ancient village church, until we

came to the stone bridge that spans the river. It was a glorious evening; the sunset had been a brilliant one, and the last faint tints still lingered in the sky. Under the bridge the river stole noiselessly on its way to the sea; the swallows darted up and down its glassy surface as if they were resolved to make the most of the waning daylight; while, soft and low, from across the meadow came the music of the church organ, where Molly was instructing her boys in the music for the coming Sunday. It was an evening I shall remember as long as I can recollect anything, if only because of the strange events which might almost be said to have dated from it.

"I hope you have been favourably considering my scheme," said Don Guzman, when we had seated ourselves on the stone balustrade of the bridge, and I was idly dropping stones into the stream below.

"Yes, I've certainly given the matter my consideration," I replied, "but I want to hear something more of your plans, and to know exactly what will be required of me, before I shall be able to give you a definite decision. Remember, beyond the mere fact that you want to get this man out of the country, I know nothing whatsoever of the business."

"I promised you an explanation, and you shall have it," he said. "Of course, before I begin, I can rely upon your treating the matter as strictly confidential, can I not? You can see for yourself the position I should be placed in were you not to do so."

"Most assuredly," I replied. "I pledge you my word that whatever you may say to me regarding this matter shall go no further."

"In that case I will begin. First and foremost, let me inform you that the country in question is the Republic of Equinata. As doubtless you are aware, it is a most prosperous and fruitful one; indeed, I know of no other that I like so well. I lived some of the most pleasant years of my life there, and should in all probability be residing there now if it were not for the treachery of the man whom I thought to be my friend, who became my adviser, and eventually ended in ousting me from my position and assuming the reins of Government himself. The name of that man is Manuel Fernandez; he is about fifty years of age, of iron physique, and I will do him the credit of saying, of indomitable courage. His subjects do not love him, but they fear him, which is much more to the point. Whether I was loved or not I am unable to state, but the fact remains that a large number of the population are most anxious that I should return to them to take up my former position. This I am very anxious to do, but I do not see how I am to accomplish it unless the present President is out of the way. Doubtless I could enter the country by stealth, and sow the seeds of another Revolution, which might, or might not, be successful. But there would always be the danger of Fernandez discovering my whereabouts and putting me out of the way. Now, my idea is this, if we could only manage to get him out of the country, I could return, rally my friends about me, prove his flight, and proclaim myself Dictator. That done, even should he return in the end, I should be prepared for him."

"But how do you propose to get him out of the country?"

"That's exactly what I want you to manage," he answered. "With the plan I have in my mind, and a little care, it should not be a difficult matter. This is my scheme. Lying at a certain port on the Florida coast is a large steam-yacht, of upwards of a thousand tons. She is the property of an old friend and sympathizer of mine in the United States. He has offered to lend her to me for the purpose in hand. Now, if you are willing to assist me, you might go out to the West Indies, join her at Barbadoes, and board her in the capacity of a rich Englishman. You steam away to Equinata, and go ashore, in order to study the customs of her people. Most naturally you would call upon the President to pay your respects. You are invited to call again, in the end you strike up a friendship, then one evening he dines with you on board, or perhaps you meet him somewhere, and then – well, I will leave the rest to your imagination."

Here he looked at me meaningly, and I gathered what his thoughts were.

"And what is to happen to him then?"

"After that you steam away to a certain small island the name of which I will give you, land him, and place him with some people who will take charge of him until such a time as shall be agreed upon. It should not be a difficult matter, should it?"

"No, as you put it, it is simplicity itself," I replied; "but what about the officers and men of the yacht? How will you prevent them from talking? And, what is more, will they assist in the scheme?"

"They will be most carefully chosen for the work," the other replied. "You need have no fear that they will give trouble. Now what do you say?"

"I do not know what answer to make. Supposing I am caught? What would happen then?"

"You will stand a very good chance of being shot offhand," he answered; "but that, of course, is your own risk. It will depend entirely upon how you go to work."

"It would be running a terrible risk," I answered. "I have the girl I am going to marry to think of."

"If you succeed, you will be able to marry her on your return to England," he replied. "Surely *that* counts for something."

"It counts for everything," I replied. "That's the temptation; if it were not for that, I'd have nothing to do with it. I must have time, however, to consider the matter."

