Bindloss Harold

The Dust of Conflict

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Содержание

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I – VIOLET WAYNE'S CONFIDENCE

THE November afternoon was drawing towards its close when Bernard Appleby stood with a gun on his shoulder in an English country lane. It was a costly hammerless gun, but it had been lent to him, and the fact that his right shoulder was sore and there was a raw place on one of his fingers was not without its significance. Appleby, indeed, seldom enjoyed an opportunity of shooting pheasants, and had been stationed at what proved to be a particularly warm corner of the big beech wood. Here he had, however, acquitted himself considerably better than might have been expected, for he had a steady eye and the faculty of making a quick and usually accurate decision, as well as a curious coolness in action, which was otherwise somewhat at variance with an impulsive disposition. These qualities are useful in more serious affairs than game shooting, and it was fortunate for Appleby, who was a poor man, that he possessed them, because they comprised his whole worldly advantages.

A little farther up the lane his kinsman, Anthony Palliser,

was talking to a keeper, and though Appleby could not hear what they said, there was something in the man's manner which puzzled him. It was certainly not respectful, and Appleby could almost have fancied that he was threatening his companion. This, however, appeared improbable, for Anthony Palliser was a man of some little importance in that part of the country, and endowed with an indolent good humor which had gained him the good will of everybody. Still, Appleby had seen that complaisance can be carried too far, and knowing rather better than most people how little stiffness there was in Palliser's character, watched him somewhat curiously until the keeper moved away.

Then Palliser came up and joined him, and they turned homewards down the lane. They were not unlike in appearance, and of much the same age – Appleby twenty-six, Palliser a year younger. Both were healthy young Englishmen, but there was an indefinite something in the poise of Appleby's head, and the very way he put his feet down, which suggested who possessed the most character. He had clear blue eyes which met one fearlessly, and into which there crept at times a little reckless twinkle, crisp brown hair, and lips which could set firmly together, while he held himself well, considering that he labored for the most part at a desk.

"What do you think of keeper Davidson?" asked Palliser.

"A surly brute!" said Appleby. "Ill-conditioned, but tenacious. Have you any reason for asking?"

He fancied for a moment that Palliser had something to tell him, but the younger man smiled somewhat mirthlessly. “I don’t like the fellow, and wonder why my respected uncle tolerates him,” he said. “He is certainly tenacious. You have a trick of weighing up folks correctly, Bernard.”

“It is fortunate I have some qualification for my profession, and it’s about the only one,” said Appleby dryly. “Still, it did not need much penetration to see that you and he held different opinions.”

Palliser appeared irresolute. “The fact is, he would have the netting put up in the wrong place, and spoiled what should have been our best drive,” he said. “It was by his bad management they had to put two of the game hampers in the dog-cart, which sent us home on foot. I hope you don’t mind that. It’s a pleasant evening for walking, and you know you don’t get much exercise.”

“Not in the least!” said Appleby. “Don’t make excuses, Tony. It isn’t everybody who would have walked home with me, and it was very good of you to persuade Godfrey Palliser to have me down at all. It is the only taste I get of this kind of thing – one fortnight in the year, you see – and I’m considerably fonder of it than is good for me.”

Palliser flushed a trifle, for he was sympathetic and somewhat sensitive, though his comrade had intended to express no bitterness. By and by he stopped where the lane wound over the crest of a hill, and it was possible that each guessed the other’s thoughts as they looked down into the valley.

A beech wood with silver firs in it rolled down the face of the hill, and the maze of leafless twigs and dusky spires cut sharp against the soft blueness of the evening sky, though warm hues of russet and crimson still chequered the dusky green below. Beyond it, belts of thin white mist streaked the brown plough land in the hollow where Appleby could see the pale shining of a winding river. Across that in turn, meadow and coppice rolled away past the white walls of a village bowered in orchards, and faded into the creeping night beyond a dim church tower and the dusky outline of Northrop Hall. As they watched, its long row of windows twinkled into brilliancy, and the sound of running water came up with the faint astringent smell of withered leaves out of the hollow. Appleby drew in a deep breath, and his face grew a trifle grim.

"And all that will be yours some day, Tony!" he said. "You ought to feel yourself a lucky man."

Palliser did not appear enthusiastic. "There are," he said, "always drawbacks, and when there are none one generally makes them. The place is over head and heels in debt, and setting anything straight, especially if it entailed retrenchment, was never a favorite occupation of mine. Besides, a good deal depends upon my pleasing Godfrey Palliser, and there are times when it's a trifle difficult to get on with him."

"Still, your wife will have plenty of money."

Appleby almost fancied that Palliser winced as they turned away. "Yes," he said. "Violet and I are, however, not married yet,

and we'll talk of something else. Are you liking the business any better?"

Appleby laughed. "I never liked it in the least, but Godfrey Palliser gave me my education, which was rather more than anybody could have expected of him, and I had the sense to see that if I was ever able to practise for myself the business he could influence would be a good thing for me. My worthy employer, however, evidently intends holding on forever, and the sordid, monotonous drudgery has been getting insupportable lately. You may be able to understand that, though you haven't spent six years in a country solicitor's office."

"No," said Palliser sympathetically. "I never go into such places except when I want money, as I frequently do. Still, is there anything else open to you?"

Appleby straightened his shoulders with a little resolute gesture, and – for they were heading west – pointed vaguely towards the pale evening star.

"There are still lands out there where they want men who can ride and shoot, and take their chances as they come; while if I was born to be anything in particular it was either a jockey or a soldier."

Palliser nodded. "Yes," he said, "you got it from both sides, and it was rather a grim joke to make you a solicitor. Still, it's a risky thing to throw one's living over, and I have a fancy that my uncle likes you. You are a connection, anyway, and one never knows what may happen."

"Godfrey Palliser has done all he means to do for me, and even if there were nobody else, your children would have a prior claim, Tony."

Palliser looked up sharply, and though the light was very dim there was something in his face that once more puzzled his companion. "I think that is a little personal – and I wouldn't make too sure," he said.

They said nothing further, but tramped on in the growing darkness, past farm steadings where the sleek cattle flocked about the byres, into the little village where the smell of wood smoke was in the frosty air, through the silent churchyard where generations of the Pallisers lay, and up the beech avenue that led to Northrop Hall. It would, as Appleby had said, all be his comrade's some day. They parted at the head of the great stairway where the long corridors branched off, and Appleby looked at Palliser steadily as he said —

"One could fancy there was something on your mind tonight, Tony."

Palliser did not answer, and Appleby went to his room to dress for dinner, which was a somewhat unusual proceeding for him. Nothing of moment occurred during the meal, and it was nobody's fault that he felt not quite at home, as he had done at other functions of the kind. The gayeties of the Metropolis were unknown, except by hearsay, to him, and it was but once a year he met Tony's friends at Northrop Hall. It was, however, not quite by coincidence, as he at first fancied, that he afterwards found Miss

Violet Wayne, Tony's fiancée, sitting a little apart from the rest in the drawing-room. He did not think that either of them suggested it, but presently she was walking by his side in the conservatory, and when they passed a seat almost hidden under the fronds of a tree fern she sat down in it. The place was dimly lighted, but they could see each other, and Appleby had realized already that Violet Wayne was distinctly good to look upon.

Her face was almost severely regular in outline and feature, with but the faintest warmth in its creamy tinting; but this was atoned for by the rich coloring of her hair, which gleamed with the hues of gold and burnished copper. There was also a curious reposefulness about her, and Appleby had wondered why a young woman of her distinction had displayed the kindliness she had more than once done to him. He was grateful for it, but what he had seen of men and women during his legal training had made him shrewd.

"This place is pleasantly cool and green, but I am not sure that is why we are here," he said. "In any case, I am glad, because I am going away to-morrow, and wished to thank you for your graciousness to me. I am, as, of course, you know, an outsider here, and you have in several tactful ways made my stay pleasant to me."

Violet Wayne looked at him with big calm eyes, but made no disclaimer. "You are a relative of Godfrey Palliser!"

"A distant one; but my mother married a penniless army captain, and a ranker. He had won his commission by worth and

valor, but that was no reason why the Pallisers should hold out a hand to him."

Violet Wayne nodded gravely. "Still, Godfrey Palliser sent you to school with Tony. You were always good friends, though I think he told me you were born abroad?"

"Yes," said Appleby, "he was my first English friend. My father died at Gibraltar, and my mother stayed on there until she followed him. She did not want to forget him, and living is cheap in Spain. Tony and I fought our way through three schools together."

"I think it was you who fought for him," said Miss Wayne, with a little smile. "He has, I may mention, told me a good deal about you, and that is one reason why I feel that I could trust you. You would, I believe, respect any confidence a woman reposed in you."

Appleby flushed a trifle. "I fancy I told you I was grateful," he said. "The little kindnesses you have shown me mean so much to a man whose life is what mine has been. One gets very few of them, you see."

"Still," the girl said quietly, "when we first met you were not quite sure of me."

The color showed a trifle plainer in Appleby's forehead, for he had not had the advantages of his companion's training, but he looked at her with steady eyes. "You can set that down as due to the pride of the class I sprang from on one side – I feared a rebuff which would have hurt me. I was, you will remember,

Tony's friend long before he met you!"

"And now?"

Appleby made her a little inclination. "Tony," he said, "is a very good fellow, as men go, but I do not know that he is good enough for you."

Violet Wayne smiled and then sat still, looking at him with a curious softness in her eyes. "He is in trouble," she said simply, "and I am fond of him. That is why I have led you on."

Appleby rose, and there was a suggestion of resolute alertness in his attitude, though his head was bent. "Don't ask me for any help that I can give. Let me offer it," he said. "I don't know that I am expressing myself fittingly, but it is not only because you will be Tony's wife that you can command whatever little I can do."

The girl saw his lips set and the glint in his eyes, and knew he meant what he said. She also saw his chivalrous respect for herself, and, being a young woman of keen perceptions, also surmised that the son of the ranker possessed certain qualities which were lacking in the man she was to marry. She was, as she had admitted, fond of Tony, but most of those who knew and liked him guessed that he was unstable and weak as water. Violet Wayne had, however, in spite of occasional misgivings, not quite realized that fact yet.

"I want you to help him because you are his friend – and mine, but it would hurt him if you told him that I had asked you to; and I do not even know what the trouble is," she said.

"I have pledged myself; but if you have failed to discover it

how can I expect to succeed?"

Violet Wayne did not look at him this time. "There are some difficulties a man would rather tell his comrade than the woman who is to be his wife."

"I think, if I understand you aright, that you are completely and wholly mistaken. If Tony is in any difficulty, it will be his usual one, the want of money."

A tinge of color crept into the girl's face. "Then you will lend it him and come to me. I have plenty."

She rose as she spoke, and Appleby long afterwards remembered the picture she made as she stood amidst the tall ferns with the faint warmth in her face and the vague anxiety in her eyes. She was tall, and held herself well, and once more he bent his head a trifle.

"I will do what I can," he said simply.

Violet Wayne left him, but she had seen his face, and felt that whatever it cost him the man would redeem his pledge; while Appleby, who went outside to smoke, paced thoughtfully up and down the terrace.

"If Tony has gone off the line in the usual direction he deserves to be shot," he said.

He went in by and by, and watched his comrade in the billiard room. Tony was good at most games, but that night he bungled over some of the simplest cannons, though Appleby remembered that he had shot remarkably well during the afternoon. Still, he expected no opportunity of speaking to him alone until the

morning, and when the rest took up their candles retired to his room. He lay in a big chair thinking, when Tony came in and flung himself into another. Appleby noticed that his face was almost haggard.

"Can you lend me ten pounds?" he said.

"No," said Appleby dryly. "I had to venture an odd stake now and then, and do not play billiards well, while I am now in possession of about three sovereigns over my railway fare home to-morrow. What do you want the money for?"

"I only want it until the bank at Darsley opens to-morrow. This is my uncle's house, of course, but I am, so to speak, running it for him, and I couldn't well go round borrowing from the men I asked to stay with me."

"It seems to me that you have not answered my question."

Tony showed more than a trace of embarrassment. He was, though a personable man, somewhat youthful in appearance and manner, and a little color crept into his forehead. Appleby, who remembered his promise, saw his discomposure, and decided that as the bank would be open at ten on the morrow Tony wanted the money urgently that night.

"Is there any reason why I should?" said the latter.

Appleby nodded. "I think there is," he said. "We have been friends a long while, and it seems to me quite reasonable that I should want to help you. You are in a hole, Tony."

Palliser had not meant to make a confession, but he was afraid and weak, and Appleby was strong. "I am. It's a devilishly deep

one, and I can't get out," he said. "Well, I'll tell you. I'm in that condemned Davidson the keeper's hands, and he is squeezing the life out of me. You will remember his daughter Lucy, who lived at the lodge?"

"Blackmail!" said Appleby dryly. "Go on."

Tony took out and played with a cigar. "She was pretty, and you know I was always a trifle soft. Now and then I stopped as I passed, and talked to her. I don't think she disliked it. Well, I don't remember exactly how it came about, but I made her a trifling wager, and, of course, I lost it; while some fiend put it into my head to send her a little brooch, with a note, instead of the forfeit agreed on – I think it was a box of chocolate. I was away for a week or two, and when I came back she told me she didn't think she ought to take anything of that kind from me. There was nobody about the lodge – at least so I fancied – and I insisted upon putting the condemned thing on. I think I told you she was pretty."

"I have seen it for myself," said Appleby, whose face was a picture of disgust. "Go on!"

"Well," said Tony, "why the devil are you looking like that at me? I wasn't engaged to Violet then, and I kissed her – and went away immediately. It is necessary that you should know this, you see."

Perhaps it was relief, for his comrade was more truthful than weak men usually are, but Appleby lapsed into a great burst of laughter. Tony, however, looked at him lugubriously.

"It really isn't in the least amusing – to me," he said. "It's an especially risky business kissing that kind of young woman, especially when anybody sees you. Still, I'd seen something in the girl's face that warned me, and on my word of honor the affair ended there; but in a week or two, when I didn't answer the note she sent, Davidson came and worried me. Talked about his feelings and a motherless girl's reputation, showed me the note I'd written her, and said a good deal about witnesses. Well – you know I'm careless – I gave him five pounds, a note, and then saw he had one of his men hanging about. 'Go down to the "Black Bull," and get this fiver Mr. Palliser has given me changed,' he said."

"Clever!" said Appleby. "I begin to understand the thing."

"Well," said Tony, "I never went near his place since then, and the girl went away, but soon after I was engaged to Violet, Davidson turned up again. This time it was a more serious tale – the usual one – but you have got to believe what I told you."

"Yes," said Appleby, "I think I can. You were often a fool, Tony, but that contented you."

"I gave him twenty pounds. If I'd had any sense I would have knocked him down instead; but it was an unpleasant story, and I was engaged to Violet. Godfrey Palliser was bent on the match too, though it wasn't that which influenced me. Then Davidson commenced to come for money regularly, and I can't get out of the fact that I've been subsidizing him without perjury; while it's evident that if I told the truth now nobody would believe me. I

tell you, Bernard, the thing has been worrying the life out of me."

This was apparent from his strained voice and the dejection in his face, but Appleby smiled reassuringly. "You should have gone to a lawyer long ago, Tony; but you can leave it to me," he said. "Davidson expects you to give him money to-night?"

"Yes. He makes me come out at midnight and meet him to show he holds the whip over me. Thirty pounds – and I can only raise twenty – at half-past eleven by the fir spinny! Have you the slightest hope of doing anything with him?"

Appleby nodded as he took out his watch. "I shouldn't wonder if I bring you good news to-morrow. Remember, you are to say nothing to anybody. Give me what money you have and then go to sleep. You look as if you needed it."