"By all means," he answered, "but don't be any longer than you can help. As I said a few minutes ago, if you don't care about undertaking it, I must find some one else. Time presses."

"In case I do take it on, when will it be necessary for me to start?" I asked.

"The sooner the better," he replied. "If you can see your way to doing so, I should like you to leave by next week's mail boat for Barbadoes, where the yacht will meet you."

"Will it satisfy you if I give you my answer to-morrow morning?" I asked.

"Yes, to-morrow morning will suit me admirably," he answered. "And if you decide in the affirmative, my cheque for five thousand pounds shall be handed you at once, and the remainder on the day you deliver the President to the representative whom I shall appoint. Do you consider that proposition a fair one?"

"Very fair indeed," I replied. "I could not wish for anything more so."

Then we strolled back along the road until we reached the lych-gate of the churchyard. Here I bade him good-night, and he continued his walk. On my part, I made my way into the church, and seated myself in one of the pews until the practice should be finished. From where I sat I could catch a glimpse of my darling's pretty figure at the organ in the chancel, the light from the two candles on either side illumining her face. When the practice was at an end, she dismissed her boys and came down to join me. Then, bidding the old verger a good-night, we made our way home together. She inquired how I had enjoyed my dinner, and what my friend had had to say to me. This put me in rather a dilemma, for, of course, having given my word, I could say nothing to her regarding the subject of our conversation. I explained, however, that he had come down to consult me on some important business connected with Central America, and that he had proposed that I should go over and transact it for him.

"He, at least, must have great faith in your ability then, Dick," said my sweetheart. "I am prepared to like him, even though he does monopolize your society. I know you will transact the business beautifully, and then perhaps it may lead to something really good for you." She paused for a moment, and then added a little nervously, "When will you have to start?"

"Next week, if I go at all," I replied; "but I have not yet decided whether or not I shall accept his offer."

"You must act as your own judgment dictates," she continued. "I know that whatever you decide to do will be right."

All things considered, I was not quite so certain of this myself, and for a moment I was tempted to declare I would have nothing whatsoever to do with it. But the money and the knowledge that it would mean a wife and happiness for me, if I succeeded, was a temptation I could not resist.

As may be imagined, I did not sleep very much that night, but tumbled and tossed upon my bed, turning the momentous question over and over in my mind in maddening reiteration. There was one side of it that was unpleasantly suggestive. I had to remember that, if I were caught, no power on earth could save me. My own Government would certainly not interfere in such a matter, while Don Guzman would, far from taking any responsibility, in all probability, repudiate entirely any connection with me and the affair. Then, from this, back I came again in the circle of argument to the one absorbing question of the money. Five thousand down, and five thousand when I handed over the President. It would be a fortune to me. If I had it, I need never go to sea again, and Molly would be my —

"Yes, by Jove," I said to myself as I sprang from my bed, "I'll do it! Come what may, I'll do it, and chance the risk."

Having arrived at this resolve, I had my tub, ate my breakfast, and after I had smoked a meditative pipe in the garden, and had given the matter a bit more consideration, set off for the inn where Don Guzman was staying. He had only just risen, and was about to begin his breakfast when I entered the room.

"Well," he said, as we shook hands, "what news have you for me?"

"I have come *to accept your proposal*," I said.

CHAPTER IV

"I am indeed glad you have decided to help me," Don Guzman de Silvestre replied, when he heard my reply. "I felt certain you would accept, and I assure you I shall value your co-operation. Would it be possible for you to leave England on Wednesday next?"

"If it comes to that I must make it possible," I answered. "From what you said to me last night, I gather that there is no time to be lost."

"The sooner we get to work the better," he returned. "I will send a cipher message to the States this morning, to ask my friend to have the yacht in readiness. If you leave London on the sixteenth you should reach Barbadoes on the twenty-ninth. The yacht will meet you there, and from the moment you set foot on board her, you may regard her as your own private property to use as you will. You will find her captain a most reliable man, and he will receive orders to do his utmost to assist you. He will discharge all expenses, and will be held responsible for the working of the vessel and the crew. You will, of course, be known on board by another name, which we must arrange, and you will be supposed to be a young Englishman, of immense wealth, whose particular hobby is yachting. In order to sustain the fiction, it will be necessary for you to have a large and varied outfit, which I think you had better order to-day. I shall leave England a week after you do, and shall go direct to the island, where you are to hand the President over to me."

"But you have not told me the name of that island yet," I answered.

He took a map from his pocket and unfolded it upon the table. Then placing his finger on a small dot in the Caribbean Sea, some distance from the Republic of Equinata, he continued —

"There it is! It is called San Diaz, and is a picturesque little place. The man who owns it is monarch of all he surveys. If we can once get Fernandez there, all will be well. No vessels call at the island, and, unless he likes to attempt a long swim, which I should be the last to prevent, I fancy he will find some difficulty in returning to the mainland."

Another thought flashed through my mind.

"Before we go any further," I said, "there is one thing I should say to you. It is this. Before I take any hand in the business, I must have your positive assurance that no violence will be used towards the man you are so anxious to secure. I could not be a party to anything of that sort, nor could I possibly deliver him to you if I thought you meant to do him any ill."

"I will give you the assurance for which you ask most willingly," my companion replied without hesitation. "I merely desire to keep Fernandez out of Equinata for a time, that is to say, while I reinstate myself in my old position."

When I was satisfied on this point, we discussed various other details connected with the scheme, and the part I was to play in it. It was certainly a big business.

"So far as I am concerned," said Silvestre, "I'm going to be selfish enough to say that I think it is a pity you are going to be married. As President of the Republic, I could make your fortune for you in a very short time. You wouldn't care to bring your wife out to Equinata and settle down there, I suppose. I'd like to have a man beside me whom I felt sure I could trust."

"Many thanks for the compliment you pay me," I replied. "I fear, however, South American politics are a little too uncertain for my taste."

"Well, perhaps you are right," he answered meditatively, as if he were considering the matter; "but you must at least admit that, as compared with the House of Commons, there is some life in them."

"I should be inclined to substitute the word 'death' for 'life,'" I returned, thinking of the stories I had been told of the thousands who had perished during the last Revolution. "And now I must go. I have all my work cut out for me if I am to sail on Wednesday."

"Before you leave me," he remarked, "I had better give you this!"

So saying, he took from his pocket a Russian leather case. From it he produced a draft on a London banking firm, which he handed to me. It was for no less a sum than six thousand pounds. This was more than I had expected to receive. I therefore asked his reason for adding the extra amount.

"It is for your expenses," he replied. "For many reasons it would be better that I should not be brought into the business. You had, therefore, better book your passage yourself. You will also have to get the outfit of which I spoke just now. That will cost a good deal. What is left should suffice for your other expenses, which, in your capacity of a rich young Englishman, you will probably find heavy."

This was generous treatment, and I said as much.

"Not at all," he answered. "Believe me, I am only too glad to do it. I count myself lucky in having secured your services, and I am willing to pay for that good fortune. Well, now that I have arranged matters with you, I shall return to London and set the ball rolling in the various directions. If you could make it convenient to meet me on Monday next, I could then tell you how matters progressed, and we could discuss future proceedings together. Here is my address."

With that he handed me his card, which I placed carefully in my pocket-book with the cheque. After that, having promised to call upon him on the day mentioned, I bade him good-bye, and returned to my own home.

Great indeed was my mother's consternation on learning that she was to lose me again so soon. She had counted, she declared, upon having me for another month at least. Molly tried to be brave, but the effort was not a conspicuous success.

"Never mind, darling," I said, "we must put the best face we can upon it. It is a fine chance for me. If I am successful, we shall be able to be married when I return, and I shall then be able to give up the sea. So we must cheer up and look forward to that."

"It should be very important business you are to be engaged upon if you will be able to do that," she answered, looking up at me with her trusting, loving eyes.

"It is most important," I answered. "The biggest thing I have ever had to do with. Some day, perhaps, I may be able to let you know more about it, but at present my lips are sealed."

"Tell me nothing but what you wish, dear," she answered, like the good little woman she was. "I am quite content to wait."