He took the notes Palliser handed him, and when he went away hung about the head of the stairway until Violet Wayne came up with a white-haired lady. He contrived to catch her eye, and though she passed on with her companion within five minutes she came back again.

"Well?" she said expectantly.

Appleby smiled. "If you can let me have ten pounds and ask no questions I think it will be an excellent investment, though it is quite possible that I shall be able to hand you them back to-morrow," he said. "If I were a richer man I would not ask you."

The girl made a little gesture of impatience and flitted away, but in a few minutes she once more stood beside him, a trifle breathless, and there was a crisp rustle, as she slipped something

into his hand.

"Thank you ever so much! When you can you will tell me," she said.

Appleby only nodded, and went down the stairway. He took a riding crop from the rack in the hall, and then passed through the drawing-room into the conservatory, the outer door of which was not fastened yet. He opened it noiselessly and slipped out into the night, taking the key with him; but, though he did not know this, a man who afterwards remembered it saw him and noticed that he carried the riding crop.

II – DAVIDSON MEETS HIS MATCH

IT was with confused feelings that Appleby, treading softly as he crossed the gravelled terrace, slipped into the gloom of a shrubbery. There was a trace of frost in the air, and the stars shone brightly, but here and there a thin white mist hung in filmy wisps. He was, however, conscious of an elation which had a curious bracing effect. Violet Wayne had trusted him with her confidence, and it was the first time a woman of her station had cast more than a passing glance on him. Her reposeful serenity, with its faint suggestion of imperiousness, had impressed him more than her beauty, and he was sensible of an unbounded respect and admiration for Tony's fiancée. Tony had also, in his indolent fashion, and perhaps because the favors he dispensed cost him nothing, been a good friend to him, which was, however, not astonishing, since Appleby had fought most of his battles for him and stood between him and the results of his easy-going carelessness at school. Tony Palliser was one of the men who need the guidance of a stronger hand, and usually obtain it.

Appleby had, however, affairs of his own to think of that night, and as he swung across a misty meadow the half-formed resolution which had been long in his mind took definite shape, and he decided he would not go back to the drudgery his

soul detested. His father had risen by valor from the ranks, and the instincts he had stubbornly held in check at last asserted themselves dominantly. He remembered the sordid poverty, the struggle to maintain appearances, and the strain of forced attention to an uncongenial task, and asked himself half contemptuously why he had borne them so long. He had spent his early years in Spain, where he had been taught out of charity by an army chaplain, and had reckless brown-faced muleteers and smugglers and grave artillery officers, the gatekeepers of the Mediterranean, for his friends, while the fortnight spent at Northrop had brought back old associations overwhelmingly.

It was, however, not the leisure and wealth and luxury which appealed to him – and indeed there was little of the latter at Northrop Hall – but the smell of the brown woods and the ringing of the guns. There were also the horses, for Appleby had learned to ride in Spain, the wide spaces he could gallop through with tingling blood, and the hours he had spent pitting every faculty against the wariness of the grayling in the stream. He felt he could never go back to the old colorless life again, and as he looked out into the dusky blueness under the stars and across the dim landscape which rolled away before him, silent, and wide, and shadowy, his courage rose. There was room, he felt, beyond the confines of English cities for men with thews and sinews who were willing to hew their own way to fortune out in the wind and sun.

He stopped for a few moments on a hillside and looked about

him, while his heart throbbed faster. There was still a light or two in the hall behind him, but none in the village, and the earth lay asleep wrapped in fleecy draperies of drifting mist, while the low murmur of the river came out of the great stillness. He could see its pale blink where it slid out from the gloom of a wood, and above, across the stubble where the footpath led, a clump of rigid spires that rose black and solid against the faintly luminous night. That, he knew, was the fir spinny where he was to meet the blackmailer, and shaking all thought of his own affairs from him he went on quietly resolute to do battle for his friend. Appleby was an impulsive man, quick to decide; but there was also an obdurate persistency in him, and the decision once made was usually adhered to. Keeper Davidson was not to find an easy victim that night.

He stopped outside the spinny with the riding crop held, where it would not be seen, behind him, and a man who had been listening for his footsteps came out of it. It was unfortunate for him that he had spent most of the evening in the hostelry at the village, or he might have recognized the difference between them and Tony Palliser's reluctant tread. Appleby had come up with swift, resolute stride, as one who had a purpose, and meant to accomplish it.

"Davidson?" he said, with a little ring in his voice, which was very unlike Tony's then.

The man stared at him. "It was Mr. Palliser I expected to see," he said.

"I have come in place of him, and don't think it likely that he will meet you here again," Appleby said dryly. "In fact, unless we can come to some arrangement, it is very probable that you will get a month's notice from Mr. Godfrey Palliser to-morrow."

Davidson laughed unpleasantly. "Mr. Tony tried that game before, and found it wouldn't pay. Now, you listen to me, though I'm not telling you anything you don't know. Mr. Tony has to marry money, and Miss Wayne is a particular young lady. They say he's fond of her, too; but if I thought it my duty to tell her the kind of man he is there'd be no more talk of that match."

"The trouble is that Miss Wayne would not believe you," said Appleby.

Now, though Appleby was not aware of this, Davidson had consumed a good deal of liquid refreshment that evening, or he might not have shown his hand so plainly. Nor did he know that Appleby had any connection with the legal profession.

"It would be easy convincing her when she saw his letter. I've got witnesses – and a certificate," he said.

The sullen anger in the last words would probably have caught Appleby's attention had he been an older man, and shown him that it was not avarice alone which prompted Davidson. As it happened, however, he did not notice it.

"That proves nothing," he said. "We do not dispute the fact it relates to, but maintain that Mr. Palliser had no connection with it."

"Do you think you could convince anybody who heard my

story?"

"We can try. Isn't it clear to you that Mr. Palliser can't go on subsidizing you forever?"

"He'll go on until there's enough put by to bring his daughter up a lady."

Again Appleby failed to discern the sincerity of conviction in Davidson's tone, which would have been evident to him had he possessed any of the qualities which go to make a successful lawyer.

"I think you are mistaken," he said. "It is quite clear to us that you will tell your story sooner or later, and because it is Mr. Palliser will tell it before you in his own way. That cuts the ground from under your feet, you see. Then he will indict you and your daughter for conspiracy. It is a somewhat serious thing to blackmail anybody, but you shall have one more chance. I will pay you twenty pounds for Mr. Palliser's letter, on condition that you sign a statement confessing there is no truth in the slander you have brought against him, and leave his uncle's service within a month from to-morrow."

The man stood silent a moment or two, his gun on his arm; and it was unfortunate that Appleby could not see the passion in his face. A sullen hatred of the class he served had smouldered within him since the day a gunshot accident, for which he had obtained no adequate compensation, left him with a limp, and now when he saw the game was up it blazed into unreasoning anger. He may also have been as fond of his daughter as he was

of gold, and deceived by her, for the veins were swollen on his forehead when he made a step forward.

"Who are you to thrust yourself into what doesn't concern you?" he said.

"I am a lawyer," said Appleby quietly. "Don't come any nearer!"

Davidson dropped the gun into the palm of his left hand with a rattle. "I might have known it by your tricks," he said. "Well, I'll make you fight, and we'll see who Miss Wayne will believe to-morrow. Now take yourself and your money to – out of this!"

He raised the gun, and Appleby's calmness deserted him. With a sweep of the riding crop he struck the barrel aside, and, perhaps without Davidson intending it, there was a flash and an explosion. Then the riding crop came down upon a dim white face. The man reeled, recovered, and lurched forward, while next moment he and his adversary were panting and straining in a breathless grapple. Davidson was a strong man, but the blow had dazed him, and the refreshment consumed at the "Black Bull" had endued him with an unreasoning passion, which was not an advantage in a conflict with a man who kept his head. Appleby was also wiry, and tolerably proficient in a certain useful art. Thus when he got his fist home in a place where it would hurt Davidson slackened his grasp, and Appleby struck again as he flung him off. He staggered backwards and went down heavily. Appleby stood still until he rose shakily to his feet again.

"Go home," he said. "You will be sorry for this tomorrow. It

will probably cost you twenty pounds."

Davidson turned without a word, and Appleby waited a minute or two watching him cross the meadow towards the narrow, one-railed footbridge that spanned the river. He was walking unevenly, but Appleby was too shaken himself to trouble about his condition. Perhaps keeper Davidson was still dazed by the blows dealt him, or his brain was clouded by impotent anger, for he passed on, a dim, shadowy figure, into the gloom of a coppice, and no man saw him alive again. Then Appleby went back to the hall and let himself in through the conservatory. He found Tony waiting him in a state of feverish anxiety, told him briefly what had passed, and, assuring him that Davidson would in all probability listen to reason next day, went to sleep. He also slept soundly, and awakened later than usual when Tony's man, who had found knocking useless, entered the room with some of his garments on his arm.

"Mr. Palliser was asking if you were up, sir, and they're getting breakfast now," he said, and then glanced at the clothes. "I've been giving them a brush. There was some mud on the trousers, and I notice a seam split in the coat. I could ask one of the maids to put a stitch in it before it gets worse."

"No," said Appleby, a trifle too hastily. "You can put them in my bag. I am leaving by the night train."

He got into his tweeds, and went down to find the rest of the men who had finished breakfast lounging about the hall, while Tony and his uncle stood on the terrace outside. A dog-cart was

also waiting, and another vehicle coming up the avenue. Appleby commenced his breakfast, wondering – because he surmised that Miss Wayne would be anxious to hear what he had accomplished – whether any of the ladies would come down before the shooters started. By and by he saw a light dress flit across the gallery at the head of the stairway, and immediately got up with the ostensible purpose of going back to his room. He, however, stopped in the corridor which led out of the gallery, where, as he had expected, Violet Wayne was waiting him. She usually appeared to as much advantage in the morning as she did under the glitter of the lamps at night, but Appleby fancied that she had not slept very well. There was, so far as he could see, nobody else about.

"You have something to tell me?" she said quietly.

"No," said Appleby. "I fancied I should have had, but instead I have ten pounds to give you back."

"Then some plan you had has failed?"

"Not exactly! I am going to try a bolder course."

The girl looked at him steadily. "I have trusted you, Mr. Appleby. Would it be too much if I asked you to take me into your confidence?"

Appleby shook his head. "I am afraid I can't very well do that just now," he said. "In the meanwhile you can be kind to Tony. He has been foolish – and a trifle weak – but he has done nothing that you could not readily forgive him."

There was a faint sparkle in Violet Wayne's eyes, and a suspicion of color in her cheek. "How do you know that my code

is as lenient as your own – and are you wise in asking me to take so much on trust?"

Appleby smiled gravely. "I think I grasp your meaning, but if you try to follow up any clue I may have given you it can only lead you into a pitfall. Please wait, and I think I can engage that Tony will tell you the whole story. It would come best from himself, but he must substantiate it, and that is what I expect I can enable him to do."

The color grew a trifle plainer in Violet Wayne's cheek, and Appleby, who guessed her thoughts, shook his head.

"There is a question you are too proud to ask, but I will venture to answer it," he said. "I have known Tony a long while, and he has never wavered in his allegiance to you. To doubt that would be an injustice you have too much sense to do yourself. Now you have the simple truth, and if it is a trangression to tell it you, you must remember that I have had no training in conventional niceties."

The girl looked at him with a curious little glow in her eyes. "Tony has the gift of making good friends," she said. "One could have faith in you."

She turned and left him, while Appleby, who went down, found Godfrey Palliser talking to the under-keeper on the terrace. He was a spare, gray-haired gentleman, formal and fastidious, and betrayed his impatience only by a faint incisiveness of speech.

"Davidson has kept us waiting half an hour, it has never

happened before, and it shall not occur again," he said. "You have been round to the lodge, Evans?"

"Yes, sir," said the man. "They had not seen him since last night. He told them he was going to the fir spinny. Some of the Darsley men had been laying snares for hares."

"It shall be looked into, but we will make a start now as you have sent the beaters on," said Palliser, who turned to his guests. "I am sorry we have kept you waiting, gentlemen."

They started, and, as it happened, Tony and Appleby sat at the back of the dog-cart which followed the larger vehicle, while the rattle of gravel beneath the wheels rendered their conversation inaudible to those who sat in front.

"You heard what Evans said?" asked Tony anxiously.

"Of course!" said Appleby. "I am almost afraid Davidson has made a bolt. If he hadn't he would have come for the twenty pounds."

"I hope so," and Tony drew in a deep breath. "It would be a merciful relief to feel I had seen the last of him. Why in the name of all that's wonderful are you afraid he has gone?"

"Because I wanted a statement and your letter from him," said Appleby. "You see, you will have to tell Miss Wayne that story sooner or later."

"Tell her!" said Tony blankly. "I'll be shot if I do!"

"Then she'll find out, and it will be considerably the worse for you."

Now, Tony Palliser was a good-natured man, and had as yet

never done anything actually dishonorable, but whenever it was possible he avoided a difficulty, which, because difficulties must now and then be grappled with, not infrequently involved him in a worse one. He lived for the present only, and was thereby sowing a crop of trouble which he would surely have to reap in the future.

"I don't think it's likely, and there is no reason why I should make unpleasantness – it wouldn't be kind," he said.

"You don't know Violet yet. She is almost unmercifully particular, and now and then makes one feel very small and mean. It would hurt her horribly to know I'd been mixed up in the affair at all – and, the fact is, I don't feel equal to telling her anything of that kind. Besides, I did kiss the girl, you see – and I don't think Violet would understand what prompted me."

"Still," said Appleby dryly, "that story will have to be told."

Just then one of the other men touched his shoulder and asked a question, while there are topics which when once left off are difficult to commence again; but Appleby fancied that Tony had made one incorrect statement. He felt, strange as it seemed, that he knew Violet Wayne better than her prospective husband did.

They drove on, and nothing of moment happened during the shooting, or at the lunch they were invited to at one of Palliser's neighbor's houses, though Tony, who seemed to have recovered his spirits, shot unusually well. He also bantered the beaters and keepers, and, though he was as generous as such men usually are, the largesses he distributed somewhat astonished the recipients.

It was a bright day of early winter, with clear sunlight that took the edge off the faint frost; and most men with healthy tastes would have found the hours spent in the brown woods, where the beech leaves still hung in festoons about the lower boughs, invigorating, even if they had not just had a weight lifted off their minds. Tony made the most of them, and it was, perhaps, as well he did, for it was long before he passed another day as free from care again.

Still, the troubles he could not see were trooping about him, and it was doubtless as part of the scheme that was to test him, and bring about his retribution when he was found wanting, that a nut on the bush of the dog-cart's wheel slackened during the homeward journey. As a result, four men and several guns were flung without serious injury into the road; and when the horse had been taken to a neighboring farm, Tony and three of his friends found themselves under the necessity of walking home. He took them the shortest way by lane and stile, and they came to the footbridge across the river as dusk was closing down. Both he and Appleby long remembered that evening.

The sun had sunk behind a bank of smoky cloud, and a cold wind wailed dolefully through the larches in the wood, under which the black water came sliding down. There was no mist in the meadows now, and straggling hedgerow and coppice rose shadowy and dim against the failing light. The river, however, still shone faintly as it swirled round the pool beneath the bridge, and the men stopped a moment and leaned upon the single rail.

It was seldom any one but a keeper took that path to the hall.

Appleby noticed how the dead leaves came sailing down, and little clusters of them swung round and round in the eddies. It was a trifle, but it fixed his attention, and often afterwards he could see them drift and swing at the mercy of the current. Then it seemed to him that their aimless wandering had been curiously portentous. He, however, looked up when Tony struck a match to light a cigarette with, and saw his face by the pale flame of it. Tony shook off his troubles readily, and there was a twinkle in his eyes, while his laugh rang lightly at a jest one of the others made. Then a man standing further along the bridge stretched out his hand.