After lunch she walked into Salisbury with me, and did her shopping, while I visited the bank, where I paid in my cheque, and then went on to the tailor's to arrange about my outfit. It is doubtful whether the firm in question had ever had such an order before, and for once in my life I took rank as a person of importance in their eyes. They would have been more surprised, I fancy, had they known the reason of my wanting it all! The next thing to be done was to telegraph for a passage to Barbadoes. This I did in my own name, and, as the transaction was with my old firm, I could well imagine the surprise my communication would cause them. A letter I had already written followed the wire, and conveyed the passage money. After that the matter was settled. I had nothing to do now but to make the most of my time with my mother and Molly, before it should be necessary for me to leave for London.

When that day arrived I walked into Salisbury and took the train to Waterloo. Thence I made my way to the fashionable hotel at which Guzman de Silvestre was staying. He was in the act of going out as I entered, but on seeing me he led me back to his sitting-room and carefully closed the door.

"I am very glad indeed to see you," he said, placing a chair for me as he spoke. "I trust your preparations are progressing satisfactorily?"

"Everything is prepared," I answered. "I shall join the vessel on Wednesday morning in the docks. The receipt for my passage money arrived this morning."

"It does me good to meet so expeditious a person," he remarked, with a smile. "I, on my side, have not been idle. I have received a cable from the folk in Florida to the effect that the yacht will reach Barbadoes on the twenty-sixth, where she will await your arrival. After that I leave the conduct of affairs in your hands entirely."

"I trust I shall be able to carry it through," I answered. "I only wish I had a little more confidence in my ability to succeed."

"You'll manage it, never fear," Silvestre replied. "I am as certain that I shall one day see Fernandez coming ashore at San Diaz, as I am of eating my dinner to-night."

"And that reminds me," I hastened to remark, "that there is still one thing that puzzles me."

"And what may that be?" he inquired. "Don't hesitate to ask any questions you may think of. This is no time for half confidences."

"I want to know why, with all your experience, and the number of men you have met, you should have selected me for this business. Surely you could have discovered hundreds of others better fitted for the work."

"To be candid with you," he returned, "I chose you because I liked the look of you. You seemed to be just the sort of man I wanted. I won't deny that I know lots of men who might have been able to carry it through successfully had it come to a pinch, but the chances are that they might have failed in some little thing, and that would have given rise to suspicion. I wanted an Englishman, and one possessed of the manners and appearance of a gentleman. Allow me to pay you the compliment of saying that in my opinion you combine both these qualifications."

"It is very good of you to say so," I replied, "but I don't quite see what the appearance of a gentleman has to do with the question."

"I will explain," he said. "Fernandez, as I have already told you, is an adventurer himself. He knows the type, and, for that reason, would be quick to detect a brother hawk. One suspicion would give rise to another, and then, you may rest assured, the attempt to remove him would be frustrated. Now you can see why I want some one who can play the part and yet not rouse his suspicions."

"And so I am to be a gentleman in manners and appearances – and yet be a traitor in reality. I don't know that I consider it altogether a nice part to be called upon to play."

"You must settle that with your own conscience," he answered, with one of his peculiar smiles. "Call it an act of political expediency, and thus settle all qualms."

After that I put a few further questions to him concerning certain contingencies that might occur in the event of the President obtaining an inkling of what was toward. When all this was arranged, I left him, at the same time promising to call upon him on Wednesday for final instructions.

From the hotel I drove to Mr. Winzor's offices in High Holborn. He was not in at the moment, but when I returned, half-an-hour or so later, I found him ready to receive me.

"Well, young gentleman," he began, after we had greeted each other, "and what can I do for you to-day. No more legal troubles, I hope?"

"I have come to you on two errands," I replied. "In the first place I want to know what you have done concerning Harveston and the Company?"

"I have received a letter from the former gentleman this morning," he answered, turning over some papers on the table as he spoke. "Let me see, where is it? Ah! here it is! In it he states that, while he has not the least desire to damage your reputation, or to prejudice your career, he cannot retract what he has said, or withdraw what was entered in the ship's log. The charge of untruthfulness, he admits, might be reconsidered, and he is also willing to suppose that your neglect of the ship might be due to a certain slackness which was engendered by the easy-going habits of your late commander. In conclusion, he begs to assure me that he has never, at any time, entertained the least feeling of animosity for yourself, but that, in reporting the matter to the Company, he merely acted in the manner that he deemed to be consistent with his duty."