"There's a stone among the boulders at the tail of the pool that seems different from the rest. One could almost fancy it was somebody's head," he said.

"Good Lord!" said one of the others. "One could do more than fancy it. Can't you see his shoulder just above the water?"

Tony dropped his cigarette, and stared at Appleby with a curious horror in his face, but the latter gripped his arm.

"Keep your head!" he said sternly.

Nobody else heard him, for the rest were hastening across the bridge, and in a moment or two one of them sprang down among the boulders at the edge of the pool. He called out sharply as the others followed him, and standing very still when they came up with him, they saw a white face that moved as the stream swirled about it looking up at them. A wet shoulder also bumped softly

against a stone.

"I think it's your keeper, Palliser," said one of them a trifle hoarsely. "It would have been more pleasant if somebody else had found him, but we can't leave him in the water."

Tony seemed to shiver, and glanced at Appleby. "Yes," he said, and his voice was very strained, "it's Davidson."

It was Appleby who, as one of the rest remembered, stooped down and grasped the dead man's arm. "Give me a lift," he said.

The men had evidently little liking for the task, but they accomplished it, and stood still again when the rigid object lay with the water draining from it at their feet.

"He must have fallen over the bridge and struck his head. There are stones yonder, and you can see the bruise," said one. "Still, it might not have happened that way, and it seems to me we had better push on to the hall, and send somebody for the police."

They went on in haste, and twenty minutes later Tony stood, a little white in face, in Appleby's room.

"I don't ask you whether it was the truth you told me last night," he said.

"No," said Appleby, who was flinging articles of clothing into his bag. "I could not have taken that from you, but I told you what happened precisely. Perhaps I should have seen him across the bridge, but I never thought of it. Still, there will be an inquest, and when they find out a little more it will be difficult to convince an average jury that one of us didn't kill him."

"It could be managed," said Tony, a trifle hoarsely.

"Yes," said Appleby, "I think it could, though I couldn't be certain; but, if there was a defendant, not before everything came out. That would spoil my two best friends' lives. You see, he did not sign the statement, and folks are very quick to believe the kind of story that would certainly get about."

"That would ruin me," said Tony. "Godfrey Palliser would turn me out for bringing it on him. It's a trifle horrible. You have got to help me!"

"Yes," said Appleby, closing the bag with a snap. "I fancy it would. Still, there will be no defendant, because I'm going out of the country. If you sent to the bank you might lend me fifty pounds, and tell somebody to get the dog-cart out. There's a train I can get through to Liverpool starts in an hour. If I am ever able, I'll send you back the money."

Palliser stared at him. "But they may bring it in homicide against you! I can't let you do this for me."

Appleby smiled curiously. "I had decided to go, anyway, and I haven't a friend who would worry about me except yourself, and perhaps Miss Wayne. It would be very different with you. Now, don't waste a minute, Tony. I have made my mind up."

Tony Palliser had usually yielded to the domination of his friend, and was not in a condition to think very concisely then, so he did what he was bidden, and ten minutes later grasped Appleby's hand as the dog-cart came up to the door. He did not remember if he said anything, but Appleby, perhaps for the groom's benefit, laughed as he drew the rug about him.

“You will remember to send on the cigars you promised me,” he said.

Then the groom flicked the horse, the dog-cart rattled away, and Tony Palliser was left standing, flushed in face, on the steps, with his heart beating painfully.

III – TONY CANNOT DECIDE

THE beat of hoofs died away, and Tony shivered as he strove to collect his scattered wits. He wanted to think, but mental effort had always been distasteful to his easy-going nature, and now the faculty of concentration had deserted him. It was also very cold out on the terrace, for the raw wind was driving a thin drizzle before it, and Tony was fond of warmth and light, so with a little shake of his shoulders he went back into the house, and sought inspiration in a stiff brandy-and-soda. After that he felt a little more cheerful, and decided that in the meanwhile there was nothing to be done but refrain from unnecessary worry and wait events, which was the usual course with him. There was, it seemed, nothing to be gained by involving himself before suspicion was cast upon his friend.

He, however, spent an unpleasant five minutes with his uncle, who asked a few general questions respecting the affair, in the library, and then went down to dinner, where Violet Wayne did not find him a very entertaining companion. She, however, noticed that he allowed his glass to be filled more frequently than usual, for Tony was an abstemious man, and during a lull in the conversation turned to him.

"I have spoken to you at least three times without getting an answer, Tony," she said. "One could almost fancy that you had something on your mind to-night."

Tony did not meet the questioning gaze of the big grave eyes, though there was a sympathetic gleam in them. "I have a headache. Gun headache, you know," he said. "I got a warm corner, and fired every cartridge I had. I had them specially loaded with an extra quarter-ounce, too."

Violet Wayne appeared thoughtful, for she had heard the other men grumbling at the scarcity of pheasants that afternoon; but she was a wise young woman, and did not tell Tony so.

"What has become of Mr. Appleby?" she asked.

"Gone away," said Tony. "He left just after we came in."

Again Violet Wayne glanced at him with grave quietness, but Tony was looking at his plate just then.

"His train does not leave for an hour yet," she said.

Violet Wayne did not often speak without reflection, but she blundered then. Tony Palliser was not the man to boldly choose his path, but rather addicted to follow the one events seemed to force him into, and she who might have proved his good angel helped to start him down hill.

"He was going to Liverpool," he said, and a moment later regretted it.

"To Liverpool! What has taken him there? He told me he was going back to his office."

Tony looked round in search of inspiration, and did not find it. It was also a somewhat fateful moment for him, because he had as yet been guilty of nothing more than a passing indiscretion, which the woman would have forgiven him. Had he decided to

take her into his confidence she would have believed his story, and she had sufficient strength of character to carry him with clean hands through the difficulty. As it happened, however, he was not looking at her, and saw only the glitter of light on glass and silver and the faces of his friends. Tony was as fond of pleasant company as he was of luxury, and what he saw reminded him that he had a good deal to lose. That put him on his guard, and he took the first fateful step in haste, without realizing where it would lead him.

"I don't quite know," he said; "Bernard isn't communicative. He asked me for the dog-cart, and I didn't worry him."

Violet Wayne deferred her questions, though she was not satisfied. She had her duty to her hostess, and because news of what had happened had got about felt it incumbent on her to do what she could to lessen the vague constraint, especially as Tony, who wanted to think and could not, did nothing whatever. He was glad when the meal was over, but afterwards appeared to even less advantage in the billiard room, where one of the men commented on his play.

"You are showing remarkably bad form, Tony," he said. "What is the matter with you? In your case it can't be worry, because there is nothing a man could wish for you apparently haven't got."

Tony did worse at the next stroke, and put down his cue. "It's a fact that I can't play to-night," he said. "You were not with us at the bridge, and it wasn't a nice thing we had to do. As to the

other remark, I suppose I've got my worries like the rest of you; but since you will get on just as well without me I think I'll go to bed."

He went out, and the man who had spoken laughed. "That is just the one thing that is wrong with Tony – he gives up too easily and doesn't play the game out when it seems to be going against him," he said. "He had Bernard Appleby to help him through at school, but I have a notion that Miss Wayne would do as much for him now if he would let her, and if he's wise he will. Men like Tony generally find somebody to stand behind them, but that slackness is the only fault anybody could find in him. Tony never did a crooked thing."

"No," said another man dryly. "Still, it is comparatively easy to go straight when you are never called upon to stand up under a deflecting pressure."

"If Tony hasn't had to do that yet, he will most certainly have to sooner or later, and Miss Wayne is the woman to help him," said his companion. "Will you take his cue and finish the fifty for him, Lonsdale? It is, you see, quite the usual thing."

Tony in the meanwhile sat staring at the grate in his room. No definite course had yet occurred to him, but he was conscious of a vague relief. Davidson, at least, could not come back to trouble him, and Tony knew that his daughter, whom he had done no wrong, did not possess her father's pertinacity. He fancied she could be easily dealt with, and rising with a little shake of his shoulders he went to bed, and, as it happened, slept almost as

well as usual. Next day, however, events commenced to happen, for during the morning Godfrey Palliser received a visit from a sergeant of police. Soon afterwards he sent for Tony, and it was with distinct uneasiness the latter entered the library.

Godfrey Palliser sat, gray-haired and somewhat grim of face, beside the fire; and he was a punctilious English gentleman with a respect for conventional traditions and no great penetration, to whom Tony owed his present status and all he hoped for in the future. He had led a simple, wholesome life, and though it was perhaps not unwarranted, placed an undue value upon the respect his tenants and neighbors accorded him.

"This is an especially unfortunate affair," he said. "Sit down. I want to talk to you."

"Yes, sir," said Tony, wondering what was coming.

Godfrey Palliser drummed on the chair arm with his fingers. "There will be an inquest, and as I am, most unfortunately in this case, a magistrate, Sergeant Stitt thought it fit to consult with me. He has suspicions that there has been foul play."

"Stitt is a meddlesome idiot," said Tony. "It seemed quite evident to me that Davidson struck his head when he fell off the bridge."

The elder man made a gesture of negation. "Unfortunately he left his gun behind him. There was a dent on one barrel, and Stitt fancied that the grass round the spot where he found it had been trampled. That, and the condition of Davidson's clothing, points to a scuffle."

Tony gasped, for he had not expected this. “There is not a man in the neighborhood who would have injured Davidson,” he said.

Godfrey Palliser flashed a quick glance at him. “Do you know when Bernard left the hall the night before it happened?”

Tony braced himself with an effort. “I don’t quite remember, sir.”

“Then I can tell you. It was a few minutes after eleven, and he took the path to the footbridge. When he came back his clothes were muddy.”

Tony sat still a moment, horribly conscious that Godfrey Palliser was watching him. Then he broke out: “It’s wholly impossible, sir, unutterably absurd! Nobody would kill a man without the least motive.”

Godfrey Palliser’s face grew a trifle grimmer. “There may have been a motive. Lucy Davidson was pretty, and, I understand, vain and flighty, while she disappeared, I think, a little too suddenly. You will remember when Bernard was last here.”

Tony stood up, with a dampness on his face and his hands trembling. “Good Lord, sir, you can’t believe that!” he said. “Bernard never had any failings of the kind. It must” – and Tony gasped and stared round the room – “have been poachers. You will remember Evans said Davidson had gone out to look for somebody who had been laying snares.”

To his vast relief he saw that Palliser clutched at the suggestion. It would perhaps not have appeared very conclusive to another man, but Palliser was anxious as well as willing to be

convinced, which makes a difference.

"Yes," he said. "That is the most sensible thing you have said for a long while, and I sincerely hope events will prove you right. I am getting an old man, and if a connection of the family and a guest in my house had been guilty of such an intrigue and crime, I think I could scarcely have held up my head again. No breath of scandal has touched our name, and I could not forgive the man who brought a shadow of ill-repute upon it."

The speech had its effect, for Tony was aware that he had nothing to expect if he forfeited Godfrey Palliser's good opinion. He also quite realized the fact that he was singularly devoid of the qualities essential to the man who finds it necessary to make his own way in the world, and very much in love with Violet Wayne. These considerations made for silence. Tony, however, did not discover until later that the next person Palliser sent for was the girl. It was with reluctance he did so, and he stood up leaning against the mantel when he had drawn her out a chair.

"I understand that you saw Bernard Appleby immediately before he left the house the night before last," he said.

The girl appeared perplexed. "I do not know how you came to hear of it, but as a matter of fact I did," she said.

"Then " – and Palliser made a little deprecatory gesture – "I feel sure, when I tell you that they are necessary, you will excuse me asking you a question or two. You met him in the corridor, I think with intent. What had he to say to you?"

A little flush crept into the girl's face. "He asked me to give

him ten pounds. This will no doubt astonish you!"

It certainly did, and had Godfrey Palliser been a little less punctilious he might have betrayed it. As it was, he said in a perfectly level voice, "May I ask you for what purpose?"

There was no hesitation about the answer, and as he met Violet Wayne's eyes the unpleasant thoughts which momentarily obtruded themselves upon the man vanished again, and left him with a faint sense of shame.

"I had asked him to do me a favor which would entail some little expenditure," she said. "It was, in fact, to do a kindness to somebody I wanted to benefit, and could not have any bearing on your object in making this inquiry. I know you will take my word for that."

Godfrey Palliser was not gifted with much penetration, but the girl's composure had its effect on him, and he made her a little respectful inclination. "It would go a long way with me, my dear, even if the testimony of my eyes were against it; and Tony never did a thing that pleased me more than when he told me he had succeeded in inducing you to marry him," he said. "It is quite evident that you can throw no light on the affair."

Violet Wayne left him, a little perplexed, but relieved. As he believed what she had told him implicitly, his thoughts fixed themselves upon Tony's suggestion, and he commenced to sift what he had heard for anything that would confirm the poacher theory. He meant to do his duty as a magistrate, but he had made a fetish of the family honor, and the man who knows

exactly what he is looking for has the better chance of finding it. Accordingly he almost convinced himself, and proceeded to another conference with Sergeant Stitt, who was a little more obtuse than superior.

Violet Wayne was, however, not relieved at all. Only one hypothesis suggested itself to her, and that was that the unfortunate keeper had had some hold upon Appleby, but she promptly dismissed it as wholly untenable. She felt convinced that the man who had been Tony's loyal friend could have done nothing that he need blush for, and the fact that he had been willing to take ten pounds from her was an additional proof of his innocence rather than evidence against it. She felt absolutely convinced that he would never have abused her confidence by asking her for the money had he desired it for his own purposes. This conclusion naturally led to the supposition that he had involved himself on Tony's behalf, but she would not harbor that thought for a moment; while Appleby, whom she believed implicitly, had told her that Tony had done nothing wrong.

Still, it was evident that Tony was in trouble, and as he did not go shooting with the rest she found him idling in an empty room when dusk was closing down. He was standing by the hearth looking down into the flickering flame; but the fashion in which he started when she gently touched his shoulder was significant.

"You might have something upon your conscience, Tony," she said, with a little smile. "Sit down and talk to me. I have scarcely seen you to-day."

She sank into a low chair, and the uncertain firelight forced up her face and gleaming hair against the shadowy background. The pose, wholly unstudied as it was, also suited her, and she smiled as she saw the appreciation in the eyes of her companion. Tony's regard for her was respectfully deferential, but he was a man, and she did not disdain at times to profit by the advantages nature had endowed her with.

"I never saw you look better than you do just now," he said, and laughed as he found a place on the stool he placed at her feet.

"Turn your head a little, Tony; I want to see you," the girl said softly. "Now, what has made you so quiet today?"

Tony looked at her, and the effect was unfortunate. He saw the calm eyes shining with unusual tenderness, and felt the full influence of her beauty, even while he remembered that Appleby had said she would find out the story sooner or later and then it would be bad for him. He also determined, foolishly, that if the revelation must come at all it should, at least, be delayed as long as possible.

"I have my little worries, but they vanish when you appear," he said.

Violet Wayne shook her head. "That was pretty, but not quite sincere," she said. "In some respects I am older than you – and you are in trouble, dear. Perhaps if you told me everything I could help you."

Tony turned his head away, and checked a groan as he stared at the fire. "I have been a little thoughtless, and one must pay

for that kind of thing," he said. "Still, it would be most unfitting to trouble you with my trifling difficulties." He felt a little constraining touch on his shoulder, and a low voice said, "Is it money? You must not be proud, dear, for I have plenty, and it could buy me no greater pleasure than to see your cares melt away."

Tony flushed a little. "That is out of the question, Violet, and you exaggerate," he said. "I haven't any real cares, you know."

The girl smiled at him. "Only very good imitations, Tony; but perhaps you are right. I should dearly like to give you whatever you have need of, but it would not please me to see you willing to take it. Still, why did Appleby go out at eleven o'clock that night?"

It was a chance shot, but it told, and had results Violet Wayne could not have anticipated. Tony started a little.

"Why should you ask me?" he said.

Violet Wayne was not as a rule demonstrative. Indeed, her behavior that evening would have astonished those who thought they knew her best, but the touch of her hand on the man's shoulder was caressing, and as she leaned forward nearer him there was a curious softness in her eyes.

"I want you to listen, Tony, and I am not going to find fault with you," she said. "When you showed your preference for me people who I know are wise talked to me of you. They had very little to urge against you except one thing, which I think is true. They said you were a trifle too fond of shirking a difficulty."

"I hope you thanked them for their kindness," said Tony dryly.

The girl pressed his shoulder. "Tony," she said, "shall I tell you why I liked you? Well, it was because I fancied the respect you showed me was genuine, and you were open and generous. That, at least, was one of the reasons, for I detest a cunning man. I am ready to give you everything, but I shall expect a good deal from you; and now you see why I am not pleased with your answer to my question."

It was an unexpected opportunity, and, though the man aid not know this, the last he would have. The girl, as she had said, was willing to give him all she had to offer, of which her faith in him was not the least, but he had not the courage to put it to the test. Had he done so she would have taken his word, and believed in it against all other testimony; but the story he had to tell was not a pleasant one, and he dreaded her incredulity, in which he wronged her past forgiveness. Meanwhile, looking up at her he saw, not the love and strength which would have saved him from his weaknesses, but the calm, proud face which was tender, too, just then, the gleaming red-gold hair, and the beautifully moulded form. In place of speaking he gazed at her a moment with passion in his eyes.

"I can never understand how you came to think of me at all," he said. "I am not fit to dust your shoes; but if I lost you now I think it would kill me."

The girl checked him with a little quiet gesture, and laid the hand she raised from his shoulder on his forehead. "I like to hear

you tell me so, but there are times when the man who is willing to lose everything gains the most. I wonder if you understand that, Tony? There are men who do."

"No," said Tony in honest bewilderment, "I'm afraid I can't."

"Still," said the girl softly, "it is true; but perhaps it isn't seemly that I should preach to you. Am I to conclude that if any odium follows your friend because he went out that night you could not dispel it?"

This left a loophole, which was unfortunate, because the man reflected that he could offer no convincing testimony as to what had really happened at the fir spinny.

"No," he said a trifle hoarsely, "I could not."

Violet Wayne looked at him steadily, and Tony, who saw the gravity in her eyes, felt his heart thumping furiously. Then she said very slowly: "Since you have given me your word we will never mention this again."

Tony drew in his breath as he turned his head away. The crisis had passed, and he knew that Violet Wayne believed him; but a little shiver ran through him, for he felt that he was committed to a course of deception now, and that if exposure came he could not face her scorn. She was a proud woman, who seldom unbent even to him as she had done that evening, and his one impulse was to lead her thoughts as far from the question she had asked him as he conveniently could.

"You hinted that you had met men who would give up everything for – a fancy," he said. "Do I know them?"

"You know one. I think Bernard Appleby would sacrifice a good deal for a friend – or a woman he respected."

"He could not help it in your case. You could compel most men to do almost anything for you."

The girl shook her head. "Even if that is true it would not gratify me much," she said. "It is only those nearest and dearest to me I expect the most from, and that I am not worthy of it does not affect the case. Still, I think we have talked sufficiently in this strain."

Tony rose and stooped over her chair, but the girl made a little restraining gesture, and he straightened himself again.

"No," she said quietly. "Not now, Tony. We are strange creatures; but I think if you had made me a confession a little while ago I could have forgiven you anything and kissed you afterwards."

Tony said nothing, and a maid came in with a light; but he spent a very unpleasant half-hour when Violet Wayne left him. Now it had slipped away unprofited by, he saw what that opportunity would have meant for him. Tony was not clever, but he realized that fate does not give men such chances frequently.

IV – THE VERDICT

THE inquest on keeper Davidson was duly held, and at the commencement seemed likely to cause Tony Palliser less anxiety than he had expected. There were reasons for this, and among them was the fact that the Pallisers had lived at Northrop for generations, and the fathers of the men who served them had watched their game and groomed their horses. Godfrey Palliser was also a liberal master, who seldom put an embargo on any man's perquisites; while Tony scattered pleasant words and silver with a tactful kindliness that made either doubly acceptable.

There was accordingly a desire to spare them unpleasantness in the minds of those who attended the informal courts of inquiry held at the "Black Bull," as the result of which the men who appeared to testify at the one sanctioned by the law of the land came there with convictions already formed, for Northrop village had thrashed out the question. Northrop knew all about Tony's flirtation with Lucy Davidson, but it also knew a good deal more about that lady than Tony did, and exculpated him. He had, it was true, been seen to give Davidson five pounds, but that was not an astonishing thing when the friends he brought down had been enthusiastic over, the partridge shooting provided them; while there were not many men in his uncle's service he had not given sovereigns to. The men remembered this, and hoped for more.

It was also known that he had not left his room on the

eventful night, and though everybody was aware that Appleby had gone out, the guests at the hall were occasionally addicted to taking nocturnal strolls after an evening in the billiard room. Northrop accordingly knew just how much it meant to admit when it attended the inquest, and when the rustic mind adopts that attitude there is nothing further to be extracted from it.

The coroner did not elucidate a great deal when he commenced his inquiry. Tony, who appeared distressed by the recollection, as indeed he was, deposed to the finding of the body and was corroborated by two of his friends. He was listened to sympathetically. Sergeant Stitt testified that he had found signs which apparently suggested a scuffle, but could not be certain there had been one. Then a hush of attention followed the appearance of the doctor. He alluded to certain bruises.

"The one upon the head was evidently caused by a fall upon a stone, which would, I think, alone have produced insensibility," he said. "The one upon the cheek was apparently the result of a blow from a stick, but it might have been occasioned by a fall."

"Would either of the blows alone have occasioned death?" asked a juryman.

"Not directly," said the doctor. "The cause of death was exhaustion resulting from immersion. A man who fell upon the boulders beneath the bridge and rolled into the water would be very likely to succumb in that fashion."

Two servants from the hall were called, and then Tony's man. "I saw Mr. Appleby go out," he said. "It was about eleven o'clock,

but might have been later. He took something from a rack which held sticks and riding-whips. He usually did take a stick. What do I mean by usually? Well, he would walk down the avenue and home by the footpath now and then just before he went to his room at night. I heard him come in about half an hour later. I noticed mud on his shoes and trousers next morning; but he would have to cross a wet place before he reached the lawn."

Everybody seemed satisfied; but there was a little murmur when Miss Wayne appeared, and somewhat indignant glances were cast upon Sergeant Stitt. She wore a veil, but she removed it when she turned to the jury; and it was in a clear, cold voice, which had a trace of haughtiness in it, she answered the questions asked her.

"I am. I believe, the last person Mr. Appleby spoke to before he went out," she said. "So far as I noticed he did not appear disturbed or in any way irritated. I met him at the head of the stairway."

"Was the meeting accidental?"

A faint trace of color crept into the girl's cheek, but it was in a clear, even voice she said: "He had given me to understand that he wished to see me."

"Had he anything in particular to say to you?"

One or two of the jury made it evident that they considered the question in bad taste, but there was a curious silence when it was seen that the witness hesitated.

"He asked me for ten pounds," she said.

Tony gasped when this was told him, and felt his face grow a trifle warm, while a little thrill of indignation ran through him. He had been pleased to see his friend and sweetheart on good terms, but that one should borrow ten pounds from the other suggested a degree of intimacy he had not contemplated.

"Do you know why he wanted the money?" asked the coroner.

The girl looked at him steadily, and nobody saw that her hands were trembling. "No," she said coldly. "That is, I do not know exactly. I had, however, asked him to do me a favor which might cost a little money, and surmised that he needed some. It was not quite certain that I should see him on the morrow."

"What was the favor?"

Violet Wayne straightened herself with an almost imperceptible movement, but there was a change in her pose, and she held her shapely head higher. "It had nothing to do with anything that could concern this inquiry," she said.

"You are on oath, Miss Wayne," said the coroner. "Remembering that, you are willing to repeat the assurance you have just given me?"

"Yes," said the girl, standing very still, though every nerve in her was tingling. She long remembered the strain she underwent just then, but it was not until afterwards she was sorry that she had submitted to it. She did nothing by half, and her love for Tony carried an obligation with it. There were only one or two people, and Tony was not among them, who realized all that Violet Wayne was, but they paid her a respectful homage they

offered to no other woman.

The coroner had not seen her until that morning, but her bearing, and perhaps her beauty, had an effect, for he signified that he was contented, and Godfrey Palliser was called. He carried himself a trifle stiffly, and was as usual immaculate in dress while it was with a suggestion of carefully suppressed annoyance, which some of those present sympathized with, he gave his evidence.

Davidson had served him four years, he said. He frequently went round the woods at night, and had of late suspected that poachers had been at work about the fir spinny. So far as he knew, and he had made inquiries, nobody but Bernard Appleby, a relation of his own, and a young man of unimpeachable character, had gone out of his house on the night in question. Appleby had spent fourteen days at the hall and it was at least twelve months since he had stayed there before. It appeared unlikely that he should have intended to meet Davidson.

Palliser was followed by a teamster, whose evidence made an impression. “I came out of the ‘Black Bull’ with Davidson at ten minutes to eleven,” he said. “He wasn’t exactly what one would call sober, though a man who didn’t know him wouldn’t have noticed it. He told me he was going round by the fir spinny to see if he could catch somebody who’d been laying snares. I told him to be careful he didn’t pitch over the footbridge.”

Most of those present were sensible of a little relief. Nothing unpleasant could, it seemed, transpire now, and the jury, who

waited for Appleby to inform them that he had seen nothing of Davidson during his stroll, began to see what their verdict would be. There was also no great show of interest when the coroner asked for Bernard Appleby.

He asked twice, however, and there was no answer, while the jury exchanged significant glances when five minutes passed and the witness did not appear. Then there was a curious silence as Sergeant Stitt, flushed with haste, came in.

"Mr. Appleby was duly summoned, sir," he said. "I have just received this telegram from the solicitors he is engaged with."

Nobody moved while the coroner opened the message, and there was deep stillness as he read aloud: "In reply to inquiry Appleby has not resumed his duties here as expected. Have no clue to his whereabouts. Anxious for information."

"It will be the duty of the police to discover them as soon as possible," he said. "Have you any notion, Sergeant Stitt?"

Stitt led in a young man whom everybody recognized as the booking clerk from the station four miles away. "Mr. Appleby bought a ticket for Liverpool just in time to catch the train on the evening Davidson's body was found," he said. "He came into the office and sat down about a minute. I noticed he turned up the steamer sailings in the paper he borrowed."

"A mail-boat left for New York the following afternoon," said Sergeant Stitt.

The effect was evident. Men looked at one another with suspicion in their eyes, the coroner sent for Palliser and conferred

with him and Stitt, while the heavy stillness the murmur of their voices emphasized was curiously significant. Hitherto nobody had seriously thought of connecting Appleby with Davidson's death, but it now appeared that there could be only one meaning to the fact that he had sought safety in flight. Then the coroner stood up.

"It is unfortunate that more precautions were not taken to secure the attendance of so important a witness as Mr. Appleby," he said. "As it appears tolerably certain that he is no longer in this country, there is, I think, nothing to be gained by postponing the inquiry, and it is for you to consider whether you can arrive at a decision without his testimony."

The jury were not long over the work, and the Northrop carpenter and wheelwright made their decision known. "We find," he said, "that the deceased died of exhaustion as the result of a fall from the footbridge, during, or very soon after, a struggle with a person, or more than one person, by whom he was injured. We recommend that a double fence be placed on the said bridge, with three by two standards and two rails well tennoned in."

"I am afraid that is a trifle too ambiguous," said the coroner.

There was another consultation, and this time the verdict was concise. "Manslaughter by some person or persons unknown."

"It will now be the duty of the police to find them," said the coroner.

Northrop Hall was almost empty of its guests that evening. They, of course, knew what everybody's suspicions now pointed

to, and while it was unpleasant to leave abruptly, felt that it would be an especially tactful thing to Godfrey Palliser accepted their excuses with dry concurrence, but he pressed Violet Wayne and her aunt to remain. It would be a kindness, he said, because Tony seemed considerably distressed by the affair. The girl fancied that he appeared so when he came into the room where she sat beside a sinking fire. Only one lamp was lighted and the room was dim; while a cold wind wailed outside, and the rain beat upon the windows. Tony shivered, and his face seemed a trifle haggard when he stopped and leaned on the back of her chair.

"It is a wild night, he said.

"Tell me what you are thinking, Tony," said the girl, "I fancy I know."

"I was thinking of the big liner driving through the blackness with Bernard on board. She will be plunging forecastle under into the Atlantic combers now. I almost wish I were on board her too."

"But I should be here," the girl said softly. "Do you want to leave me, Tony?"

Tony laughed. "Oh, I talk at random now and then, and I'm not quite myself to-day. That confounded coroner made me savage for one thing. Did you feel it very much?"

"Can't you see that I am tired, dear?"

Tony, who moved a little, saw it plainly by the pallor of her face and the weariness in her eyes.

"I felt I could have killed the officious beast," he said, and

stood still, looking down on her irresolutely. “But whatever did you give Bernard ten pounds for, Violet?”

“Is there any reason why I should tell you?”

“Yes” – and the man’s tone suggested that he felt his grievance was warranted. “I think there is. Of course, I’m not a censorious person – I can’t afford to be – but it really didn’t seem quite the thing, you know.”

The protest was perhaps natural, but Violet Wayne checked a little sigh. She was in love with Tony, and that meant a good deal, but he was trying now and then, and she had discovered that his views were narrow, and now and then somewhat mean. Indeed, she had once or twice received an almost painful astonishment when he had made them plain to her.

In the present case his reproaches were especially ill-timed after what she had suffered on his behalf. Tony was in difficulties, and she had desired to free him of them; but it had been clear that he must be helped surreptitiously, lest his self-respect should suffer, which was why she had passed on the task to a man she had confidence in, and had so feared the coroner would force a revelation from her.

“You don’t wish to vex me?” she said.

“No,” said the man, still with a trace of petulance. “That is the last thing I would like to do; but if you ever want ten pounds when you haven’t got them I wish you would come to me. You see, it really isn’t flattering to me that you would sooner borrow from Tom, Dick, and Harry, and it sets the confounded idiots talking.”

A faint light crept into Violet Wayne's eyes, and Tony knew he had gone far enough.

"The one thing I resent is that it apparently sets you thinking," she said. "I can't be satisfied with less than I offer you, Tony, and the man who loves me must believe in me implicitly. I did not get angry when you would not share your troubles with me."

Tony softened. "I'm sorry, Violet, but the fact is I don't feel very pleased about anything to-night. Nobody could expect it!"

"Is it Davidson's death that is troubling you?"

She looked at him with a curious intentness, for Tony's face was haggard, and a horrible fear came upon the man as she did so. Her gaze disconcerted him, and he fancied he saw suspicion in it. Accordingly he clutched at the first excuse that presented itself.

"Not altogether! It's Bernard," he said.

Another irretrievable step was taken. Tony had waited as usual for events, instead of choosing a path to be adhered to in spite of them. As the result he was forced into one by which he had not meant to go, and it led rapidly down hill. Violet Wayne, however, straightened herself a trifle in her chair.

"Tony," she said, "it is quite impossible that you should think what your words suggest."

The man's face flushed, for her quiet assurance stirred the bitterness of jealousy that had hitherto lain dormant in him, and again he answered without reflection, eager only to justify himself.

"When a man borrows money, and goes out at night to meet another who may have been blackmailing him, and then disappears when that man is found dead with marks of violence on him, what would anybody think?" he said.