"A preposterous letter in every sense of the word," I cried angrily. "Not content with injuring me, he must endeavour to reflect on Captain Pomeroy, who is dead. Never mind, I'll be even with him yet – the hound."

The old gentleman permitted a dry smile to appear on his face.

"I am glad at least to observe," he said, "that you have abandoned your notion of taking immediate action against him."

"It would be impossible for me to do so, even if I had any desire that way," I replied. "The fact is, I am leaving England for South America on Wednesday next, and don't quite know when I shall be back. And that brings me to the second portion of the business upon which I desire to consult you."

"Am I to understand that you have obtained another situation?" he inquired. "And, pray, what line of steamships are you now going to serve?"

"I am not serving any line of steamships," I replied. "I am going out on private business, and I want you, if you will be so kind, to take charge of a certain letter I have written, and which I desire shall be opened by the person to whom it is addressed, in the event of my not returning within a year. One never knows what may happen in that part of the world to which I am now going. Here is the letter."

So saying I produced the epistle I had written on the previous evening, and which was addressed to my mother and Molly jointly. The old gentleman took it and turned it over and over in his hands.

"I hope you are not going to get into any mischief," he said. "I mistrust that part of the world. And now what else is there I can do for you?"

"I want you," I replied, "to draw up my will. I have some little property that I should like to leave to Molly and my mother. It is not very much, but it would doubtless prove useful, should anything befall me."

"We will hope that nothing will happen to you," said the lawyer. "At the same time I will draw up your will with pleasure. What have you to leave?"

When the old boy discovered the amount of my fortune his face betrayed his astonishment. Knowing that I had not been left anything by my father, I could see that he was anxious to question me concerning the manner in which I had accumulated this amount. Fortunately for my reputation for truthfulness, however, he repressed his inquisitiveness.

"It is a very creditable sum for a young man to have got together," he remarked. "Much may be done with five thousand pounds. It may interest you to know that I myself started with my articles and not a penny more than a hundred guineas to my name. To-day, however, I fancy – but there, I understand that you wish this amount, in the event of your death, to be divided equally between your mother and Miss Molly. And supposing that one survives the other?"

"In that case the whole amount must pass to the survivor!"

He promised me that the document should be drawn up and forwarded to me for my signature without delay, whereupon I shook him by the hand and bade him good-bye. My one thought now was to get back to Falstead as quickly as possible. I grudged every hour I spent away from it. Perhaps it was the dangerous nature of my enterprise that was accountable for it; at any rate, I know that I was dreading the leave-taking that was ahead of me more than I had ever done before. No one could say what the next few weeks would have in store for me, and, as it happened, that very night I was fated to have a dream that was scarcely calculated to add to my peace of mind.

It seemed to me that I was standing in a large yard, walled in on every side. Some tropical foliage was to be seen above the walls. At my feet was a large hole which I knew to be a grave. A squad of slovenly soldiers, clad in a uniform I had never before seen, were leaning on their rifles, some little distance away, watching me, while their officer consulted his watch. Then he shut it with a snap and nodded to me. I was about to throw down the handkerchief I held in my hand, when there was a cry and Molly appeared before me. Running towards me, she threw her arms about my neck. Knowing that at any moment the men might fire, I tried to put her aside. But she only clung the tighter. Every moment I expected to hear the rattle of rifles, but it seemed an age before it came. Then the soldiers fired, and Molly and I fell together, down, down, down, and I awoke with a start, to find myself sitting up in bed, my face bathed in perspiration. Never had I had such a dream before.

More than twenty-four hours went by before I could get the effect it produced out of my mind. Molly noticed my condition after breakfast and asked what ailed me.

"Cannot you guess, darling?" I asked, having no intention of telling her the truth. "Is it likely that I could be anything but depressed, when I am leaving you for I cannot say how long?"

"But you will be in no danger, and you will come back to me before very long, will you not?" she said, looking at me seriously, as if she were afraid I was hiding something from her.