"Blackmailing him!" said Violet Wayne, and then sat very still a moment while the blood crept into her pale cheek, for the meaning of one or two vague allusions she had heard concerning Lucy Davidson flashed upon her.

"It slipped out. Of course, I should not have mentioned it to you."

"You have done so, but the thing is so utterly hateful that it carries its refutation with it"; and there was a portentous sparkle in the girl's eyes as she fixed them upon him.

Tony saw it, and trembled inwardly. He had been favored with glimpses of Violet Wayne's inner self before, and could discern the difference between a becoming prudery and actual abhorrence.

"Still," he said slowly, realizing that he was committed, "he disappeared. Of course, the affair may not be as black as it looks, and perhaps he was driven into it. Men with really good intentions are forced into doing what they never meant to now and then."

Violet Wayne laughed a little scornful laugh. "Isn't the cowardice which leads a man into meanness he is ashamed of more contemptible than bold iniquity?"

"Well," said Tony, "I don't quite know. I don't worry over those questions, but it seems to me there is something to be said

for the man who does what he shouldn't when he can't help it."

"Can't help it?"

"Yes," said Tony. "I mean when it would only cause trouble to everybody if he did the correct thing."

The girl looked at him curiously. "I think we had better abandon that subject, Tony," she said. "We will go back to the other. Your friend could have had no hand in Davidson's death – because he is your friend, and because I know what kind of man he is. Is there nothing you could do to clear him?"

Tony shook his head. "No; I wish I could," he said.

"Still, you see, it doesn't matter quite so much in his case. He leaves nobody to worry about it behind him, and had no prospects. He told me he was going out to try his fortune in another land, anyway."

"It doesn't matter! Is it nothing that he should go out with a brand of that kind upon him?"

"Well," said Tony reflectively, "I really don't think it counts for very much where he is going to. You see, they are not remarkably particular in America."

Violet Wayne rose. "You are not in a pleasant mood tonight, Tony, and I am tired. We will not stay here and vex each other."

Tony endeavored to slip his arm about her. "I know I'm a bad-tempered beast now and then. I can only tell you that you are ever so much too good for me again."

The girl did very little to repulse him, in fact scarcely more than lift her eyes, but Tony's arm fell to his side. Then she smiled

somewhat curiously. “Don’t make too determined an effort to convince me,” she said. “I should not like to believe you.”

She went out, leaving Tony alone with a horror of himself. He realized that there could be no turning back now. He must go on by the path he had taken, and standing with hand clenched on the mantle he groaned a little.

V – APPLEBY MAKES A FRIEND

IT was blowing a moderate gale, and the "Aurania," steaming at full speed into it, rolled viciously. A half-moon shone out low down beneath wisps of whirling cloud, and the big black seas shook their frothing crests high aloft against the silvery light as they swept in long succession out of the night. The steamer met them with dipping forecastle from which the spray blew aft in clouds, lurched and hove her streaming bows high above the froth, rolled until one rail seemed level with the sea, and slid down into the hollow, out of which her head swung slowly up to meet the onslaught of the next. Bitter spray was flying everywhere, her decks ran water; but it was only between foremast and forecastle head she shipped it in cascades, and little groups of passengers stood where they could find shelter. They had finished their dinner with some difficulty, and because the vessel rolled so that it was not an easy task to keep one's seat or footing had found their attempts to amuse themselves below a waste of effort.

Bernard Appleby stood a little apart from one group of them under the lee of a deck-house. Tony had lent him fifty pounds, and he had taken the cheapest berth obtainable which would permit him to travel saloon. This was apparently a reckless extravagance, but Appleby had inherited a certain shrewdness from his father, who had risen from the ranks, and decided that

the risk was warranted. He would, he told himself, certainly make acquaintances, and possibly a friend, during the passage, while he knew that the majority of those who travelled by those vessels were Americans who had acquired a competence by commerce, and could therefore direct him how to find an opening for his energies if they felt inclined. He had already made the acquaintance of five or six of them, and acquired a good deal of information about the great Republic, which did not, however, promise to be of much use to him.

Still, he was by no means dejected. Bernard Appleby had a good courage, and there was in him a longing for adventure which he had hitherto held in check. He knew that the gates of the old life were closed against him, but this caused him no regret, for he had not the least desire to go back to it. Indeed, he wondered how he had borne the monotonous drudgery he detested, and practised an almost Spartan self-denial so long, and it was with a curious content he looked forward into the night over the plunging bows. The throb of hard-driven engines, roar of wind, and crash of shattered seas that fell back seething from the forecastle, stirred the blood in him. It all spoke of stress and effort, but there was a suggestion of triumph in it, for while the white-crested phalanxes arrayed themselves against her the great ship that man had made went on, battered and streaming, but irresistible. Appleby felt that there were in him capacities for effort and endurance equal to those of other men who had fought their way to fortune, if he could find a field for them.

Then he became interested in his companions. There were two women among them, and he could see the figure of one silhouetted against the blue and silver of the night when the steamer rolled. It was a dainty figure in spite of the big cape that fluttered about it; while the loose wisps of hair that blew out from under the little cap in no way detracted from the piquancy of the half-seen face and head. Appleby recognized the girl as Miss Nettie Harding, whom he sat opposite to at the saloon table.

"Keep a good hold, Miss Harding!" said one of the men beside her. "This boat is trying to roll her funnels out of her, and it seems to me quite possible for one to pitch right over the rail."

The girl's laugh reached Appleby through the roar of the gale, as she stood, poised lightly, with one hand on the guardrail that ran along the deck-house, and the deck slanting like a roof beneath her, while the white chaos of a shattered sea swirled by, as it seemed, directly beneath her. Then she fell against the deck-house as the steamer rolled back again until her streaming plates on that side were high above the brine, and a woman said, "Can't you be careful, Nettie?"

There was a crash beneath the dipping bows, a great cloud of spray whirled up, and a man's voice said: "Hold on, everybody! She has gone slap into an extra big one."

There was a few seconds interval while the wet deck rose up before the roll began, and then the "Aurania" swung back with a vicious jerk. Appleby heard a faint cry, and saw Miss Harding reel away from the deck-house. The sea lay apparently straight

beneath her, with the steamer's slanted rail a foot or two above it. Almost simultaneously he sprang, and felt the girl's shoulder under his hand. How he span her round and thrust himself behind her he did not know, but next moment he struck the rail a heavy blow, and the girl crushed him against it. He afterwards decided that they could scarcely have fallen over it; but that fact was not apparent just then, and flinging himself on hands and knees he dragged the girl down with him. As he did so two of her companions came sliding down to their assistance, and the four glissaded back to the deck-house amidst several inches of very cold water as the following roll began. Appleby helped Miss Harding to her feet, and into the lighted companion, where she turned to him, flushed, gasping, and dripping, with a grateful smile.

"That was awfully good of you," she said. "I should have been hurt against the rail, anyway, if you hadn't got in front of me. But your face is bleeding. I hope I didn't hurt you."

Appleby said he was not hurt in the least, though his shoulder felt unpleasantly sore; and leaving her with an elder lady who came in with the rest he hastened to his state-room, where he struggled into dry clothing, an operation which is not altogether simple on board a rolling steamer. There was also a lacerated bruise on his forehead which required some little attention, and while he was occupied with it a man who tapped upon the door came in. He was apparently of middle age, and had a shrewd, lean face, with blue eyes that had a twinkle in them. He sat down

and waited until Appleby turned to him. Then he held out a card.

"I guess you will know my name, but there's my address. Put it in your wallet," he said.

"Mr. Cyrus P. Harding," said Appleby. "What can I do for you?"

The man laughed pleasantly. "That is rather what I should ask you. Anyway, I want to thank you for the help you rendered my daughter."

Appleby made a little whimsical gesture. "The conventional answer fits the case. It was nothing, sir."

"Well," said Harding dryly, "it would have been a good deal to me if my girl had gone out over the rail."

"I don't think that could have happened."

Harding nodded, but the twinkle snowed more plainly in his eyes. "I don't either, but I guess you were not quite sure of it then, and there are men who would have made the most of the thing. I understand you got between her and the rail, anyway, and that is what gave you the bruise on the head."

"I'm glad I had so much sense. I have, however, had more serious bruises, and may get them again. I hope Miss Harding is none the worse."

"No," said Harding. "She seems quite pleased with herself. It's an adventure, and she likes them. She will thank you to-morrow, and I don't want to intrude on you. Still, you haven't told me what to call you, and I hope to see more of you."

Appleby was a young man, and the fall against the rail had

shaken him, or his answer would have been more prompt and decided.

"Walthew Broughton," he said.

Harding, he fancied, looked at him curiously, and then smiled as he went out; but there was a trifle more color than usual in Appleby's face when he took up the card. It bore a business address in New York, but there was written across it, apparently in haste, "Sonoma, Glenwood, Hudson River."

"I wonder if that has any special significance," he said. "I will not force myself upon the man, but it's quite evident I can't afford to stand off if he means to be friendly."

He met Miss Harding on deck next morning, and she graciously allowed him to find her a chair, pack her wraps about her, and then sit close by talking to her for half an hour, which he had cause for surmising excited the indignation of other passengers. He found her vivacious, witty, and almost astonishingly well-informed, for Nettie Harding had enjoyed all the advantages the great Republic offers its daughters, and these are many. Still, he knew that it is a mistake to overdo anything, and, though Miss Harding still appeared contented with his company, took himself away when two or three of her feminine companions appeared. They had questions to ask and Nettie Harding laughed.

"Then the Englishman can talk?" said one.

"Yes," said Nettie Harding reflectively, "he can. Still, he's sensible, and doesn't say too much. I'm rather fond of those

quiet men. There was another point that pleased me. He didn't hang about where he would be sure to meet me, and then appear astonished when what he expected happened, as some men would have done, but waited until I walked up to him."

"After all, he only picked you up off the deck. There was really no danger; and I would like to have kodaked you holding on to each other. In daylight it would have made quite an amusing picture."

"Anyway, I must have hurt him, because he put himself between the rail and me," said Nettie Harding. "You see, I do weigh something, though I'm a good deal lighter than you are, Miriam."

Miriam, whose proportions were not exactly sylph-like, appeared slightly nettled, but the others laughed.

"He is quite good-looking," said one of them. "Now, such a send-off would make a good beginning for a romance. Quite sure you don't mean to fall in love with him, Nettie? No doubt he's poor but distinguished, or he wouldn't be coming out to us."

Miss Harding smiled, but there was a trace of softness in her eyes, which were of a fine deep tint of blue. "I don't think so, and there is a difficulty. I'm in love already – with the man I'm going to marry."

A girl who had not spoken nodded sympathetically, for she knew the story of Nettie Harding's engagement to an officer of the United States navy who was far from rich.

"This year – next year, Nettie?" she said.

Miss Harding smiled a little. “This one’s nearly through, and I’m going to Cuba early in the next.”

“Cuba can’t be a nice place just now, with the patriots and filibusters running loose all over it,” said the girl called Miriam. “What do you want to go there for?”

“My father’s going. He has a good many dollars planted out there, and I fancy he is getting anxious about them. I quite often go round with him; and Julian will be away in the Bering Sea.”

She rose, for a cold wind still swept the sun-flecked Atlantic; but she spoke to Appleby at lunch, and also at dinner that evening, after which her father carried him off to the smoking-room. There was a considerable difference between their ages and views of life, but a friendship that was free alike from patronage or presumption sprang up between them in spite of it. Cyrus Harding was an American, and what is usually termed a self-made man, but he did not attempt to force his belief in himself and his country upon everybody else, though it was sincere enough. He was typically lean in face and frame, but his dress was as unostentatious as his speech, and he wore no diamonds, which are, indeed, not usually displayed by men of substance in his country. The little glint in his keen blue eyes, together with the formation of his mouth and chin, however, hinted that he possessed a good deal of character.

Being a man who noticed everything, he was quite aware that Appleby spent at least an hour in the aggregate in his daughter’s company every day, and said nothing. Nettie was, he knew, a very

capable young woman, and Appleby, he fancied, a gentleman, which was, in the meanwhile, sufficient for him. A friendship may also be made rapidly at sea, and on the seventh day out he asked Appleby a question. They were leaning on the rail together cigar in hand while the ship rolling her mastheads athwart the blue swung with an easy lurch over the long smooth heave of shining sea.

"What is bringing you out to our country?" he said.

Appleby laughed. "What I expect is quite the usual thing. The difficulty of getting a living in the old one."

Harding looked him over. "Army too expensive?"

Appleby flushed a little. "I have never been in it, though I think I was meant for a soldier."

"One can't always be what he was meant for," said Harding, with a little dry smile. "It's a general belief among young men in my country that they were specially designed for millionaires, but only a few of them get there. Got any dollars?"

Appleby made a calculation. "Taking the rate at 4.80, I have about one hundred and twenty."

He had expected his companion to show signs of astonishment at his rashness, but Harding nodded. "I began with five but I was younger than you are," he said. "Business pays best yonder. What are you strongest at?"

"I can ride and shoot a little, which is what seems most likely to further my intentions, and speak Spanish reasonably well. These, I surmise, are very doubtful advantages, but I have no liking for

business whatever. Is there anything to be made out of horses or cattle?"

"Oh yes," said Harding dryly. "There are men who make a good deal, but you want ten or fifteen thousand dollars to begin with, anyway. It's only a big ranch that pays. Quite sure you wouldn't like to try your hand at business? I could introduce you to one or two men if you came out to Glenwood and stayed a week with me."

Appleby felt that the keen blue eyes were quietly scrutinizing him. "No," he said. "There is a fact I must mention which I also think would prevent you wishing to entertain me. A business man hiring anybody would have questions to ask, and I left the old country suddenly. I am not sure that a charge of manslaughter has not been brought against me by this time."

Harding did not seem in the least astonished; in fact, his very impassiveness had its humorous aspect, as Appleby recognized.

"Did you kill the man?" he asked.

"No," said Appleby, "I did not even attempt it; though in the face of circumstances I think nobody would believe me. Still, that's a story I can't go into, though it seemed the correct thing to mention it to you."

Harding nodded gravely. "The straight road is the shortest one, though it's quite often steep," he said. "Now, I had a notion you had some difficulty of that kind."

"I don't know that there is anything in my appearance which especially suggests the criminal."

"Well," said Harding, with a little laugh, "you didn't seem quite sure of your own name when you told it me; but I've handled a good many men in my time, and found out how to grade them before I began. I wasn't very often wrong. Now, it seemed to me there was no particular meanness about you, and homicide isn't thought such a serious thing in my country, when it's necessary. Before I was your age I had to hold on to all I had in the world with the pistol one night down in New Mexico – and I held on."

His face grew a trifle grim, but Appleby was glancing out towards the saffron glare of sunset on the ocean's rim. "I want to live in the open, and see what the life men lead outside your cities is like," he said. "There is nobody to worry about me, and I don't mind the risks. Can you suggest anything with a chance of dollars in it a little outside the beaten track?"

"You speak Spanish?"

"I was born at Gibraltar, and lived in Spain until I was ten years old."

"Well," said Harding, "as it happens, I can suggest something that might suit you, though I would rather, in spite of what you told me, have found you a business opportunity. The men who play the game will want good nerves, but there are dollars in it for the right ones. It's running arms to Cuba."

A little gleam crept into Appleby's eyes, and he flung up his head. "I think," he said quietly, "that is the very thing I would have wished for."

"Then," said Harding, "I'll give you a letter to some friends of

mine in Texas."

He went away by and by, and Appleby decided that the cost of his saloon passage had been a good investment. Still, he wondered what Harding could have to do with such a risky business as he surmised the smuggling of arms into Cuba must be, until he strolled round the deck with his daughter in the moonlight that evening.

"I think you have made a useful friend to-day," she said.

Appleby looked at her with a little astonishment, and the girl smiled when he said, "I don't understand."

"I mean Cyrus P. Harding. There are quite a number of men with dollars anxious to be on good terms with him."

"What have I done to please him?"

"You wouldn't come to Glenwood," and the girl laughed again. "No, I don't mean that exactly, but I need not explain. Cyrus P. Harding never did a mean thing in his life, you see."

Appleby smiled at her. "So one would surmise. In my country we rather believe in heredity."

"Pshaw!" said the girl. "There really isn't much in compliments when they're served out all round. But if you are going to Cuba I may see you there."

"Will you be in Cuba?"

Nettie Harding nodded. "My father has no end of dollars there – in tobacco and sugar."

"I wonder if one could ask what induced Mr. Harding to invest money in such an unsettled country as Cuba is just now?"

Nettie Harding looked up at him confidentially. “It’s a thing I wouldn’t tell everybody, and if I did I shouldn’t be believed,” she said. “Well, Cyrus Harding can see ever so far ahead, and I never knew him mistaken yet. Some day something will happen in Cuba that will give us an excuse for turning the Spaniards out and straightening things up. They need it.”

“But if the thing doesn’t happen?”

Nettie Harding laughed. “Then I shouldn’t wonder if he and a few other men made it.”

Some of her companions joined them, and she said nothing more to Appleby; but they met again that evening, and she induced him to promise that he would spend at least one day at Glenwood, while when they disembarked in New York Harding walked down the gangway with his hand on Appleby’s shoulder as though on excellent terms with him. He also kept him in conversation during the Customs searching, and when a little unobtrusive man sauntered by said to the officer, “Can’t you go through this gentleman’s baggage next? He is coming to Glenwood with me.”

The unobtrusive man drew a little nearer, glancing at Appleby, and then touched Harding’s shoulder.

“Is that gentleman a friend of yours, Mr. Harding?” he asked.

“Of course,” said Harding. “He is staying with me. We have business on hand we couldn’t fix up at sea.”

Appleby caught his warning glance, and stood very still with his heart thumping, apparently gazing at something across the

shed, go that the man could only see the back of his head.

"In that case, I guess I'm wasting time," said the man, who laughed. "Still, you understand we have to take precautions, Mr. Harding."

He went away, and Appleby turned to Harding with a little flush in his face as he asked, "Who is that man?"

"That," said Harding, with a dry smile, "is one of the smartest of our New York detectives."

They reached his house at Glenwood that afternoon, and Appleby spent two pleasant days there. On the third he left for New York, and Nettie Harding smiled as she shook hands with him.

"I wonder whether we shall see you in Cuba?" she said.

"It will not be my fault if you do not," said Appleby. "I am heavily indebted to you and your father."

As it happened, he afterwards saw Nettie Harding in Cuba, and paid his debt; for Appleby, who had gone out under a cloud that Tony's sweetheart might retain her faith in him, was one of the men who do not take the kindness that is offered them and immediately forget.

VI – THE SCHOONER "VENTURA"

THE night was considerably clearer than anybody on board her desired when the schooner "Ventura" headed for the land. It rose in places, black and sharp against the velvety indigo, over her dipping bows, though most of the low littoral was wrapped in obscurity. Harper, the American skipper, leaned upon the helm watching the growing brightness in the east, and a man whose white garments cut against the dusky sea sat upon the rail close beside him. They were both anxious, for there were no lights on that strip of Cuban coast, and the "Ventura" had drifted with the stream in a calm which had complicated Harper's reckoning. He had to find a certain reef-studded bay, and run the schooner into a creek among the mangroves without being seen by the gunboat which he had reason to surmise was looking out for him.

Forward, a cluster of men were sitting about the windlass and leaning on the rail. They were of diverse nationality and doubtful character – American, Castilian, and African by extraction, though in the case of some of uncertain color it would have been difficult to decide which blood predominated in their veins. It was their task to supply the insurgents with the munitions of war, and they undertook it dispassionately, without any patriotic convictions, for the dollars it would bring. Indeed, most of them were not held in much esteem in the countries they belonged to, or they would not in all probability have been there on board the

"Ventura."

Appleby watched them languidly from where he sat behind the wheel, and wondered what lay before him when he glanced towards the dusky coast-line. He was, however, not unduly anxious, for he had cut himself adrift from the cramped life he had led, and as yet found the new one pleasant. It needed qualities he felt he possessed, and which, indeed, he had with difficulty held in due subjection in England; while the fact that it might at any time terminate suddenly caused him no great concern. In the meanwhile the risks and opportunities attached to it had their charm for one who had long found poverty and the restraints of conventionality irksome.

"We'll have the moon up in ten minutes," said Harper, as the "Ventura" swung up on a frothing sea. "That would suit us if we were in the bay, but I'm not certain where we're heading for just now. You still think that was Sparto Point we saw at dusk, Rosendo?"

The man who sat upon the rail shook his head. "Who knows!" he said. "If she is not the Sparto she may be the Playa Santiago, or the Cameron."

Harper turned to Appleby with a little gesture of resignation. "You hear him. He's talking," he said. "Thirty miles more or less don't count with them. If we don't get in to-day, we may to-morrow, and if it's next week nobody's going to worry. They've nice business-like notions in their country."

Rosendo laughed. "We not find the Sparto? Good! It is simple.

She is farther on. We find her in two or three more hour."

"Oh yes!" said Harper. "Still, what I want to know is, what's going to happen if the gunboat comes along while we're looking for her? I've a notion it might mean a white wall and a firing party."

Rosendo shrugged his shoulders, and Appleby glanced towards the east. There was a bank of cloud in that quarter, but the sky above it was a pale luminescent blue. Then he looked astern, and saw the white tops of the seas heave against the darkness, for it was blowing fresh from the north. The "Ventura," rolling lazily, was running before it with only her boom-foresail and two jibs set, but now and then the crest of a sea that surged past lapped her rail.

"Wouldn't she stand more sail?" he said.

"Oh yes!" said Harper, pointing to the mainsail which lay loose beneath the big boom that swung, banging a little, above them. "It's there ready. Still, it will be 'most three hours yet before there's water in, and if the gunboat came along I'd sooner be here, where I've room to run, than jammed right up between her and a lee shore. If I was sure that was the high ground behind Point Sparto I'd feel considerably happier."

They rolled on awhile, and then a half-moon sailed up. The sea changed to flashing silver, and Harper, leaving the wheel to Rosendo, went up the foremast hoops and swung perched on the cross-trees, black against the night. He came down by and by, and there was relief in his voice.

"That's the Point sure enough! We'll have the mainsail on her, boys," he said.

The men came aft in haste. There was a rattle of blocks, and Appleby bent his back among the rest, while the folds of dusky canvas rose thrashing up the mast. They swelled into shape and became at rest, while the schooner, slanting over suddenly, put on speed, and drove away towards the land with a great frothing beneath her rail. She rolled little now, but there was a thud when her bows went down and the spray whirled half the height of her foresail. Appleby felt the exhilaration of swift motion, and his pulses throbbed a trifle faster as he watched the great breadths of canvas that gleamed silver now sway athwart the blue, and the froth swirl past the slender strip of hull that was dwarfed by comparison beneath them. The "Ventura" was very fast, but she could not compete with steam; and he noticed that Harper, who had taken the helm again, every now and then glanced over the rail. He appeared to be staring persistently towards one quarter of the horizon.

Suddenly a man standing high on the cross-trees shouted, and Appleby, springing to his feet, saw a faint, dusky smear drift athwart the blue and silver, where a minute earlier there had only been sky and water.

"Smoke!" said Harper. "I don't know that it's the 'Enseñada,' but I'm taking no chances of meeting her, We'll have the gaff-topsails up, boys, and the foresail over."

He pulled at the wheel. There was a bang as the boom-foresail

lurched over, so that it and the big mainsail now swelled on either hand. Then the men swarmed about the deck again, and Appleby wondered a little when amidst a clatter of blocks two more strips of sail went thrashing aloft, for it seemed to him that the "Ventura" was already carrying a risky press of canvas. He, however, pulled among the rest, and it was not until the schooner was clothed with canvas to her topmast heads that he straightened his back and looked about him. As he did so she dipped her bows into a sea, and a cascade poured in forward. It came aft frothing when her head went up, and then as she plunged into the hollow another mass of foam came up astern and surged by a foot above her rail. Harper laughed.

"Wet feet don't count in this trade," he said. "She's not going to scoop in too much of it if I can keep her running, but you'll see something very like chaos if we have to put her on the wind. Is that smoke rising any?"

Appleby fancied it was, for the dusky smear had lengthened, and it seemed to him there was something more solid than vapor in the midst of it. The skipper, however, in view of the inadvisability of bringing the great mainsail crashing over, could not turn his head.

"Still, even if it is a gunboat, we should be well in with the land before she overhauls us," said Appleby.

"Yes," said Harper grimly. "The trouble is there's no water yet into the creek, and there'll be a blame nasty surf running into the bay. Still, there's a place where we could hold her to it with

two anchors down, and it would take good eyes to make us out against the land. It's just a question whether those fellows yonder see us first."

It appeared to Appleby a somewhat important one, but he had to wait for the answer with the rest, and by and by it came. The man on the cross-trees shouted, the smear of smoke seemed to break in two, as though the vessel beneath it had changed her direction, and she became visible in a moment or two, a faint dark blur upon the moonlit water. Harper turned his head swiftly, and his face showed very grim in the moonlight when he stared in front of him again.

"I guess our chances have gone down fifty cents in the dollar," he said. "Get a range of cable up on deck. Then we'll have the boat cleared handy and the hatch-wedges out."

The men became busy amidst a rattle of chain, and then stood where it was a little dryer between the masts, with their shadows lying black upon the silvery cloths of the foresail. They were watching the steamer, which was rising upon one quarter with the smear of smoke blowing away from her. Appleby could see her plainly now, a strip of black hull that rolled with slanted spars across the harmonies of blue and silver – and she seemed to him portentous in her shadowiness, for there was no blink of light on board her.

"The 'Enseñada'?" said Harper.

"Si, señor!" said Rosendo, with a little gesture which was very expressive.

Harper pulled at the wheel, and Appleby saw that he was addressing him.

"There are two of their gunboats on this coast, and it's quite in the usual course that it's the one I don't want to see that turns up," he said. "Her commander has a little grievance against me."

Appleby did not ask him what it was. He had something else to think of, and the swift upward lurches and wisps of spray that blew about the "Ventura" made conversation difficult. The seas also seemed to be growing steeper as she closed with the land, and washed in as they went smoking past. Still, but for that sinister shape steadily rising higher on one quarter he could have found pleasure in the scene. The wail of wind, the humming of the shrouds, patter of spray, and roar of frothy seas stirred the blood in him, while the swift reeling rush when the bows went up brought him a curious sense of exultation.

It was stress and effort of muscle and body he had hungered for in the sleepy English town, for slow endurance was nothing new to him, and he was apparently to get it now. There was a meaning in the tense black figures of the men, and the grim impassiveness of Harper's face as he stiffened his grasp on the wheel, for human fibre was under strain as well as hemp and wood and metal, which groaned under the pressure which racked them to the uttermost limit. Yet while the gunboat crept up astern Appleby felt at home, as though this was not a novel sensation, and he had been through it all, or something very similar, more than once before. The fixed look in the eyes that gleamed in

the moonlight, the set faces, and the rigidity of the men's pose appeared in a curious fashion familiar.

A flash from the steamer roused him, there was a detonation, and a quarter of a mile beyond them a little white cloud rose from the sea. Some of the black figures swung round, but Appleby looked straight in front of him. He did not know why he avoided any abrupt movement, but he felt without reflection that it was incumbent on him. It was, however, not the first time a man of his or his mother's name had stood outwardly unmoved, at least, under artillery fire.

There was also something to see ahead – a dim, forest-shrouded littoral across which the vapors were streaming, and a faint white line of beach. In the foreground were broad streaks of froth, and the long blur of a jutting point with a yeasty seething about the end of it. Away on the other hand lay a smear of dusky trees, and the gap between them and the point was, he surmised, the bay they had been looking for. It held no shelter for them that he could see. Then Harper called the Spaniard Rosendo.

"There's not going to be water in for an hour yet, anyway," he said.

Rosendo shook his head. "There is much tree on the Point," he said.

Harper appeared reflective. "Yes," he said, "that's what I was thinking. Well, with this wind the Point would break the sea, and she mightn't bump the bottom out of her if we did put her on the bar. Those fellows couldn't get a clear shot at us across the trees,

and they wouldn't be anxious to send boats in considering the sea that's running. Still, there's a thing that's worrying me."

He glanced forward towards one of the streaks of froth which Appleby surmised showed where a reef lay below, and Rosendo made an expressive grimace.

"Los Dientes!" he said, and spread his arms out as though to indicate a measure. "One brazo a half now."

Harper nodded. "I can't run for the gut behind it without bringing that fellow too close," he said. "If I go round to weather we'll have to close-haul her, and he'd come up near enough to sink us if we took sail off her. Still, she'll scarcely carry what she has got now on the wind."

Rosendo shrugged his shoulders as he said in Castilian, "Between the fire and the cooking pot there is not much choice, my friend!"

Then the men between the masts came aft together, and one of them, whose color was not exactly white, stopped in front of Harper.

"We have no use for being run slap on the Dientes, and she's not going to work off it if we hold on much longer."

Harper swung a hand up commandingly. "When I'm not fit to sail this boat I'll ask your help," he said. "I've a good deal less use for showing the Spaniard just what I mean to do while he could spoil my hand by altering his course a point or two. Get your boom-foresail over, and the staysail on to her!"

It was done, though the "Ventura" rolled her rail in when the

big sail swung banging over. By and by Harper brought the wind abeam, and she drove along at an angle to her previous course, with one side hove high, while the sea came in in cataracts over either bow. Appleby clutched the rail, for the deck slanted away beneath him, and he wondered how the barefooted men kept their footing. The other rail was apparently level with the sea, and the brine that sluiced down the incline washed knee-deep inside it. The masts sloped as the deck did, with the spray beating like grapeshot into the foresail between them; but the topmasts above them slanted further, and Appleby understood why Harper's face was anxious when he glanced aloft. The gunboat was within easy range now, and it was evident there would be no escape for them if anything yielded under the strain. In fact, Appleby was wondering whether her commander felt sure of them since he was not firing, when there was another flash followed by the roar of a gun. An unseen object that could be heard through the sound of wind and sea passed between the masts, and Harper nodded.

"I guess that decides the thing. What she can't carry she'll have to drag," he said.

She dragged it for another five minutes, staggering under a press of sail, and then there was a crash aloft, and topmast and mainsail gaff fell to leeward together. A clamor of voices went up, and the "Ventura's" bows swung round a little further off the wind; while Appleby, who saw Harper's face in the moonlight, noticed that it was set and very grim.

"You can run down the staysail and outer jib so she'll not fall

to leeward all at once," he said.

The men went forward floundering amidst the spray, and the plunges grew a trifle easier, while the seas swung the "Ventura" aloft instead of deluging her; but a glance made the position unpleasantly plain to Appleby. To leeward lay the white frothing on the Dientes reef, and he surmised that the "Ventura" could not clear it without her after canvas; to windward the gunboat, coming down on them rapidly. There was, it seemed, no escape, and he wondered vaguely what would happen. Harper said nothing whatever, but stood with his lean figure casting a black shadow upon the crippled mainsail, grasping the wheel. So they drove on for another five minutes, and then, with a glance at the gunboat, the skipper straightened himself.

"They're not going to have the guns, and the schooner might fetch ten dollars when I'm through with her," he said. "Get the foresail off her, and stand by to swing out the boat!"