"Of course, dear," I replied. "Every man, however, has to take his chance of something befalling him when he puts to sea. I might go to the end of the world – risk my life in a thousand different ways – only to return to England to be knocked down in the Strand by a runaway cab. I might go to the North Pole and come back safely, to fall through the ice and be drowned in the Vicarage pond. You mustn't be angry with me, dear," I continued, "if I am a little downcast. Let us try to think of the day when I shall return to make you my bride. Oh, how happy we shall be then!"

"Happy indeed," she answered. "God grant that day may come soon. I shall pray for you always, Dick, and ask Him to send my darling back to me, safe and sound."

We walked as far as Welkam Bridge and then home again across the meadows to lunch. By the time we reached the house I had somewhat recovered my spirits – but they were destined to fall to zero again before the day was at an end. It was a sad little party that sat down to dinner that evening. My mother could scarcely restrain her tears – Molly tried to be cheerful and failed in the attempt; as for myself – though I joked on every conceivable subject, save that of foreign travel – my heart was heavy as lead, and my face, I'll be bound, was as solemn as that of an undertaker's mute. For the reason that I felt it would be too much for her to leave it until the last moment, Molly and I bade each other good-bye that evening.

Next morning I rose early, breakfasted at seven, very much in the same state of mind, I should say, as a man who is about to be led to execution, and at eight o'clock gave my dear old mother one last kiss, and left the house with a lump in my throat that came near to choking me. I can see my mother's tear-stained face at the window even now, as I waved my hand to her before turning the corner of the village street. Little did I dream then how much I was to go through before I should see that beloved countenance again.

When the last house of the village was behind me, I mended my pace and struck out for Salisbury. It was a bright morning; the birds sang in the hedges, the cattle grazed peacefully in the meadows, indeed, all nature seemed happy but myself. I turned the corner of the Ridge Farm, and, passing through the chalk cutting, began the descent of the hill that, when you have left the cross roads and the gipsy's grave behind you, warns you that you are half-way into town. As everybody who knows the neighbourhood is aware, there is at the foot a picturesque cottage, once the residence of the turnpike keeper, and, a hundred yards or so on the other side again, a stile, which commences the footpath across the fields to Mellerton. I was thinking, as I approached it, of the last time I had walked that way with Molly, and was wondering how long it would be before I should do so again, when, as I drew near the stile, I became aware of a girlish figure leaning against the rail. My heart gave a leap within me, and I cried out, "Molly, can it be you?" Yet it was Molly sure enough.

"Oh, Dick, dear," she faltered, as I approached her, "do not be angry with me. I could not stay away. I felt that I must see the last of you!"

It was impossible for me to be angry with her, even though, as she told me later, she had breakfasted at six o'clock, and had been waiting at the stile for me since seven. However, I satisfied myself by promising her a good wiggling when I came home again, and then we set off together. How short the remainder of that walk seemed, I must leave you to imagine. It appeared scarcely to have commenced before we had left the country and were in the quaint old streets of Salisbury, making our way towards the railway station. We must have walked somewhat slowly, for, when we reached it, I found that I had only five minutes to spare. Over the parting that took place when the train put in an appearance I must draw a veil.

Punctually at half-past eleven the train steamed into Waterloo and disgorged its passengers upon the platform. I immediately engaged a cab and drove direct to Silvestre's hotel, where, for upwards of half-an-hour, I was closeted in close confabulation with him. Then I bade him good-bye, for it was part of our arrangement that he should not accompany me to the ship, and, having done so, returned to my cab and bade the man drive me to the railway station, where I was to take the train to the docks. By three o'clock I was on board, and endeavouring to convince myself that I was only a passenger, and not in any way connected with the working of the vessel. At a quarter to four we were steaming down the river, and my one and only adventure had commenced.

How was it destined to end? was the question I asked myself.

CHAPTER V

It was a new experience to me to find myself at sea as a passenger, to have no watches to keep, and no round of irksome duties to perform. It was a pleasant change to be able to turn into one's bunk at ten o'clock and to enjoy a good night's rest, after being used to leaving it at midnight in order to go up and pace a cold and cheerless bridge for four long hours at a time. I had a vague premonition that I should be recognized as soon as I arrived on board. Strangely enough this proved to be the case, for I had no sooner set foot on the promenade deck, before a well-known voice hailed me.

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.