The sail came down thrashing, and the men stood very still and silent when they had hooked the tackles on the boat. Their faces were turned forward, and Appleby guessed that they were watching the white upheavals that showed where the seas rolled across the submerged reef. This was not astonishing, for the "Ventura's" bows had swung further round, and it was evident that Harper was running them upon it. Appleby was sensible of a curious admiration for him. He still stood at the wheel, slouching over it, now suspense had gone and certainty had come, a most unimpressive figure, in old duck jacket and brine-soaked trousers

that were both too loose for him, but it was evident that the spirit which disdains dramatic expression and often burns most clearly in unexpected places was in him.

"Hold on!" he said quietly as the bows went up.

Then she struck, with a crash that sent two men reeling across her deck, and the sea that rolled up behind her surged frothing on board. It went forward waist deep; the "Ventura" lifted, and came down again, with everything in her rattling and her crew holding fast for their lives. Then she twisted round, so that the next comber foamed across her and ground her on the reef, hove herself up, scraped forward, grinding and groaning, a few more fathoms, and stopped again; while a negro and a Cuban shaken from their hold rolled down the slanting deck clutching at each other until they fell into the water pent up by the lower rail. The din was bewildering, for every block and spar banged and rattled amidst the dull roar of the seas, but it was rent by the crash of a gun.

Grasping the rail with both hands, Appleby saw the gunboat rolling black athwart the moonlight, while a smear of vapor broadened about her; but there was another sound beneath him as he gazed, and while the splinters flew in showers a great rent opened in the deck. Nobody said anything, or could have been heard if he had, and Appleby clung tighter still when once more a sea crested with spouting white came along. It lifted the "Ventura" up, and then there was a curious quietness as it dropped her clear of the reef. Through the sudden silence

Harper's voice rose evenly and almost expressionless.

"I guess there's some of the rudder left, though it's jammed. Give me a hand," he said.

Appleby sprang to help him, and between them they dragged the helm over. The "Ventura" lurched on more smoothly with a gurgling sound inside her, for the reef broke the sea; but ten minutes later she struck again, and remained this time immovable. Nobody waited for orders, and in swift silence the boat was got over, while a fire commenced to twinkle on the beach. Wooden cases were passed up from the hold, and – for the water was smoother there – the boat got away. Four men went in her, and the rest dropped into the hold, where they tore out boxes and cases and passed them from man to man. While they worked the gun boomed again, but the gasping men toiled the more fiercely, and Appleby did his part with them. He was dripping with perspiration and spray, his hands were bleeding, and his duck jacket rent up the back, but, gasping and panting, he labored on with a fierce pleasure that seemed wholly illogical.

Once he lifted his head above the hatch, as he tore the jacket which impeded him off his shoulders, and saw that the gunboat had stopped. She was not firing now, and his comrades had, he fancied, sent three loads ashore by that time; but he had scarcely glanced at her when Harper saw him. "Hustle!" he said. "The boats are coming."

How long they toiled in the hold Appleby could never remember, but though it appeared no more than a few minutes

to him the moon had moved across a broad strip of sky when he crawled on deck again. The boat lay beneath him, half full of cases, and the men were dropping into her. Two other boats showed for a moment to windward, and then sank from sight again.

"Hold on!" said Harper, pointing to the cases still on deck. "Into the sea with them!"

Appleby and another man threw them over, though there were impatient cries from the boat below, and the rest were shoving off when they dropped into her. Somebody was baling furiously, two men tugged and thrust, Spanish fashion, at every oar, and they reeled away shorewards with the water lapping into her. Then a fire grew brighter above the roaring beach, men came floundering waist-deep through the surf, those in the boat sprang over, and they went up with the wash of a sea. Appleby, scrambling out of the backwash, stood up, dripping, breathless, and aching all over, and saw Harper not far away and a host of dusky figures flitting about the fire. Then there was a flash from seawards, a crash in the forest behind them, and they disappeared.

"Well," said the skipper quietly, "the 'Ventura' isn't going to sea any more. You have to take your chances in this business; and we got most of the inside out of her, anyway."

VII – THE DESCENT OF SANTA MARTA

A LITTLE fire burned in a hollow of the dusty barranco that fissured the face of the hill, a clear red fire of the kind that gives little light and makes no smoke, and its pale glow showed but feebly against the rock behind. This was still flushed with a warm lustre caught from the western sky, though the sun had dipped and the fleecy mists were creeping across the dusky plain below.

A group of weary men lay about the fire, dusty and ragged, for they had spent most of twelve weary hours forcing a path through thickets and climbing like goats from rock to rock under the heat of the tropics. Two of them wore garments of cotton, which hung about them rent by thorns; three others jackets of American make, looted from a loyalist store; and one trousers of English tweed, through which his knees protruded, and a jacket of alpaca of a kind esteemed in Spain. He had, however, a red silk sash of beautiful texture, which had cost somebody else a good many dollars, round his waist; and his face, which was bronzed to a coffee color, had once been of paler complexion than those of most of his companions. He raised himself a trifle, and glanced about him with a little whimsical smile.

"They are a choice collection of scarecrows to take a city with," he said in English.

A man who lay close by looked up with a twinkle in his eyes. “I have seen smarter soldiers,” he drawled. “Still, they’re a hard crowd, and I’d feel kind of sorry for Colonel Morales if his cazadores don’t put up a good fight to-night. What we have on hand isn’t quite the thing I came out to do, but I guess it’s better than catching fever down there in the mangrove swamps. That’s how it strikes me, though it will scarcely be the kind of business you’ve been used to, Appleby.”

Appleby laughed again as he glanced at the ragged men sprawling in attitudes that were rather easy than picturesque a little farther up the gorge. They were of various shades of color, from pale Castilian olive to African jet, and a good many of them were barefooted, while the shoes of the rest were burst. The arms scattered about them were as curiously assorted – American Marlin rifles, old English Sniders, Spanish service weapons, and cutlass-like machetes with a two-foot blade, which proved as efficient when, as quite frequently happened, there was a difficulty in obtaining the right kind of cartridges.

They were for the most part men with wrongs, individual as well as national; for the Spanish system of checking disaffection was sharp and stern, and the man who has seen brother or comrade butchered to bolster up an effete authority is apt to remember it. Those who had no wrongs possessed a lust of plunder which served almost as well as animus; but there were a few who had been driven to join them by patriotic convictions. They had already made themselves a terror to the

conscript troops of Spain, as well as peaceful peasants with loyalist sympathies, who called them the Sin Verguenza – the men without shame. It was not from choice that Appleby had cast in his lot with them, but because it seemed to him preferable to falling into the Spaniards' hands. He had, however, by daring in one encounter, and shrewd counsel, already made himself an influence, and had been endowed with the rank of Teniente.

"No," he said a trifle dryly, "it is not. When I plundered folks in my country I did it for other people with a bill, and I had the law behind me. I was trained to it, you see."

"It's quite a good trade," said Harper, who had joined the Sin Verguenza because the coast was too strictly watched to leave him any chance of getting away again. "Kind of pity to let up on it. It was a woman sent you here?"

Appleby laughed, and then sat silent a moment or two staring straight before him. The dusty gorge seemed to fade, and he could fancy himself standing once more at the head of a shadowy stairway in an English hall looking into a woman's eyes. They were big gray eyes that seemed to read one's thoughts, set most fittingly in a calm, proud face, above which clustered red-gold hair, and he had seen them often since that eventful night, on many a weary march, as well as in his sleep.

"Yes," he said; "but not in the way I think you mean. She was my best friend's sweetheart, and nothing to me. No doubt she has married him by now."

Harper's smile seemed to express incredulity, and for the first

time a doubt flashed into his comrade's mind. Would he have done so much for Tony if the woman had been any one else than Violet Wayne? The question almost startled him and though he strove to answer it in the affirmative no conviction came. Tony had been his friend, and until he came to Northrop he had never seen the girl; while it was, of course, preposterous to suspect that he had gone out under a cloud for her sake; and yet the doubt remained to be afterwards grappled with. In the meanwhile he brushed the question aside as of no moment. Violet Wayne would marry Tony, and in all probability he had already passed out of her memory. He was, however, glad when a man with an olive face stood up beside the fire and glanced at him with a smile.

"Among comrades it is not good courtesy to speak apart, and the English is a difficult tongue to me," he said in Castilian. "I have apprehended no more in the Havana than the response discourteous, 'You bedam.'"

Appleby laughed. "I fancy you others can beat us in that line," he said. "Shall we get in to-night, Maccario?"

The Insurgent captain made a little expressive gesture. "Who knows!" he said. "They have two companies of cazadores, but there is this in our favor – they do not expect us. Four days' march – for troops – from Adeje, and we have come in two! Yes, I think we shall get in, and then there will be trouble for those others in Santa Marta and the Colonel Morales."

Appleby glanced down the barranco, and saw framed, as it were, in its rocky gateway the sweep of plain below. The tall

green cane and orange groves had faded to a blur of dusky blueness now, but in one place he could still discern the pale gleam of white walls. That was Santa Marta, and he remembered how they had been welcomed there when, weary and dusty with travel, they had last limped that way. There were no troops in Santa Marta then, and the Sin Verguenza, who did not know that an infantry battalion lay close by, had accepted the citizens' hospitality, and borrowed much less from them than they usually did when their entertainers had loyalist sympathies. While they slept the deep sleep of weariness the cazadores fell upon the town, and the Colonel Morales allowed a very short shrift to those who failed to escape from it. Therefore Santa Marta was anathema to the Sin Verguenza, and, what was almost as much to the purpose, it was rich.

While he watched the white walls faded, and the fire in the barranco grew brighter as darkness closed down. A negro, who removed a kettle from it, carefully put it out, and served them with a meal, though Harper sighed disgustedly as he lighted a maize-husk cigarette when he had consumed his portion.

"Well, I guess we'll get breakfast to-morrow, if we're alive," he said. "I've lived on some kind of curious things in Cuba, including fricassee of mule, but onions, bad guavas, and half-ripe mangoes, as a mixture for fighting on, doesn't suit my taste at all. No, sir. I want to lie down nice and quiet, and not worry anybody, when I've got dysentery."

His companions, however, did not complain. Perhaps they

were accustomed to scarcity, though the Sin Verguenza lived well when they could do so at other men's expense; and there is a capacity for patient endurance in most of the peoples of Spain. They lay smoking cigarettes instead, while a little cool breeze came down out of the soft darkness that now veiled the hills above. Beneath them lights twinkled dimly like clustering fireflies in the misty plain, and once a faint elfin ringing of bugles came up. The Sin Verguenza answered it with a hoarse murmur, and then lay still, patiently biding their time.

The dew settled heavily as the rocks grew cooler; Appleby's alpaca jacket grew clammy, but he lay motionless beside the embers, once more grappling with the question what was he, an Englishman of education, doing there? Violet Wayne's eyes seemed to ask it of him reproachfully, and he could not find a fitting answer. The plea that he was there because he could not help it did not occur to him, for he was young, and believed that a determined man can shape his own destiny. Instead, he admitted vaguely that the reckless life, the testing of his bodily strength, the close touch with human nature stripped of its veneer, and the brief taste of command, all appealed to him. This, he knew, was no defence; but he felt that he at least owed the Sin Verguenza something, for they had come upon him while he hid from the troops of Spain, and, finding that he had nothing but his life to part with, had incontinently given him what they had, which was just then very little.

At last the Captain Maccario rose to his feet and called aloud.

There was a murmur of voices, a clatter of arms, a rattle of stones, and a patter of feet, and the Sin Verguenza came out from the barranco like beasts from their lairs. The hillside fell steep beneath them, but they went down, flitting noiselessly, half-seen shadows, while each man chose his own path, and not as troops would have done. Here and there the machetes cleared a way where it would take too long to go round, or there was a crackle of undergrowth when they plunged into a belt of trees. Then a mule track led them down to the level, and with a shuffle of broken boots and soft patter of naked feet they swung along the dusty carretera road. It wound away before them smelling of dew-cooled earth, a faint white riband, past the shadowy tobacco and dusky sugar cane, and there was no stoppage when here and there a flat-roofed house loomed up beside it. Then there was a murmur of warning, a drowsy "Viva la libertad!" and the column passed on; for the insurrection had taken hold, and the enemies of the Sin Verguenza were the men who had something to lose.

Still, a dozen men with rifles, and cartridges to match, stayed behind when they filed through a white aldea lying silent amidst the cane, and the Sin Verguenza swung into slightly quicker stride. If the Colonel Morales was to be caught at all he must be caught napping, and, as they knew, he usually slept with one eye open. Still, Appleby fancied it might be accomplished, for he had discovered already that the Castilian has a disdain for petty details, and frequently leaves a good deal to chance.

By degrees the dust grew thicker and the little flat-topped

houses more plentiful, while here and there white haciendas grew into shape among the trees. There were no lights in any of them; but by and by the Sin Verguenza stopped where the white orange flowers lay crushed upon the road and consulted with their guide. The Colonel Morales, they believed, did not expect them, but it was likely that he had pushed forward a section or two of cazadores to watch the road. The leaders also argued softly for some little time, and Appleby listened with his Marlin rifle under his arm, noticing how the fireflies sparkled in the leaves meanwhile. There were great stars above him in the sweep of cloudless indigo, and the low murmur of voices emphasized the stillness, while the heavy scent of the orange flowers was in his nostrils. Long afterwards a vision of the long, straggling column waiting in the dim white road would rise up before him when he breathed that scent.

Then they went on again, by paths that led through tobacco fields and amidst breast-high cane dripping with the dew that brushed them as they passed. This was, however, the work the Sin Verguenza were accustomed to, and no one saw them flit through the misty fields file by file. The cazadores, on their part, marched with bugles and wagons and loaded mules; and there was perhaps some excuse for their leader, the Colonel Morales, who believed the Sin Verguenza to be hiding some ten leagues away.

They stopped for the last time within sight of the white-walled town, which lay dark and silent girdled by thin wisps of mist,

and the Captain Maccario spoke to those who could hear him. His words were not eloquent or especially patriotic, but they were answered by a portentous murmur; and Appleby surmised that there would be wild work if the Sin Verguenza sacked the town. He, however, moved forward as he was bidden with his ragged half-company, realizing that in the meanwhile he was rather going with than leading them. Where the rest went he could not see, for his attention was occupied in getting into and out of enclosures noiselessly, and once he fell into an aloe hedge and pricked himself grievously. Then he wondered what had happened to the barefooted men, but none of them at least said anything, and the dim, flitting forms went on. It all seemed unreal to him – white walls that rose higher, shadowy figures, and the silence they scarcely disturbed; but once more he was vaguely conscious that it was curiously familiar.

Then there was no more cover, for they straggled out, not in ranks, but clusters, from among orange trees and tall, flowering shrubs, which he fancied by their scent were oleanders, with a bare strip between them and the flat-topped houses. Santa Marta lay before him scarcely two hundred yards away, and he felt his heart throb painfully. His guide whispered something, and Appleby nodded, though he could not remember what the man had said, and they went forward at a run. The patter of feet, and clatter of strap and swivel, seemed to swell into a bewildering din, but they were almost upon the fielato offices, where the carretera entered the town, before a rifle flashed.

It was answered by a bugle behind them, for it seemed that the cazadores had watched the road; another rang out in the town. But it was in grim silence the Sin Verguenza ran, though there were now pale flashes along the parapet of the flat roofs in front of them. A man – a negro, he fancied – clutched at Appleby's arm, loosed it, and reeled backwards with a shrill scream. Another staggered, and Appleby trod on him as he fell under his feet. He scarcely saw the man, only the white walls that seemed to come no nearer, though he knew by the way his heart was thumping that he was running savagely. A curious din was going on, bugles ringing, the patter of desultory riflery; but he caught the words of somebody who ran behind him, and cried out breathlessly in Castilian as he swung up his hand.

Swinging past the fielato offices they swept under a white wall, and plunged into a shadowy calle, where pale faces peered out at them from the lattices. They went down it at a run, and would have gained the broad plaza it led to but that the blast of a volley met them in the face. Men went down, but not many, for Appleby heard the click of the bullets on the walls and stones, and surmised that it was conscript troops shipped off half trained in haste from Spain that fired. He could dimly see more of them flocking into the calle, and it became evident to him that his men must go through them.

With a hoarse shout he sprang forward, though he could never remember whether it was in English or Castilian he cried, and the Sin Verguenza came on with a roar behind. This was not the

kind of fighting they preferred, but they had the best of reasons for surmising that no mercy would be shown them if they did not succeed. They were in among the huddled men before the rifles could flash again, barrel and butt rattling among the bayonets of those who had found opportunity of fixing them, and machetes swinging.

Almost to Appleby's astonishment they also went through; and when, swinging the Marlin rifle by the muzzle, he reeled out into the plaza the cazadores fled across it like sheep. There was a breathless howl as they did so, a fresh trampling of feet, and the rest of the Sin Verguenza poured out from another calle with a half-company of cazadores retiring before them, and firing as they went. Some of them were less than half dressed, but they gave back unwillingly, with the spitting of their rifles showing red against the walls that shut in the shadowy square.

It seemed to Appleby that if the others rallied and joined them the Sin Verguenza would have their work cut out, and when one who carried a sword in place of a rifle made a stand he shouted in Castilian. He spoke the words that came to him, without reflection; but he was the son of a ranker, and the grandson of a colonel on his mother's side. There was a flicker of riflery from the calle where Maccario's men were, but the officer with the sword was standing still, and men who turned by twos and threes closing in on him. The first mob of beaten men were also halting, when Appleby hurled his ragged handful like a wedge in between.

They went in with clubbed rifle and red machete; the officer went down, and for a few wild, moments cazador and rebel fought hand to hand. Then the drilled men broke and fled, half of them to meet the other band of Sin Verguenza pouring from the street, and the rest up the dark calle that led out of the plaza with Appleby and his followers hard upon their heels. It was a fierce chase, but a short one, for the cazadores vanished into a great archway, and streaks of red sparks lighted the windows above. Appleby glanced over his shoulder and saw the rest of the ragged column running down the street, and then that some of them were going down. He had no leisure for reflection, but it was borne in upon him that if they were to carry Santa Marta it must be accomplished before the scattered infantry had recovered from the surprise, for he had seen already that there is very little cowardice amongst the troops of Spain.

What he said or in which tongue he spoke he did not know, but in another moment he and a negro with a machete sprang into the smoke of the rifles that whirled in the archway, and, howling like beasts now, the Sin Verguenza followed them. Men he could scarcely see broke away before them, though he fancied some remained and were trampled on; and then they were in a broad patio with lights shining behind the lattices about him, and the negro was no longer beside him. A door crashed to in front of them, pale flashes shone at the windows; but in another moment the door went down, and they were pressing up a stairway through stinging smoke, with half-seen men firing down on them. There

was dust in the smoke, and the plaster came raining down until Appleby could scarcely see anything at all; but the Sin Verguenza went on, and he was borne forward in front of them when they poured tumultuously out upon a flat roof at the head of the stairway. Then there was a roar of exultation, and he dimly saw men in uniform floundering over the low walls that divided roof from roof, while from other openings there poured out more of the Sin Verguenza.

Appleby wondered why he could not see them clearly, and then his hearing also seemed to fail him. He was conscious of a confused shouting in the street below, but it grew curiously faint, and he staggered clear of the rest, and, scarcely knowing why he did so, groped his way back to the patio, where he sat down beside a bush of heliotrope or some other flower that had a heavy sickly smell. He did not know how long he sat there feeling cold and faint, but at last somebody shook him and held something to his lips. He drank, gasped, and saw Harper smiling gravely down on him.

"I guess you feel better now!" he said.

Appleby blinked at him. "I don't quite know what's the matter with me, but I feel – dazed," he said. "What are the boys doing?"

Harper gravely felt his head, for Appleby had lost his hat. "Well, that's not astonishing – and it's a good one," he said. "The whack that sergeant gave you would 'most have felled a bullock. As to the other question, the Sin Verguenza have the town. Morales' men hadn't a show at all, though they might have

made a stand if you hadn't kept them on the hustle. Take another drink."

Appleby drank again, and his scattered senses came back to him. "I don't seem to remember very much," he said.

"No?" said Harper, with a curious little laugh. "Now it's my business to get the most out of men, but I haven't seen anything much smarter than the way you took hold and handled the Sin Verguenza. Say, who taught you soldiering?"

Appleby stared at him, and then laughed softly when he saw that the man was perfectly serious.

"I never saw a shot fired at a man in my life until I joined the Sin Verguenza," he said. "Still, though I don't know that it has anything to do with the case, most of my folks had their share of fighting, and one was with the Cristinos in Spain."

Harper shook his head. "Never heard of them," he said. "Anyway, if you feel fit for walking you had better come along and get some food. I guess you'll want it, and onions and mangoes don't go very far with me. This place will be very like the pit with the blast on when the Sin Verguenza get their work in."

VIII – APPLEBY'S PRISONER

THE night was pleasantly cool when Cyrus Harding sat with his daughter and the Colonel Morales on the veranda which ran round the patio of the "Four Nations" hostelry in Santa Marta. The hotel was, as usual, built in the shape of a hollow square, and the space enclosed formed a pleasant lounging place when the only light was furnished by the soft glow from the latticed windows surrounding it. That night it fell upon pink-washed walls, clusters of purple Bougainvillea that climbed the trellis, the white blossoms of a magnolia, and a row of carved pillars, while the square of indigo above was set with silver stars. It is true that the stables opened into the patio, as did the kitchen, next door to them, but that was not unusual, and the curious musky smell that hangs over most Spanish towns was tempered by the scent of flowers.

Harding lay in a cane chair, with the blue cigar smoke drifting about him and a little thoughtful smile in his lean face. He was a widower, and though he now enjoyed a very respectable competence, desired a fortune to bequeath his daughter, which was why he had sunk good money in what his friends considered reckless ventures in Cuba. Harding had, however, taken risks all his life, and knew there is not usually very much to be made by the business man who follows the beaten track. He looked further ahead than his fellows, and taking the chances as they

came played for heavier stakes.

His daughter sat a little apart, daintily fresh and cool, in a long white dress, with the soft light of the lamp above her gleaming on her hair, which was of warm brown, and emphasizing the little sparkle in her eyes. The cold of New York did not suit her, and she had accompanied her father to Cuba before. Opposite Harding, across the little table on which stood a flask of wine, sat a spare, olive-faced officer, with a sword girt to his waist. He had keen dark eyes with a hint of sternness in them, and a straight, thin-lipped mouth; while he was already known in that country as El Espada, Morales the Sword. His mission was to put down the insurrection in that district, and the means he employed were draconic.

"You ask a good many questions, señor," he said in Castilian. "There is no difficulty with respect to some of them and the information in my possession is at your service; but it is different with those that concern the situation political. We are not sure yet who you Americans sympathize with; and I am, you understand, an officer of Spain."

Harding made a little deferential gesture, but he also smiled. "One can usually obtain political information of importance in my country – when one is rich enough," he said, as it were, reflectively. "Of course, one avoids hurting anybody's feelings, but it seems to me that the best guarantee we can give of our good will is the fact that some of us are investing our money here."

Morales shook his head. "It is not quite enough," he said.

"There are men without money in your country, my friend, and it is those who have nothing that love the revolution. I have also a little affair with two of your estimable countrymen."

Nettie Harding, who understood him, looked up. "Now," she said, "that is interesting! You will tell us about it?"

Morales nodded. "It is a month since we marched east with a strong company and a little machine-gun," he said. "We march by night, and it is sunrise when we climb the Alturas gorge. Above, three leagues away, hides a company of the Sin Verguenza, and the Captain Vincente who marches round will take them in the rear. I have scouts thrown forward, and we march silently, but by and by the front files come running back and there is firing in the pass. The Sin Verguenza, it seems, are upon us, but that is not wise of them. Figure you the place – the rock one cannot climb above us, a barranco, very deep, below, and the machine-gun to sweep the track. Pouf! It is swept. The Sin Verguenza melt away, and we go forward to conclude the affair."

"Well," said Harding a trifle impatiently, "where do the Americans come in?"

Morales' face grew wicked. "Down the rock, my friend. Perhaps they are sailors; for where there is no footing for any man they slide down the lianas, and others follow them. The cazadores do not look above; there is still firing, and they do not hear me. The Americans are upon the gun, and more of the Sin Verguenza arrive behind them. I see one American who is young with his shoulder at the wheel of the gun, and in another minute it is gone,

and there is a crash in the barranco. Then the Sin Verguenza come back again, and we go home, my friend; but it is not all my company who come out of Alturas Pass. One waits, however, and by and by my turn comes."

Nettie Harding said nothing, but there was a significant sparkle in her blue eyes, while her father's nod was deprecatory.

"They are not friends of mine, and I have a good deal to lose," he said. "What I want to know is, if you had money to spare would you buy the San Cristoval hacienda? There should be a profit in it at the price, but not if the patriots are likely to burn the sugar mill, or the administration to quarter troops there. You are responsible for this district!"

"Money is very scarce with me, my friend," said Morales dryly.

Harding nodded sympathetically, and dropped his voice to a lower tone. "One would be content with a little less profit if it meant security," he said. "It would pay me to make certain that the hacienda would not be meddled with – by the Sin Verguenza."

There was a little gleam of comprehension in the officer's eyes, and he thoughtfully flicked the ash from his cigar. "I think I could promise that," he said. "We will talk again, senor, but now – if I have your excuses – I think I will be wanted at the cuartel."

He rose, made Miss Harding a little punctilious inclination, and moved away, while the lamplight flung his shadow black upon the pink-washed walls. It seemed to the girl suggestively

sinister.

"I do not like that man," she said. "He has wicked eyes, and his face is cruel!"

Harding laughed. "Anyway, it's evident he has his price, and I think I'll buy the hacienda, though I'll want a man to run it, since I can't stay here. He will have to be the right kind of man."

Nettie Harding appeared reflective. "I wonder what has become of Mr. Broughton whom we met on board the 'Aurania'?" she said.

"The folks I gave him letters to told me he was here in Cuba; but I'm not quite sure his name was Broughton. He had got himself mixed up in some kind of trouble in England."

"Then," said the girl decisively, "somebody else made the trouble."

"It's quite likely. I don't think there's any meanness in that man; but I wouldn't worry about him. It wouldn't please Julian."

The girl laughed. "Julian," she said, "knows me too well to be jealous."

Harding said nothing, and the two sat silent awhile. There were few guests in the "Four Nations" just then, and only a faint murmur rose from the plaza beyond the pink-washed walls. Somebody, however, was singing, and now and then a soft tinkle of guitars came musically through the stillness with the chorus of the "Campanadas." Nettie Harding listened vacantly, while glancing up at the blue above she wondered whether the same clear stars shone down on a certain naval officer, and if he

thought of her as the big warship rolled across the wastes of the Pacific. It was very still, and cool, and peaceful, and she lay, languidly content to dream, in the cane chair, until she straightened herself with a little gasp as the ringing of a rifle came sudden and portentous out of the darkness. It was followed by a crash of firing, and Harding looked up sharply.

"Winchesters – but those are Spanish rifles now!" he said. "It seems the Insurgents must have got in behind the pickets."

"The Insurgents!" said the girl, with a shiver.

Harding rose, and stood looking down upon her curiously grave in face. "This is a thing I never expected. Morales told me there wasn't a rebel within ten leagues of us; but he has men enough to whip them off," he said. "Put on a jacket, Nettie. We can see what is going on from the roof."

In another minute they stood looking down over the low parapet into the shadowy plaza. There was not a light in it now, but through the ringing of the bugles there rose a confused clamor and the patter of running feet, and Nettie Harding could dimly see clusters of citizens apparently making the best pace they could towards the calle that led out of Santa Marta. As she watched a line of figures broke through them and by their rhythmic tramp she guessed that these were soldiery. Then a fresh mob of citizens poured into the plaza, and the rifles crashed again.

"What does it mean?" she asked.

Harding, stooping over the parapet, listened a moment to the

confused voices, and then shook his head. “I’m afraid it’s the Sin Verguenza coming,” he said. “They have a little account against Santa Marta, and I wouldn’t like to be Morales when they send in the bill.”

His attitude betokened strained attention, and the girl fancied he was endeavoring to ascertain how the troops had fared. Then the clamor grew suddenly louder, and she grasped his arm.

“Oh!” she said. “They are in the town!”

“Yes,” said Harding curtly, “I guess they are. The sooner we leave them and the Santa Martans to it the better! Get your little trinkets together, Nettie; I’ll have the mules we hired ready inside five minutes.”

He plunged down the stairway, burst through the negroes already clamoring about the stable, and dragged the mules out. There was a crowd in the archway leading out of the patio when the girl joined him.

“We can’t mount here,” he said. “Keep close behind me until we make the plaza.”

It was accomplished with difficulty, but the men who pressed upon them saw the glinting pistol; and Nettie Harding stood ready to mount in the plaza when a mob of fugitives surged about them. There was a crash of riflery very close at hand, the mule plunged, and she reeled backwards with a little cry. For a moment she felt her father’s grasp upon her shoulder, then the mules seemed to vanish and Harding with them, and she was driven forward amidst the press. A voice she recognized was

shouting a few yards away, but it ceased suddenly, and she was jostled this way and that with the little breath she had left almost crushed out of her. She could only wove as the crowd did, and it bore her onward into a dark calle, where screaming women were pouring from the doorways, and here and there a pale light shone down upon the terrified faces about her, but there was no sign of Harding anywhere.

She could never remember how long this lasted; but by and by the crowd seemed to melt away where two or three streets branched off from a smaller plaza, and she stood still, breathless, striving to draw the thin jacket, whose buttons had been torn away, over the trinkets she had hastily clasped into her bodice and cast about her neck. Then the venomous clanging of rifles commenced again, and when something zip-zapped along the stones and struck the white walls with a curious splashing sound she turned to run and saw a dusky archway in front of her. Stumbling into it, she flung back the great leather curtains, and found herself in a little church. It smelt of stale incense, and a few pale lights that only intensified the darkness blinked here and there; but she could hear low rustlings which seemed to indicate that others had taken refuge in it, and shrank into a corner.

She fancied she spent at least an hour in the church, listening with apprehension to the clamor that broke out and sank again outside. There were murmurs inside the building, and an occasional rustling of the leather curtains, but this told her nothing; and at last, unable to bear the suspense any longer, she

moved softly towards the door. The town was almost silent when she reached it, and there was a light burning in what appeared to be a wine shop across the plaza. She could also hear laughter as well as the tinkle of a guitar; and as this did not indicate fear she decided to enter the shop and endeavor to hire somebody to search for her father. Unfortunately, however, she did not remember a saying common in Spain respecting the fondness of evil-livers for the sound of church bells.

She flitted across the plaza without molestation, and then stopped in front of a building which bore a scroll announcing that it was a café. A blaze of light shone out from it, and looking in between the wooden pillars she could see the little tables and wine barricas. Then she gasped, for in place of reputable citizens the tables were occupied by women with powdered faces in cheap bravery and ragged men with rifles slung behind them. The light also showed her standing white in face with torn garments and the jewels sparkling at her neck to the revellers; and a man of dusky skin, with a machete hanging at his belt, sprang up with a shout.

There was a burst of laughter, and Nettie Harding fled, with the patter of several pairs of feet growing louder behind her, until two men came forward to meet her. They, however, let her pass; there was an altercation, and she stood still, trembling, when a cry in English reached her. Then she saw three or four dim figures moving back towards the café and the two men coming towards her. One of them also raised a hand to his big shapeless hat.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.